TWISTED TALES ANTHOLOGY SERIES

Cooper McKenzie Bronwyn Judde Sinistre Ange Minette Moreau Cari Silverwood Vivian Murdoch



A Twisted Takes Anthology

COOPER MCKENZIE BRONWYN JUDDE SINISTRE ANGE MINETTE MOREAU CARI SILVERWOOD VIVIAN MURDOCH



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BEAR'S LITTLE CRITTERMAKER BY COOPER MCKENZIE

A Twisted Retelling of The Little Match Girl

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"I want you to take all these beautiful creatures you've made for me home with you. Sell them and use the money to start a new life away from your father."

Bailey Dupree looked from Mrs. Baer lying on the pile of silk and satin pillows in her bed to the rest of the woman's bedroom. Dozens of colorful crocheted animals covered every flat surface in sight, including the tall bookshelf that Bailey had moved into the room a few weeks before in order to display even more animals.

"You want me to sell off your zoo?"

Mrs. Baer had taught her to crochet the first week after Bailey had come to work as her overnight caregiver. That had been nearly six months ago. Since then, under the frail woman's tutelage and encouragement, Bailey's skills had improved to the point she was not only creating, but also designing new critters for her elderly charge.

Surprisingly, Bailey had used only a small portion of the collection of yarn from the craft workroom where Mrs. Baer claimed to have spent most of her time since her husband's death ten years earlier. The room was still crammed full of yarn, cloth, and other craft supplies. When Bailey ran out of

the acrylic fluff used to fill the animals, Mrs. Baer had given her money to buy more.

At ninety-eight, Mrs. Baer was growing frailer by the day. They both knew her time was nearing, though neither deigned to discuss the inevitable. Instead, Mrs. Baer spent the early evenings helping her design new animals or choose the best colors for the patterns she found online. Once Bailey finished the animals, they were added to the zoo that now filled Mrs. Baer's bedroom.

Mrs. Baer looked at the nightstand where her favorite critter, Henry the Hedgehog, lived. She then looked back at Bailey. "If you don't take them and do something productive with them, my family will just throw them away. Just like they'll be throwing away most everything else in the house that I haven't already rehomed. They never cared for my handcrafted gifts, or my collections of china or figurines. I want you to take the animals. I also want you to have anything you want from my workroom. Now. This week. Once you have them out of the house, they can't fight you for ownership."

Mrs. Baer stopped talking for a moment and simply breathed. When she spoke again, her voice sounded stronger than Bailey had heard it in weeks. "I know your father hurts you. I've seen the bruises. If he's like some of the other men I've known, he also steals your money and refuses to let you move out and live on your own. I want you to sell our critters and use the money to get away from him. Now, go get some garbage bags and start packing up *your* animals tonight. I also want you to take all the yarn, and whatever else you want, from the workroom. Promise me." Instead of arguing, Bailey gave in. These days Mrs. Baer lived by sheer force of will. She had survived growing up during the Great Depression, had been a young woman during World War II, outlived two husbands, outlived three of her five children and several grandchildren who had all died too young.

It was not in Bailey to argue. Especially when Mrs. Baer got that glint of determination in her eyes. Under the old woman's supervision, she sorted and bagged up the critters. All except Henry. It took five large plastic bags to hold them all.

Moving the bags downstairs to the back door, Bailey waited until Mrs. Baer fell asleep before entering the old woman's workroom. She filled three more bags with the soft yarn she preferred to use to make the critters with. She left one of the two bags of fluffy acrylic filling behind. She would need it here in the nights to come. From now on, she would bring a bag of yarn with her each evening she worked to have something to do.

Once the yarn was packed up, she found a box in the closet and filled it with the patterns she had found on the internet and she had printed out at the library. She then added a full set of metal crochet hooks she liked and a few other odds and ends. After checking on Mrs. Baer, she went downstairs and loaded everything in her car. The treasure filled the trunk and back seat of her small car.

When she returned to Mrs. Baer's bedroom and settled in the rocking chair she preferred to use, the old woman roused. Bailey picked up the yarn and crochet hook and began making a purple octopus.

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"Finished packing already?"
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"Yes, ma'am. Everything is bagged up and packed in my car. Your critters and the yarn are safe from your family. Thank you. Thank you for teaching me to crochet. Thank you for allowing me access to your supplies. Thank you for gifting me the critters and yarn."

Mrs. Bailey gave her a weak smile. "Good girl. I have one last request. Sometime in the future, I want you to pass along the skills I've taught you. Oh, and find yourself a good man who will stand up to your asshole of a father and keep him from hurting you anymore. A man who will treat you with love and respect, the way a woman should be treated."

"I promise," Bailey said as she blinked back tears.

The passing on of her crochet knowledge was an easy vow to make. The man, not so much.

Bailey was hesitant to bring anyone into her messy life because she knew her father would react badly. Better to stay alone and keep the rest of the world safe.

But Mrs. Baer did not need to know that.

"Good girl," Mrs. Baer said before falling back to sleep.

"What does one wear to sell crocheted critters at a farmer's market?" Bailey Dupree whispered as she stared at the contents of her closet.

With a sigh, she turned, wincing as her bruised ribs protested the movement, and looked at the group of critters she decided to keep from Mrs. Baer's zoo. They sat atop the wide headboard of her neatly-made, queen-size bed. Rabbit, Bear, Hedgehog, Dragon, Wolf, and Lion stared back at her, but did not answer.

"Y'all are a whole lotta help. Not," she muttered as she turned back to her closet.

Knowing the warehouse-style building where the farmers market was held each Saturday had no heat and it was a cool morning, she decided to go with multiple layers that she could peel off as the day warmed up. She started with her favorite tshirt with a picture of a dragon on the front. This shirt always gave her a boost of bravery and she would need it. She needed all the confidence she could get to put her yarn art, as Mrs. Baer called it, out for the world to see.

Blue jeans, socks, and sneakers finished the base layer. She then pulled on a bright pink fleece vest and zipped it up before grabbing her purple three-seasons coat. Looking toward the bed again, she said, "Behave yourselves. And stay out of Dad's way or you'll find yourself in the trash. And we don't want that."

The animals did not respond, not that she expected them to. After all, they were just stuffed animals, though she counted them as her closest confidants.

When she had left Mrs. Baer's house the morning before, her car refused to start, so she'd had to walk home. She would not be able to deal with it until Monday morning.

There was a silver lining of sorts to having her car break down. Halfway home, she'd spied a purple wagon at the curb beside a trashcan, waiting for trash pickup later that morning. Looking it over, Bailey found it to be in perfect working order, just a little scratched and dented. In that second, she decided it was just the thing she needed to transport her critters to the market.

After pulling it home, she cleaned the wagon up before hiding it in the shed. Earlier in the week, she had sorted the critters by species and put them in smaller reusable bags that would be easier to move around. The yarn was also sorted, bagged and hidden under her bed. She was able to check her inventory with just a glance, and quickly packed the wagon so she would have at least two of each animal to offer for sale.

Leaving her room, Bailey moved through the house as quietly as she could. In the kitchen, she collected the bag of snack foods before filling her big purple travel cup with ice and water. Tossing her bag of snacks on top of the carryall that also held her purse and several skeins of yarn and hooks, she slipped out the back door. She had a two-mile walk to the market and needed to get started. On weekends, her father often slept through the whole day, giving her hope that she would be back before he ever knew she'd left. Normally, she spent weekend days at the library a few blocks away, searching out new critter patterns and reading the sexy shifter romance books she was addicted to. She knew she was a coward for hiding from the man, but spending time at home when he was there never ended well. That was one of the reasons she had become a night sitter for the home care agency.

Glancing at her watch, Bailey calculated that if she hurried, she would arrive at the market with plenty of time to set up her table.

She had already decided to keep making and selling her critters as long as she had yarn to work with. By the time she ran out, she would hopefully have enough money to buy more yarn and fluff. Her father was growing more violent by the week, smacking her around whenever he saw her. She was not sure how much longer it would be before his angry outbursts put her in the hospital. Or worse. She needed to find a way to escape the hell her life had become.

With a slow, deep breath that caused her ribs to ache, she pulled the wagon out of the shed. Adding her carryall to the wagon, she started around the house. A glance at the dark house to assure herself that her father was still asleep, and she hurried down the driveway.

Bailey did not take an easy breath until she was two blocks from the house. She stopped for a moment to catch her breath before starting to walk again at a slower pace. As she walked, she visualized what a successful sales day would look like. Not only finding homes for the friends she had made, but also earning the money to buy more supplies. Everything beyond that would go into her escape fund, so she could move out of her father's house and into a place of her own.

THE BATTERED PURPLE WAGON CAUGHT NOAH KILLIAN'S attention as he rolled the last of his ice chests into the building that housed the weekly farmers' market. It sat in front of the table to the left of his, piled high with intriguingly lumpy cloth bags.

A moment later, the market manager approached, followed by a young woman who looked tired even though the day had barely begun.

"Good morning, Noah," Kate, the manager, greeted him with a smile.

"Morning," Noah returned with a nod as he opened the oilskin tablecloth he used to protect the market-provided tables that made up his booth.

"This is Bailey's first week at the market. Can you show her the ropes?" Kate asked as someone across the room called her name.

"Sure, Kate. No problem."

The older woman hurried away, leaving the woman named Bailey standing in the aisle, looking around the large open room in awe.

"Hi, Bailey, I'm Noah Killian," he said, stepping from behind his table.

Bailey jumped and whirled to face him when he touched her shoulder. "Oh, hello. I'm sorry. I'm Bailey Dupree." At that moment the sweet, sweet scent of the honey spice cake his mother made when he was little wrapped around him, waking his inner bear from a years' long slumber.

Mate. Our mate. Claim her now.

Noah wanted to roar to the world that after almost forty years on earth, he had finally found his mate. Instead, he took a breath and tried to calm both sides of his being. As a bear shifter, he lived a quiet life, and tried hard not to call too much attention to himself. Especially since most humans feared the shifters who lived among them.

"This place is amazing," she was saying, oblivious to his internal struggle.

"It is that. Just wait until about ten o'clock when the place is full of customers and loud and busy. Now, do you have a tablecloth? It's best if you cover the table before putting out your wares."

"Yes. When I talked to Kate about being here today, she told me I would need one."

Instead of a tablecloth, she pulled out what looked like a fitted sheet. Noah watched as she opened it and smoothed the bright yellow fabric over the table. Once she smoothed the elasticized edges around the tabletop's edges, it stretched to fit the table perfectly.

"I've never thought to use a bed sheet before," he said as he moved behind his tables and began setting up his own space.

"Thanks. I saw the idea on the internet and figured I'd try it," Bailey said as she wheeled her wagon behind her table.

Noah had no response, so he turned his attention to making sure his table was ready for the day. The meats he offered for sale were already weighed, wrapped, priced and frozen. The orders from last week were separated into cloth bags emblazoned with the farm's logo and the customer's name and contents attached to the front.

A dozen cartons of eggs from his small flock of chickens were neatly piled on one side of the table. On the other side, he set up the small whiteboard, which listed the meats he had available for the week. His money box went behind the whiteboard and then he laid out the fliers that held information about the meats, the eggs, and the story of Fuzzy Heaven Farm.

Though he was a former NFL football player, he worked to keep the focus on the free range, organic farm he owned and ran with the help of several veterans he had hired off the streets, in the hopes of giving them a new start in life.

Once his table was set up, he checked on the new girl and found himself entranced. She had to be a foot shorter than his own six feet four inches and looked too thin, even under the several layers of clothes she wore to combat the cool morning. Her dirty blonde hair trailed down her back in a thick braid, tempting him to undo it and bury his face in the strands. His mate was a lovely woman, and he could not wait to get to know her better.

In contrast to the other vendors setting out their wares, Bailey unpacked one item at a time, lifting it to her lips for a private whisper before setting it on the table. Moving out from behind his table, he stepped in front of her to see what she was selling and smiled.

An army of cute little animals were lined up shoulder-toshoulder along the front of the table and she was now working on a second row. He watched, charmed by the way she held them as much as their appearance, handling them not as if they were fragile, but as if they were alive and just as nervous as she was, as if they needed her support and encouragement. Plenty of vendors here at the market claimed their goods were 'made with love,' but this was the first time he really believed it.

Stepping closer, he picked up a fat black bear sitting between a yellow and black bee and a pink pig.

"It's a black bear," Bailey said softly.

"You made it?"

"I made all of them," she said, waving her hand over the table.

His gaze swept the table before he looked into her face and a pair of dark chocolate brown eyes. "They're amazing. You do beautiful work."

"Thank you," she said, her cheeks pinking up at the praise. "I hope they sell."

"Oh, they will. Don't worry about that. No one else here has anything like them. You should do really well. Especially with all the families who come through."

"I hope so," she sounded nervous.

"When the market closes, would you like to go out for a late lunch?" Noah asked before he could censor his words.

Bailey shrugged and dropped her head so he could not see her face. "I don't think so, but can we talk about it later?"

Though he was disappointed that she did not jump at his invitation, Noah nodded his agreement. "We'll talk again later."

The chaos of dozens of vendors setting up in preparation for the market day nearly sent Bailey running home again. She had to remind herself time and again that her father would not show up to make a scene. He did not know where she was. She had to be brave, stay strong and trust the critters would sell themselves since she had no selling talent.

The critters covered the table in two rows, like an army of cuteness ready to defend her against the world. Standing in front of the table, she lost herself in reorganizing them one last time. When a loud cowbell rang out, drowning out all other noises, she jumped.

As she looked around, the man at the next table chuckled. "Don't worry, Sunflower. That's just the signal that it is eight o'clock and the market is opening for the day."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks," Bailey said, taking a breath and hoping to settle her suddenly racing heart.

Checking her table one last time, she gave up on rearranging things. Either the stuffed critters would sell, or they wouldn't. There was nothing else she could do except smile and be friendly to whoever paused in front of her table.

Stepping behind her table, Bailey took a moment to straighten up the bags still in the wagon before forcing herself

to sit down in the metal folding chair provided by the market. That was the moment her stomach decided to rumble, reminding her that she had skipped breakfast.

Digging into the carryall, past the yarn and her purse, she reached into her snack bag and pulled out a pack of crackers. She then retrieved her travel cup of water. Thank goodness it had not tipped over and spilled all over the wagon.

Opening the crackers, she looked around, her eyes once again pulled to her uber-hot, sexy neighbor. There were several customers in front of his table already, so she was able to study Noah Killian without him noticing. She hoped.

He was tall. Much taller than she was, and his shoulders were as wide as a barn door. He wore a pair of loose-fitting dark gray cargo pants with a pair of cowboy boots that looked well-used, but obviously cleaned up for his day at the market. On top, he wore a jacket over a hoodie.

Looking away when he glanced in her direction, she wondered how many other layers he had on. How much of his bulk came from his clothes, and how much was just the man himself? His belly appeared flat, instead of carrying the spare tire that so many men over thirty developed. Whether it happened at the gym or just came from hard work, this was a man who worked with his body.

Earlier, he had been wearing a gray felt cowboy hat, but he had taken it off, exposing a full head of glossy black hair with silver strands glinting at his temples. He wore it short on the sides and longer on the top. She absently wondered if the few days of scruffy beard covering his chin and cheeks would be scratchy or soft, which then led her to wonder how hairy the rest of his body was. Pushing away those thoughts, Bailey felt her face heat with embarrassment.

"Daddy, look at these!" A young girl pulled her father straight to her table.

Her father followed with an indulgent smile. "Which one do you want, honey?" he asked, already pulling out his wallet.

Grabbing up a plump yellow and black bee, she gave it a squeeze in one hand while reaching for an elephant with her other. "Can't I have two? Please, Daddy?"

Instead of pressuring the father, Bailey turned to pull out a plastic bag from the bag of recycled grocery bags she had taken from Mrs. Baer's house. She usually took a bag of bags back to the grocery store when the bag was full, but after her conversation with the market manager, she decided she might need them here.

"All right, but only two," her father pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet and extended his arm over the table.

"Thank you," Bailey said as she opened the bag.

The girl looked at the bag and shook her head. "I don't need a bag," she said.

"Okay. I hope you enjoy your new friends," Bailey said as the girl bounced away with her father rushing to keep up.

She took a moment to write down her first sale in the small notebook she had brought to track which critters sold and make notes of special orders, requests for different animals, or anything else she might need to remember. She had made her first sale just minutes after the market had opened. She could not wait to share her day with Mrs. Baer when she went back to work Sunday evening. Looking over at Noah's table, she met his gaze and felt herself go all warm and squishy at the man's bright green-eyed gaze.

"Congratulations," he said with a grin and a wink.

"Thanks," she smiled back before turning her attention to the pair of older ladies who were admiring several of the animals.

IF HE HAD NOT BEEN SWAMPED WITH HIS REGULAR EARLY morning customers, Noah would have gone over and given Bailey a high five to celebrate her first sale. She looked so pleased, which brightened a little of the sadness he could see radiating from her soul.

His inner bear continued pacing, wanting him to make a move, despite the line of people waiting for his attention.

By the time he had taken care of what seemed like a neverending line of customers, Bailey had made several more sales. With each one, he could see her spirit brighten, even though she still looked tired.

"How's it going?" He asked, stepping closer to her table when the customers had moved on and they had a moment to talk.

"I've sold ten critters!" she said with a smile that reached all the way to his heart and squeezed it.

"That's great. Now, how about that date? If you don't want to go to lunch after the market closes, how about tomorrow?"

She looked hesitant for a moment. "Can I think about it and let you know later?"

"Sure, but just to warn you, I'm going to keep asking until you say yes," Noah said with a grin. "You'll soon learn that I can be a persistent S-O-G when I see something I want."

"S-O-G? What's that?"

"Son of a gun. I try not to swear around ladies."

Bailey's giggle had his cock stiffening. It was as bright and full of joy as some of the toys on her table.

"You're funny," she said before turning to a family who approached.

Noah watched as the youngest daughter snatched up the black bear he had eyed earlier. When the girl's mother tried to take it from her, she twisted away.

"No! Mine!" the little girl yelled.

The mother picked her up and whispered to her, but the little girl shook her head. "It's mine!" the little girl insisted.

The other two children, an older girl and boy, were pointing and naming the other critters with hopeful expressions.

"All right, Missy. It's yours. Do guys want to pick one?"

The older girl picked up a pink creature with peach antennae extending from its head and showed it to Bailey. "Is this an axolotl?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is," Bailey said with a smile that turned into a yawn. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Noah had a hard time allowing Bailey to finish her sale. He wanted to pick her up and take her home with him so he could care for her and make sure she got enough rest and food. You can't do that, he warned himself. That would be kidnapping. Besides, you don't even know if she's single and looking for a man in her life.

"Hey, Noah, how was your week?"

"Hi, Mr. Santino. How are you today?" Noah turned and faced the elderly man who bought a pound of hamburger and a dozen eggs from him every week. He was leaning heavily on his cane and moving slower than he had in months past. He had been one of Noah's first customers, and though his prices had gone up over the past three years, he refused to charge the elderly veteran the higher prices.

"Still above ground," the old man said, handing over a tendollar bill before exchanging the Fuzzy Heaven cloth bag in his hand for the one Noah had ready with his order.

"There you go," Noah said with a smile. "Thank you."

"Thank you, young man. I'll see you next week."

"Yes, Sir. Have a good week."

Noah took the empty egg carton out of the bag and added it to the pile other customers had turned in. He had found that by offering a discount for the returned containers, he saved money on constantly ordering new ones. His customers liked the discount and felt like they were saving the planet by recycling.

As usual, he had sold almost everything by the time the cowbell rang out again, signaling the close of the market. He would be taking home one roast and two packages of hamburger. Even though they were still frozen, he would not return them to the business freezer. Instead, he would take them home and Naomi would cook them up for him and the men who worked for him. After wiping down his tablecloth, he wiped out the last cooler and put the meat into one of the cloth bags. He then packed the duffel bag with the sales supplies, the empty cloth bags, and egg cartons in it. He had already taken the other two empty coolers to the truck.

Checking on Bailey, he was pleased to see her army of stuffies had thinned out considerably. A glance at her wagon showed him that the two other bags that had been full earlier that morning were now empty. All of her animals were on the table. Bailey's stunned expression as she flipped through her notebook brought a smile to his face.

"How did you do?" he asked, picking up another black bear that sat in the second row.

"I sold thirty-nine critters in six hours! That's amazing!" she said, sounding breathless.

He held out two five-dollar bills. "Make that forty animals. I want this one."

Bailey made a note in her notebook before looking up into his face. "Thank you, but you don't have to pay me. I owe you for being so helpful today."

Noah laid the bills on the table and crossed his arms over his chest. "Take the money, Sunflower. Now, how about joining me for lunch?"

Though tempted by his invitation, Bailey forced herself to shake her head. She would love to spend time with Noah and learn more about him and Fuzzy Heaven Farm, but it would be a waste of time. Once he learned about her fucked up life, he would run far and fast, so why bother?

"I'm sorry, I can't. I need to get home and get some sleep. I work nights during the week and as great as today was, it's also messing with my sleep schedule. Maybe I'll see you next week."

"Well, how about dinner one night this week? I really do want to see you again, preferably before next Saturday."

Instead of answering, Bailey grabbed a cloth bag from the wagon and began tossing critters into it.

"Please, Bailey? Let me buy you dinner. Tuesday evening."

She knew it was a bad idea, and yet she heard herself agreeing. "It would have to be mid-afternoon coffee because I have to be at work at five-thirty."

"Whatever you want. Here's my card. My cell number is on the back. Call me if things change between now and then. What's your number?" He exuded such a warmth, she just wanted to curl up on his lap and hide from the world. Without giving it much thought, Bailey pulled one of the cards she had made with her name and email on it and wrote her number on the back. Noah secured it to his clipboard and then gave her a smile that had her insides melting from the warmth.

Before she realized what he was doing, Noah leaned in and brushed a kiss on her lips. His beard felt soft against her skin. After a quick kiss, he pulled back.

"All right, Miss Crittermaker, I'll be in touch about Tuesday."

With that, he grabbed his cooler and disappeared, leaving her alone. Touching her lips with her fingertips, she could not help but wish her life was different. As the feel of his lips and beard faded, the icy chill she lived with on a daily basis returned. She would have to come up with an excuse to get out of their Tuesday date.

Turning her attention back to her table, she quickly bagged the rest of the critters and folded the sheet. The wagon was over half-empty as she dragged it from behind her table and out the front door. With a long sigh, she started the walk home, exhaustion dogging her every step. As the blocks passed, she smiled as she remembered the day and the warmth she felt from the many sales, as well as from being in Noah Killian's presence.

Back home, she hid the wagon, the money pouch, and the animals she had not sold at the back of the shed before entering the house. Even though her father never went into the shed, she still hid everything behind the broken-down chest freezer to keep it extra-safe. If she brought the money into her house, her father would find it, take it, and either drink it up, or gamble it away. He somehow had a sixth sense for whenever she had extra cash in her possession.

At some point in the next day or two, she would find a new hiding spot for the money she made while also making sure she had enough change for next Saturday's market. She couldn't worry about that now. She also needed to figure out a way to take credit cards, since she'd lost two sales because she only took cash.

For now, though, she needed a shower, some food, and some sleep.

DRIVING AWAY FROM THE FARMER'S MARKET WITH THE knowledge that he was leaving his mate behind was one of the hardest things Noah had ever done. Even the decision to leave professional football and start Fuzzy Heaven Farm had not been this difficult.

He left promising himself he would see his mate again in a few days. When they met next, he would explain who he was and how he knew they were meant to be together. He only hoped Bailey had an open mind and would understand without him stripping down and shifting in front of her. Someday he would introduce her to his bear, but later, after they knew one another better.

Arriving home, he forced himself to work through his end of market day routine. After taking the leftover meat to the kitchen, he carried the ice chests across the yard to the building that held the farm office and retail shop. Micah Trooper, his right-hand man, was waiting for him, the water hose in his hand. It only took a few minutes to clean out the coolers and set them behind the building to dry. Micah would move them into storage tomorrow, where they would wait until Saturday morning, when they would be filled for the next market day.

As he worked, Noah's mind drifted time and again to his mate. Looking around the farm, he pictured Bailey sitting on the porch making her critters with one of the cats playing with a ball of yarn at her feet. He could see her playing with the goats, feeding baby carrots to the horses and throwing out feed for the chickens. Everywhere he looked, he could see how perfectly she'd fit in his life.

He only hoped she could believe him and accept his claim when he explained that they were mates and meant to be together forever. Pulling her card from his pocket, he was both disappointed and yet pleased that the card did not have anything but an email address on the front. Disappointed because he could not drive by and check on her. Pleased because no one else could find her either. As he stared at the card, he wondered how long he should wait before contacting her to firm up plans for their Tuesday date.

Before dawn Tuesday morning, Bailey's pocket vibrated, indicating she had a message. Slipping out of Mrs. Baer's bedroom, she opened her phone and found a text message.

FARMER NOAH: GOOD MORNING. WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE TO go for our date?

BAILEY READ THE MESSAGE A SECOND AND THEN A THIRD TIME early, stunned that Noah still wanted to meet. After two days of not hearing a word from him, she figured he had come to his senses or changed his mind. After all, what did a hot, gorgeous, older man want with her?

She stared at the message, knowing she should decline. Her father had come home Sunday afternoon after three days of drinking and beat her. Again. The last thing she wanted was to involve Noah in her family problems.

Overall, her life was so cold, so dark, and so depressing that no decent man would want to be involved in it. Spending time with him on Saturday had brought a warmth and light into her life that she had not experienced since the last man she dated. The man her father had run off after their second date.

Was it fair to Noah to agree to a date when she knew he would run far and fast once he learned the truth of her life?

Then she changed her mind and decided to go ahead and give him an answer.

BAILEY: I'M SORRY, I CAN'T MAKE IT. MAYBE I'LL SEE YOU ON Saturday at the market.

Farmer Noah: All right. I'll see you Saturday.

A moment later her phone buzzed again.

FARMER NOAH: JUST SO YOU KNOW, I'M NOT GIVING UP. I WILL take you on a date, whenever you're ready.

BAILEY READ THE WORDS AND HAD TO BLINK BACK THE TEARS his confident words brought forth. She wished she could feel so certain about things.

"Bailey? You okay?" Maureen, the day sitter asked as she approached.

Slipping her phone back into her pocket, Bailey wiped her cheeks and nodded. "I'm fine."

"How's our lady?" Maureen said, peeking through the open door into Mrs. Baer's bedroom.

"She's slipping. Didn't eat much for dinner last night, but I was able to get her to drink about half a protein shake about one-thirty when she woke up. She's been asleep since three."

Bailey slipped into the bedroom and gathered her things as quietly as she could. Some mornings, just walking around the room was enough to wake Mrs. Baer, and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Maureen had already settled into the rocking chair by the bed with her computer tablet by the time Bailey walked out into the hallway. She stopped at the notebook computer where they logged their hours to jot down a few notes about Mrs. Baer's condition and care, then left.

Her car still sat in front of the garage in the back yard, so she sent a text to a high school friend who worked at a garage. Maybe he would be able to at least diagnose what the problem was, if not fix it at some point during the day. In the meantime, she would go home and hopefully get some sleep.

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Bailey started walking home, sighing when raindrops started falling about halfway there.

Yeah, there was no need to bring Noah into her life, no matter how attracted she might feel toward the big farmer.

By SATURDAY MORNING, NOAH THE MAN WAS AS IRRITABLE and twitchy as his bear. He had forced himself to limit his texting to Bailey to once a day, unless she responded. Sometimes he would tell her a joke, sometimes asking a question, always trying to be as nonthreatening as possible. Friday afternoon, he sent her a picture of the newest members of the farm family, twin baby goats that had been born during the night.

He barely slept Friday night in anticipation of seeing his mate again. He woke well before dawn in order to pack the meat. Normally he did the task alone, but that morning Micah was in the storeroom, packing the preorders when he walked in.

"Morning," Noah said as he sipped the coffee he hoped would wake him up and settle his inner bear.

Micah grunted in response. The man was not a big talker, which Noah was grateful for at that moment.

"Can I come with you today?" Micah asked as they loaded the coolers into the truck.

"You want to come to the market with me?"

"Yeah, I thought you could use the backup so you can spend more time courting your girl," Micah said as he closed the tailgate.

Instead of asking how the man knew he had met someone, Noah took a breath and nodded. "Thanks, I'd be happy for the extra help. But you'll have to wear one of the company tshirts."

Micah shrugged again. "I can do that. When do you want to leave?"

After agreeing to the departure time, Micah disappeared, no doubt heading back to the cabin Noah had offered him as part of his employment agreement to change and eat breakfast.

The formerly homeless Army veteran had been working for him two years now and though he had not learned a lot about his background, Noah did know that the man cared about the farm and all of its resident animals nearly as much as he did. He also rarely left the farm, which made his asking to join Noah at the farmer's market even more of a surprise.

But he would not turn down the man's help. The farm's offerings of meat and eggs had grown so popular that over the last few weeks he had often wished for another set of hands.

He had contacted Kate earlier in the week with the request that he and Bailey be stationed next to one another again. It would be torture spending the day next to her and not be able to claim her, but Noah hoped that, with Micah helping at his booth, he would be able to spend more time letting his mate get to know him. He also wanted to talk her into visiting him on the farm the next day.

After a quick breakfast and another cup of coffee, the two men climbed into the truck and headed to the market – one to test the waters of being away from the farm, and the other to hopefully make strides in courting his mate-to-be.

As they approached the market, Noah saw a slight figure pulling a familiar looking purple wagon down the sidewalk. He frowned as he slowed and then pulled over.

The market was still three blocks away, why was she walking?

"Boss?"

"Take the truck and park it behind the building. We're at table eighteen, about halfway down on the right hand as you enter the back door. I'll be there in a few." Noah said as he climbed out.

"Table eighteen. Got it, boss." Micah said as he slid over to the driver's seat. Noah knew his truck and its cargo was safe with the other man, so he turned and headed to the sidewalk where Bailey was slowly approaching. He stopped and waited for her to reach him before speaking.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," she responded as she continued walking. She did not look at him, or otherwise react. It was as if she were in another place mentally and moving forward by sheer will.

While he wanted to ask her a thousand questions, Noah took a deep breath and released it. Though it was difficult, he walked beside her and kept his curiosity under wraps. He had a feeling that pushing too hard would scare her off, which was the last thing he wanted.

It wasn't until they reached the bright lights inside the market that he noticed she was pale, sweating, and looked to be wearing a heavy layer of makeup, which was strange since the week before she had worn none.

Once she reached her table, Bailey stopped and breathed for a moment, as if she was trying to find the strength and energy to set up her table.

When he touched her shoulder, she flinched as she opened her eyes and looked at him. The surprise mixed with pain he saw made him want to scoop her up and take her home right now and to hell with the day's market.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

Was she all right? Bailey was not sure how to answer that question.

Her car was fixed, but her friend had not been able to return it to her. Last night when they talked, he promised to bring it to the market today. Which meant she had spent the week walking to and from work. In the wee hours of the morning, her father had come home drunk. He woke her up by dragging her out of bed and then proceeded to smack her around, leaving bruises not only on her body, but also her left cheek.

Though she thought about staying home or fleeing to Mrs. Baer's to hide from the world until her face healed, she had to be here today. She had to sell her critters so she could get the fuck out of the icy hell of her home life.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to answer, though it was a blatant lie. "I'm fine."

She turned her attention away from the man who was like a warm beacon in the night, calling her to wrap herself around him and hold on tight. She needed to set up for the day before she gave into temptation and begged him to carry her far away from her life. Bailey tensed when a big, warm hand slid around the back of her neck, but did not resist as Noah gently pulled her against him. When he wrapped both arms around her back, she relaxed and leaned into him. She rolled her lips over her teeth to keep from crying out when his powerful arms pressed against the bruises and sore spots.

"You're lying. You're not all right. I just hope that by the end of the day, you'll trust me enough to tell me what's going on. I really do want to help you. And I still want to take you out this afternoon."

"Maybe," she whispered as her body stopped screaming in pain, and warmth filled her.

By the time he kissed the top of her head before finally releasing her, her nipples were erect, and panties were damp.

"I'll accept that answer. For now," he said as he slowly stepped back and pulled his arms from around her.

Bailey nodded and then turned her attention to her table. By the time the opening cowbell rang, her critters were lined up as they had been the week before. As she settled behind the table, she wished she'd stopped long enough to eat breakfast and hadn't left behind her bag of snacks. It was going to be a long, hungry day.

Through her own set up to do, she covertly watched as Noah and his helper worked together to carry in the coolers and set up their own space. After things were set up, the men held a quiet conversation before the assistant walked away.

As before, Noah had a line of customers just minutes after the bell rang. At some point, the helper came back with a big bag of food from a local fast-food place. He then took over dealing with the customers while Noah dug through the bag. Bailey looked away quickly before he could catch her staring at his food, and the next thing she knew, he was beside her with a paper-wrapped breakfast sandwich in each hand.

"Here, eat this," Noah said as he held one out to her.

Bailey looked at his hand, then up at him, but did not take the offering. "You got me breakfast?"

He smirked as he laid the sandwich on the table in front of her. "You won't let me take you out, so I decided to bring food to you. Eat it while it's still warm."

Bailey hesitated only a moment before picking up the sandwich and unwrapping it. Bacon, egg and cheese. Yum.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"You're welcome."

Taking a bite, she chewed and swallowed quickly. He joined her and they ate in silence. Once she finished, she crumpled up the paper and slipped it into the plastic bag she'd brought this week to hold the random trash that collected during the day.

"Thank you again," she said as she used a wet wipe from the packet in her purse to clean the crumbs and grease off her hands. "That hit the spot."

Before Noah could respond, his assistant called for help. "I'll be back later to discuss taking you to lunch after we close up today," he said with a wink and a grin.

Bailey had to smile even as she shook her head at his determination. What was it about the man that he always wanted to feed her?

As HE RETURNED TO HELP MICAH, NOAH COULD NOT HELP BUT smile. His bear might not be completely happy, but watching their mate eat the food they gave her settled it somewhat. Providing food for Bailey was but the first step to claiming their mate. The next step would be to convince her to visit Fuzzy Heaven and see how she liked his home territory.

Then he would explain what he was and who she was to him. Once they passed that ginormous hurdle, he would set about the final steps in claiming and fully mating Bailey Dupree as his life mate.

As the day progressed, he had a hard time staying focused on his customers and their needs. He wanted to sit with Bailey behind her table, watching her interact with her customers and getting to know her better.

At noon, Micah took a frozen roast out of his hands and returned it to the cooler, then took out the package of hamburger the customer had actually asked for. "Go take a break."

"What? Why?" Noah asked as he glanced over to where Bailey smiled at two children who were debating which critters they wanted.

"Take a break," Micah repeated. "Your mind isn't here, so go be where it is before you give away all the meat."

Noah frowned at his friend and right-hand man. "Are you sure you can handle it without me?"

"Yes, boss, I can handle it without you. Go be with your woman."

That comment caused Noah to pause. If Micah recognized the connection he felt for Bailey, did everyone else? Would that cause problems for them? Or would it help when he asked Kate to assign them to adjoining booths every week?

And the biggest question – would Bailey be okay with them becoming joined at the hip?

Instead of simply grabbing a chair and settling in behind Bailey's table, Noah decided they needed lunch. Looking around the market, he was not surprised to see nothing he could offer her in the way of prepared food. There was a restaurant next door, he just needed to find out if she had any allergies before he placed an order.

He waited until her latest customers walked away before stepping close enough to talk to her without having to yell over the noise of all the other conversations going on in the building.

"Do you like seafood?"

She blinked at the question before nodding. "I love seafood. Why? Are you taking a survey or something?"

"Nope," Noah said before pulling out his phone as Bailey turned to help another customer.

Fifteen minutes later, he watched with a smile as Bailey took the first bite of her lunch and moaned in pleasure. He waited for her to take a second bite before turning his attention to his own meal.

She ate about half her meal before setting it aside when a pair of older women stopped to admire her work. When they moved on, she turned to look at him.

"Why is it so important to you that I eat?"

"Because I'm attracted to you," he answered, choosing honesty over social niceties. "I hope it will be my job, and privilege, to care for you for the rest of our lives."

"What do you mean, care for me?"

"Feed you, protect you, make you smile. Care for you."

Bailey blinked and stared pensively into space for a moment before focusing on him again. "And how do you know we're meant to be together?"

"Instinct. The fact that my cock has been hard every second you're in my sight. Because I couldn't stop thinking about you all week and couldn't wait to get here this morning to see you again. Fate and my gut tell me that we are meant to be together for the rest of our lives. So, how about having that picnic with me Tuesday morning when you get off work?"

His bear rumbled a happy sound when she gave him a small smile and nodded.

Two hours later, as Micah loaded the empty coolers into the truck, Noah followed Bailey out to her car. When the rear door did not open at first tug, he pulled her back and stepped in. It took a strong yank on his part to get the door to lift. He helped load her wagon and bags into the back and then closed it again.

Walking Bailey to her door, he hesitated when she turned to look at him. "Thanks again for breakfast. And lunch. How much do I owe you?"

"You are very welcome. You don't owe me a penny. It was my honor," he said, before his bear pushed for closer contact. "But, if you really want to pay me back, I'll take a hug."

"A hug?"

"Yep."

A blush covered Bailey's face as she stepped forward and slid her arms around his middle. He wrapped his arms around her and held her gently, loving the feel of her. She was a tiny little thing compared to him, but holding her against his body felt perfect.

"You feel so good," he murmured, tilting his head forward to brush a kiss on her forehead.

When she tilted her head back and looked up at him, he could not stop himself. Dropping his head lower, he brushed his lips over hers. Once, twice, a third time before settling in and tracing the seam of her lips with his own.

Her lips parted and he took the kiss even deeper. Her tongue met his and their passion heated to near boiling, despite the people walking by. When he finally lifted his head, they were both gasping for air.

With a deep breath to calm himself, he pulled his arms from around her and stepped back, forcing her to release him. "I'll see you Tuesday," he said as took another step away from the woman whose soul called to his.

"Tuesday," Bailey murmured before shaking herself and climbing into her car. He waited the few minutes it took for her to start the car and pull out. Turning, he watched as she drove out of sight. He had a feeling it was going to be a long two and a half days until he saw her again.

Bailey yawned as she checked the directions Noah had texted her the evening before. What had she been thinking to agree to visit his farm for their mid-week breakfast date? Timing-wise, it was better than a midafternoon picnic, but after two twelvehour shifts sitting with Mrs. Baer, who was growing weaker by the day, she wondered if maybe she should have canceled and just gone home to bed.

At the third driveway past the designated crossroads, she turned off the main road and eased past the sign welcoming her to Fuzzy Heaven Farm. A moment later, she drove through the open double gate in the brick and metal fence that had run parallel to the road for the last quarter mile.

Continuing on, she took her foot off the gas and allowed the car to roll forward at its own pace. She smiled at the glimpses of animals in the fields on either side of the driveway. She found herself giggling at the sight of two baby cows dancing as they followed their mothers across the field.

The house, barns, and other outbuildings came into view, and she turned her attention, fascinated. She had not visited a working farm since a field trip in grade school to a local dairy farm. She remembered on that trip, a cow had licked her hand and it had been both amazing and gross. She wondered what adventures and surprises this visit would hold.

She pulled in and parked next to a big white pickup that she recognized from the market. Turning off her car's engine, she pocketed the keys before climbing out. In an automatic move, she hit the car locks before closing the door.

She hesitated, looking around as she wondered if she should head to the main house, or wander toward the barn where she saw a handful of men gathered together in front of the big red structure.

The two-story farmhouse was painted white and had cerulean blue shutters and front door. The wide front porch extended across the front and held several chairs including a pair of wooden rockers, a wide swing, and several small tables. She smiled at the thought of sitting on the porch in the evening, making her critters while a dog laid on her foot.

What a great dream. But she could only be here for a couple hours before she had to return home and get some sleep before work tonight.

Turning her attention back to the barn, she saw the meeting had broken up. The two men headed in different directions, with Noah walking toward her, his long strides quickly crossing the ground.

"Good morning," he called.

"Good morning," she returned with a smile. "You have a beautiful farm."

He looked around and smiled. "I think so."

Before she knew what he was doing, Noah stepped forward and wrapped her in his big arms, giving her a hug that immediately warmed her up. "Just breathe and relax," he murmured as he brushed a kiss on the top of her head.

Resting her head against his chest, she gave a big sigh as she hugged him back.

A deep breath brought the smells of fresh air, animals, and hay into her lungs. She held it for a moment before releasing it, along with tension she had not known she'd been carrying. Her shoulders dropped and the muscles of her jaw loosened, and she felt more relaxed than she'd been in ages.

Slowly releasing her, Noah placed a hand at her low back and guided her toward the front porch steps. "Let's go see what Naomi fixed for our picnic."

Naomi?

Bailey stopped midstride and turned to face Noah at the base of the steps that led to the porch. "Who's Naomi?" she asked, doing her best not to sound accusatory, but if he already had a woman in his life, what was she doing here?

Noah halted with only a few inches separating them. He gazed down at her with a big, relaxed smile on his face. "My housekeeper. She is married to Benny, the farm expert here on Fuzzy Heaven."

"And Micah?"

"My right-hand man. Two years ago, he was a homeless veteran I offered a job to."

"Really?"

"All the men who work here are formerly homeless veterans and about half of the animals come from rescue situations as well. I run a unique farm. Now, come on, our breakfast picnic is waiting. Afterwards, we can go to the barn so I can introduce you to the babies."

Bailey took a deep breath and nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not getting offended."

Noah shrugged and took her hand to pull her up onto the porch. "Why would I? I understand. If you wanted to introduce me to a man without telling me who he is, I'd think he might have touched you and be pissed. After all, you're my mate. Just know that once we're mated, I won't share you. With anyone."

NOAH HAD NOT THOUGHT HE WOULD BE NERVOUS INTRODUCING Bailey to his friends and employees, but surprisingly he was. Entering the kitchen where Naomi was handwashing pots, he felt like his stomach was going to flip over before it jumped out of his body.

"Naomi, I'd like you to meet Bailey. She made that bear you stole from me last week. Bailey, this is Naomi Evans, Fuzzy Heaven's chief cook, bottlewasher, and housekeeper."

"Good morning," Naomi said as she dried her hands on the dishcloth she habitually wore draped over her left shoulder. "Welcome to Fuzzy Heaven."

"Good morning," Bailey returned as the two women stepped forward.

They shook hands, but neither spoke again. They turned to him as an awkward silence fell over the room. Instead of trying to force a conversation, Noah decided it was time to get their picnic started.

"Is it ready?"

"It's all ready, just the way you asked," Naomi said with a smile, adding to Bailey, "I hope you enjoy your day here. Noah hasn't been able to talk about anything but you since he met you at the market."

Noah felt his cheeks warm as both women once again turned to him. "That's not all I've talked about," he protested weakly.

"Just about. Go, the food's getting cold." Naomi shooed them out of her kitchen.

Noah took Bailey's hand in his, not surprised at the surge of warmth and electrical power that flowed at the connection. He led her out the back door onto the porch and then down into the yard. Turning left, they walked toward the field that had a gazebo in the middle of it.

The gazebo had been one of the first additions after he'd taken over the farm. A path made of stepping stones led the way from the gate to the three steps that led to the covered octagonal pavilion. Though they couldn't be seen in the daylight, strings of twinkle lights hung around the perimeter of the ceiling.

The goats often played in this field, but today they were in the next one over so that they could eat in peace.

He'd set up the card table and chairs earlier but could see that Naomi had added a white tablecloth and vase of flowers from the garden. There was also a closed covered basket, which he knew held biscuits, as well as small containers with butter and jelly and the hot sauce he loved. "Oh my," Bailey said as she climbed the steps and approached the table. "It's beautiful."

Noah wasn't sure how to respond to the praise, so he said nothing. Stepping around her, he pulled out her chair and helped her take her seat. Once she was settled, he went to the stone bar at the side of the structure. Two skillets sat on electric warmers beside a small open cooler, filled with ice and bottles of juice and water.

Noah fixed two plates with scrambled eggs, bacon, and cooked apples. As he carried them to the table, he kicked himself that he had not asked if she had any allergies or funky eating habits. Setting the plate in front of her, he moved to the other side of the table and sat down with his own plate.

"I hope this is okay."

Bailey looked at her plate then smiled at him. "This looks delicious. Thank you."

He smiled in return and then waited as she took her first bite. When she moaned her approval, his bear sat up and made a happy sound. Providing for his mate filled him with a feeling of contentment he had never felt before.

Once he was certain she was pleased with her meal, he tucked into his own breakfast. The conversation they needed to have could wait.

"What did you mean when you called me your mate?" Bailey waited until they had finished eating before asking the question that had her pussy throbbing with need even as her gut clenched with nerves.

Noah straightened in his seat and suddenly looked nervous. "Let's take a walk and I'll explain."

"Sounds good," Bailey said with a wide yawn. With her stomach full, she knew would fall asleep if they continued sitting here.

They both rose and after stacking the dishes together, Bailey took the hand Noah offered. They left the gazebo and started walking across the field away from the house. She was surprised how good it felt to just walk hand-in-hand with him. It was as if they fit together like two puzzle pieces. She wondered if the rest of their bodies would match up as well.

They walked up a wide path that led between a field with a handful of cows in it and a large garden that was laid out and growing well.

"You don't sell vegetables at the market," Bailey commented when her nerves began to jump due to the extended silence. "The meat sells better. The garden feeds us, and what we don't eat, we wholesale to a neighbor who runs a fruit and vegetable stand out by the highway. Whatever he doesn't sell, he donates to the local food bank. And of course, the inevitable spoilage goes to the pigs and chickens. That way, it all gets consumed."

They were well out of sight of the farm buildings, and there was no one in sight. They came to a clearing with a park bench in the center of it. Noah led her to the bench. He sat down in the center of the bench, then lifted her to sit straddling his lap.

Once she was settled, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. The kiss started slow and gentle, but quickly deepened until Bailey felt more out of control than ever before. Granted, she had only been with a couple of guys, but never had anything felt as right as making out with this man.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight as the kiss went on and on. Her hips seemed to act on their own as they began to hump the long, thick erection that pressed against the front of his jeans.

She arched her back when one of Noah's hands slid between them and cupped one of her tits. The warmth of his hand sent even more heat straight to her pussy.

It felt so right. So perfect. Better than anything she had ever participated in before.

"More," she moaned into his mouth. "Please, fuck me."

It took a moment for her to realize that Noah had stopped moving. She broke the kiss and pulled back. "Noah?"

Instead of answering, he lifted her and set her on the bench beside him. Then he rose and began to pace. "I need you to keep an open mind while I explain a few things before anything else can happen between us."

"All right, I can do that."

She watched as he took a deep breath and released it in a long, slow exhale. He paced back and forth once more, five steps in one direction, then pivoting to walk five steps in the other. She was beginning to wonder if she was pushing him too fast. But he was the one who had been so insistent they date, and then referred to her as his mate. All she wanted was some answers to questions she wasn't sure she could even give voice to.

She watched him take another lap before stopping right in front of her.

"I'm a bear shifter," he stated as he looked into her eyes. She could see the truth glowing in his bright green eyes. "And you are my life mate. The mate the universe put on Earth just for me. As mates, we are meant to spend the rest of our lives together."

His words were not at all what she expected.

"A bear shifter," she repeated as she processed exactly what that meant, "and we're mates."

The problem was, she had no idea how to fit this information into her rather small and sheltered view of the world. Shifters were the stuff of romance books and movies, not real life. And a bear shifter? At least he chose to settle in an area where bear sightings were a fairly common occurrence. But how did all this work?

It took a few minutes before she could ask her next question: "So, what does being your mate mean?"

"It means that the rest of my life will revolve around. Your safety, your happiness, you. My goal in life will be to care for you, protect you, love you until my last breath."

While that sounded wonderful, especially in light of her father's increasingly abusive behavior, Bailey still had doubts about the whole shifter thing. She needed more proof than just Noah's word.

"Can I see it?"

Noah leaned back slightly, eyebrows raised. "You want to see my bear?"

"Yes, please."

Bailey sucked a sharp breath in when Noah pulled his tshirt off, leaving him bare to the waist. His chest and belly were covered with a tantalizingly thick pelt of hair. At once, she wanted to pet it and see if it was soft and silky or coarse and scratchy.

Her eyes grew wider when he took off his boots, balancing easily on one foot as he took one off and then the other. She could only wish she was that coordinated. She would have fallen on her butt if she'd tried such a move.

When his hands undid his belt and the button of his jeans, she wondered if she should cover her eyes. She had not seen a nude man in person since Stevie Jenkins decided to go skinny dipping in the town pool when they were both seven. Not only had he been thrown out of the pool for the rest of the summer, he'd been banned from the pool for life.

"Um," she started, but wasn't sure what to say, so she shut her mouth again.

Noah paused with his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his jeans. He met her eyes and smiled, his expression sending a shiver through her body that ended at her warm, wet pussy.

"Feel free to look your fill, sweetheart. Shifters don't have the same problem being naked outside that humans do."

With that, Noah bent over and pushed his jeans down his long, tree trunk-like legs. When he straightened, Bailey couldn't help herself. Her gaze went straight to his groin where a long, thick, fully erect cock pointed straight at her.

He was a gorgeous man, from his shaggy hair all the way to his toes. Once again, she wondered what he saw in her that made him think they were supposed to be mates for the rest of their lives.

"I'm going to shift, but you need to sit right there. Don't run or I'll chase you, and it might end badly," he said as he took two steps back then dropped to the grass.

Stunned stupid by the beauty of the man, she could not move when a bubble of air around him shimmered silver for a moment. When it cleared, Noah the man was gone. In his place stood a large black bear with Noah's grass green eyes.

Bailey held very still, not sure what the animal would do. His unsettling warning turned over in her mind. What did 'end badly' mean? Would he attack if she even twitched? Because her nose was beginning to itch and she really, really needed to scratch it.

She slowly moved her arm, millimeter by millimeter until she was able to ease the tortuous itch. The bear watched her, his muzzle stretching into an ursine smile.

"You're a very pretty bear," she said, wondering if he would understand.

He shook his head and made a grumbling sound.

"Oh, sorry. You're a very handsome bear. Very manly and handsome," she corrected herself and giggled at her silliness.

The bear nodded his agreement and took a step toward her.

She tightened her fingers that were twisted together in her lap. She stopped breathing when he took several more steps, slowly closing the distance between them. He did not stop until his chin rested on her left thigh. He took a deep breath and released it on a long sigh as he sat down.

Hoping he wouldn't bite her hand off, Bailey raised one hand and slowly touched the top of the bear's head. The bear blinked, but did not otherwise move.

She petted his head, neck and as far down his back as she could reach. "Your fur is so soft," she said quietly.

He huffed in agreement, then moved his chin back and forth on her leg as if he was scratching an itch.

"Okay, I believe that you are a bear shifter. Can you shift back so we can talk more?"

NOAH RELUCTANTLY BACKED AWAY FROM HIS MATE AND shifted back, keeping an eye on Bailey the entire time. His mate did not seem too freaked out by his secret, but only time would tell if she could fully accept him, both man and beast, as her mate.

She seemed calm enough as she watched him pull on his jeans and t-shirt. He carried his boots with him as he approached the bench and sat down with a few inches separating them. "Are you all right?" he asked, hoping she wouldn't run back to her car and escape before he pulled his boots on.

"Will I become a bear shifter after we mate?"

She sounded curious, not scared, and when he glanced at her, she did not seem the least bit frightened.

"Afraid not. But, if we have any children, the boys most likely will be while the girls will have a fifty-fifty chance."

"And how does a human mother punish shifter boys in their out-of-control teenage years?"

Noah chuckled as he finished pulling on his boots. "Shifters are taught from birth to revere and protect their mothers. My mother had a big wooden spoon that she used to spank me with when I was little. Once I was bigger than her, my father stepped in. He only had to knock me across the room once when I called Mom a bitch to get it through my thick skull that she was the queen of the sleuth, even though she was human."

That story earned him another of the sweet giggles that had his cock twitching with need.

"You are a bear shifter, and I am your mate," Bailey said, sounding like she was beginning to accept his announcement.

"Yep."

"So how does this mating work? I don't have to do it with your bear do I?"

"No, sweet thing. You won't have to mate with the bear. When you're ready, we'll make love and I'll claim you as mine. I'll bite you right here," he explained, touching the spot where neck and shoulder met, "and as I take in some of your blood, I'll come, and you'll take in my seed." "Will I get pregnant right away?"

"No, not the first time. And maybe not for a long time after that. I've been told that bear shifters have a hard time reproducing, even when they find and claim their life mates."

Bailey yawned, then yawned again as the long night of work caught up with her. "You don't want to mate right now, do you?"

"No, not today. And maybe not this week. Bear shifters can be patient, so I'll give you until Saturday to think things over."

Bailey nodded. "That sounds reasonable. I'm afraid I can't stay and meet all your baby friends. I need to get home and get some sleep."

"I have a guest room you can use," he offered even though he knew she would turn him down. She needed time, and he would have to be the stronger bear and give it to her.

"I think I should just head home. I have some things to do before I head to work tonight."

The phone call Bailey had been expecting yet dreading, came Thursday afternoon as she was getting ready for work.

Mrs. Baer was dead.

Bailey blinked back tears as she said a quick prayer and sent a silent thank you into the universe for the woman who had sent her life in a new direction by teaching her to crochet. A moment later, fear-filled panic shoved the sorrow out and took over.

She would be out of a job until the service could find her another client, which normally took a week or two. Which meant there was no money coming in for at least a couple of weeks. It also meant she had nowhere to go at night in order to stay out of her father's way.

What the hell was she going to do?

Noah and his claim of their being mates came to mind, but she shook her head. While she was not technically unemployed, she was between contracts. He would not want his mate to not be bringing in any money.

Time slipped away as she tried to come up with a solution but failed. She would be living out of her car at night, at least for the foreseeable future. The front door opening made her jump and check the clock. Shit. Her father was home. From the sounds of him slamming the door, he was once again in a bad mood. But then, when wasn't he?

Grabbing her work bags, one of which held her purse as well as several skeins of yarn and a half bag of fluff, Bailey went to the window in her room and opened it. In a move she had not performed since high school, she dropped the bags out the window, then climbed out after them. She heard her father yell her name just as she pulled the window closed.

Picking up the bags, she bent low and ran to her car. Another minute and she backed out and drove away, just as her father stepped out onto the front stoop.

He did not look happy, which made her certain that she did not want to return home until late the next morning, well after he left for work. She would worry about that later. For now, she needed to think about where she could hang out for the next twelve hours while she mourned the passing of her mentor and client.

Though she had money from the critters, she did not want to spend it for a hotel room where she knew she would not rest. Instead, she drove to Mrs. Baer's house. She parked down the street and watched as the undertaker's van pulled out, followed a few minutes later by Maureen, the day sitter, in her SUV.

Though she was tempted to pull in and spend the night in the house, she did not want the neighbors calling the cops, or her boss, telling them that she was hanging around the house where a woman had just died. Instead, she sat in the car and allowed her grief to well up and overflow. A few tears turned to violent sobbing as she thought about Mrs. Baer and all she had given her in the past months. A new skill, a new career, an inventory that would provide her with the money to get out from under her father, and the confidence and feelings of selfworth to even try.

Finally, she calmed down and, after cleaning up using the spare shirt from her work bag, Bailey forced herself to start the car. "Good-bye, Mrs. Baer. Fly with the angels," she whispered as she pulled away.

After hitting a drive-through for a burger and fries, she drove downtown to her favorite park. Sitting on a bench near the river, she ate dinner and watched the water flow past on its way to join the ocean. Being near the water soothed her battered spirit and allowed her to finish grieving for her elderly friend.

Night fell, but time lost all meaning to her, until a policeman walked up. "Miss? Are you all right?

"Yes, I'm fine," she lied.

"The park is closing. You'll need to leave now," the man said brusquely.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Bailey gathered her trash and threw it in a nearby receptacle before heading to her car. The officer watched her and then followed her from the park. She drove through town, amazed at how quiet everything was after dark. There were not even people walking around, which surprised her. But then again, it was a Thursday night, and most businesses closed at five during the week.

The library was closed for evening, so she could not go inside and crochet. Not sure where else to go, she drove to the farmers' market building and pulled in, parking just behind the building so the police would not see her car unless they drove around. She would spend the night here and in the morning, she would go home at her usual time. With luck, her father would already have left for work.

By SATURDAY MORNING, NOAH WAS READY TO DO WHATEVER it took to convince Bailey they were meant to be together. The text message conversations they had had were not nearly enough to soothe his increasingly frustrated bear. He needed his woman with him, beside him, under him. He wondered how upset she would be if he simply threw her into the truck and took her home with him after the day's market closed.

Pulling in behind the warehouse that housed the market, he scanned the other cars, but her little sedan was not among them. Was she having car trouble again? Was she even planning to come again? Or had their picnic at the farm scared her away?

Pulling out his phone, he checked, but there were no texts from Bailey since they had chatted Thursday evening. After he and Micah unloaded the giant coolers, he sent his assistant to pick up breakfast for three while he set up the table. Kate had been very understanding when he asked that Bailey be situated beside him, but her table remained empty.

Just before the opening bell, Kate walked by.

"Morning, Kate," he said, as he stepped out from behind his table to have a quieter conversation with the market manager. "Have you heard from Bailey this morning? When I talked to her Thursday, she was planning to be here." Kate nodded. "She sent me a text early this morning saying she wouldn't be able to be here today. She didn't explain why, so I figured she picked up that nasty bug that's been going around. If you want to take over her table as well, go ahead."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks." Noah pulled his phone out again as he stepped behind the table.

He quickly sent a text to Bailey asking if she was all right and requesting her to call him. Micah returned just as the cowbell rang the market opening with a large bag of breakfast that smelled delicious.

Noah was able to eat between customers, giving the breakfast biscuit meant for Bailey to one of the teenagers who volunteered at the market to fulfill their community service hours required for graduation from high school.

The market was unusually busy. It felt like the line of customers in front of the table never ended. Noah was not able to check his phone for any messages until the last customer walked away with the last two packages of meat. Micah began taking the coolers to the truck while he packed up the tablecloth, scale, and money box. A glance at the big clock at the end of the building showed him it was not quite noon. When Noah finally checked his phone, he was disappointed to see that Bailey had not responded to his earlier text.

"Are we going to visit your girl on the way home?" Micah asked once they were in the truck and leaving the market.

"Yeah, unless you have something else you'd rather do."

"Buy me lunch and I'll take a nap while you visit with her."

"What do you want? Chicken, burgers, or tacos?"

When they parked in front of Bailey's house forty minutes later, Noah's bear was pacing and grumbling as if it knew something was very wrong.

He had just climbed out of the truck when a loud, long, high-pitched scream rang out from inside the house. He looked at Micah who was already climbing out as well. The two of them ran across the yard and up the steps.

By the time he reached the door, Noah could hear the sounds of slaps and punches and grunts coming from inside. Twisting the knob, he pushed the door open even as he fought to keep his bear from pushing forth and taking over. The scene he walked into would haunt him for years to come.

CHAPTER o

It seemed that Bailey had only closed her eyes when she was violently torn from sleep by the sound of her door slamming open and the sharp pain of a man dragging her from her bed by the hair. Although startled, she wasn't really surprised. Even before she'd fully awakened, she knew it was well after midnight and her father had returned from his regular Friday night bar crawl to take out his inexplicable anger on her yet again. It had been like this most of her adult life. She was nothing to him except a paycheck and a punching bag.

She did her best to protect herself without provoking him further, but the first punch sent her head spinning and the others followed so fast and with so much force behind them, that she was unable to even lift her hands to shield her head. Senseless, but conscious, she lay limp in his grip, catching fist after fist. She could not understand what he was screaming at her about, could not understand his words, could only process the accusatory tone of them. This was different from the other beatings. He really thought she'd done something, and he was determined to make her pay.

Had he found the critters in the shed? Her hidden escape fund? There seemed to be a question in his thunder, but he punctuated it with slaps, so she couldn't have answered even if she understood what he was saying. His hand was rough and hard as beer bottles. Slap by slap, her face swelled, and when she could no longer see out of her left eye and could feel the hot trickle of bloody drool pouring over her burning lips onto her chest, she knew she would not be showing her face anywhere tomorrow. No farmers' market, no chance to sell the last two bags of critters Mrs. Baer had left her, no more money and no escape.

And with that realization, she must have done something, shown some sign of defeat, because the interrogation had stopped and he just beat her. He'd punched her ribs until it hurt to breathe, and she thought at least one or two were cracked if not broken. Finally, he dumped her on the floor, then stomped on her left foot with his work boot, rocking his weight back and forth until she felt it snap.

Through her scream, she heard him mutter, "Guess you won't be running anywhere now," with drunken satisfaction before he finally lumbered away. His heavy footsteps retreated as far as the living room, where he collapsed and passed out on the couch.

For a long time, Bailey lay on the floor, simply fighting to breathe and storing up the strength to move. When she thought she had enough, she dragged herself into the bedroom – she couldn't even remember when he'd dragged her out into the hallway, or had she crawled there on her own before he'd beaten her down? – and found her phone. She had just enough energy to text Kate and let her know that she would not be using her table later that day. She thought briefly about calling 911, but was afraid her father would hear, and if he did, he wouldn't just resume the beating. This time, he might actually kill her. She needed to get away, and then she would seek help. She passed out several times as she crawled around the room, gathering the things she would take with her as she escaped for the final time. She did not want to leave anything behind because she never wanted to return.

She was not sure Noah would want her in this battered condition, but she had to get away from her father. Since he had driven all her other friends away over the years, she had no one to call, nowhere to go. Focusing solely on getting out, she decided she would drag herself and her belongings to her car first, and then get the critters and from the shed. Once everything was in the car, she would see if she could drive to Fuzzy Heaven.

Bailey was so focused on her plan that it never occurred to her to simply call Noah and ask to come and help her get away.

Dragging her bags behind her, she slowly crawled toward the front door. She was almost there when a hand grabbed her hair.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going, bitch? You're not going anywhere. You're staying here with me forever. Your mother tried to leave me, and I taught her a lesson she'll never forget." Her father pulled her to her feet and forced her backward.

She gasped at the pain when he forced her to walk on her injured leg. When he slammed her against the wall, her pain level rose so high she could not stop herself from screaming as loud as she could, hoping one of the neighbors would hear her and call the police to come investigate.

A punch to her stomach put a stop to that and she had to fight just to pull air into her lungs. She was slipping into unconsciousness when she heard what sounded like an animal roaring in anger.

In the next moment, the slaps and punches stopped, and she collapsed, no longer able to stand on her own.

But she never hit the floor. Instead, someone caught and cradled her against a wide, warm chest.

"Shhh, sweetheart. It's all right. I've got you."

"Noah?" she managed to ask through lips that felt two sizes bigger than normal.

"Yes, Bailey, it's me. I'm here now and you're safe."

The voice sounded like Noah's deep grumbly growl, but at the same time, it didn't.

"Cold," she whispered as she leaned her head against his chest. "So cold."

After that, she had a hard time tracking things. Noah was here, her father was not beating on her any longer, and that was enough for now.

"Sir, I need you to put her down so we can check her over," a stranger's voice said, pulling her out of the gray fog she had slipped into.

"No," she whispered.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

Noah shushed her before telling the stranger, "I'm not putting her down while we're still in this house. I'll carry her out to the ambulance, and you can look her over there."

"But sir—"

"Take it or leave it. I'm not putting her down in here."

Bailey remained half aware of what was going on until Noah laid her down. Not wanting to lose connection with him, she lifted her hand and waved it. "Noah!"

Instantly, it was enveloped in warmth. "It's all right, Crittermaker. I'm right here. I'm not going to leave you."

Opening her right eye just enough to see out of, she turned her head until she could see him. She looked up at him and whispered, "Mine," before she faded out and everything went dark.

WHILE HE WANTED TO SHIFT AND HUNT DOWN THE MONSTER who had been beating his mate, Noah stayed beside Bailey instead. His mate needed him more than the man needed to be killed. Once Bailey was safe, secure and on the mend, he could always come back and kill him later.

Noah stared down at the unconscious woman lying on the stretcher until Micah returned. A glance at the man's unbruised knuckles told the story, but he asked anyway: "Did you get him?"

"No, he got away from me. For an old drunk guy, he could really move."

Noah nodded with a grunt. Yep, he would definitely be coming back for the asshole later.

"I saw a couple bags of stuff by the front door. Do you want me to get them and take them to the farm?"

"Yeah. Also check the shed out back. She told me the other day that she hid her stuffed animals and supplies out there so her dad wouldn't know about them." "That was her dad?" Micah asked with a darkening expression.

"I believe so. I'll get more answers once we get her to the hospital," Noah said. "For now, get her stuff and head back to the farm. I'll call and let you know what's going on as soon as I find out."

"Sure thing, boss. Hope she pulls through," Micah said before turning toward the house.

With that dealt with, Noah turned his attention back to his mate. The paramedic worked around him as his partner drove them to the hospital. Even there, he stayed by her side, though he was surprised the emergency room staff allowed it. But every time he let go of her hand, she cried out until he took it back into his again. Her hand was so cold in his, he wondered if that had something to do with shock, or if she was just cold natured. Either way, he was determined she would never be cold again.

He remained quiet as the medical team worked, listening closely as they charted her injuries. From a possible concussion and facial bruising to a fractured bone just above her ankle, Bailey was one battered woman.

Noah made mental note of each and every injury so that he could return them on her father, before he killed the man. And he would kill the man. It was what any shifter would do to someone who had injured his mate. And from what the doctor was saying, some of the bruising was two or three weeks old. X-rays might show a pattern of abuse going back years.

"We're going to have to sedate her before we take her to radiology," the doctor said as he tapped away at the computer tablet in his hand. One of the nurses started an IV in the arm Noah wasn't attached to while the other found a blanket to cover her with since she was now trembling. "Then you'll have to move to the waiting room, sir."

"I'm not leaving her," Noah stated. "Consider me her bodyguard from now until she leaves the hospital."

The doctor looked like he wanted to argue, until he looked at Noah. "You can stay until she wakes up. Then she'll have the choice of you staying or leaving."

Noah nodded but said nothing else. There was nothing else to say. She was his mate, they both knew it, and she would not want him going anywhere.

His pocket buzzed and rang out with the ringtone assigned to all the farmhands. Pulling it out of his pocket earned him a frown from the nurse. "We don't allow cell phone use in the ER."

Ignoring her, he answered. "What's up, Micah?"

"I talked to the police. They're heading your way to talk to you and her. Got her bags from the house and found a couple of bags of craft stuff in the shed, so I took those as well. Benny and Naomi are coming to take her car to the farm. Do you want me to check the house to see if there's anything else of hers?"

"Yeah, thanks, man. It looks like I'm going to be here for a while. Keep the boys calm and on task for the rest of the day. I'll call Benny once she's moved to a room. If you need me, text. The staff doesn't like cell phones."

"Got it. Bye." With that Micah hung up and Noah returned his phone to his pocket. "I won't use it again in the emergency room."

CHAPTER 10

A steady beeping and an increasing tightness around her upper arm pulled Bailey from a fuzzy dream of pink clouds and baby goats. Blinking her eyes, she squinted into the painfully bright lights. She was not sure how he knew, but suddenly someone leaned over her, blocking the light. A familiar scent filled her lungs.

"Noah?"

"Shh, sweet mate. I'm here. You're safe."

Noah's deep voice and the touch of his hand covering hers cut through her building panic. She took another breath, moaning when her ribs let her know that wasn't such a good idea. Relaxing, she took stock, but had a hard time isolating the pains. It felt like every nerve in her body was firing off.

"Hurts," she whimpered, closing her eyes when he moved away and the bright light was back assaulting her eyes.

"I know. The doctors sedated you earlier, but did not want to give you pain medicine until you woke up again."

Her mouth was so dry, she was certain she was breathing sand as she tried to lick her lips.

Before she could voice another complaint, a spoon touched her lower lip. She opened her mouth and welcomed the spoonful of ice chips Noah fed her. She sucked on them and then opened her mouth for more. That continued until someone bustled into the room.

"So, Miss Dupree, you're back with us," a woman's voice greeted, far too cheerfully for Bailey's liking.

She forced her eyes open and looked at the woman in nursing scrubs who'd just come in. She was much older than Bailey had assumed from her voice. The woman took a moment to make notes on her computer tablet before approaching the bed.

"How are you feeling after your nap?"

"Hurts," Bailey said, trying not to let the welling tears escape.

She had always had a low pain threshold, something her father liked to exploit in the past. A hard smack on the ass or arm would cause her to tear up and cry. This much pain was overwhelming.

"I'm sure you do. Well, let's see what I can do about that," the nurse said, suddenly all business. She injected something into Bailey's IV and then after bustling around the room a few more minutes, she left.

"Bailey, sweetheart, who was that man?"

"Man?" Bailey frowned as the sharp edge of pain began to dull.

"The man who hurt you. Who was he?"

Bailey whimpered as the memory of her father's actions returned even as she began to float back into the pink clouds. "Dad," she managed to murmur just before a black hole rose up and swallowed her whole. NOAH SUCKED A BREATH AT THIS CONFIRMATION OF HIS suspicions. Her own father had done this? Beaten her nearly to death? How long had this been going on? Why the hell had she stayed with the monster if he hurt her?

Noah had so many questions, but with Bailey now sleeping under the effect of painkillers, she was in no position to answer any of them. For now, he could do nothing except protect her in the extremely unlikely event that the man showed up here.

Settling back in his chair, he pulled out his phone and sent a text to Naomi asking her to prepare the guestroom. He also texted Micah and Benny and updated them on the situation, and that he would not be returning to the farm for at least a couple of days.

Both men responded with a thumb's up emoji.

Naomi asked what he needed her to bring him when she came to town in the morning. As usual, his housekeeper was going way above and beyond in the caregiving.

He responded and then slid his phone away just as Bailey began to whimper and reach out for something. He caught her hand, surprised at the power in hers as she squeezed his.

"I'm here, Bailey. I'm not going anywhere," he murmured. Rising from the chair, he leaned over the bed and brushed a kiss on her forehead. "Rest and heal so I can take you to Fuzzy Heaven with me."

"Don't wanna die," she murmured as she moved her head back and forth.

"You're not going to die for a long, long time, my mate. But you will be coming to Fuzzy Heaven to live there for the rest of our lives," Noah assured her as he pulled the chair closer to the bed and settled in it once more.

"Okay," she whispered before growing still and returning to deep sleep.

As he watched her breathe, Noah began to make plans. Not just finding and dealing with her father, but also for his and Bailey's future. Though the rescue farm had been his dream since he had rescued his first dog, if she didn't like farm life, he would give it up. Anything to make his mate happy.

IT WAS THREE DAYS BEFORE BAILEY WAS ABLE TO STAY AWAKE for more than a few minutes at a time. All she could remember over those days was the pain that seemed to radiate throughout her body, and that every time she woke up, Noah was sitting beside the bed holding her hand.

When she woke on the third day feeling more awake than she had in days, she found Noah asleep in the recliner that had been pushed as close to the bed as it could get. His arm reached through the metal railing with his fingers entwined with hers.

She watched him sleep, taking in the longer than usual beard and the dark smudges under his closed eyes. She looked at their interlocked fingers and thought she felt a warmth pulsing from his hand to hers.

"Welcome back."

She looked into his face and smiled. "Morning," she returned softly.

"Feel better?" he asked as he shifted the chair until he sat up instead of lying back in it.

When he pulled his hand from hers to stretch, the cold that she normally felt began to wash through her. It began with her hand where Noah had held it and swept up her arm, spreading through her body with each heartbeat. She began to shiver despite the weight of several blankets over her body.

What was it about this man that he could chase away the chill of life that had enveloped her entire being until now?

Before she could analyze that question too deeply, he stood from the chair. He leaned over her and brushed a kiss on her nose. "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

She huffed at the thought as he walked through a door across the room. Probably the bathroom, she deduced when he pulled the door closed behind himself. She looked at her right leg that lay on top of the covers, encased in pristine white bandages from above her knee to her toes. It did not look like she would be going anywhere anytime soon. At least not without some help.

She was just settling into a deep well of icy depressive pity when the bathroom door opened. Noah reappeared carrying a washcloth in one hand.

"Close your eyes," he said as he crossed to the side of the bed.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to wash your face and hands. It will help you feel a little better," he explained as he lifted the cloth toward her face. With a shrug, Bailey did as she was told. Might as well let him care for her now, though she knew it would not last long. Men were not natural caregivers and as soon as she was able to move out of this bed, he would be gone for the weeks or months it would take her to fully heal. Then, maybe, he would come back, check in, and then decide whether he really wanted to be her mate or not.

And that knowledge just added to her downward spiraling mood.

He quickly wiped her face and neck, then both hands as far up her arms as he could without disturbing the tubes going in both arms. After returning the cloth to the bathroom, he returned and pushed the call button.

"Nurses' station," the tinny voice answered almost immediately.

"Bailey Dupree is awake and fairly coherent," Noah said as he stared deep into her eyes.

"Someone will be right there, Mr. Killian," the voice returned before the connection clicked off.

"Wow, how do you rate such great service?" Bailey asked as he retrieved a small bottle of water from a cooler under the window.

He opened it as he crossed the room. Taking the bendable straw from the cup, he put it in the bottle and held it up to her lips. He was surprised, but pleased, when she drank deeply without argument.

"Ex-football player with a little bit of fame in the past," he said with a smirk. "I'll use whatever I have to in order to stay with you and get you the best care possible." "So, you haven't decided I'm too much trouble to be your mate?"

Noah froze, then looked down at the battered woman. "Why would you ask such a thing? I would never do that. Mates are for life. For longer than life. Mates are for eternity. There will never be anyone else in my life now that I've found you. We just have to get you healed up and out of here so I can mate you and claim you. Then you'll understand everything I'm feeling."

CHAPFER II

It was another week before Bailey was released from the hospital. After ten days of sitting at her bedside, only leaving to get food or meet one of his employees down in the lobby, Noah seemed even more eager to leave than she was.

In truth, she didn't think she was ready for this. Moving in with Noah wasn't even the problem. That felt so right, even though she had food in the fridge older than their relationship. It would be fine if she was moving in to help him at Fuzzy Heaven Farm, but she was moving in so that he could help her and she couldn't do anything to make up for it. Until the home care service found her another client, she had no paycheck, and until the doctor cleared her, she couldn't work anyway. She couldn't even walk without the help of her rolling knee scooter.

"Wait right there," Noah said after parking his truck near the house.

As if I have a choice, Bailey thought, but forced herself to hold her tongue. He had been so patient with her during her entire hospital stay, but especially the last couple of days when she was grumpy and fussy and horrible.

She watched Noah climb out of the truck and came around the front. Instead of getting the wheelchair or scooter out of the back, he came around to her door.

She unhooked her seatbelt and opened her door as he approached, earning herself a frown from the big shifter, but surprisingly he did not say anything. Instead, he leaned in and kissed her, sending fire through her bloodstream that burned away all her doubts, if only temporarily.

"Welcome home, mate," he said as he picked her up bridal style and carried her toward the house.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked as they entered the house and he continued down the main hallway. "You shouldn't be carrying me like this. You'll hurt your back or something."

He chuckled. "I've carried calves around that weigh more than you do."

"I doubt that," she grumbled, pinching at her hip. "I'm all bloated from the IVs and hospital food. I weigh more than any calf, including elephants and whales."

"And that's three," he remarked as he entered the kitchen and headed toward the rolling office chair sitting at the near end of the long table.

"Three what?"

"Three punishments. I'm keeping track and when you're feeling better, you will be going over my lap for a spanking."

She froze, stiffening in his arms. How was a spanking different than the hand upside her head her father had used as a quick punishment? Had she made a mistake trusting Noah to take care of her? Now that she was here and helpless to escape, would he turn into the monster her father had become?

She began to whimper in fear.

Noah set her down at once and knelt before her. "What's going on in your head, mate?"

"You're going to beat me," she whispered as tears filled her eyes. "Just like him."

"What? Oh, God, never. I would never beat you like he did. What he did was out of control, overemotional and abusive. I'm talking about a spanking, controlled, and given calmly and with very clear, strict boundaries. But if you want, I'll come up with another punishment."

"Like what?" she asked apprehensively.

"Probably writing lines," he said after a moment's thought. "Understand, Bailey, that the point of punishment is not to hurt you, but to help you understand that you are a beautiful precious person, and in no way are a burden or a pain or too heavy to be carried around. Okay? I'm sorry I scared you and I promise I will never, ever raise my voice to you or raise a hand to you in anger. Forgive me?"

Bailey sniffed as he used a paper napkin to wipe her tears away.

Thinking over his actions of the past ten days, Bailey knew Noah was speaking the truth. After all, even though he claimed they were mates, he had yet to push her for sex. Though truth be told, she was still a fairly colorfully bruised eyesore, and with the cast on her leg, sex might no longer be on the table.

"Sorry I'm such a screwed-up mess," she whispered.

"You are not a mess. You are my beloved mate. And I don't want you to say anything bad about yourself from here on out. Deal?"

"Deal," she said with a wide yawn. Why was she tired? She'd slept more in the past ten days in the hospital than she had in ages. She should not be tired already.

"Good. Now for some lunch before we get you settled in so you can take a nap."

The HARDEST CHALLENGE NOAH EVER FACED WAS NOT RIPPING off Bailey's clothes, laying her across the kitchen table, and mating her right here, right now. Instead, he brushed a kiss on her forehead before going to the refrigerator. Naomi was off doing her weekly run into town for groceries and whatever other supplies were needed to keep the farm running smoothly, but she had texted him earlier that she would leave a platter of sandwiches for them.

Noah's teeth ached, his cock pulsed with pain, and his bear was ready to tear him apart, but he could not mate with his woman. Yet. Though he wasn't sure how much longer he would be able to control himself, Noah was determined that Bailey pick the time of their mating.

After Bailey ate a sandwich and washed it down with a glass of milk, Noah carried her across the hall to the small parlor Naomi had set up as a temporary bedroom. Pulling back the covers on the double bed the men had moved from upstairs, he laid her down, then took her shoe and sock off her uninjured leg.

"Do you want me to help you take off your pants?"

"No, thanks. I'll be okay sleeping in them," she answered softly as she rolled onto her side and snuggled into the pillows. "The boys set up one of the monitors we use to keep an eye on pregnant cows so that when you wake up all you have to do is call out and I'll hear you." He pointed to the camera and microphone set up on the small table in the corner.

Her response was a soft snore. His mate was already asleep.

Picking up the receiver, Noah clipped it on his belt before forcing himself to walk out of the room. He pulled the door half closed behind himself, then crossed the hall to the kitchen. After eating two sandwiches, he cleaned up their lunch dishes and put the rest of the sandwiches back in the refrigerator for later. He checked on Bailey again, then made himself walk away again. He wasn't sure what to do with himself now that she was safe in his home.

Not that she would be truly safe until her father had been dealt with. The cops hadn't found him yet, and as much as Noah did believe they were taking the matter seriously, he was a realist about how many resources they were willing to devote to finding him. He had his own men out looking, but so far, they hadn't turned up much beside the fact that the man had been fired for drinking at work the day of the attack and had not been back to the house since. In other words, he knew there would be consequences for his abuse this time, but did that mean he would run from them or want revenge?

Because of that, Noah did not want to leave the house until Naomi returned from town. He also did not want to face the mess he suspected his office had become in his absence. Just because he wasn't there to deal with it didn't mean the paperwork stopped. Standing outside her door, he listened and heard her breathing, slow and easy. Knowing she would sleep for several hours now that there were no nurses to wake her, he forced himself to walk down the hall enter his office. As expected, the top of his desk was covered with papers. He made a mental note that the next person he hired would not be a farm hand, but someone who could deal with the surprising amount of paperwork the small farm generated.

Setting the monitor on the corner of his desk, he piled all the papers together before he went through them page by page. He sorted out the bills and invoices that needed to be paid from the letters, invitations, and other miscellaneous paperwork.

CHAPTER 12

"Have you changed your mind?" Bailey asked as she used the knee scooter to walk herself into his office.

It had been a month since Noah had brought her home with him and she was tired of him keeping her at arm's length.

She was the only one brave enough to enter the office when Noah was working. The rest of the Fuzzy Heaven employees had begun spending less and less time in the house, preferring not to be around their boss, who was always in a bad mood these days. Only Bailey had an idea of why, because she had read a lot of shifter romance novels when sitting with her clients. She knew he was frustrated at living with her, but not finishing their mating.

While they spent most days together, and had made out nearly every evening, Noah had yet to take things any further than kissing and groping her over her clothes. Whenever she had tried to touch his cock or give him a blowjob, he quickly left her room.

Bailey had seen her orthopedic doctor the day before. While the x-rays showed her leg was not completely healed, the doctor did take off the cast that had encased her leg from the thigh down and replaced it with a removable cast that ended just below her knee. She still could not put any weight on it until her next appointment in two weeks, but she already felt a hundred percent better.

Her ribs were healed, her bruises faded, and her pain diminished to nothing. Except for having to use the scooter to get around, Bailey felt she was as back to normal as she could get. Though being demanding was not her normal style, she'd decided it was time she made demands of her grumpy bear.

Noah looked up from his papers and frowned in confusion. "Have I changed my mind about what?"

Though it would crush her heart, Bailey needed to know if it was time to find a new place to live or not. "About mating me. Do you not want to have me as your mate anymore? Is it time for me to leave? Then you can get back to your life before I invaded."

Noah looked stunned. "What? No. Absolutely not. You are my mate and aren't going anywhere. How could you think such a thing?"

Bailey had a feeling she was poking the bear and it would take another moment or two of needling before he would let go of his incredible control and take what they both wanted him to have.

Shrugging, she dropped her gaze to his broad chest. "You haven't tried to have sex with me, you won't let me pleasure you, and you're getting grumpier by the day. I figured you were getting tired of having me around, but were too kind to tell me to leave."

She jumped when Noah surged to his feet. Before she could move any further, he rounded the desk and scooped up her in his arms.

"You are my mate and are not going anywhere without me. I've held off because you were healing, and I knew that if we did anything more than what we've done, I would lose control. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you by being too amorous. I had promised myself I wouldn't push for more until you asked me for it."

"How many more times do you need me to ask?" she countered. "Here I am, telling you I'm healed, I'm ready, and I want you. What are you going to do about it?"

Without a word, he hip-bumped the door all the way open and carried her away, jogging easily up the stairs before turning left. He swiftly moved them down the hall and through the doorway at the end.

Bailey had just a moment to look around, seeing the big room with cream-colored walls and navy-blue curtains and wide pine board floors. The bed he set her down on was the biggest one she'd ever seen and the blanket she landed on appeared to be a handmade quilt.

There was a big golden-brown dresser along one wall, and a big navy blue club chair with a table beside it and a lamp behind it filled another. The room surrounded her with comfort, making her want to curl up on the bed and stay awhile.

Turning her attention to the man standing beside the bed, she said, "You have a beautiful bedroom."

"Thanks. This will be our room for the rest of our lives. We can change anything, except the bed. I need a big bed," Noah said as he pulled off his shirt and sat beside her.

Bailey was so distracted by his broad, hairy chest she could not respond. Instead, she reached out and ran a hand

down the middle of his chest, stroking the pelt of black hair that covered him from collar bone to beltline.

"Silky," she murmured as she repeated the action.

Her pussy clenched and dampened as her body prepared itself for what was to come.

NOAH BEGAN TO MAKE A GUTTURAL PURRING SOUND AS Bailey stroked his chest. "Are you sure, Bailey? Are absolutely sure you're ready to be my mate? Because once I claim you, there's no leaving me. No walking away."

The last thing he wanted was to let her go, but if she was in any way hesitant, he would walk away and go spend the night in the woods. He'd spent more than a few nights the past few weeks wandering the woods in his bear form. Allowing his beast freedom was the only way he kept his sanity.

"If you don't claim me and right now, this afternoon, I may kill you," she threatened as she seized a fistful of his chest hair and tugged until he winced.

Noah's already hard as stone cock jerked at the threat combined with the heat and need he saw in her eyes.

"Whatever my mate wishes," he murmured as he gently worked her fingers free from his chest hair before stretching out on the bed beside her.

"Really? Anything I wish?" Bailey grinned at him.

He had to return her grin at the happiness he saw in her eyes. "Well, I can't buy you the moon, or get you the sun, but anything within reason." "I want ..." She paused long enough that Noah began to get nervous. "I want you to make me your mate, please."

He chuckled. "That I can definitely do," Noah said as he moved so he was over her. He was careful to keep his weight resting on his elbows as he leaned down and kissed her. The kiss started hot and turned into an inferno in seconds.

While he thought about taking things slow and easy, Bailey, his cock, and bear all had different ideas. When they were breathless, he shoved himself back and leapt from the bed.

"Noah?"

"Get out of those clothes quick or I'll be ripping them from your body," he said, his voice low and growly as his bear made itself known.

He opened his jeans and shoved them down and off his legs as he watched Bailey strip off her clothes as well. Once he was naked, he forced himself to stop and just breathe, trying unsuccessfully to calm his beast within.

When the loose shorts and panties caught on her cast, he stepped in to help. It only took a moment to ease them off her foot and toss them over her shoulder. And then they were both naked.

He held himself still, waiting as he took in Bailey's beautiful body. The bruises that had covered most of her body had faded, and she had put on a few much-needed pounds in the weeks since the hospital. Even with the removable cast on her lower leg, she was too beautiful for words and all he could think about was making her his mate.

She held out a hand to him, palm up, then curled her fingers in a come here motion. At that point, the last threads holding his control in check snapped. Crawling onto the bed, he did not stop until he was crouched over her.

"You are so damn beautiful," he said as kissed her.

She kissed him back, and though his body demanded he dive between her thighs, fuck the hell out of her, and claim her as his mate, Noah held himself back one last time.

Instead, he began stroking her skin and kissing his way down her body. Her skin felt so soft as he licked and nipped at her breasts before continuing down her body. Her honey spice cake scent grew stronger as he continued kissing and licking over her belly to her mound. He was careful as he pushed her legs apart and settled between them.

Lowering his face, he licked at her open pussy, making a happy purr as her juice coated his tongue. With a deep breath, he settled in, determined his mate would have her first orgasm with his head buried between her legs. Then, and only then, would he move up and finally, finally claim her as his mate for the rest of their lives.

Then, once their lives were irrevocably tied together, he would go hunting and deal with her father.

CHAPTER 12

Everywhere Noah touched her, kissed her, tasted her warmed and the heat radiated out until her entire body glowed with it. His tongue stroked over her pussy, dipping inside to taste her, then moved up to play with her clit. Her temperature rose until she thought she would burst into flames at any second.

Noah slid two fingers into her pussy, her body tightened around him, clamping around them as they drove in and out. Her orgasm wound tighter and tighter around her like a rubber band until it snapped when he gently nibbled on her clit.

She screamed as her fingers scratched at the bed and her body arched off the mattress. Her orgasm shot through her like lightning bouncing around in a glass bottle.

Noah gentled his touch, easing her back into her body. He kissed her clit one last time before slowly crawling up the bed until his cock bumped against her pussy lips and he hovered over her like a giant protector bear.

"Beautiful," he murmured, brushing a kiss on her lips. "So damn beautiful."

Bailey could tell by the tight expression on his face that he was once again holding back. And that was the last thing she wanted.

Lifting her arms and legs, she wrapped them around his body and tightened them until he dropped down until only millimeters separated them.

"Claim me, my bear," she ordered. "Make me your mate."

It had been a long time since she had last had sex, and Noah was not a small man in any respect. She sucked a breath and held it as he pushed the head into her pussy, slowly driving it deeper and deeper until his cock filled her completely.

"Oh, God," she murmured when he paused and held still. Looking up into his eyes, she watched in amazement as they shifted from bright grass green to glowing gold.

"I'm sorry, but this is going to be fast. I promise I'll make it up to you. Next time," he said, his voice so deep and growly that she barely recognized the words.

As he apologized, his canines dropped into place and he shifted to lick at the side of her neck where it flared out into her shoulder. When he began sucking at that spot, her arousal shot back through the roof.

He began to piston his cock in and out of her body, driving hard and fast, which sent her flying higher and higher. She felt his cock growing even thicker in her pussy and knew he was close as well.

He nudged her head to the left side and then she screamed as he struck. The pain of his biting at the right side of the base of her neck swirled with the pleasure of their fucking and, in the next heartbeat, she felt like she was blown apart with her orgasm. At the same time, she felt Noah's cock pulse and fill her with the heat of his seed as he roared with his own release. It took several minutes before Bailey's breathing returned to normal and the muscles that had locked up with her orgasm, released and allowed her to relax fully onto the mattress.

Noah pulled his teeth from her flesh and licked the bite mark closed before dropping his forehead to rest on the bed next to hers.

"Are you all right, mate?" he whispered.

It took a moment for Bailey to figure out how to pull in a breath big enough to say, "Ask me when I return to my body."

Noah gave a deep-throated purring sound in response.

Sliding an arm between her back and the bed, Noah rolled their bodies until they both rested on the bed on their sides. His cock remained buried deep in her pussy as he pulled her leg up so the cast rested over his thigh.

His deep chuckle had her smiling in response as she took a deep breath and gave a little purr of her own, which harmonized with his.

THEY WERE MATED. HE NEEDED TO CLEAN THEM BOTH UP, BUT he had no motivation to move. He was right where he had wanted to be since the first time he had scented his mate: with her wrapped in his arms and his cock buried deep in her body.

Bailey's soft breathing told him his mate was asleep. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to drift. For the first time in almost two months, his bear was happy and content.

He woke when his cock slipped from her pussy, but did not immediately move. His mate was moving next to him, clearly taking pains not to wake him. Curious, he feigned sleep as she slipped from his embrace and wiggled her way down the bed.

He tried to remain still when she wrapped one hand around the base of his cock and licked at it like it was an ice cream cone. His cock immediately began to fill as his breathing quickened. He closed both hands into fists to keep himself from moving when she wrapped her lips around the top of his cock. He was determined to let her play, at least for a few minutes, before he pulled her up and impaled her on his long, thick cock once more.

She slowly took more and more in, her mouth warm and wet around him. When she began to slowly slide up and down his cock, sucking gently, he could not help but purr. His bear was so happy, it wanted to dance.

Instead, he reached down with one hand and combed his fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head. He did not force anything, just added another connection to his beautiful mate as she began to hum. The vibrations sent him higher and higher as his hips began to rock back and forth. It did not take long for his orgasm to gather at the base of his spine.

"Come up here, sweetheart," he murmured, hoping to hold off until he was buried deep in her pussy.

She ignored him, sucking harder and moving faster up and down his cock. The orgasm that was building at the base of his spine moved through his balls and up his cock. In the next moment, his seed pulsed out and she swallowed every drop.

Once he finished, she licked his cock clean before dropping a kiss on the tip and working her way back up the mattress to emerge from the covers. "Hello," she whispered with a grin.

"Hello," he returned, still breathing hard as he worked to recover from the best blowjob he had ever received. "How are you feeling?"

Her grin widened even further, and her eyes twinkled with mischief as she leaned in and kissed his chin. "I feel amazing. How are you feeling?"

He could not help but laugh before he said, "I'm feeling a little weak in the knees at the moment. I'm also wishing I had the stamina I did twenty years ago."

"Oh? And what would you be doing with that stamina?"

"I'd be rolling you over and fucking you until neither of us could move. But you beat me to it, only you're still moving."

"That's okay. I'll stay here with you until you can move again."

He smiled as she snuggled into his side when he rolled to his back. While he did not fall asleep, he did relax and float, enjoying the feel of his mate wrapped in his arms.

Life was good.

CHAPTER 14

Saturday morning, Bailey happily made her way on her knee scooter into the farmers' market. Noah was just behind her, pulling her little purple wagon, while Micah was in charge of bringing in the ice chests full of meat, eggs, and other Fuzzy Heaven products. It had taken a lot of convincing, and a promise that she would stay seated unless absolutely necessary, for Noah to agree to her coming to the market.

Since being released from the hospital, she had spent her days making critters, to the point that Naomi had been sent twice to the craft store for more supplies. She was not able to return to work for a few more weeks, and needed the income if she was going to feel like she was pulling her own weight.

Once again, they were assigned to adjoining spaces. While Micah set up Fuzzy Heaven's table, Noah helped her put out the shoeboxes along the back of her table before laying out the cloth to cover them. By raising the second row of animals, she hoped they would be seen and bought as quickly as the first row did. After she was happy with the placement of the boxes and the tablecloth, Bailey took over and began setting her critters out. When she finished, she worked her way around the table and took her place on the folding chair, ready for the day to begin. She was surprised by how many of the other vendors stopped by the table to tell her they had missed her. More than a few also bought critters, for family or friends or for themselves. Bailey could only smile and thank them as they hugged their new friends and handed her cash before heading back to their own booths.

"Quick, eat this," Noah said as he handed her a breakfast sandwich.

"How can you be hungry already?" Bailey took the sandwich and set it on the table for later. "We ate a big breakfast at the farm two hours ago."

He leaned in until his lips were right next to her ear. "A shifter's metabolism runs hotter and faster than a human's. I'm always hungry. And for more than just food. Wanna go home and fool around?"

Bailey could not help but giggle at his suggestion. "Get back to your table. I have critters to sell."

Noah made a disgruntled noise, but slowly backed away. "Let me know if you need anything."

"I will."

She took a deep breath as the opening cowbell rang. Though she still could not put weight on her leg, she was determined to sell her critters and make the money she needed to live. It was more important to her now than ever since she had not been able to return to work, and wasn't even sure Noah would let her out of his sight after the doctor released her to walk.

It was a busy day, and she remained upbeat about her return to the market. And then, as she finished bagging up several critters for her latest customer, a familiar voice hit her like a fist.

"So, this is where you've been hiding."

Bailey froze, but only for a moment. After calmly thanking the woman and trading the bag for her money, Bailey turned to face her father. "What are you doing here?"

She felt Noah step closer and could feel the menace radiating off the bear shifter. Glancing his way, she shook her head. The last thing she wanted was for her mate to end up getting arrested for attacking her father in this busy and very public place.

"I heard you were here. When are you coming home?" Ted Dupree asked, leaning on her table, and displacing several of her critters, one of which rolled onto the floor.

Bailey's nose twitched at the man's body odor and bad breath, but she refused to back away. She was free of him, and with Noah nearby, there was nothing he could do to her without serious repercussions, even if he did not realize it.

"I'm not coming home. Ever. You put me in the hospital for ten days. Why would I want to return to your house again?"

She wanted to stand up, lean in, and show him he no longer scared her, but she could tell her father's temper could flip either way in a heartbeat. Knowing Noah was watching the interaction, ready to step in, gave her the boost of courage she needed to not back down.

Her father looked surprised for a moment. Her answer and the strength in her tone had obviously been unexpected. There was no way she would return to that house, that cold, lonely existence, even if Noah let her. "You need to come home. Today. I know where you're staying and I know what you've been doing with him," her father said, pointing at Noah as his voice grew louder with every word. "Come home or I'll be forced to do something you won't like."

The hostility in his tone and the anger in his eyes sent an icy chill race through Bailey. There was a part of her, broken by years of desperate peace-keeping efforts, that wanted to give in and go home with him in the hopes that he would calm down, even though she knew better. Shifting in her chair to stand up and face off with him, the cast on her leg reminded her of what had happened the last time she had been alone with him. At the same time, a large, warm hand settled on her shoulder, holding her in her chair.

"You need to leave. Now," Noah said easily as he moved around the table, drawing her father's attention away from her. "Otherwise, the manager will be forced to call the police and have you escorted from the premises, and you'll probably be booked for assault and battery."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," her father sputtered as he straightened.

"No, I'm not. And neither is she," Noah said, nodding to the woman standing behind her father.

Kate had her phone out and several of the men who had booths close by had gathered in a half-circle around her father. Beyond them, customers gathered to watch the drama unfold.

"What's it going to be, sir? Shall I call the police to escort you out?" Kate asked.

Bailey held her breath as she waited for her father to make a decision. Would he continue to make a scene, or would he leave quietly?

"I'm going. But she'd better come home tonight. Or else," he blustered as he stormed away from Bailey's table. An aisle opened to the front door and Bailey did not take an easy breath until he left the building.

"Thank you. Thank you all," she said, looking around at the men who still looked like they wanted to go to war on her behalf.

"Are you all right?" Kate asked as the vendors slowly dispersed back to their own booths.

"I'm fine, thanks. That was really impressive."

"We're a family," Kate said with a smile as she knelt and picked up the critters her father had knocked off the table. "We take care of our own. Let me know if he comes back. Next time I won't bother to confront him, I'll just call the police and have him arrested for trespassing or public display of drunkenness or something."

"I will. Thanks again."

As Kate walked away, Bailey looked around, frowning when she did not see Noah anywhere in sight.

Looking over at Micah, she asked, "Where did he go?"

NOAH WAS RATIONAL ENOUGH TO REALIZE HE COULD NOT shred the man to pieces on the street, but he could give him a warning of what was to come if he did not leave Bailey alone. He followed Mr. Dupree out of the market building. The man stormed about, bumping into people then cursing them for being in his way. How had such a sweet, loving person like Bailey come from such a psychotic fuckwit like him?

When the man stopped at a rust bucket of an SUV parked on the wrong side of the road, Noah made his move.

"Hey, Mr. Dupree," he called as he approached, stopping far enough away he would not be tempted to rip the man's head off.

The man turned quickly, losing his balance, and ending up leaning against his vehicle. He scowled as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, it's you. Send my daughter home. Now. She needs to come home today."

"No. I won't be doing that. I just wanted to tell you to leave her alone. Don't call. Don't text. Don't ever come back to the market. As far as you're concerned, she's dead. Do you understand?" Noah worked to control his temper, though his bear was ready to go to war on this asshole.

Mr. Dupree's expression darkened even further. He pushed to stand on his feet, though he swayed like a stalk of wheat in a breeze. "You've had her long enough. You should be tired of her by now. Send her home. She's *my* daughter, she belongs to me."

"She may be your daughter, but she's my woman, and I'm not going to give her back," Noah said, his voice dropping to growly bear range.

"She's a cunt, just like any other woman. Get yourself another one. Bailey belongs to me," Mr. Dupree continued, unaware that his life was in serious danger as Noah's bear grew more and more agitated.

Taking a deep breath, Noah fought to keep from shifting. "She's not your property. She is an adult woman and has agreed to be with me, now and for the rest of our lives. If you wish to contact her in the future, you'll be speaking to me first."

With that, Noah forced himself to turn and walk away. Even as he did so, he knew this was not the end of it. Her father was too drunk and too stubborn to heed the good advice Noah had given him.

Pulling out his phone, he called 9-1-1 and reported a drunk driver, giving the location and description of both Mr. Dupree and his SUV. Maybe that would distract the man long enough for Noah's temper to cool. For now, he had meat to sell and a mate to care for.

When he returned to his table, Bailey looked like she was ready to burst. "Where did you go?" she demanded as soon as he stepped behind her table.

"I wanted to have a little talk with your father. I told him to stay away from you," Noah brushed a kiss on the top of her head as he gently squeezed her shoulder.

That was as much affection he felt comfortable showing with as many people around and no doubt watching them. Otherwise, he would drag her to the floor behind her table and claim her again.

But that would have to wait until they got home and behind the locked door of their bedroom.

CHAPTER 15

Bailey wanted to dance, she was so happy and excited.

The doctor had finally released her from her cast so she could walk around the farm and play with the babies. She had not heard from her father in the ten days since he had showed up at her table at the market. And at the moment she, Noah, Naomi, and the rest of the staff were in the barn, anxiously watching Millie, one of the nanny goats, give birth.

"You know, boss, she might reject it," Benny said as he chewed on a piece of hay.

"Why would she do that?" Bailey asked.

She was determined to learn all about the goat business, beyond the fact that baby goats were adorable, and fun to play and snuggle with.

"This is her first time as a mama and she's been skittish, more than usual. Just a feeling," he said with a shrug. "There's a number of reasons they reject their babies, Miss. We don't always know why. If she does reject one or both, we'll have to step in and take over the feeding and care of the little ones. Don't worry, we'll make sure they're well taken care of."

Bailey looked into the pen at the restless goat with new respect. Other than her huge belly, she seemed way too little to be having babies. When the little doe began to cry and kick at her sides, Bailey knew it was time for her to get out of there.

She slipped away and made her way to the other end of the goat barn where Manda and her baby were in another pen. Manda had delivered her baby the day before. Leaning against the pen, she watched as the baby tucked his head up under mama's belly and had a snack.

Just watching nature at work made her horny. Looking at the front of the barn, she saw Noah staring at her instead of the laboring goat. He smiled at her, and after having a word with Benny, stalked in her direction. When he reached her, he did not stop. Instead, he lifted her and tossed her over one shoulder as he kept moving out the back of the barn into the night that had settled while they had been on Millie-watch.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked through her giggles as he carried her into the darkness.

"You'll see," he responded, his voice that low deep growly tone that told her he was as aroused as she was.

"If I get carried away by mosquitoes, I'm going to come back and haunt you forever."

When he kept walking without responding, she watched his ass cheeks move and licked her lips. They were full and round and called to her. Not sure if it would come back to bite her or not, she began smacking his ass, playing them like bongos, giggling with delight when he popped her on each of her ass cheeks.

"Are you trying to spank me?"

She was giggling so hard she could not answer. When she settled down, she began to sing as she continued patting his ass cheeks.

She squealed in protest when he bent and set her on her feet. The blood rushed out of her head so fast she got dizzy. Her knees refused to hold her, and she began to fall. Thankfully, he caught her before she hit the ground. He held her hips until she found her equilibrium again.

He'd brought her to the gazebo, well away from the main buildings of the farm. Noah released her and walked to one of the enclosed benches. He opened the top and pulled several things out before closing it again. A moment later, a single flame lit the night. He used the barbecue lighter to set several candles to burning, which he placed around the gazebo.

When he turned to look at her, Bailey felt her pussy immediately grow wet. He held out his arm, palm up, and waited. Feeling as if in a dream light by the golden light of candles, Bailey crossed the gazebo and laid her hand in his.

She had been fighting with her feelings for weeks, but here, in this special place, she could hold not hold the words back any longer. Looking deep in his eyes, she spoke from the heart.

"I LOVE YOU, NOAH KILLIAN."

"I love you, too, my sweet mate. So damn much," he said, stepping up until their fronts pressed together.

Sliding his hands down her back, he cupped her ass and lifted her until they were nose to nose, and her feet dangled several inches above the floor. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his middle and smiled. Without another word, he kissed her, immediately pushing for entry past her parted lips so he could taste every inch of her mouth. She allowed his invasion, then began kissing him back.

It was only a few minutes before he had to stop the kissing so they could move on to more. Reaching between her legs, he shifted just enough for a single claw to emerge. He used it to carefully slice her jeans open. He then willed the claw away again. Sliding his fingers through the hole he had just created, he slid her damp panties to the side and slid two fingers into her wide-open, dripping-wet pussy.

"You ripped my jeans," she pointed out softly.

"Yes, I did. I think from now on you're going to have to wear skirts or dresses. That way I can get to you whenever I want."

He watched as she considered his words before nodding with a sassy grin. "I like skirts. Especially long ones so I don't have to wear stockings."

"And no more panties."

"Talk later. Right now, I need your cock in me," she panted.

And with that, the conversation was over. Pulling his fingers from her pussy, he quickly opened his pants and shoved them and his boxers to midthigh, freeing his cock. He staggered to the box seat in the darkest part of the gazebo and sat down.

Once he was comfortable, he lifted her. "Put me in," he ordered gruffly, feeling the need as acutely as ever.

She reached between them and fit the head of his cock to her pussy. As soon as she opened around him, he lowered her until his cock was fully embedded. Their moans harmonized with the symphony of night sounds around them.

"Ride me, mate," he growled.

He kept his arms wrapped around her as she rose and fell over his cock, fucking herself on his staff. His hips began to rhythmically push upward, driving them higher and higher.

His canines dropped into place, and he nuzzled the side of her neck, preparing to claim her again with his bite. When her pussy tightened around his thickening cock, he struck, and they both flew over peak of arousal and into orgasmic nirvana.

His bear curled up and purred a happy sound as they slowly recovered. Though he would have been happy to sit and hold his mate for the rest of the night, the temperature had dropped and she was starting to shiver.

Pulling from her, he used the bandana he always carried to clean them both before straightening their clothes. After blowing out all the candles, he took her hand and led her down the path back toward the main part of the farm.

"You're going to marry me," he rumbled softly.

"I am, am I?" she asked, sounding relaxed, but also sassy and happy.

"Yes, you are. I'll ask you properly, but I just wanted you to know."

Her soft laughter had him smiling. Yes, the universe had gifted him well when they gave him Bailey for a life mate.

Life was amazing.

CHAPTER 16

"Stop calling me!" Bailey yelled into the phone the next morning before disconnecting the call. Though tempted to throw her phone across the living room, she held off, and set it down on the coffee table instead. An icy shiver worked its way up her spine and spread throughout her body.

Since she no longer answered phone calls from his phone number, her father had taken to calling from other people's phones. Her problem was that she had to answer the phone, because it might be the office with a new work assignment or any of the dozens of people who'd taken a business card at the market and was calling with a critter order.

"Your dad?" Noah asked as he stepped into the room.

Bailey nodded. "He's demanding I come home and bring the rent money and groceries."

She could not believe his audacity. It wasn't enough that he beat her on a near daily basis and forced her to care for everything around the house and yard, now he expected her to pay his rent.

Crossing to Noah, she wrapped her arms around his middle and held on. He immediately engulfed her in an embrace that chased away the chill dealing with her father always gave her. Noah rubbed one hand up and down her back in a motion that immediately soothed her. "I know he's your father, but you will not see him. Not now. Not ever. He is out of your life."

"I totally agree, but I'm afraid to ignore him. He sounded so desperate." Bailey leaned into Noah's body, weary from the calls, the threats, the menace that was her father.

"From now on do not answer calls from numbers that you don't know, or numbers that do not have a name attached to them. If it's really important, they'll leave a message, and you can call them back. In fact, let's put your phone in my office and you can only look at it twice a day – after breakfast and just before dinner."

Bailey nodded her agreement. "Sounds like a plan. But what am I going to do about my father? He's not going to go away."

"I'll deal with your father, sweetheart. Don't you worry about a thing. Now, are you ready to go out and check on Millie and her babies?"

"Oh, yes. Let's go," Bailey said, grabbing his hand and pulling him along to the back door.

It was a perfect evening to be outside. She held Noah's hand during the walk to the barn, the connection to her bear sending waves of peace and contentment through her. The warmth that came from his love and their mating made the icy life she had lived with her father a distant memory.

Entering the goat's barn, they found Benny standing by Millie's pen, looking serious.

"Everything okay?" she asked as she stepped up beside the man.

"Not really. Millie's decided to reject one of her babies."

Looking into the pen, she saw Millie and her twins, but could tell immediately that there was a problem. While Millie seemed all right with one baby getting close and suckling, she seemed to be ignoring the other. When the second baby approached, she would walk away, or headbutt the baby to keep it away from her.

"So, what happens now?" Bailey's heart immediately went out to the little one.

"Now there's a decision to be made. We can try putting him with Manda or one of the nannies, but I can't guarantee they'll take him on. The other choice is to bottle feed him."

"How long has he been without feeding?" Noah asked, reminding her that she was not the boss to make such a lifechanging decision.

"Too long, in my opinion. I figured I'd give him a bottle while Micah brings Gizelle in from the field. As an older nanny and a milker, she'd be most likely to adopt him."

Bailey watched her mate as he studied the baby goat for nearly a minute. "Let's try that. If he's not feeding by morning, we'll bring him into the house and start bottle feeding him."

"Can I help?" Bailey could not help but ask. Being around all these babies made her feel like a little kid visiting the petting zoo. To actually help feed the baby would be one of those life experiences she never knew she wanted, but could not wait to have.

Benny looked at Noah who nodded. "I have to run an errand, so you can stay here with Benny and help while I'm gone."

He wrapped her up in a hug and a long, deep kiss before releasing her and stepping back. In the next moment, he had left the barn and was gone. Benny chuckled at her when she swayed and had to grab the top of the pen's fence to stay on her feet.

"Come on, Miss, let's set up a stall for Gizelle, and then we'll go fix baby boy a bottle and then you can learn the fine art of feeding baby farm animals."

NOAH PULLED THE TRUCK TO A STOP DOWN THE BLOCK AND studied the house under the light of the full moon for a long moment. The unkempt yard made it clear which Dupree had been doing all the lawncare as well as the housework. He would not allow that in the future, not unless she wanted to do a chore.

There were no lights on in the house, but Mr. Dupree's rust bucket SUV sat in the driveway. Either the man had gone to bed already, or the power had been turned off and he was sitting inside in the dark.

Opening the door, Noah climbed out of his truck, sniffing the air. Someone was having a fire, which was not unusual this time of year. As he approached the house, the smoke grew thicker, making him hesitate at the front door. Instead of knocking, he slipped around to the back yard.

In the middle of the yard, well away from any building, Mr. Dupree sat beside a blazing firepit, muttering to himself as he looked at his phone. A half dozen empty beer cans lay on the ground around his chair. The yard itself was choked with weeds and trash. Walking back to his truck, Noah drove around to a dirt road that led into the woods behind Dupree's house. Stripping off his clothes, he walked through the woods and into their backyard. He had an idea how this encounter would go, and needed to be prepared to shift, just in case.

The air was cold, and Noah could not wait to get this little meeting done and return to the warmth of his woman's arms. It was as if the man's personality froze the air around him.

Stepping closer, he moved around the fire pit so he could see the drunken man's face. "You fucked up, Dupree."

His bear was restless, wanting to get past the talking and deal some shifter justice on the man's ass. Noah held his beast back, determined to talk to the man before going furry on him.

"What the fuck? Where the fuck are your clothes? Where's my fucking daughter? I told her to get her ass home and bring money. Where the hell is she?" Mr. Dupree tried pushing to his feet, but was so drunk he ended up falling back into his chair.

Ignoring the questions, Noah stepped closer. "I told you that if you wanted to talk to her, call me, but you didn't. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt, since you don't know my number, and give you one chance to talk to me face to face."

"I want Bailey," Dupree said petulantly. "I lost my job. The bar won't let me back. They've turned off the power and the landlord's gonna kick me out. Bailey needs to get her ass back here and sort this shit out." Dupree pushed to his feet, this time managing to stay on them, though he was swaying enough that Noah worried that he would end up falling in the fire. "Ungrateful bitch." "She's not coming back. She's home, where she belongs, and she's not giving you so much as a wooden nickel. You've fucked your life up and you've hurt her time and again. You won't hurt her anymore."

Dupree pulled a big knife out and waved it in front of him. "Then I'll just have to kill you. Then she'll have to come home," the man muttered as he staggered forward, obviously planning to stab him.

Noah took a deep breath and allowed his bear to push forward and take over. Dupree screamed as his bear attacked, determined to protect their mate from this monster.

The fight, such as it was, was over in seconds, and Noah walked back into the woods, leaving obvious signs behind that a bear had visited the neighborhood.

He felt nothing as he stopped at a stream long enough to clean up. Returning to his truck, he dressed quickly before climbing in and driving back home at a leisurely clip. The last thing he needed was to be stopped by the police for speeding.

Pulling into the driveway to the farm, he stopped and took a few minutes to just breathe and put the activities of the last hour behind him. When he and his bear were both calm, he put the truck in gear and drove on. His mate was no doubt waiting for his return.

He was not surprised when he parked to see Bailey sitting on the porch in the rocking chair that she had claimed as her own. An oil lamp burned on the table next to her, and as usual, she was crocheting something. Climbing from the truck, he took a deep breath and relaxed. He was home, his mate was safe, and she was waiting for him.

CHAPTER 17

Feeding the baby goat, who she decided to name Norman, had to be one of the highlights of her life. After he finished sucking down his bottle, he allowed her to cuddle with him, and he fell asleep in her arms. When Micah led another goat into the barn to one of the empty pens, she knew Norman's new mama had arrived. Benny came for the baby once they had the nanny settled.

She followed as the old farmer carried the baby toward the pen. He stopped just outside, and Micah smeared something all over Norman's head and shoulders. Then Benny carried him into the pen. Bailey closed the gate so neither animal could escape during this most important introduction.

"Gizelle, this little boy needs a mama," Benny announced as he set Norman down in front of her. "You interested in the job?"

Bailey watched as Gizelle and Norman sniffed at each other. Gizelle then began to lick at the baby's head and shoulders, cleaning the baby. Once he was clean, she turned around and nudged him toward her milk sac. It took a moment for Norman to figure out what was going on, but soon he was suckling at her teat, his little tail flipping back and forth with happiness. "Looks like he's got himself a new mama," Micah said.

"His name is Norman," Bailey informed the two men.

Benny nodded his approval. "Norman. That's a good name for a goat. Gizelle, meet Norman. Norman, meet your new mama, Gizelle," Benny said. "Come on, you two, it's time to let them get settled. Let's go see if there's any pie leftover from dinner."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Micah said as he led the way out of the barn.

Bailey followed and Benny brought up the rear, turning out the lights and closing up the barn before they all headed to what the farmhands called "the big house." There was half a cherry pie in the refrigerator that the trio split before the two men headed home, leaving Bailey alone.

She locked the back door behind them, then washed the dishes so Naomi wouldn't have to wash them in the morning. Knowing she would not sleep until Noah returned, Bailey grabbed her basket of yarn and carried it to the front porch.

After lighting the oil lamp kept on the table, she settled into her favorite rocking chair and started crocheting. Instead of making another critter, she started making a baby hat. Once she made a dozen or more, she would take them to the hospital in town for the newborns to wear.

She had just started the third hat when Noah pulled into the yard and parked. He sat in the truck for several minutes before climbing out. She could tell something was bothering him, but decided that he would tell her when he wanted her to know. In the meantime, all she could do was love him.

"Why aren't you upstairs asleep?" he asked as he climbed the steps to the porch. "I was waiting for you," she replied as she put her crochet work back into the basket and then picked the basket up. "Benny, Micah, and I ate all the pie, but I could make you a sandwich if you want one?"

"No, thanks. I've eaten." He opened the door and held it while she led the way into the house. "I need a shower and then I'd like to snack on my mate's sweet pussy."

"I think that can be arranged," she said, giggling as she dropped her basket on the bench just inside the door before running up the stairs, only two steps ahead of her big, burly mate.

As soon as they had stripped off their clothes and tossed them in the laundry basket, Noah scooped up his mate and carried her into the bathroom. Setting her on the counter, he turned on the water before retrieving towels from the linen closet. Then he returned to his mate.

"I love you, my sweet mate," he said as he slid his hands under her ass and lifted her.

"I love you, too, my bear," she said against his lips as she wrapped her arms and legs around his body.

He carried her into the shower, pausing a moment to check the water temperature before stepping under the spray. He smiled as she sucked in a breath as the warm water hit her back.

He grabbed the liquid soap and washcloth and washed her back and ass. Then he gently peeled her from his body and forced her to stand on her own while he knelt and washed the rest of her. While she rinsed off, he quickly washed himself.

Once they were both clean, he picked her up and pressed her between his body and the wall of the shower. As before, her arms and legs wrapped around him like a monkey held onto a tree. Reaching around her hip, he placed his cock at her pussy and flexed his hips to slide home.

They both made happy moans as he filled her completely. "God, you feel so good," he said as he pulled back and then surged forward again.

"So do you," she panted. "Fuck me, bear. Fuck me hard."

Her demand proved to him once again that they were meant to be together. It was as if she had read his mind. Pulling back, he slammed forward again and again, not stopping until the pressure in his cock and balls was too great.

Nuzzling the side of her neck, he licked the scar of her bite mark as his canines dropped. When her pussy clenched around his cock, he drove his teeth into her flesh, sending her rocketing into her orgasm. At the same time, he thrust into her body once, twice, and came hard on the third one.

Pulling his teeth from her body, he licked the bite mark closed again, then rested his head against her shoulder and worked to simply stay on his feet and breathe for the next few minutes.

"It gets better and better," Bailey whispered when he was finally able to straighten from the wall.

"I just hope you'll still be saying that in forty or fifty years," he returned with a grin as he moved them back into the shower's spray to rinse off. Thank the gods of invention for making tankless water heaters that made hot water run forever.

Once they were both clean against, he gave her a moment in the shower while he stepped out and quickly dried off. Once she turned off the water and emerged, he carefully dried her off before carrying her to bed. They curled together and she told him about Norman and how much she loved the little goat and how he and Gizelle had bonded.

Finally, she kissed his chest and sighed. "Good night, bear. I love you."

"Sweet dreams, my mate. Know I love you more than anything in the universe."

He only hoped that, if she found out what he had done earlier in the evening, she would understand and forgive him.

CHAPTER 18

Her cellphone ringing in the office when they headed past on their way to breakfast the next morning caught her attention. Entering, Bailey went to where it sat in its charger on the sideboard. Since she did not recognize the ring tone or the number, she did not touch her phone. She was not surprised when Noah stood next to her, dropping his arm over her shoulder in a protective gesture.

His touch made her smile and lean into him as they waited to see if the caller would leave a message or not.

A moment later, the tone signifying a new message sounded. Pushing the necessary buttons, she turned on the speaker so they could both hear what the caller had to say.

"This is Sergeant Rick Webster of the Craven County Sheriff's Department. I'm trying to reach Miss Bailey Dupree regarding her father. You can contact me at ..."

The rest of the message was lost as Bailey looked up at Noah.

Her bear returned her look with one that told her he was with her whatever she decided to do. "Call him back, mate," he said gently. Bailey nodded and, after listening to the voicemail a second time, called the number the man gave.

"Sergeant Webster," the same voice that had left the message a moment ago answered.

"This is Bailey Dupree. You just left a message about my father?" Bailey said, not sure if she wanted to hear her father was in jail or not.

If he was, she wondered if she should bail him out or leave him there to dry out? Why else would the police be calling her?

"Yes, Miss Dupree. There's been an ... um, incident. Would it be possible for you to come to the house now?"

"An incident? What kind of an incident?"

"Please, just come to the house, and I'll explain everything then," the sergeant sounded distressed.

Bailey looked at Noah who looked serious as he nodded. "All right. We'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Thank you."

Bailey hung up and slid her phone into her back pocket. If there was something wrong with her father, she might need it to call the attorney or bail bondsmen.

"I guess I'm going to town," she said as she walked out of the office and headed to the front door where her purse hung on a hook next to Noah's dressy cowboy hat.

"You're not going alone," Noah said as he sat on the bench and pulled on his cowboy boots. "You don't go anywhere near that man without me." "Thank you," Bailey said as she slid on her own shoes. She looked down at her clothes and shrugged. A t-shirt and jeans would be fine for dealing with whatever was going on with her father.

In just a few minutes, they were in the truck and headed toward town. Neither of them said anything as Noah drove faster than the posted limits, but well within the range where the cops would not stop him and give him a speeding ticket.

When they arrived at her father's house, Bailey was surprised to see three police cars as well as an ambulance, the forensics van, and a pickup truck from animal control lining both sides of the road. Noah parked and came around to help her out. She had learned early in their relationship that he would help her in and out of the truck every time.

Holding his hand to keep the icy chill of being back here away, Bailey reluctantly headed toward the driveway.

"Can I help you?" A nearby officer stepped in front of them to keep them from continuing up to the house.

He was young and had no stripes on his arms, so she figured he was low man at the scene, assigned to keep the small crowd that was gathering on the other side of the road back away from whatever was going on.

"I'm Bailey Dupree. Sergeant Webster asked that I come," Bailey said as she leaned into Noah's body. Her bear released her hand to wrap that arm around her shoulders. In seconds, she was surrounded by his warmth.

"Hang on," the officer said.

Using the microphone clipped to his shoulder, he said something undecipherable. The radio crackled and someone said something in return. He answered and then nodded to her. "Sergeant Webster will be out in a minute. He said you can head up and he'll meet you."

"Thank you," Bailey said as he backed out of their way. When they were out of earshot of the officer, she looked up at Noah. "Did you understand anything he said on the radio?"

"Nope. I think it's a special code they use that only they understand."

Bailey giggled at that thought, then sobered when another sheriff's officer came around the corner of the house.

"Miss Dupree? I'm Sergeant Webster." The older man wore jeans and a Henley shirt with a sheriff's department windbreaker and baseball cap.

"Yes, I'm Bailey Dupree. What's going on?"

"There's no easy way to tell you this," he began. "Your father's dead."

Bailey stared at him without speaking for what several of the longest seconds of her life while Noah rubbed her back, up and down, up and down, grounding her. Horrifyingly, the first words that came to mind were, *Thank God*. She clapped a hand over her mouth to keep them from blurting out, and Sergeant Webster immediately stepped back and to one side, clearing a space for her to be sick. She waved at him to show him she was fine, then carefully uncapped herself and whispered, "What happened?"

"Well, it appears he had a run-in with a bear last night. Your neighbor, Mr. Swanson, said your father was out here drinking by the firepit when he went to bed last night. This morning, he was lying on the ground. When Mr. Swanson came over to check on him, he discovered the body." "A bear?" Bailey echoed, shocked but not really surprised. Bears lived in the woods behind the house and did occasionally wander through the neighborhood looking for food. That was the reason she'd kept the garbage cans locked in the shed, and she doubted her father had been as careful about that. All the same, she'd never heard of any local bear attacks. "Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so. Without getting into too much detail, there are certain wounds that can only be made by a bear."

He said more. Bailey could see his lips moving, anyway, but the rest faded out to an unimportant drone.

Her father was dead.

She was finally free from him and his abuse.

When two paramedics rolled a gurney into view with a black body bag strapped onto it, she brought her focus back to the here and now. Sergeant Webster glanced that way also, then back at her. "Given recent events, I know this is a difficult task, but we need someone to identify the body."

"All right," she said, grateful for the confirmation that her nightmare was over, but then almost immediately hesitated. "Is... Is he...?".

"No," said Webster. "There's no predation. There's surprisingly little damage at all. At our best guess, the bear came down to root around the trash in the yard, and your father..." Now it was his turn to pause, visibly searching the right words only to shake his head and simply say, "...your father brought a knife to a bear fight."

The urge to laugh bubbled up, but Bailey managed to lock it down before it escaped. "He was drunk, wasn't he?"

"That'll be up to the coroner to determine," Webster said, nodding.

"All right," Bailey said again, squaring her shoulders. "Let me see him."

NOAH STOOD BY HIS MATE AS SHE IDENTIFIED HER FATHER'S body and dealt with the police. An hour after they arrived, he helped her into the truck to head home.

Once in the driver's seat, he pulled out his phone and sent a text to Naomi to not worry about saving breakfast for them. He then headed for his favorite fast-food place. This morning called for greasy breakfast biscuits and spicy fries.

Before putting the truck in gear, he looked over to see her staring out the windshield with a blank expression on her face.

"You okay?"

"I'll have to come back into town tomorrow to start making arrangements for the funeral," she said, her voice soft and flat.

"You don't have to do that. I can take care of it."

"No. He was my father. I should do it."

Needing to connect with her, he reached over and took her hand and threaded their fingers together. She did not pull away until they reached the drive-through. Then she pulled back and crossed her arms over her chest, as if to isolate herself from him.

He bought them both biscuits, fries, and coffee. Then he drove them home. When they reached the farm, he helped her

out and gathered the food bags before leading her to the porch.

She sat in her rocking chair, so he took the other one, and unpacked their breakfast. After half-unwrapping her biscuit and handing it to her he was not surprised when she stared at it as if she had never seen an egg, bacon, and cheese biscuit before.

"Eat it, mate," he said as he set a bag of spicy fries on the table beside her before tending to his own meal.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"For what?"

"For rescuing me from my life. For bringing me to Fuzzy Heaven. For making me your mate. For killing my father."

Noah stared at her. He had not said anything. Even if asked outright, he would never confirm nor deny that he had been the bear to visit her father the night before. So how did she know?

She looked over at him and smiled. "Don't worry, I'll never say anything to anyone. Ever. And we'll never speak of it again, but thank you for saving my life, more than once."

Instead of responding in any way that would give her confirmation of her assumption, Noah turned his attention to his breakfast. The death of her father would be one secret he would take to his grave with him.

"I love you, bear," she said before stuffing several fries into her mouth.

"I love you, too, my sweet mate."

One week later

BAILEY WATCHED THE COFFIN BEING LOWERED INTO THE OPEN grave with a detached sense of relief. The dozen or so people who had attended the funeral service had surprised her. She did not realize her father had that many friends. But as they each passed by, shaking her hand, and offering their condolences, Bailey realized most of those people had been her friends and not his.

The only people to follow her out into the cemetery for the final graveside was portion of the service were Noah and her new friends from Fuzzy Heaven. Everyone else left the church and headed back to their lives when it was announced that there would be no after-service reception.

Once the coffin disappeared into the deep hole, she turned away. Noah had headed to the truck to give her a moment alone. She was surprised to see Carrie Richards, her boss, standing only a few feet away.

"Bailey, can I have a word, please?"

Bailey glanced to where Noah stood by the truck before turning her attention to her boss. She had a feeling she knew what was coming, and as soon as she dealt with it, she could return to the warmth she found in Noah's presence.

"Thanks for coming."

"I was wondering when you would be returning to work. I have an assignment that you'd be perfect for." Carrie had always been brusque and to the point and Bailey expected nothing less of the woman even now, when she had just buried her father.

"I'm sorry, I'm not coming back," Bailey said bluntly. "I meant to tell you sooner, but there's been so much going on lately."

She watched as Noah stalked toward her, looking fierce, and felt her pussy clench with need for the big bear shifter.

"You ready to go, sweetheart?" he asked as he stepped around Carrie.

"Yes, I was just telling Carrie that I would not be returning to work."

He blinked at her announcement, obviously surprised. They had discussed her quitting off and on since she'd come home from the hospital, but until that moment, she had been adamant about returning to work. Only in the past few days did she realize that was more and more reluctant to leave the farm. She preferred making critters and playing with the baby animals to caring for those in their last days. She also did not like being away from Noah for any longer than she had to.

She was spending more and more time making animals. They sold nearly as fast as she made them, both at her table at the farmers market and to her friends online. It had also been suggested that she set up a website, but she was hesitant, as she did not want her entire life to become about making critters, no matter how well they sold.

"Well, I wish you the best with your farm," Carrie said, sounding more than a little sarcastic. The woman stormed away, obviously not happy, but gleaning there was nothing she could say that would change Bailey's mind.

"Ready to go home?" Noah asked, threading their fingers together as they started walking toward the parking lot.

Bailey could only grin as she said, "Yes, my bear. Take me to home to heaven."

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cooper McKenzie always thought she had been born a hundred years too late, but appreciates air conditioning, computers and other conveniences of modern day living. She recently returned to New Bern, North Carolina, after a six-year sojourn to Georgetown, Texas. In addition to dreaming up her next story, Cooper enjoys reading everything except scary books and making amigurumi animals. She loves to hear from readers, and can be reached at coopermckenzie@ymail.com

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CINDERS BY BRONWYN JUDDE

A Twisted Retelling of Cinderella

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

Once upon a time, I was the luckiest, happiest girl in the world. I lived in a beautiful house, with everything my heart desired – in particular the dearest, sweetest daddy who ever lived. Then one day, over breakfast, he told me that he had to go away for a while and fight in the Troll Wars. These had been raging for months in the northern part of the country and we had lost a great many brave men to the hideous weapons the trolls had invented.

I begged and pleaded with him not to go, but it was in vain. His country needed him and he was set on joining the troops. He also absolutely loved getting all decked out in armor and riding his war-horse, Cyrus.

Before he left, he sat me on his knee and told me, "Make me proud, Ella. I won't be gone long, and if perchance I don't return, I know you'll find a good man to take care of you."

"I won't need to think about that, Daddy," I said, trying to hide my worry "You'll be back, right as rain!"

He looked at me sternly. "You need a strong hand, little girl. One who will cherish you and spank your naughty bottom every day to show you how much they love you. Just like this!" And he pulled me over his lap and spanked me until I was blubbering and sobbing and safe. Then he saddled up Cyrus, his great Percheron, and trotted out of the courtyard and down the road.

It was just two weeks later that I got the message I had been dreading, brought by a very apologetic carrier pigeon named Earnest. The note read:

'Your daddy is dead, Ella. It will comfort you to know he died bravely, killing a large number of the enemy before he was horribly dismembered and devoured by trolls.

Best wishes,

General Gutless.'

I was devastated. What would I do without my daddy to care for me and spoil me and spank me every day so I would feel safe and loved?

My mother had died giving birth to me, so my daddy and I were everything to each other. I didn't know what I would do without him. He'd told me to find a good man to take care of me, but how could I do that? The only place to meet prospective suitors was at the castle.

I had always wanted to go to a ball at the castle, but my daddy said I wasn't allowed until I reached the age of eighteen. My birthday arrived the day after I got the message from Earnest, but now I had no one to introduce me to any men at all.

Just days after my daddy died, his sister, Disma, moved into my house with her horrible daughters: Prunella and Drizella. Disma totally took over, telling me I was too young to know how to run a household. She spent the money my daddy left me and fired my favorites among the household staff. Her daughters mocked me and told me I was ugly and no one would ever love me. Miserable, I moped around the house. I had no friends anymore, as we lived a good way from the village, and Disma never let me take the coach to see my old girlfriends, let alone any men, good or otherwise.

Meanwhile, Disma was practically throwing her horrible daughters at every eligible male in the kingdom. While she flaunted them, she made me do all the housework and the cooking, even though we had a staff, and she never let me go out of the house except to the market. It was she who called me Cinders, as I got so dirty cleaning all the fireplaces in the house that I always had soot under my fingernails, no matter how hard I tried to scrub them clean. Soon, everyone in the house called me Cinders. I was so sad, I quit eating. I wanted to die.

ONE SUNNY DAY — NOT THAT I NOTICED — I HAD FINISHED all my chores and as soon as I heard Disma and her daughters leave for a round of brown-nosing the local gentry, I raced upstairs to my tiny bedroom, stripped off my ragged clothing and got on my bed. I wept as my heart was broken and I tried to decide if death or servitude was the better option.

I heard the rumbling of coach wheels on the cobblestones of the courtyard, and wondered who could be coming to visit. No one would be coming for me, so I buried my head back in my pillow and continued to sob.

Footsteps, more than one person's by the sound of it, raced up the stairs and the door to my room flew open. I raised my tearstained face and saw two men, one about my age and one perhaps twice that, standing in my doorway and staring at me in open-mouthed surprise. "Who the fuck are you?" I snapped. Then I took a closer look and discovered that both men were extremely good looking. "If you're looking for Aunt Disma and her daughters, they're out. You'll have to come back another time and don't let the door catch you on your way out."

I buried my face in my pillow again but was very surprised to feel somebody sit down on the bed. I belatedly realized I was stark naked and then I decided I didn't care. These men were gorgeous, but they obviously weren't looking for me.

"Cinders? I mean, Ella?" A large warm hand patted my ass.

I froze. Who were these guys? And what did they want?

"Fuck off!" I yelled at them, raising my head from the pillow.

To my amazement, I felt a hard slap on my exposed bottom. "Bad girl! Do you want me to wash your mouth out with soap?" asked the man. Four more slaps, each harder than the ones previous, rained down on me and I wasn't sure if I was outraged or turned on.

I flipped over and sat up, incensed at the treatment this stranger was giving me. "Who do you think you are? You can't just walk into people's bedrooms and spank them!"

"Your servants are very worried about you." His voice was very calm and I found my body responding to it. "I am King Horst and this is my son, Prince Caspian. I knew your late father well and I was so sorry to hear that he died. What a warrior he was! I intend to have him buried with full military honors."

I sniffled. "I miss him so much! I don't want to go on living like this."

"Because of your aunt and her daughters?" The other man sat down on the other side of the bed and stroked my leg as though I was a skittish horse.

"Yes, mostly, but how do you know about that?" I asked.

"Your servants came to the castle and requested an audience with me," said King Horst. "You have been very mistreated and I intend to see that you never want for anything, ever again."

I was seriously confused. What were these hot men proposing? "It's no good. Aunt Disma has confiscated most of my money and she is determined to make me her slave."

"Ella... or may I call you 'Cinders'? Cinders is *such* a sexy name. Caspian and I want to take you back to the castle with us. We will take care of Disma, and in the meantime, we would like to propose that you come and live with us."

Prince Caspian was still stroking my leg, but now his hand ventured up higher, inching around to my inner thigh. I was already having a hard time not spreading my legs, but when King Horst's hand settled on my other leg and as his fingers trailed lightly up towards my pussy, my knees parted quite of their own accord.

The two men took that as an invitation. Horst — If he was going to get pally with me, I didn't think I needed the honorific — got on the bed between my wide stretched legs. He and Caspian eased me down on my back and, to my amazement, his full lips attached themselves to my pussy and he began to suck and lick as no one had ever sucked and licked me before.

Meanwhile, Caspian brought his mouth to my left nipple and began to lick it as his other hand toyed with its partner. When he gave it a hard pinch, I practically exploded.

I had only had sex once before — unless you count my own fingers (and that was, ha, a bit of an anticlimax). This was better than any romance novel in my library. The King's mouth was so insistent on making me come, I stood no chance of avoiding it, but by then it was all I wanted. I thrashed and screamed and then felt a magnificent calm come over me and all the anguish of the past few weeks vanished as the two beautiful men held me and told me what a good girl I was.

"Now Cinders, say you'll come and live with us?" said the King.

"But.. I mean, why me? I'm nobody. You two could have any girl in the kingdom. You don't even know me!" I said.

"Your servants came to ask us to save you. And they had pictures of you on a cell phone. We knew then we had to have you," said Caspian.

"What photo?" I asked. "I haven't had my photo taken since I was a little girl."

The two men looked a little embarrassed. "I think someone took a shot of you in the bath. Your beautiful chestnut hair was all spread around you and, well your body is spectacular! I'm sorry if it's a little creepy, but these days, every pretty girl is naked on Instagram!" Horst said with a slight note of apology.

Caspian chimed in. "We were told it was a selfie!"

"I see. Well, I hope I don't disappoint you!" I really, really hoped not.

"So, you'll come to live at the castle? I believe you need a daddy and I propose to be him," said Horst.

"What about you, Caspian? Will you be my daddy, too?" I asked. "Perhaps I need two daddies! If you also like spanking girls, we could all live together, happily ever after!"

Horst and Caspian looked at each other.

"Could this work? Could we share Cinders, to fuck and to spank, to cherish and to spoil?" wondered Horst.

Caspian eyed my naked body and licked his lips. "I'm certain we could learn to share her. We could each have her in our bed for a week, then the other would get his turn." Caspian's eyes got big. "Or...We could both sleep with her every night, both fuck her before we went to bed and then again in the morning, and both spank her every day. Your bed is quite big enough." By now, Caspian was visibly excited, his cock tenting his tight pants.

"Well, let's see if this could work," I said, kneeling up and crooking my finger at Caspian. "Just how good are you at spanking?"

Caspian sat on the edge of the bed. He pulled me over his lap, restraining me with his other hand, and spanked my plump bottom, first gently, then harder and harder until I was squirming and moaning. I felt his erection pulsing against my stomach and it added to my arousal. He finally drew his hand through my pussy and showed his father the lovely cream that was painting my thighs. "I think this naughty girl loves to be spanked, Dad!"

"My turn." Horst sat next to Caspian on the bed, opened his fly and took me off of his son's lap. "I'm going to show you what a good girl earns as a reward."

I moaned as he sat me down on his stiff cock and squirmed as he thrust up into my wet pussy. I held onto his shoulders and his cock drilled into me as Caspian came up behind me and reached around my body to grasp my nipples.

"Yes! Fuck! Don't stop!" I cried.

Caspian rubbed and pulled on my nipples until they were hard and red like rubies, then Horst reached down and flicked my clit. I shuddered and spasmed as my orgasm set off a chain reaction. Caspian had unbuttoned his pants, freed his cock and was furiously jerking himself off. He came first, all over my back, and then Horst exploded in my tight pussy. We all fell back on the bed and cuddled together.

After we had caught our collected breaths, I sat up and grinned at the two hot men. "So, do I have two daddies now?"

"Yes, you do, dirty girl," Horst assured me with obvious delight. "We will see to it that you get all the loving, fucking and spanking that a girl could ever want."

After a few minutes when we all caught our breaths, I turned to Caspian, licking my lips and pinching my sore nipples. "It's your turn now. I know you can spank me. But can you fuck me?" I lay on my back and waited to see what he'd do.

"Just you wait, little girl." Caspian took his pants all the way off and crawled up between my open legs. He grasped my ankles and elevated them, using his other hand to guide his cock into my dripping pussy. "Fuck, you're so tight!"

As Caspian thrust into me, his father slammed his cock into my mouth.

I was in heaven. Two daddies fucking me! I bucked and writhed with a huge orgasm as my two daddies came simultaneously in my pussy and my mouth. After a short break, Horst got off the bed and put his pants back on. "I propose we leave for the castle right away, if that suits you, pretty girl?"

I got up slowly and found a suitable dress in my closet. "Should I bring all my clothes?"

"Anything you need, we will buy for you. Just bring your favorite clothes and possessions," said Horst.

FINALLY, WE WERE READY TO MOVE TO THE CASTLE. "I HAVE to bring all my animals!" I insisted.

"Of course! They will all be welcome!" said King Horst. He must have regretted that magnanimous gesture when he saw how many mice were included.

So, we got into the golden coach and drove to the castle. There was quite a cortège of animals behind us, but when we reached the castle, only my faithful hound, Bruno, was invited inside. The rest of the menagerie trotted behind us, and when we arrived, they scuttled around to the stables, introducing themselves to the animals already in residence. When he joined them later, Bruno was very taken with a little cocker spaniel named Dolly.

I was shown around the castle and introduced to all the footmen, the ladies-in- waiting and the kitchen staff. I was pretty sure I would never have to clean another fireplace!

I had my own sumptuous bed chamber, which had a view of the Deep Dark Forest and the mountains in the distance. Horst's bed chamber was next door and the bed was big enough for an army. "Can Bruno sleep in my bed?" My beloved hound had slept with me since he was a tiny puppy.

"He can sleep in your bed, but not in mine!" said Horst.

"Nor mine!" said Caspian.

I was fine with this arrangement, but I feared that Bruno would spend most nights alone in my bed.

That first night, we got very little sleep as the two gorgeous men made love to me continually until I finally dozed off with Caspian's dick in my mouth and Horst's in my pussy. My body felt so relaxed and fulfilled, I hoped this would happen every night.

Early the next morning, I woke up to find them both snoring gently, lying on their backs, so I climbed on top of Horst. Caspian was awakened by the bouncing of the bed so he politely asked if I wanted his dick in my bottom. This was a first for me, but I wanted it... I wanted anything they gave me! He produced some sort of slippery gel, rubbing it on and in my tiny hole, then gently inserting his long member into it. At first it hurt, but pretty soon I was thrusting back against him, wanting more. He obliged and I was railed by two big cocks at once. My life was just like a rather naughty fairy tale!

THE KING, THE PRINCE AND I SETTLED DOWN TO A WONDERFUL routine. We all slept together in the king's great four poster bed and we fucked in the evening and fucked in the morning – and sometimes several times in the night – and I got spanked off and on all day long. Bruno invited his new friend Dolly to sleep in my bed with him, and I assume they were as busy as we were. During the days, I busied myself with embroidery and sewing, making baby-clothes for the villagers and sweaters for Horst and Caspian. I quite forgot about Disma and her horrible daughters.

I pinched myself every day to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I had everything a girl could possibly want, but little did I guess my fairy tale was just beginning!

One sunny day a few weeks later, I was sitting in the drawing room doing some needlework, when I heard a loud knocking on the castle door. I got up and opened it, and there was a gorgeous blond man standing there. He was tall and greeneyed, and his six-pack was at least an eight-pack. He bowed to me, then gave himself a shimmer and a shake and, right before my eyes, he changed into a dragon! But not just *any* dragon! This one was hot, and not only because of the fire coming out of his nose. His greeny-golden scales glittered, and his tail looked like a python with an arrow-shaped flange on the end. I felt a bit squirmy.

The dragon smiled at me and stretched, flexing his pecs, and leaning on the door frame. His arms and chest bulged with big, green, scaly muscles, and he had bright red claws that were at least five inches long. He was very tall and, best of all perhaps, he had a *very* long tongue. I began to imagine what that tongue could do to me, and my squirmy feeling got a lot stronger.

"Who are you, little girl?" said the dragon in a sultry voice that had a strange effect on my panties.

"My name is Cinders. Won't you come in, Mr. Dragon? My daddies are just down the road. They'll be home soon." "I'm called Sam the Dragon, but you can call me Sam. Sure, I'll come in. Are Horst and Caspian far away?" said the dragon with a knowing grin.

"They're looking at a new coach. There's an electric one on the market and they're hoping to set an example by reducing their carbon foot-prints."

Sam looked suitably impressed. "That's a great idea. That old coach burns way too much gas. I bet it only gets about four miles to the gallon."

We entered the castle and I showed him into the nearest drawing room. I wondered if one should offer a drink to a dragon guest, but I decided to wait. "My daddies call me Cinders. My real name is Ella, but both my daddies think 'Cinders' is way hotter. I just moved in here recently."

"So, both Horst and Caspian are your daddies?"

"Yes! And I love them so much."

"So do you... share each other?"

I dropped my gaze. Could I tell this hot dragon that I was polyamorous? Sure, I could!

"Yes, we do share. They both fuck me and spank me. I love it!" I felt my face heating and I hoped Sam couldn't tell how turned on I was.

Sam regarded me with a smirk. "Until you've been fucked by a dragon, you haven't really been fucked. I can do more with this tail and this tongue than you can imagine, little girl."

I got a very funny feeling in my tummy. This dragon was hotter than hell and my pussy was aching to be fucked. I didn't want to cheat on my daddies, but how could I make this work? I batted my eyelashes at him. "I'm really interested in trying that, but I can't cheat. You would have to fuck me with them in the room and only if they agree. However, a spanking isn't cheating, right? Would you like to spank me?"

"More than anything in the world, except actually fucking you." Sam's tail twitched and his long red tongue swirled around his lips, and the sight made my pussy drip with arousal.

Sam told me to kneel on the seat of the big stuffed chair and hold onto the back. When I was settled, the dragon pushed up my skirt and pulled down my wet panties with his big, red claws. He picked up his great tail and started spanking my bottom with it, first gently, then harder and harder until I was shrieking. Sam stopped after twenty lashes and felt my pussy. I loved the feeling of his scaly hand with its long red claws fondling my sex. I was very, very wet.

Sam grinned and smacked my bottom one more time for good luck. "I'm leaving now, before I use this tail in quite a different capacity, but I hope we meet again. Tell your daddies that Sam was here."

I bid him goodbye, my ass throbbing from the spanking. Sam changed back into the hot blond man and kissed my hand. I hoped I would see him again.

Now I had to tell my daddies all about the visit from Sam, and how I would never cheat, but that I hoped they wouldn't mind if I got fucked by Sam's tail and tongue – just as long as they were present.

WHEN THE GUYS GOT BACK FROM THEIR ERRAND, I WENT OUT to meet them in the courtyard and told them all about how this

dragon named Sam had appeared at our door. And how he had spanked me.

"Fuck! That's the bloody dragon that made Betsy leave me. He's famous for what he can do with his tail." King Horst's face fell. "Now I expect you'll be leaving, too."

I hastened to reassure him. "I will never leave you! He spanks well, but there's something about that dragon that I don't quite trust. I'd love him to fuck me with his crazy tail, but only if you two are there. Please don't worry. You're my daddies for life! But who is 'Betsy?'"

"Betsy was my girlfriend for five years until that dragon showed up. She broke up with me by *text* if you can believe it! Five years!" Horst looked angry now. "You need a good thrashing for letting that Sam spank you without me here."

We went back into the castle and ran up the stairs to the big bedroom we shared. Horst pulled me over his knee and brought his huge hand down on my butt that was already bright pink from Sam's spanking. He spanked it harder than any man ever had, even my dear departed daddy – but not as hard as Sam the Dragon.

I cried and screamed during the thrashing, but I felt all safe and calm when he finished.

Horst dried my tears and kissed me, as his hand crept down to my aching sex and rubbed my clit with his rough fingers. I groaned and climbed on his lap. His member was erect and it immediately found its way into my pussy as Caspian stood behind me, pushing me forward and impaling my teeny asshole with his cock. I was so full and it felt *sooo* good! They both fucked me, slamming hard into my holes until I screamed and shook, then kept on until they came at the same time.

I couldn't ever get enough of having rough sex with my daddies!

When we had cuddled together, after we all came, I decided to broach the subject of sex with Sam. "So, can we have Sam come join us sometime?" I wheedled. "I would love for him to use that amazing hot tongue on my pussy and that smashing big tail too, but only while you two are in the room of course! You could all take turns. That way, it wouldn't be cheating, right?" I was beyond eager.

Horst and Caspian looked at each other.

"That might work. As long as we're here um... participating, I don't see a problem," said Horst.

"Maybe he'll bring Betsy!" said Caspian.

"Betsy! Of course. Brilliant! I'll have the royal scribe send Sam an invitation," Horst decided.

And so it came to be. Sam and Betsy were invited for tea the next day.

THEY ARRIVED PROMPTLY AT FOUR. SAM WAS IN HIS HUMAN shape, tall, blond, and muscular, with intense green eyes, carrying a military-looking back-pack. Betsy was beautiful, with huge breasts and amazing curves barely contained in a mini dress, so short it showed her butt-cheeks before she even leaned over. She was *not* wearing panties. I made a mental note to ask her where she got her stiletto heels. I led them into the drawing room, where a table was covered in teapots, cups and saucers and a big basket of scones. When Horst and Caspian stood up to greet our guests, Betsy went right over to Horst and kissed him hard on the lips.

"Darling Horst!" she exclaimed. "I do hope you will forgive me for leaving you and moving in with Sam?"

"Well, Betsy, I can't pretend it wasn't a shock. But now I have Cinders, and both Caspian and I are very happy."

Realization dawned on Betsy's pretty face. "So you three are a ménage? Oooh, lucky girl, Cinders!"

I realized that Betsy was a tiny bit jealous of me. I liked that feeling as I poured the tea and offered it and the scones to our guests. I was a bit nervous about the idea of being fucked by Sam's tail, but Betsy was obviously fine, so it shouldn't hurt me any more than I wanted it to.

Sam and Betsy had news of what had happened after I came to live with Horst and Caspian. Apparently all the staff left my house and most of them found jobs here at the castle. My mean aunt Disma and her horrible daughters had left when they found there was no one to wait on them anymore, abandoning the house.

"I'll see about renting your house out for you," said Horst. "That way you'll have some of your own money."

I still had my inheritance from my daddy, but Disma had made quite a dent in it.

"Thank you, Daddy. That would be very kind of you," I said.

When we all had finished our teas and scones and gossip, we all got a bit quiet, and no one was sure how to broach the subject of dragon sex. Betsy and I were quite chummy by that time, so Betsy just told Sam that I was anxious to try out his tongue and tail.

"Are you two okay with it?" Sam asked Horst and Caspian.

"Caspian and I are quite okay with it. Um, we kind of hoped Betsy would like to take a turn with us?" queried Horst.

"I'm fine with that," said Betsy. "A couple of human cocks would make a very welcome change right about now. Love the tail, but I've never had two human cocks in me at the same time!"

Sam took off his backpack, gave a small shiver and a shake, and morphed into his dragon form. Grinning, he beckoned me over with a big red claw, so I stood up, blushing and looking at my daddies for approval. Horst and Caspian were paying attention to Betsy now, so I went, a bit nervously, over to the glorious dragon.

Sam was an old hand at seducing girls and, after clearing the tea table with one swipe of his tail, he told me to lie down on it. He turned to the busy trio. "So do I have your formal, royal permission to ravish this maiden?"

"Of course, old boy! Be our guest," said Horst, switching his attention from Betsy's tits to me. Probably, he also hoped to pick up some pointers on ravishing.

Sam used his red claws to quickly take off my dress and panties and knelt between my legs. I moaned with arousal as his hot tongue licked my cunt, and screamed when it fucked me. It was over a foot long, and when Sam thrust it in all the way, it coiled and undulated inside me like a long, hot snake wiggling in my pussy. I came with a shout and Sam withdrew his tongue and grinned at me. He puffed some heated air on my pussy and I moaned, anxious, yet a bit nervous to feel his tail in me.

Sam took a green glass bottle out of the backpack and applied some of the contents to his tail. "This is a magical lotion that will heat up as it rubs into your snatch. Your pussy will be on fire as I scrape the flanges of my tail on the walls of your beautiful cunt."

I almost came from the filthy words.

Sam inserted the arrow-shaped tip of his large, scaly tail in my pussy. It was quite narrow at first, with lots of spines growing up and down the sides, but it rapidly broadened to a width that rivaled my arm. And that was just the lower two feet! He eased it in slowly and I was amazed at how much my tiny pussy could hold as I held onto his red claws and squirmed like an eel. It was like being impaled on a sword, and the spines meant that each thrust into my body was wonderful and filling, but the withdrawal was even better! Oh god. The spikes on his tail opening and scraping my G-spot was exquisite agony. I writhed and screamed as the great tail fucked me, my pussy oozing cream!

Horst and Caspian watched in what seemed to be amazement and not a little envy while Betsy giggled from where she sat on Caspian's knee. He had her astride his lap, her breasts plastered against his chest as she wiggled her pussy on his throbbing cock.

Horst stopped watching Sam fuck me, unbuttoned his pants and, leaning over Betsy's body resting against Caspian's chest, thrust his dick into her ass. The two royals fucked her as she moaned with pleasure. I tried to watch in case I could pick up some pointers, but Sam the Dragon demanded all my attention. Apparently, some dragons climax through their tails and Sam was that kind of dragon, (Draco Opinoictaus)! Who knew? Sam shot a gigantic stream of dragon seed into my pussy, so much that about a quart actually came right out again, leaving very happy me lying in a pool of dragon cum.

Horst came in Betsy's ass and Caspian in her cunt. Then they switched around and Caspian took Betsy's tiny asshole as Horst ate her pussy. Apparently, father and son were quite chill about each other's fluids! Betsy moaned and writhed and finally climaxed with a powerful squirt. I was fascinated by the squirting and hoped I could learn to do the same someday.

After everyone was satisfied, we all hugged and made plans for a monthly get-together with hopes – on my part, at least – for more adventures in dragon/human coupling.

CHAPTER 2

A few days later, when Horst and Caspian were out hunting and the servants were at the market, I hopped on my laptop, looking for a dress to wear to the great ball that was scheduled for next week. I was to be the guest of honor, to be introduced to the kingdom as the future bride of both Horst and Caspian. The actual wedding would take place later. My guys had told me the sky was the limit on what I could spend on a dress, so I had a catalog that featured all the hot designers.

There was one dress in particular that I wanted, but I wasn't sure it was appropriate. It featured a neckline that exposed my nipples through a wisp of netting, and the skirt, though long and full, was completely sheer. It came in red, white, and black, but I wanted the white one. I texted a link of the dress to Horst and Caspian to get their approval, then went to a shoe site and found a pair of stiletto heels that looked as though they were made of glass. I had the cursor hovering over the 'purchase' box when I heard the doorbell chime. When I answered the door, who should be standing there but Sam and Betsy?

"Cinders, darling! Sam and I were in the neighborhood and wanted to see you and your guys. Is this a bad time?" Betsy asked, avoiding my eyes. I had a feeling that they knew I was alone in the castle. The timing of the visit seemed suspicious, but we were all friends.

"Oh, Horst and Caspian are out on a hunt, but please, come in and have lunch with me."

Betsy clapped her hands and she and Sam entered the castle and shut the door. I noticed that Sam quickly locked it behind him, but I didn't make much of it.

"I was just about to make some sandwiches, so come along into the kitchen and I'll make some for all of us."

"We brought some wine. I hope you like rosé?" enquired Sam, producing a bottle from a small pink backpack that Betsy was wearing.

"Oh, I adore rosé. It will go well with tuna salad sandwiches," I said.

While I made the sandwiches, we chatted about village gossip and the upcoming ball. Sam remained in his human form while we ate the sandwiches and drank rosé but shifted into his dragon mode when he had finished his wine. "It's not easy drinking out of a glass when you're a dragon, you know," he informed me.

"You two are coming to the ball next week, right?" I had sent out invitations but hadn't opened all the RSVPs yet.

"Wouldn't miss it for anything," Sam declared.

"I'm almost 100% sure I have found the dress I want to wear, but it's pretty revealing, so I'm not sure it's appropriate. Would you take a look and help me decide, Betsy?"

"Absolutely, but Sam is a great judge of fashion, you know. He attended the Parson's School of Design in New York City. He studied under Brandon Maxwell, Lady Gaga's stylist!"

"I had no idea! Sam, you are a dragon of many talents!"

"I sure am!" Sam agreed.

I led them upstairs to my dressing room and opened the site on my laptop.

"Wow! That's crazy hot!" As he looked at the website, Sam puffed a little fire out of his nose, careful not to scorch the laptop or any of my clothes. "Let me show you a little magic trick I learned at Parsons." He touched the screen of the laptop and muttered something unintelligible, and the white dress appeared in the room, draped over a chair.

I couldn't believe my eyes. They taught magic at Parson's?

"Try it on, Cinders!" Betsy urged, excitedly clapping her hands.

Without another thought, I slipped off my clothes and stood naked in front of my friends. They had seen me nude before, anyway, so why not? I picked up the white, sheer dress and slipped it over my head, then turned and looked in the mirror.

"Oh yes! It's perfect!" Betsy exclaimed.

"Won't the villagers be shocked at seeing my nipples?" I worried.

"Nah," said Sam. "They'd just wish they could lick them. Like this!" And he proceeded to flick his long, talented tongue over my throbbing, aroused nipples.

"Oooh Sam! That feels so good!" I moaned.

Betsy giggled and took off the back-pack and her dress. Sam muttered a new spell and the white ball gown vanished from off of my body, and back into the picture on the laptop screen. Sam's tail lashed back and forth in excitement as he stared at our naked bodies.

I can't cheat! But oh, how I want that tail! I thought, so conflicted.

"That dress needs shoes," said Sam.

"I was just about to order some from Sappho's. They are really high and look like they're made of glass."

Sam opened the Sappho's site on my laptop and tapped on a pair of the same glassy footwear I had been about to order. They instantly appeared and I slipped them on. Now I really felt sexy! High heels and not a stitch of clothing.

Sam's tongue gave my left nipple another lick. "Fancy a little slap and tickle, Cinders?" His tail undulated, moving my way.

"I can't do that! My guys wouldn't like it if I..." I trailed off worriedly but tempted all the same.

"Actually, I texted them this morning. They said 'Knock yourselves out! Maybe we'll be home in time to join you."" Sam licked his lips smugly. "I hope they get home soon."

"Okay. I do hope they come in time to join us!" I whispered. I didn't really trust Sam, but surely, if Horst and Caspian texted that to him, it was okay?

To my surprise and delight Betsy kissed me and pinched my nipples. I had never been kissed by a girl, but I loved the feeling of her soft lips and long hard fingernails. Girl on girl was much less cheaty than dragon sex, after all! Sam took the green glass bottle out of the backpack and applied some of the contents to his tail. "Are you ready for me, pretty girl?"

I almost came upon hearing those words. "How do you want me, Sam?"

"Draped over the arm of the sofa. I want that ass up high where I can see it. Shoes on the floor, as wide apart as you can get them." He put the bottle back in the backpack and wiped his hands on a towel he'd extracted from the same place.

I assumed the indicated position as Betsy sat on the sofa, continuing to kiss and fondle me, then a light swat with Sam's tail announced that play had commenced.

"Harder!" I groaned. My body was pulsing with desire for his tail smacking and fucking me.

Sam smacked me again, this time putting some muscle into it as he began an all-out assault, thrashing the muscular appendage against my bottom as I howled.

He stopped spanking and thrust his long tongue into my ass. It writhed around inside, lighting up all the anal nerves and then, not having had a moment to relax, I felt the nudging of a hard protuberance at my sopping wet pussy. It slid into me, stretching me as it progressed, and a fiery heat lit up every inch of my core. Sam was behind me, his scaly hands with their long red claws, reaching around my body as he grabbed my nipples, pinching and pulling them.

When Sam's tail had reached the maximum depth into my pussy, he slowly withdrew it, letting the flanges scrape my vagina's walls. It was agony! It was ecstasy! I came so hard, I saw stars. Then it all started up again but much, much faster. My little feet were beating a tattoo in my glass shoes. I was on fire as the magical lotion worked to enhance the sensations caused by the thrusting of Sam's tail and the writhing of his long tongue. As I was pounded by the glorious dragon, I was pretty sure I was going to pass out. Suddenly, quarts of dragon seed came shooting into my pussy and seemed to fill me up completely.

Sam withdrew and wiped his tail off on the towel he'd used earlier, took a toothbrush and a small tube of toothpaste from the backpack, and made his way into the bathroom, where he proceeded to brush his teeth.

"He's not much on aftercare," explained Betsy. "Dragons are really selfish. They only pay attention to you when they want sex. Thing is, they want it all the time!"

I gazed at her, still too sex-drunk to speak.

"I miss the cuddles and the kisses, but Cinders, I'm hooked on dragon sex. He fucked me four times before we left home, and twice on the way. It's like a drug," Betsy looked so conflicted.

I completely understood.

When Sam returned from the bathroom, he and Betsy prepared to make a hurried farewell.

"I'm afraid we can't stay until the boys get home," said Sam. "We have an appointment with my chiropractor. I'm not a young dragon anymore. I get all stiff and achy, particularly in my tongue and my tail."

"Good goddess! What in the hell were you like as a young dragon?" I asked.

"Well, those times were different. I had a stable of lady dragons living with me, and I could literally fuck all night. They'd line up at the door and come into my bed in twos and threes. I could keep going indefinitely, and it was way harder and faster fucking than I can do now. The old tail ain't what it used to be. But truthfully? When I ravished my first maiden, I was hooked. I just love dirty girl pussies like yours. All pink and wet for me. And your asses? They are nectar to my tongue."

Still reeling from the sex and the dirty talk, I bade farewell to Betsy and Sam, with a promise to hook up again soon.

Not twenty MINUTES AFTER THEY LEFT, THE STOMPING OF boots heralded the return of Horst and Caspian. They had three grooms with them, who carried a large stag and a brace of partridge off to the kitchens. I ran downstairs, forgetting I was stark naked, and threw myself at my two huntsmen. One of the grooms caught sight of me and dropped a partridge. The other two blushed and fled to the kitchen.

I was delighted to see them, but even though I'd had their permission, I still felt a bit funny getting fucked without my men, so the first words out of my mouth weren't 'Hello,' but, "We tried to wait for you, but it was too hard! Sam and Betsy just left, but I'm still ready to play!"

"What?" Horst glared at me. "Sam and Betsy were here? And what do you mean, you 'tried to wait?"

I blinked at him in confusion, then at Caspian, waiting for him to explain, but he seemed just as bewildered as I and as angry as his father. "Please don't tease me," I stammered as my stomach tied itself up in knots. "They texted you this morning. You said it was all right."

"Sam. Never. Texted," Horst said in an icy, clipped tone.

"All right, calm down, Dad." Caspian took out his phone and began to tap at the screen. "You know the Deep Dark Forest doesn't always get the best signal."

I waited anxiously, but I could tell by Caspian's face that there were no new messages. Horst didn't even check his phone. He never took his eyes off me.

"And you had a good time, did you?" Horst demanded. "Fucking that dragon behind my back!"

Horrified, I backed away. "You never told him to 'knock yourselves out?' That you hoped to be home in time to join us?"

"Of course not. You must know I don't trust that dragon! How could you have fucked him when we weren't here?" Horst strode away, seething, then turned on me and shouted, "You cheated!"

"But I didn't know! Sam told me you approved. I didn't know he would lie!" I sobbed.

For just a moment, Horst seemed softened by my tears, but as his gaze moved down my naked body, he saw my feet and grew suspicious again. "I suppose he gave you those shoes."

"Well. In a way. You see he..."

"I don't care how he did it. I care that you let him do it. I'm so disappointed in you, Cinders! Now go and get dressed, and I don't want to see you again tonight." Horst stomped off to take a shower.

Caspian waited to speak to me until he was gone. "Come on, darling. He knows it's not your fault, he's just pissed off it was Sam. He'll forget all about it in the morning. Come and help me take a bath. I'm all sweaty and gross from hunting." "Caspian, I just can't. I'm so ashamed. I'm going to go to my room and get dressed."

I ran upstairs and shut myself in my room. I lay on the bed and sobbed my heart out. How could I have cheated on my daddies? I was an awful person!! Now they would never trust me again. I needed to leave before Horst threw me out.

When it started to grow dark, I got up, dressed myself and quietly slipped out of the room and down the stairs. I was almost halfway down when the heel of my right stiletto caught in the shag carpeting, and I tumbled down the rest of the way. Fearing that I had disturbed the household, I abandoned the one snared by the carpet and took the other one off. I fled the castle barefoot, clutching my remaining shoe.

CHAPTER 4

I fled into the Deep Dark Forest and ran for what seemed like hours until I came to a large house with a moat around it. An intimidating sight, but my feet hurt, it was awfully dark and spooky in the forest, and I desperately needed a bathroom.

I crossed the rickety drawbridge and approached the stout wooden door. Looking in vain for a bell to ring, I tried beating on the door with my little fists. Then I called out "Hello? Anybody home? I need to pee!"

There was a wait of perhaps two minutes, then a head popped up above the wall around the house. The head stared at me for a long minute, then disappeared again. After another long wait, the door to the house opened and a short, bald man gestured for me to come inside. I cautiously stepped in and the door slammed behind me.

The man in front of me was short and quite ugly. He had a big, bulbous nose and huge ears. "Welcome, little girl. You are safe now," were the first words he uttered.

"I wasn't actually expecting you to make me safe. I'm just passing through, and I wanted to see if I could use the restroom?"

The ugly man squinted at me in a puzzled manner. "You did say *pee*, right?"

I was getting annoyed. "Yes. That's what I said. I just need to pee and I'll be on my way."

He nodded along as I spoke until I said I'd be on my way, and then looked confused again. Shaking his head, he said, "Look, lady, you said the code word, I let you in, and as far as I'm concerned, my job is done. The master will tell you everything else you need to know."

"Code word? What do you mean?"

"The code word is 'pee," the man said irritably. "You said it and now you belong to the master."

"Says who?" I was getting a very uneasy feeling about this. I turned to leave, but the door was without a knob or a keyhole.

A deep growl answered me from across the hall. "Says me. You will be safe now. We are going to keep you here, and you will be my slave, safe and happy ever after."

A form approached from the shadows and proved to be an enormous man – he had to be seven feet tall – naked except for a pair of thigh high, black leather boots. His body rippled with the most amazing muscles and his cock swung free. With a mixture of fear and arousal, I realized it was the longest I had ever set eyes on.

"What is your name, slave?" Now that my roving gaze had reached his face, I saw the man had long black hair twisted up in a man bun. For some reason, that made me giggle.

Trying to control myself, I gasped out, "My name is Cinders, and I am *not* your slave!"

"We'll see about that. Rodney, take her to the harem." The man turned his back on me and as outraged as I was, I still couldn't help but admire his beautifully toned ass as he walked away.

I was still holding MY one REMAINING SHOE AS THE SHORT man took my arm and marched me up two flights of stairs, unlocked a door and pushed me into a large room. As the door slammed behind me, I looked around to see a bunch of girls staring at me. They were all naked as jaybirds.

"What the fuck?" I spun around and tried to open the door, but like the front door, it had no latch or keyhole.

One of the naked girls came towards me, smiling. She was tall and willowy, with short, ash-blonde hair. "Welcome to the harem! No matter why you came here, you will be safe now. Our lord has chosen you to be his slave and we will teach you everything you need to know."

"Like fuck he has!" I retorted, getting a bit panicky. "I'm nobody's slave! I just needed to pee!"

"Be calm, darling. You'll soon get used to it. Our master will fuck you so much and so well that you will never want to leave." The naked girl put her arms around me and another one joined her. As they embraced and petted me, they also quickly stripped off all of my clothing, and then they saw the glass slipper.

"Oh how beautiful! Where is the other one?" asked the second girl, a platinum blonde with cat's eye glasses.

"I lost it. What's your name?" I queried.

"I am Number Three. We all have numbers. You will be Number Nine." As she spoke, the girl's fingers caressed my breast, pinching the nipple.

Her partner slipped her hand between my legs and smiled. "Wet. You will fit right in, Number Nine. I am Number Two."

"I absolutely *have* to pee. Please may I use the bathroom?" I was afraid of the consequences if they refused.

"Of course. This way," said Number Two.

She led me into a small bathroom with a toilet that squirted water at my pussy when I was finished peeing. I hurriedly blotted myself and rejoined the group.

More young women came over and began kissing and touching me and I was aroused in spite of myself. From behind my back, a finger reached between my legs and stroked my pussy, drawing the wetness back to my asshole, then popped in and wiggled about. Another girl knelt in front of me, her fingers gently parting my pussy lips, making way for her tongue. I began to pant as I felt an orgasm building. A mouth attached itself to my nipple and began to suck, and fingers wove themselves into my hair and tugged, providing a spark of pain that sent me over the edge with a cry.

As soon as I had climaxed, the door opened and the huge man with the bun strode into the room. The women all drew back from me and bowed their heads.

"I am Bucyrus, and you are my newest plaything, Number Nine," he announced. "You will address me as 'Master.' On your knees, slave."

I hesitated, prompting a shocked gasp from the girls behind me.

Bucyrus scowled. "Now, slave. On your knees."

I realized I had no choice, so I slid to my knees and tried to cover my breasts with my arms. Bucyrus put his hand behind my head and his gigantic member nudged my lips. Seeing no help for it, I opened my mouth and the long, thick cock slid in my mouth and down my throat. It only went in about halfway before hitting my limits. I began to choke, but he paid no attention to my distress and continued to thrust in and out until a huge torrent of cum filled my throat and spilled out of my mouth. Bucyrus finally withdrew, leaving me gasping and heaving, yet strangely satisfied.

He pulled me up by my hair until I was standing, then nodded to the women behind me. They came forward and, grasping my arms and legs, they carried me to a low padded table on the other side of the room. Laying me down on my stomach, they put me up on my knees, raising my hips so my ass was in the air. With my chest on the table, they tied my wrists and ankles with some straps that were attached to the sides.

Bucyrus's penis was still erect. He strode over to where I was immobilized and stood between my wide spread knees. I felt a nudge, and the next thing I knew, his cock was in my cunt. I had to admit, bossy asshole or not, he was an amazing fuck.

The eight other young women clustered around us, putting their hands under my breasts to keep me in place, squeezing them and pinching my nipples, murmuring encouragement to their master: "Yes, Master. Fuck her just like that. She's loving it. Deeper. Faster."

Bucyrus' cock was like a jack-hammer. It seemed to thrust all the way to my womb.

I was beyond turned on, but I hadn't come. I kept crying, "More! Harder. Fuck me!" as Bucyrus continued his assault. When he finally came, I again whimpered for more.

"Perfect," he pronounced. "Now bathe her and plug her ass. I will see you all a bit later."

Incensed that I had not been allowed to climax, I shouted, "No! I need to come. That's so *mean*!"

Bucyrus glared at me, undid my restraints, and picked me up as though I weighed nothing. He sat down, slamming me over his knees.

"You will come when I say you can." Then his large hand began to spank my naked, glistening ass until I screamed and finally came. "Ah. I love a girl who comes from being spanked. Welcome to the harem, Number Nine!"

He dropped me on the floor and strode out of the room, the door magically opening and shutting without any help from him.

Furious, I muttered, "What an asshole!"

"Yes," said Number Two fondly. "But he's *our* asshole. Now come on, let's get you bathed and plugged. He may be back soon and he'll want to see his orders carried out."

I wondered what 'plugged' meant. But I was pretty sure I knew and I didn't look forward to it.

My New FRIENDS CARRIED ME INTO AN ADJOINING BATHROOM and lowered me into a huge marble tub, filled with bubbles and smelling like roses. The ceiling of the room was glass and I saw that the sky was sprinkled with stars and a bright crescent moon hung low over the house.

Number Two and another as yet unidentified woman got in with me and began to soap me from head to toe. Their busy hands explored every inch of my body and soon they were claiming my ass and my pussy with their fingers and my tits with their mouths.

I was beginning to feel this wasn't so bad after all, when they helped me out of the tub and took me into another room, on the other side of the bathroom. This was almost completely filled by a huge bed, covered in gray silk sheets. The ceiling was glass, just like the bathroom, and there were big French doors, open to the night air.

I was laid on the bed on my tummy and Number Three massaged something slippery into my rear passage.

"Now relax, pet. This will hurt a little, Master always makes us go right for the largest size butt plug," said Number Two as her hands caressed my shoulders.

Then I felt a cold hard object push against my ass. I tried to relax, but my muscles protested as the large object was inserted, inch by inch into my asshole. I let loose a small scream as the plug stretched my little hole wider and wider until it finally popped in and my muscles closed around the narrow neck.

"There. Good girl. Master will remove it when he wants to fuck your ass, and of course it comes out at night."

Number Three kissed me and whispered "You'll be so glad of the plug! When he comes to fuck your ass, it will be ready for him!" I groaned. My ass felt full and not in a good way. I loved having a cock in my ass – and Sam's tongue was even better – but I hated the plug.

The eight young women took me back into the first room and soon a trolley piled high with food was rolled in by the ugly man with the huge nose. The women eagerly helped themselves to the feast: roast of venison, little steamed potatoes, stuffed artichokes with garlicky bread-crumbs, and for dessert, strawberries and a big bowl of whipped cream.

Ravenous from all the fucking and excitement, I fell on the food like a wild beast. Everyone ate with their fingers, licking each other's and their own when they got too greasy.

We had polished off everything except about half of the cream when the door opened again and Bucyrus strode into the room. All the girls knelt with their heads bowed and their knees spread, except for me. I stood with my fists firmly planted on my hips, glaring at the big man.

"Are you still pouting about not being allowed to come?" he queried. "If you're good, I'll let you come now."

"You are an asshole!"

I heard the other women gasp, but strangely, Bucyrus started laughing.

"Number Nine, you are begging for a whipping! I'm slightly out of practice since all these girls are so obedient that I don't have an excuse to really punish them. However, I'm sure muscle memory will help me remember how to do it. Now, let's see. What shall I use?" Bucyrus went over to a tall closet and threw open the door.

Inside, there were rows and rows of every imaginable kind of instrument designed to punish naughty girls. Floggers, Cat o' nine tails, single-tails, bullwhips, canes, riding crops, wooden and metal paddles, belts and straps of varying widths, and wooden hairbrushes. I had read about all of them in my romance novels, but I had yet to have anything but a big hand, or a dragon tail, smack my bottom. My backside was conflicted; I wanted to try every one of them, but at the same time, I was a bit afraid.

Bucyrus studied the array of instruments for a couple of minutes, then selected a heavy looking flogger, with long braided strands that ended in knots. There was an audible intake of breath from the eight and a squeak from me.

"Take her over to the table and restrain her," he instructed the women.

The girls all arose from their kneeling positions and led me over to the same table where I had been so soundly fucked earlier. They strapped my arms and made me bend over the end of the table so I was standing with my feet stretched apart and my ass in the air.

Bucyrus came over and pinched my bottom. "Very nice. I will make this ass glow like Rudolph's nose," he said.

I knew I was in *big* trouble. I loved being spanked, but I was not at all sure I would love the flogger. Bucyrus twirled it a few times like a cheerleader with her pom-poms, then he brought it down hard on my poor little ass. I screeched with pain, but he chortled and told me this was just the warm-up.

The lashes got harder and I started sobbing and pleading. "Please, Master! I will be good, I promise I'll be good!"

"Oh you'll be good all right, but your ass isn't nearly red enough!" And he increased the intensity. I was in pain and then, suddenly... I wasn't. A strange calm flowed over me and I felt almost drunk, but... better. I was floating above my body and saw, with a great sense of tranquility, my bottom turning redder and redder. Bucyrus threw down the flogger and one of the women scuttled forward and retrieved it. He thrust his fingers into my pussy and showed the others how wet I was.

"This dirty girl loved that. Just look at all that cream!" He sucked his fingers, then pinched my poor bottom and the renewed pain brought me back from my inebriated state.

"Ow! Fuck! That *hurt*!"

"That was the idea, Number Nine. Don't try to tell me you didn't like it. Your pussy tells a different story." He snapped his fingers at the harem and one of them ran over to where the remains of our meal sat and fetched the bowl half full of whipped cream. He snapped his fingers again and the girl scooped a big handful of it and began to smear it over my hot bottom. The cool cream felt good, and it felt even better when Bucyrus began to play with my pussy, smearing the whipped cream into my vagina. I groaned, wanting more.

Bucyrus stepped in closer and thrust his cock into my pussy. The butt plug was still in my ass and the combination of it and his cock was pretty amazing I had to admit – even if it was only to myself.

Finally, Bucyrus kissed each of the women goodbye, giving my ass a quick smack, then he left the room, whistling. The women all crowded around me, fondling, kissing and petting me.

"You made our master so happy! He hasn't gotten to flog anyone in ages and it's his favorite thing!" said Number Eight, a lovely Asian girl with the palest, most beautiful skin I had ever seen.

"Sometimes we have to sass him to make him punish us. It always makes him happy!" Number Two clasped her hands and smiled a far-away smile.

I decided the women were all quite mad, but I had to admit, I felt quite at home.

The other young women identified themselves by their numbers, and I wondered aloud how I would remember which was which. When I voiced that question, Number Seven, a blonde with enormous breasts, showed me a tiny tattoo of the number seven on her ankle. "You'll get one on Thursday. That's the day Master's tattoo artist comes to visit. He's pretty hot!" AFTER BRUSHING THEIR TEETH, EVERYONE GATHERED IN THE bedroom, taking up positions on the great bed. Some sat, cross legged or side legged. Some lay down, their knees raised or spread. Number Three lay across the lap of sexy, red-headed Number Five and played with her nipples. Number Six, a fierce looking girl with a green and black mohawk, crouched between the spread legs of Number One, a raven-haired temptress with green eyes, and tongued her pussy. I sat a bit primly. I wasn't sure what the different relationships were and didn't want to overstep.

"So, Number Nine, tell us all about yourself and how you came to be here!" Number Four, another beautiful brunette with gleaming ebony skin, asked earnestly.

I figured I had nothing to lose by telling my story, so I propped my head up on Number Four's lap and began my tale of mean aunties and royal rescuers. There were interested murmurs from the other women, but no one interrupted me until I began to tell them about Sam.

"Oh. My. God! Sam the *Dragon*?? gasped Number Seven. "Shit! He's so H.O.T. Sometimes Master lets him play with us. Well, actually they both play with us! It's the best time ever!"

I was astonished. "Sam knows you are slaves to Bucyrus, and he's still friends with him?"

Number Three, with the short, ash blonde hair and a nose ring, giggled at my horrified expression. "Darling, he *calls* us 'slaves' but we are treated like queens, and we adore our 'Master."" "Oh! Oooh!," I went from horrified to fascinated. "So, you are all here of your own free will?"

"Absolutely." Number Six raised her head from Number One's pussy and shook her mohawk at me. "Some of us wandered in here, like you did. Others were technically 'kidnapped,' but it was all CNC, you know."

"What does CNC mean?" I asked.

"Consensual Non-consent.' Trust me. I love it here. At home, I was forced to wear little frilly dresses by my stepfather. It's not my kink and it was sooo humiliating!"

As Number Six's eyes teared up, Number One sat up and put her arms around her. "There there. It's okay. You can be a fierce warrior now. No more baby dresses."

"How often does Sam show up?" I was hoping I could have a guilt-free session with Sam's gorgeous tail, but then I remembered that Sam was the reason Horst was so disappointed in me. Sam had *lied* to me and I needed to confront him about that. But... that tail.

"About once a week. Sometimes he brings his girlfriend, Betsy. She loves to be fucked by Bucyrus! I wouldn't be surprised to see Sam tomorrow," said Number One. "Last time he came, he brought... *toys*!"

"What? What kind of toys?" I asked, intrigued. *Dolls, perhaps? Erector Sets*? Sam didn't seem like the kind of beast to play with toys. This must be a side of him I hadn't seen.

Number One threw back her beautiful hair and roared with laughter. "Not *children's* toys, Number Nine."

"Well, I don't know what you're talking about!" I was a bit affronted by their laughter.

"Sex toys! Things to help you play with yourself or play with someone else. You use them to... get off! haven't you ever used them?"

"No. Just my fingers." I leaned forward. Now I was interested. "Do they feel good?"

"Just you wait! Of course, he might not bring them this time. Last week, he brought a couple of dildos that were even thicker than his tail!" Number One was getting pink in the face, just describing it.

"Um, what's a dildo?" I was fascinated by this conversation.

"It's a fake cock, basically. Some of them are battery powered and they vibrate or even thrust when you put them in your pussy. He had one toy that vibrated in your pussy *and* sucked your clit! It could almost replace a man as far as we were concerned!"

"Wow! I am beginning to see why you like it here!"

Number Four stroked my hair. "We all came here because we heard about it and wanted to live here. Nobody was forced to come or to stay."

"But I just needed to pee! I didn't know what this place was."

"Well, I guess Master will let you leave any time you ask him. He probably thought you were one of the girls who was running away from an awful situation. Or perhaps one of the CNC girls?" Seeing my confusion, Number Four explained, "You know, Consensual non-consent."

"Yes, I remember what you said, but what does that even *mean*?"

"It means you want to be captured. You want someone to subjugate you, chase you, maybe even pretend to rape you! But it's all what you really, really want!" Number Four looked like a cat that ate the cream. "It's soooo hot! Last month, for my birthday, Master chased me for hours in the Deep Dark Forest! He was on horseback and I was barefoot. He finally tricked me, jumped off his horse and ravished me on a grassy bank."

"Holy smokes! Hmm. I can see the attraction in that. I just don't know what I want. I miss King Horst and Prince Caspian, but it's a bit lonely back at the castle when they go off hunting all the time. Here I have all of you! And besides, King Horst is really, really mad at me for fucking Sam and Betsy when he wasn't there!"

Number Eight, who hadn't said much up to this point, leaned over and peered at me. "You... *cheated* on them?"

"Yes! I mean, no. I didn't mean to. It was all Sam's fault. He told me he had texted them and gotten permission, but it turned out Sam lied. He never really texted them at all! I told Horst what Sam had said, but he didn't believe me!"

"Ouch. King Horst didn't believe you? Shame on him."

"I guess I need to talk to... Master Bucyrus. Will someone take this plug out, please?" I had absolutely *had* it with the damn plug.

Number Four led me into the bathroom and removed the offending plug, quickly and efficiently.

Then she led me back into the bedroom, pulled me down on the bed and cuddled me. "Plenty of time for explanations in the morning. You've had a busy day and you must be exhausted. Go to sleep now, Number Nine!" She must have been right because I was out before I was fully lying down.

CHAPTE

The next morning, we were awakened by Rodney, pushing a loaded breakfast cart into the room. There were three flavors of croissants, bowls of fruit, a big bowl of yogurt with various sugars and flavored syrups, and coffee: *glorious* coffee with sweetened whipped cream to add to it. Oh, and fresh squeezed orange juice. Most of the 'Numbers' – as I decided to call my fellow sirens – chowed down like lumberjacks. I stuffed myself with chocolate croissants and the heavenly coffee, then we all went into the huge bathroom and took showers.

The room was designed with shower heads coming out of three of the walls, and tiled ledge keeping the water from inundating the rest of the floor. Dispensers of scented liquid soap were conveniently placed between each shower, and handheld shower nozzles were attached below. Number Five showed me how to use the handheld nozzle on my clit and I had my first orgasm of the morning.

I was not alone in this. The room was full of moaning, writhing girls, their legs apart– or with one propped on the wall to give the water jets ample opportunity to reach the desired little buds. The water pressure was phenomenal!

We all dried ourselves with thick white towels, then trooped back into the main room, where Rodney was packing up the breakfast cart. He stopped grumbling about how messy we were long enough to say, "I am to tell you that Sam the Dragon will be visiting you this morning. Be sure to prep yourselves!" Having delivered his message, Rodney wheeled the cart out of the room.

"Prep ourselves? What does that mean?" I wanted to know.

"It's best to lube your pussy and ass up before he gets here. There is *not* a lot of foreplay when Sam comes to visit," Number Five told me.

"Do I need to wear the plug anymore?" I asked.

"Oh yes. Master will probably remove it, but he'll want it in you for the first week. Here, bend over and hold your ankles."

I sighed and assumed the position. After I was thoroughly lubed up, the plug was eased into my ass; it was much easier this time.

WHILE WE WAITED FOR SAM AND THE MASTER, THE NUMBERS told me their stories and how they came to be there.

Number One, with the long raven hair, had been captured by pirates. They sold her to a brute who had kept her in a dungeon, shackled to a wall. She was routinely brutalized and given only enough food to keep her alive.

"I escaped with the help of a magnificent eagle shifter named Cuthbert who then sent a message to Bucyrus. Master found me in the Deep Dark Forest and rode home with me thrown over his saddle. We've been together for ten years now and I adore him. On our anniversary, he takes me out in the forest and gives me a ten-minute head start!"

Number Two, the platinum blonde, told of how she had run away from a bad marriage to a gnome who had bought her from her father. "So horrible! He was really small. Made Rodney look like a giant, in fact. He couldn't make his cock stay hard long enough to fuck me, so it was slimy blow-job after slimy blow-job. I escaped while he was counting his money and found this house. Number One and Master took me in and I couldn't be happier!"

"How long ago was that?" I asked.

"Eight years ago. Best day of my life!

Number Three stretched her long, languid body and ruffled her short, ash-blonde hair. "I was about to be burned as a witch in a village about twenty miles from here. The mayor tried to seduce me, and when I resisted, he told everyone I cast a spell on him. If I could have done that, I would have turned him into a toad! Anyway, Master happened to be passing through the village square when the villagers were about to set the bonfire alight, and he rescued me. By some magic, he replaced me on the pyre with the mayor. So, I came home with him and my beautiful sisters brought me in and made me one of them. That was just about a year after Number Two arrived."

Number Four gazed at me with her huge dark eyes. The girl had eyelashes you could use to sweep the floor. "I was a slave, sold by my mother to feed my brothers. Master happened to come through the port city where the auction was being held, and he outbid everyone to claim me. At first I was terrified of him, but I soon saw the wonderful man under that imposing physique. He offered to let me leave with enough money to buy my own house, but I chose to stay with him and my sisters. That was six years ago. I am perfectly content."

Number Five was about to tell her story, when the big door opened and Bucyrus entered, followed by Sam, in his human form. All the women – except me – crowded around the two men, telling them how wonderful they were. I stood to one side with my arms crossed, tapping my foot. Sam looked up from where he was playing with Number Eight's nipple and the look on his face when he saw me was priceless.

"What are you doing here?" he gasped.

"I'm here because you fucking *lied* to me Sam! You told me Horst said, 'knock yourselves out,' when he didn't even get a text from you. Now he's furious with me."

"But how did you end up here?" Sam didn't sound at all repentant.

"Well, I ran away from home because my daddies were mad at me!" It sounded pretty lame when I put it like that. I had been so upset when Horst snapped at me, I hadn't really taken time to think the situation through.

"Wow! So now you're in Bucyrus' harem? What about Caspian? And Horst, for that matter? They must be worried sick."

Suddenly, I was stricken with remorse. I'd acted on impulse and hadn't spared a thought as to how my actions would affect my daddies.

Bucyrus had been watching this exchange and he finally spoke up, "Number Nine, you are free to leave any time. I will take you home myself, if that's what you want."

"No! I want Sam to take me home so he can apologize to Horst and Caspian for lying! I won't ever do it again, but I wouldn't mind watching everyone else have sex. I mean, Sam came all this way, and the girls all want him..."

"I guess that works. I understand Sam has some delicious new toy to show you all."

The Numbers clapped their hands and gathered around Sam, still in his human form, as he opened a backpack he had been wearing.

He pulled out what looked like a dragon's head attached to a huge silicon penis, decorated with swirls of color and glitter. He pressed a button in the shaft, and the object began to vibrate. When he pushed the button again, it rotated and thrusted. Another button caused a gush of white creamy stuff to ejaculate from the dragon's mouth and there was a collective sigh from the awe-stricken Numbers.

"Who wants to be first?" Sam was grinning as he looked around at the women. Eight hands went up. "Number Six, you didn't get to play with the clit sucker last time, so you can go first."

The very excited girl, her Mohawk all a-quiver, came forward.

"On the table, pet." Sam followed her to the indicated spot and she lay down, spreading her legs wide.

Sam shook himself and quickly shifted into his dragon shape. He stood between the legs of the panting girl and slowly introduced the dildo into her pussy. He put it about half way in, then he pushed the first button. The vibrations were quite audible as he paused and let her feel them. He pushed the button again and a low growling noise began. As Number Six began to buck and writhe, Sam thrust the device all the way in. Another button was engaged and a torrent of white cream flowed into and out of her pussy, and Number Six screamed as an orgasm consumed her. Sam withdrew the dildo and cleaned it thoroughly with a squirt bottle and a cloth.

When the satisfied girl was back to herself, Sam helped her up and looked around to see who wanted to be next. Number Four pushed me towards him, smirking at my confliction. "Come on, Number Nine. You know you want it."

And I did! But I was determined not to cheat. From that moment on, I would only have sex with my daddies' permission. "No. I can't. Number Eight? Why don't you go next? I'm just going to watch." I suppose it might not really be cheating as it was with a toy, but if Sam was guiding it into my pussy, it amounted to the same thing.

She wasted no time in getting settled on the table, and Sam quickly gave her clit a hot lick with his tongue before putting the dragon dildo into her pussy. The dragon head entered her vagina and when the vibrations started, she gasped with arousal. Then the rotations began, and she began to scream, just like Number Six had.

"Ohh! Oh *fuck*! That's... Yessss! More! Please, please, please! Don't stop! Fuuuck!"

Sam gave the dildo an extra thrust and she came apart. I watched as the cream gushed from her pussy, the dragon's head on the dildo scratching and stimulating her walls, the great girthy body of the toy rubbing against her clit. It was beyond anything I'd ever imagined and I wanted it to be me! I refused to cheat again, but I hoped I could get one of those toys to use with my daddies. Maybe even being fucked by Sam's tail couldn't beat this!

Sam removed the dildo and went about his cleaning routine. He helped Number Eight off the table and then looked

at me with a serious expression on his dragon face.

"I will take you home, if that is what you want, and I'll apologize to Horst and Caspian. Betsy will, too. She didn't like the fact that I lied and I think she's considering leaving me. I'm afraid she may want to go back to Horst, but the fact remains that she knew about the lie and went along with it. I guess I really screwed up." Sam looked really ashamed of himself, and, though I still didn't totally trust him, I found my anger subsiding.

"Okay, but I want to stay here for the rest of the day. I'm just getting to make friends with all these women and, except for Betsy, I don't have any girlfriends."

"Fine, so first we have to have a round of 'Fuck the Dragon." Sam looked at the women and beckoned Number Seven over.

"Hey baby. I need me some titty," he exclaimed, and Number Seven trotted over so he could lick and suck her large breasts and insert his tail in her pussy.

Watching Sam fuck the beautiful blonde made me very aroused, and, to my surprise, Bucyrus walked over and grabbed me around the waist. "I'm going to take you while I can, Number Nine," he muttered, bending me over the table and giving my ass a smack.

Heat pooled in my pussy and I felt the tip of his long cock nudging my nether lips, but I yelled, "No! *Red*! I'm not going to cheat ever again!"

Bucyrus backed off and patted my cheek. "Quite right. You belong to your daddies, not me. I apologize, Number Nine ... er, I mean Cinders." The other girls were watching Sam and waiting their turn while playing with their pussies or fingering each other.

Sam finished tail-fucking Number Seven and she reverently kissed his lovely wet tail, moaning, "Oh Sam! That was so good! Please come back again soon!"

He gave her a swat on the ass and beckoned to another girl. "Tail or tongue, Number One?"

"Tail, please, and could you scratch my clit with your claws, please?"

"Of course. Anything for you, dirty girl."

Sam grasped her hips and bent her over. His tail wiggled up her thigh to her pussy and then thrust inside as she shrieked. He retracted all but one of his claws on his right paw and used the remaining one to scrabble at her clit. Number One shuddered as a huge climax shook her body, then a minute later, she erupted in time with Sam's ejaculation of dragon seed.

AFTER LETTING ALL THE WOMEN TRY THE DRAGON DILDO AT least once, and a grand final session with Bucyrus, Sam, and all of the other eight women, the guys went to go drink whiskey. Sam left promising me he would collect me at six pm sharp. Once we were alone, I finally got to hear about the ways the remaining four girls had come to live with Bucyrus.

RED-HEADED NUMBER FIVE HAD BEEN TAKEN TO THE DEEP Dark Forest by her parents, ostensibly because they had no means of supporting their two children and apparently considered murder by abandonment to be a better option than getting social services involved. She and her twin brother wandered for days before they came across a house made of gingerbread. They were so hungry, they had eaten several shingles off the roof when a nasty witch emerged and grabbed them. The witch put them in a cage and tried to fatten them up so she could pop them in the oven and cook them for her dinner. They managed to put *her* in the oven instead and ran away.

"We were lost in the forest for a week and were really hungry and dehydrated. A bear named Bruno tried to feed us, but we were too afraid to let him near us, so Bruno went to Bucyrus to tell him about the situation. Bucyrus found us and brought us back to the house and fed us."

This had all happened five years ago, when Number Five was only fourteen, but Bucyrus had cared for her and her brother in a strictly philanthropic manner. She and her brother had been given an education and, more importantly, a safe haven. She'd never even known the harem existed until her eighteenth birthday, when he offered her the choice between joining his household in the harem, in service, or to be given a sum of money sufficient to buy her own house and make her own way in the world. She chose the harem, of course, and her brother had chosen to remain as a body-guard to Bucyrus.

Number Six, with the stunning mohawk, had been in an abusive relationship with her stepfather. He had – quite against her will – infantilized her, making her dress like a baby, complete with pacifier, nappies and frilly bonnet.

"You can't imagine how awful it was. I get it that lots of girls love being in a relationship like that, but I hated it. One time he was changing my poopy diaper and I kicked him. He rubbed my shit all over me and made me stay like that, tied to my crib, for two days. One of our groomsmen knew about Bucyrus and contacted him. Master rescued me and gave my stepfather a good thrashing. That was four years ago. I have never seen my stepfather since, but that groomsman is working here now."

Number Seven had been kidnapped by an ogre. He made her eat and eat and eat. He was fattening her up for a grand feast he was planning on having with his fellow ogres and he told her in great detail of how he and his friends would fuck her to death, then roast and eat her.

"I was desperate. He would have his friends over to pinch me, to see if I was fat enough to feed all six of them. Ogres have appalling eyesight, so I would put sticks between my fingers and curl my hands so they only felt the thin sticks.

"I managed to escape one day by making it look as though I was asleep in my bed. I stuffed pillows under the comforter and managed to slip through the tether he had attached to my wrist-cuff. I had told him my cuff was way too tight for a plump little pigeon like me, so he kept enlarging it until it was large enough to slip my hand through. I ran and ran and I found Master's house, just as the ogre was about to find me. Fortunately, I knew the code word."

"How?"

"It's on lots of notices throughout the Forest. Ogres are the *worst*! This was four years ago. I'm so happy here with Master and my sisters."

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "Are there still ogres out there?" I made a mental note to stay clear of the Deep Dark Forest if they, in fact, were.

"Not really. King Horst and his body-guards chased them over the hills and far away, and they were forced to agree to live in a small area near the border between the Deep Dark Forest and the troll's kingdom."

Mention of trolls reminded me of my wonderful father, and I tried not to cry as I said, "My daddy was killed by the trolls last year. They had an uprising and he went off to fight."

"Oh Cinders! I'm so sorry. I bet you miss him," said Number Seven.

"I do. He was a lovely man. But then Horst and Caspian saved me from my wicked Aunt Disma. I'm so lucky," I realized.

Number Eight was braiding her beautiful black hair as she told her story. "My mother sold me to a convoy of vampires for a lot of money. They only travelled at night and had a lot of coffins with them, so they could sleep during the day. They were on their way through the Deep Dark Forest to a convention in the next kingdom and I was their amusement for the journey. each and every day, I was chained to a tree, but it wasn't so bad at night. They were pretty hot, for vampires. They fucked me but didn't try to actually claim me. Lips, no teeth, if you see what I mean? Then I overheard them talking about how they would have some kind of competition when they got to the convention, to decide who would be my mate. I didn't want to be a vampire, but there was nothing I could do.

"Then one day, there was a solar eclipse, and they all jumped out of their coffins, thinking it was night, right? They all shriveled up and died, and there I was, still chained to a tree in the middle of the Deep Dark Forest! Fortunately an elf happened by and set me free. It told me about the code and this place. I ran and ran until I found this house. Bucyrus offered to send me home, but I'm not stupid. If she sold me once, she'd sell me again. And Master takes such good care of me. I've been here for about six months."

My story was nothing compared to any of theirs. I felt very guilty for running away from my daddies and couldn't wait for six o'clock, when Sam would take me home. I needed to apologize to Horst and Caspian!

Finally, the clock chimed six and Sam and Bucyrus came back. They had obviously had a *lot* of whiskey, as their arms were around each other and they were singing drinking songs. Rodney's look of disapproval as he helped them navigate was really funny.

"So, little Cinders, are you sure you want to go home?" Sam's voice was slurred.

"Yes, please, Sam. I shouldn't have run away. I hope my daddies aren't too angry with me."

"I 'spect they'll be so happy to see you, they won't be too angry. Just angry enough to give your bottom a good spanking." Sam's tail twitched and he eyed the Numbers with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. Clearly, he wasn't quite ready to leave.

With a chuckle, Bucyrus gave Sam a sobering slap on the shoulder and invited him to come back next week for a new round of 'fuck the dragon.'

Sam agreed and we trooped outside, Bucyrus, Sam, Rodney, and me.

Sam crouched down on the ground and spread his wings. "Hop on, Cinders. I'll give you a ride home." I eyed him nervously. "Sam, you've had a lot of whiskey. Are you okay to fly?"

He gave a laugh that was half hiccup. "Sure! I do this at least once a week. Bucyrus has the best whiskey. Haven't crashed yet, have I, Big B?"

"Well, except for that time when we went to the beach. Tequila is *not* your friend!" 'Big B' grinned at some embarrassing – for Sam – moment in their shared history.

Sam shook his wings and beckoned me over, "Now or never, little girl. The ship is leaving and, unless you want to walk home at night in the Deep Dark Forest, I'm your ride."

I gingerly clambered onto his broad back and sat in front of his wings, where I held on tight to one of his neck horns. His body was so muscled, and I shivered, only partly from the cold.

Sam began to flap his wings, causing a familiar sensation in my crotch as his muscles undulated against it. I ground against them and they rubbed my pussy in a very pleasant way. It was like what I imagined having the dragon dildo pulsing against my clit would feel like.

Gripping the horn tightly, I closed my eyes, giving myself over to the blissful sensation.

I damn near fell off!

We sailed over the trees, startling a few birds who scolded Sam for flying too low over their nests. Then I spied the castle and tried to prepare myself for my daddies' wrath. SAM WAS A PRETTY GOOD DRUNK FLIER, I HAD TO ADMIT. HE nailed the landing in the castle courtyard with barely a wobble. I slid off his back just as Horst and Caspian ran out of the front door and smothered me in a sandwich hug.

"Oh my god, Cinders! We were so worried!" cried Caspian. "Where have you been?"

Squeezed so tightly between them, I struggled for breath as I explained, "I'm so sorry, Daddy. I went to stay with Bucyrus. I needed to pee and his house—"

"You stayed with *Bucyrus*??" my daddies exclaimed in chorus.

"Yes! But I didn't mean to stay, I just needed to pee! His house was the first one I came to."

Sam shifted from his dragon form to human. "This is all my fault, Horst and Caspian. Cinders never would have fucked me and Betsy if I hadn't lied and told her you two had given her permission. I suppose I shouldn't have done it, but I just wanted that pink little pussy so bad. I didn't know you humans would take so hard or that Cinders would run away. Betsy is hopping mad at me, too," he added. "She says she won't fuck me again until I've apologized, so… sorry 'bout that."

"But how did you end up rescuing Cinders from that evil man?" Caspian wanted to know. "I've heard that he has multiple women locked in a harem."

I pushed the men away from me and spun around, facing them. "The women of the harem—"

"So there *is* a harem!" interrupted Horst.

"Well, yes! But the women—"

"Were you subjected to terrible acts of depravity?" queried Horst.

"No more than I get with you two!" I retorted, beginning to be pissed off. "Now hush and let me explain."

Horst and Caspian backed off a bit and folded their lovely, muscled arms.

"Bucyrus has eight women who all live in a luxurious apartment and have masses of sex with him and each other. Totally consensual, by the way. They were either rescued from horrible fates by Bucyrus, or they found their way to his house and willingly joined the harem. Sam didn't exactly rescue me. He joins in occasionally and he happened to come there today, so he offered me a ride home."

"I bet that wasn't the only ride he offered you!" Horst grumbled, glowering at Sam.

I lost my temper at last. "I *beg* your pardon? That's a really shitty thing to say, Daddy. Sam encouraged me to come home, even though I was worried you would be angry with me. And after all, he has apologized."

"It was a great apology, too," Sam interjected. "Totally sincere and deeply heartfelt."

Horst relaxed a little and stopped frowning. "I'm sorry, pet. I just didn't like to think of you..."

"Having sex without you there? You're right. No more of that. But it was all a misunderstanding back at Bucyrus' house. He thought I knew all about the harem and wanted to join it. Several of the women sought him out and apparently the secret code word is *pee*! A woman who shows up and says she needs to pee is asking to be given sanctuary in the harem. It just so happened that I actually needed to pee and his was the first house I saw."

"I see. But if it was so wonderful, why did you want to come home?" Caspian asked uncertainly. "I mean, how can we compete with that?"

"Daddy, this isn't a competition. You guys are my daddies and I want to be with *you*. I shouldn't have run off like that. I'm really sorry. I promise that for the rest of my life, I will only have sex with you both there or if you give me permission."

"Well, I overreacted," Horst admitted. "I'm sorry I grumped at you. I should have known it was Sam's fault."

"What?" said Sam, looking hurt. "I said I'm sorry. I even meant it. Betsy will never forgive me if we can't go back to how we four were before. She – and I– really enjoyed ourselves at tea the other day."

Sam looked so shame-faced that Horst's stern stare finally softened.

"Well, I guess I can forgive you. I enjoyed it, too. Variety is the spice of life, as long as the rules are followed." Horst reached for Sam's hand and shook it. "Tell Betsy we're all good and come have tea the day after tomorrow."

"I'll do that," said Sam.

AT TEATIME ON THE DESIGNATED DAY, SAM AND BETSY showed up and we had a lovely time with all the guys taking turns with me and Betsy, and sometimes all the guys took just me or just her. When Horst had his cock in my mouth, Caspian had his dick in my pussy and Sam had his long tongue in my ass, I came like a rocket from the hot sensations. Betsy watched us, fingering her wet pussy, finally exploding in a massive orgasm. When it was her turn, Sam gave me the dragon dildo I had enjoyed so much. When later I inserted it into my pussy and cycled through the various options, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I was never giving it back!

Life at the castle settled into its previous routine: Lots of sex, lots of spankings and masses of cuddling. The preparations for the ball were also in full swing, and we were having breakfast in the garden when suddenly, Horst decided it should have a theme. A circus!

"I will be the Ring-Master!" exclaimed Horst. "I have just the bull-whip for it. Submissives can sign up for funishments!"

"Funishments? What are those?" I wondered, my imagination on overload.

"Fun punishments, silly girl," said Caspian.

"But... whips? What's fun about that?" I asked.

Horst and Caspian exchanged an amused glance.

"You know how much you like it when we give you a spanking?" asked Horst.

"Um, yes. But you've never whipped me!"

"Would you like us to?" Caspian grinned evilly at me. "I think you'd like it just fine."

Why was the idea of being whipped by my daddies so arousing? My pussy was getting wet. I suddenly remembered the flogger Bucyrus had used on my bottom and realized I hadn't told my daddies about that. I also remembered how turned on it had made me. "Maybe?"

"We'll talk about that later. Let's get the party planning settled and then we can find out what you think about a bit more discipline," Horst said, already busy making notes on his phone.

"Um, Daddy? I think I forgot to tell you about something that happened while I was at Bucyrus's castle. He used a flogger on me."

The two men looked at me in shock. "What?" said Horst.

"I just totally forgot to tell you. I mean we didn't talk much about that visit afterwards, and it just slipped my mind.

Caspian grinned. "I bet you liked it, little girl. We will be sure to give you more now we know you've already tried it. Seriously, *did* you like it?"

"Not at first. It hurt more than spanking, but after a while I got all floaty."

Horst looked up from his phone. "We'll table this discussion for later. Now let's think about the entertainment."

"How about naked trapeze artists?" Caspian suggested excitedly. "I know girls who specialize in that. Very engrossing."

Horst stared at his son. "Where on earth did you hear about them?"

"It was when we visited Club Exssses in New Brunswick. You and Betsy were off in one of the private rooms. They are pretty amazing! I got to fuck both of them when their act was over. Their names are Elouise and Phyllis." My head was swimming, trying to imagine who had done what to whom. "How about dancing? There will be dancing, right?"

"Of course!" Horst leapt up, pretending to waltz with an imaginary partner. "The court musicians play everything from Mozart to Led Zeppelin." He sat back down and helped himself to a muffin.

"How many people will be coming?" I wanted to know. "Do we *have* to invite my awful aunt and cousins?"

Horst looked at me severely. "Of course we will invite Disma and her daughters. They are my subjects, too. Besides, just think of how envious they will be of you!"

I had to admit I loved that idea.

"I imagine we will have about four-hundred guests," Horst declared. "The werewolf pack will be fifty or so, more with their witch women. And of course, Sam's dragon employees will be invited. They'll have to come in shifts so as to keep the dragon gas supply going.

I paused as I was about to take a large bite. "Dragon gas? Employees? Sam has a business?"

Horst looked up from his plate. "Sam has a natural gas company that heats the homes in the Deep Dark Forest. He employs dragons to breathe fire into a condenser and it's pumped all over. Quite lucrative, I understand, and it gives young dragons a means of acquiring wealth without devastating kingdoms or running off with damsels and that sort of mischief."

"Oh," I said.

"We'll have a large contingent of elves and fairies, of course, so we'll need to make sure the fairies stick to having sex with suitable participants and in a suitable place. We don't want another incident like last time."

"Oh! What happened last time?" I was so curious about the fairies, never having seen one.

"Fairies have sex on the brain. It's like breathing to them. They absolutely love to fuck anything that stays still long enough. At a ball we had a few years ago, they seduced four of the serving wenches and six groomsmen. It's not as if I object to sex at parties, but the middle of the dance floor is not the place for it!" Horst laughed at my intrigued expression. "Uh oh! Cinders wants to have sex with the fairies!"

I blushed. "But aren't they tiny?"

"Yes, but the male's sex organs are as big as ours. And the girls can accommodate huge cocks."

"Like Bucyrus"?"

Horst frowned at me. "The less said about Bucyrus' cock the better, naughty girl."

"I'm sorry. You know I prefer you two to all others. And there may be such a thing as too big!"

"Not for the fairies!"

Caspian took a bite of quiche, adding, "Animal acts with shifters would be fun. I know of a troop of tiger acrobats."

"And the Ape Shifters from Hohenzollern. They have gorilla and orangutan performers. I saw them at King Wilhelm's fortieth birthday party," Horst reminisced.

"Wasn't there a problem with them, though?" Caspian asked. "I seem to remember one of the gorillas claimed a maiden and wouldn't let her go." "As I remember it, she was an entirely willing participant and it was only an ex-boyfriend of hers who made a fuss. Heavens, that gorilla guy was huge! Even shifted, he was bigger than Bucyrus!"

I perked up at the repeated mention of Bucyrus. "Will you invite him and his harem? I promise you, it's all consensual with them, and the girls are so fun!"

"I'd need to meet him first," Horst said skeptically. "Sam seems to like him, but that's not saying much."

I'd have to see if I could get Betsy to speak on Bucyrus' behalf. My friends, the Numbers, would have so much fun at the ball! "What about the horses?" Caspian asked, busily drawing up a list. "We could get the centaurs, Mr. and Mrs. Dobbin. They are a great couple. They put on quite a show!"

"Absolutely! And why not the Pony Shifters? They did a train at the last party that ended up involving almost everyone!"

"Good times, good times." Horst finished his breakfast and got up. "Well, duty calls. I have to go and be kingly this morning. I believe I'm opening a hospital."

Caspian eyed me and grinned. "We'll try not to be bored while you're gone, Dad. I promised to show Cinders my etchings."

"You have my permission to do more than that! In fact, I'd be suspicious if you didn't. I'll expect the same delights when I return." Horst kissed me chastely on the cheek and gave me a hard slap on my bottom for farewell.

Caspian and I ran upstairs, where he wasted no time in stripping me naked and exploring every inch of my body. He

had already mapped it many, many times, but it seemed he needed to refresh his memory every day.

"God, I love your pussy. It tastes so fucking good!" Caspian groaned as he nuzzled his mouth on my sex, licking and sucking until I couldn't stand it.

"Yes! Fuck. that's.. oh goddess. More, suck me.. yes, right there... ohhhh!" I was in heaven.

His tongue circled my clit, making it emerge from its little hood. His lips latched on to it and began to suck. Hard. Then he withdrew his lips and made me wait. I almost lost my mind, begging, "Pleeeease! I'm going to die if I can't come!"

"Not yet, filthy girl. You'll come on my cock when I'm ready." And the torture/pleasure continued.

His cock finally slammed into me and hit my G-spot and I came screaming his name.

We cuddled on the bed – his, this time – and eventually fell asleep. When we awoke, it was lunch time and we only had time for a quickie.

CHAPTER o

I decided against the dress I had found online. It had too many unhappy memories of how I had – albeit accidentally – cheated on Horst and Caspian. So, I contracted with a woman in the village named Harriet to make my dress. Internet shopping was fun, but it was better to shop locally, especially for this occasion.

After Caspian and I finished lunch, Harriet arrived to take my measurements. She was surprisingly young for having a business so well-established, and very simply dressed in a short green tunic, but when her hair began to sprout rosebuds as she excitedly showed off her dress sketches, I realized she was a dryad. I was immediately awed that she had come in person to plan my gown, since dryads tended to be shy and preferred you to give them a call with what you needed. But then again, I was engaged to the King and Prince!

I took Harriet and the samples of material she'd brought with her up to my bedroom. After much deliberation, I chose a real Disney-type ballgown, deciding I wanted to be taken seriously as the queen of this kingdom, and not be mistaken for a stripper.

"Do you have shoes?" she inquired.

I suddenly remembered my glass stilettos and wondered where they were. One was probably here at the castle, but the other had been left behind at Bucyrus' house.

"I had some, but if I can't find them, I'll order new ones." I supposed I ought to feel the same guilt about the glass shoes as I did about the dress, but I loved them too much for that! "The ones I'm wearing now are six-inch stilettos, the same height, if that helps."

"That does. Let's measure you now, and I'll get started tonight." She was so excited at the thought of this new project that tendrils of flowering ivy had grown out of her tunic and was winding down her slender arms and thighs.

I stripped and stood there in my thong as Harriet's magical measuring tape encircled my body while she made notes to herself on a small iPad. Just as the tape was winding around my breasts, Horst came in and his eyes lit up.

"Am I too late, or too early?" he asked.

"Neither Daddy. I'm getting measured for my dress." I fluttered my eyelashes at him and giggled. "I can forget to put my clothes back on afterwards, if you like?"

"I like. In fact, I like so much I'm going to stand right here and watch you. I'm envying that tape measure right now. It's touching you where my mouth should be."

The magical tape recoiled in shock and Harriet blushed rose-pink, stammering, "Your Majesty, would you like me to leave?"

"No indeed. It adds to my pleasure seeing another person's hands on that hot body. Carry on."

The magical tape turned from a burnished gold to a blushing pink as it hesitantly repositioned itself around my tits,

but I noticed that one tasseled end flicked at my nipple in an entirely unprofessional way. Harriet tried to keep her eyes on her iPad, but the rosebuds in her hair began to quiver and bloom, betraying her arousal as she said, "Thirty-six inches. I don't think you'll need a bra with this dress. It will have a boned bodice and balconette cups. Your breasts will fit perfectly."

Horst growled, "Check again. I want to make sure you have all her measurements."

Harriet blinked, her flowering ivy fluttering and putting out more blooms, as her measuring tape hesitantly wrapped around me, loops of tape circling and squeezing my breasts, slithering around my waist and hips, coiling around my thighs until I was trussed up like a turkey, hardly able to move at all. I could see the ivy on Harriet's body mirroring the tape's movements, and her roses were growing pinker and pinker, pulsing slightly as she stared at me.

When the end of the tape suddenly swatted my ass, Harriet jumped and bloomed all over, then threw her iPad into her sewing case and squeaked, "That's it! I will start right away on the dress and we'll have a fitting in a couple of days. I have all my seamstresses on alert to work on it." The magical measuring tape fled into Harriet's sewing case and, after curtseying to the king, she ran out of the room, leaving a trail of sweet-smelling droplets of nectar behind her.

"My turn." Horst strode over and grabbed me, his erection tenting his soft leather pants so much I was afraid they'd split. His fingers encased my right nipple and he pinched it so hard I squeaked. "You like that, don't you, dirty girl?"

"Yes, Daddy. More, please."

"It was so hot seeing that tape squeeze your tits. Your nipples got so hard." His mouth crashed into mine, his tongue exploring every inch.

He released me only to swing me around and force me to bend over. His fingers roughly hooked themselves in my thong and tore the fine lace so it fell to my feet, then his cock was out of his pants and buried deep in me as his hands gripped my hips.

I would have fallen to my knees if he hadn't held me in place, his rough hands gripping me so hard I knew there would be bruises. My climax, when it came, was so strong I got lightheaded, my legs wobbly in the high heels. I reached back to find a hand-hold, my fingers grabbing his arms and my nails digging into his flesh as his cock jerked in me, and cum flowed down my legs. Horst held me for several minutes as we panted and regained our composure. And he was still hard. The man recovered from cumming faster than anyone, ever, except maybe his son.

"How was that, filthy girl? Was that as good as what Caspian gave you while I was out being kingly?"

"Yes, Sire!" I moaned, knowing Horst absolutely *loved* it when I called him 'Sire.' "You are both the best lovers any girl ever had."

"What did you do with him?"

"Um, well..." I peered at him from under my eyelashes. "He took my ass."

Horst's eyes narrowed. "Like this?" And he proceeded to fuck me again, this time in my ass, as hard as he had the first time in my pussy.

"Yes!" I shrieked. "Just like that!"

"Fuck. You're so tight. It's hard to believe this is the second cock in here today. I'm going to fuck you until I come again, then I'll eat your delicious pussy."

He was as good as his word.

CHAPTER 10

Finally, the day of the ball arrived. The castle and its gardens had all been prepared for the event, but I made sure the staff was well rested.

Early that morning, I walked around and marveled at the beauty of the place. Inside, everything shone with polish and new paint. The chandeliers sparkled and the floors were waxed to such a shine you could see your face in them. I wondered if they would also allow the guests – and my daddies – to see up the ladies' skirts, so I summoned my favorite maid, Donna, to test the theory. She came running and I asked her about the bed-chambers that were set up for the guests who would spend the night. As she talked, I casually looked down at the floor and saw that, yes indeed, I could see her panties under her long skirt. I giggled to myself and we parted, she to see to the endless tasks ahead, and I to the gardens.

THE CASTLE HAD MANY FORMAL GARDENS, MOST WITH PLACES to sit and enjoy the amazing views of the Deep Dark Forest and the mountains beyond. There were fountains and lily ponds, bowers of roses that sheltered pretty benches, complete with downy cushions, and groves of ancient trees that seemed to whisper to me as I walked under them. I sat down on a bench under an oak that must have been a thousand years old. The tree had huge roots that erupted from the earth and formed small hollows about two feet in diameter, covered in emerald moss. As I sat, still as a mouse, I saw movement in one of them and shortly, a small face peeked out at me.

I held my breath. Was this one of the fairies? The little creature emerged from the mossy cave and stared at me.

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"Hey," I whispered. "Are you a fairy?"
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She put her tiny hands on her tiny hips. "Naturally! What do you think? I'm obviously not a human. You must be Cinders, the royal strumpet!"

I was aghast at the fairy's cheek. "I am the fiancée of King Horst and Prince Caspian."

"Exactly. The royal strumpet! Don't worry. I'm not judging you. I bet you get more sex than you can handle with those two."

"Um, no? I can 'handle' anything they need. You sound a bit... jealous?"

The fairy grinned and hopped up on the bench next to me. "Not me! I get all I can handle in my own ménage, thanks very much. There are ten boys in our polycule and I'm the only girl. I was just taking a break from getting railed by all ten in preparation for tonight. We're supposed to be on our best behavior for the party."

My mind immediately conjured up an image of this tiny creature, who couldn't have been more than two and a half feet tall, being fucked by ten well-endowed little men. My panties grew damp at the idea. "I have a feeling you won't need to be very circumspect tonight. The whole thing sounds like a welldressed orgy to me. Or un-dressed, as it may be."

The fairy laughed and swung her small legs back and forth. She was a pretty little thing, with pale hair that floated out from her head like a dandelion. Her dress was sheer and I could see her hard, tiny nipples. She unfurled her wings, long and narrow as a dragonfly's, translucent and veined with silver.

"What is your name?" I asked her, offering my hand.

The fairy grabbed it with surprising strength for one her size and shook it. "I'm called Cowslip. Pleased to meet you." Suddenly she looked up and waved to something emerging from the mossy hollow. "There's one of my guys now! Hey, Thistle. Come meet my new friend, Cinders."

Thistle was a gorgeous tiny man. He couldn't have been more than three feet tall, but he was all muscle and had tattoos all over his arms. He was nude except for his felt hat and a pair of leather shorts. His cock was poking through his fly and though it was the size of an average human cock, on his tiny form it looked enormous and it stood straight out from his body as he ambled over to the bench. "Hey, your royal hotness," he greeted. "I hope Cowslip wasn't too forward. She's a bit of a flirt."

"I've enjoyed her company, Thistle. It's lovely to meet the fairies. I've heard such interesting things about you."

Cowslip snorted with laughter. "Not as interesting as the things we've heard about you! You ran away and joined Bucyrus' harem. That must have been fun." She jumped down off the bench, reached for Thistle's cock and began rubbing it with her tiny fingers. Thistle fondled her breast and I could see they were getting ready to have sex, right then and there. I rather hoped they did, actually.

"And you had Sam the Dragon and Betsy over for an orgy. His tail's a bit too big for my pussy, but his tongue!" Cowslip gave a shiver. "It's sooo good." Her fingers left Thistle's cock and began to rub between her legs.

Wow! Sam really got around!

I watched as the two fairies totally forgot about me and began to fondle each other's bodies. In a flash, Thistle's cock was pounding into Cowslip's pussy as she held onto the bench. It was hot, but quick, and in less than a minute, they separated and grinned at me.

"Want a turn?" Thistle started to push my knees apart, but I firmly dissuaded him.

"I don't have sex unless my men agree," I told him. "No cheating. It's not that you aren't very tempting, Thistle, but I made a promise."

"Humans!" huffed Cowslip. "No fun at all. Well, never say we didn't offer."

"I won't." I hadn't stopped to realize how strange this all was. The fairies obviously lived up to their reputation, but the fact that they were eager to have sex with anyone and anything they met was a bit of an eye-opener.

Cowslip seemed to know what I was thinking. "We can't help having very high libidos, you know."

"Actually, I'm rather jealous. Even with my two guys, I can't fuck all day."

"Didn't Sam give you one of his dragon vibrators?" Thistle enquired.

"How on earth do you know that?" Were there no secrets from fairies?

The fairies laughed uproariously. "We see you when you're sleeping. We know when you're awake. We know when you've been bad or good, so be bad for goodness' sake," sang Cowslip.

"Uh, I think it's supposed to be: 'So be good for goodness' sake!" I giggled.

"So boring, being good all the time. You sound like Luisa."

"Who's that?"

"She's the Good Fairy, of course. She doesn't visit the Deep Dark Forest very often, though. There's too much to keep her busy, doing her 'good deeds' –" Cowslip made brackets in the air with her fingers. "– in the Great Wide World."

"Well, well, well," a familiar voice drawled behind me. "I see you've met some of the fairies, pretty girl. I bet they tried to seduce you."

I spun around to see Horst standing behind me. I hadn't heard him approach.

"Your Majesty." Thistle made a low bow. "Your lady is quite immune to our charms. Apparently, you humans have much stricter standards than we do."

"Not always," said Horst, perhaps thinking of my sojourn in Bucyrus' harem. "But we are a tiny bit more selective than you fairies. I'm told that, for you, nothing is off-limits." "Not quite true, Your Majesty. We draw the line at ogres."

I shuddered, remembering Number Seven's tale of her ordeal. Ogres *were* the worst if they were the only things fairies wouldn't fuck!

"Cinders, say goodbye to these two. We need your help with the menus. And we'll see you two at the party!" Horst took my hand and led me back to the castle. When we entered the great hall, he stopped to check out how the room was decorated.

"Looking good, I think," he mused. "We have the trapezes and the high wire set up for the aerialists. I can't wait to see that! It puts sex-swings to shame! And the flaming hoops for the tiger-shifters are all set. Is your dress ready?"

"Yes, Harriet delivered it last night. She was still blushing over what you said in front of her, Horst."

"Good, she looked like she needed a good pollinating. Maybe she'll come to the ball!"

I giggled. Horst was never afraid to say exactly what he was thinking.

"Did your new shoes arrive?"

"No, I'm afraid I'm going to have to wear my Jimmy Choos. I do wish I had the glass ones, though. Maybe I'll get Sam to make some magically appear, like he did..." Too late, I remembered Sam was a sensitive subject for Horst.

"The Jimmy Whatsis will be fine. Sam has caused enough trouble, Cinders. You may have one dance with him. That's it."

I was careful not to pout. "Where's Caspian?"

"He's seeing to the field where the pony shifters will sleep tonight. They shift to their human form to dance and party, but they prefer to fuck and sleep in their horse form, for some reason."

We walked across the gigantic room and I gazed at the furnishings that made it look like a circus tent. There were gauzy curtains around the circumference and a large circular ring in the center of the floor. Lots of tables and chairs surrounded the room with plenty of space in the center for dancing. The orchestra stand was on the right side, nestled between the split staircase that rose in two graceful arcs to the upper floor. On the second story, there were curved balconies, wide enough for more chairs and tables. A section of it was divided into small private rooms that could be open to the floor below or closed off with more gauzy curtains if the occupants wanted privacy.

"Caspian and I will join you later for tea and, perhaps, a bit of fooling around," Horst announced. "Until then, please make sure Cook is ready with the menus, and the wine and beer are in place. The guests will start arriving at about seven-thirty."

"Yes, Sire. Your wish is my command." I grinned at him and scurried off to the kitchen.

The cooks and servers were busy arranging huge trays of finger foods. It had been decided that it was much easier to have a more informal buffet-type meal instead of a sit-down one. As I sampled a few hors d'oeuvres and moaned at how wonderful they tasted, the chief cook came over and introduced herself to me as Mrs. McMillan.

"There's something for everyone. A lot of the guests are vegetarians, so we decided to stick to just vegetables and fish," she told me. "Great idea! Where does the fish come from?" I wondered.

"There's a stream in the forest that frankly gets overcrowded if we don't take fish from it, and even the fish are okay with that. They volunteer and we make sure they don't suffer."

"Wow! That's pretty noble of them!" I said.

"Animals aren't as selfish as humans, for the most part," said Mrs. McMillan. "They look to the greater good."

"What about fairies? Are they selfish?" I wondered.

"Very," was Mrs. McMillan's response.

I wandered around, trying not to get in the way until I was finally shooed out with instructions to tell Horst that the food was 'under control.'

I went down to the cellars to check on the wine and found a very elegant Frenchman polishing bottles of domestic Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noirs. He bowed to me and asked if I would like to taste the wines he had chosen for the party.

Of course I said 'yes', and he put a white linen napkin over his arm and poured me two tiny glasses. I sipped them and, honestly, couldn't tell them apart, but I smacked my lips and told him how wonderful they were.

"How about the beer? Is that all set?" I asked.

"That is not my job. You need to go to the other side of the cellars and ask for 'Tom'. I don't drink beer and he does little else," said the Frenchman.

I thanked him and trotted off, following the sounds of a voice singing what sounded like a sea shanty.

"Way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, early in the morning," sang the voice.

I rounded a corner and beheld a sorry sight. A young man was sprawled on a bench, clutching a bottle of beer, and surrounded by a bunch of empties. His trousers were open and he was playing with his cock with his other hand and singing at the top of his voice.

I coughed and he stopped singing and stared blearily at me. "Who goes there?" he slurred. He was, to use a nautical term, three sheets to the wind.

"I'm King Horst's fiancé and I was asked to check and make sure we had enough beer for the party. You must be Tom."

"There's plenty. Now go away and let me be."

"Well, how many cases did you get?"

"Enough." His hand began to stroke his cock again.

I stamped my foot. "Stop that. Your king has put you in charge of an important task. Put down that bottle, button your pants, and get to work. I need all the beer stacked in the spring house."

The young man looked very surprised. He sat up and did as I said, then he scratched his head. "Who are you again?"

"My name is Cinders. I'm the fiancé of King Horst and Prince Caspian. Are you Tom or not?"

"Aye. I'm Tom. I heard the royals were sharing a woman. I wish I was that rich."

"Rich has nothing to do with it."

"I bet they like to fuck the living daylights out of you."

"That, Tom, is none of your business. Now, do you want me to fire you? Or will you pull yourself together and do your job?"

He got up, grumbling as he staggered over to a door nearby. Opening it revealed a small room stacked to the ceiling with cases of beer.

"The spring house, you say?"

"That's right. Hurry up. It needs time to chill before the party."

He picked up a case and staggered past me, muttering under his breath about bossy women, and I went back upstairs to have tea with my men.

TEA WAS BRIEF AS WE WERE TOO EXCITED TO EAT MUCH, AND I, for one, was anxious to get to the 'fooling around' part of the afternoon. We managed to hold out long enough to take a few sips of Earl Gray and a tiny scone or two, but Caspian swallowed quickly and pushed his chair back from the table.

"Come here, Cinders." He opened his fly and pulled me roughly onto his lap. I was not wearing panties, and his cock had easy access to my hot, wet pussy.

Horst finished his scone and wiped his hands on a napkin before getting up from his chair and sauntering over to where Caspian was bouncing me on his dick. He undid the buttons on my dress and pulled it roughly off over my head, then he pushed me forward against Caspian's chest and began to fuck my little hole, sliding his hands between my body and Caspian's to grip my breasts. One of the servants started to enter the room to clear the table only to hurriedly retreat with a shocked gasp, but we knew they weren't really shocked. We were pretty public about our displays of affection as the guys basically took me whenever and wherever they felt the urge.

When we had all come, we kissed each other lovingly and went off, each to our designated tasks. I was so happy, I was humming. I had to be the luckiest girl in the world – or at least in the Deep Dark Forest.

CHAPT

Harriet was waiting for me in my room soon after my very enjoyable session with my beautiful men. With my ass and my pussy more than satisfied, I was now looking forward to trying on my gown.

"I hope you like it, Your Highness," she murmured, casting flustered glances at the door, probably expecting Horst to come in and say something bawdy.

I slipped out of my skirt and t-shirt and put on the amazing dress. It was a beautiful pale blue silk, with soft panniers over my hips and a laced corset top that showcased my breasts, presenting them to anyone standing in front of me like an offering. I figured you could *just* see my nipples if you were very tall. The tiny sleeves were off-the-shoulder and a pair of white kid gloves covered my arms to above the elbows. I twirled in front of my bedroom mirror, amazed at how I looked.

"It's like a dream! You are so talented, Harriet. I want you to make all my clothes from now on!"

She blushed and curtsied to me, the roses in her hair turning pinker, and I giggled. I still wasn't used to having people treat me like royalty. Just then, Horst and Caspian burst into the room. "Holy shit! That's just gorgeous! exclaimed Caspian. "I can't wait to rip it off you!"

"Don't you dare touch it before the party!" I scolded as they advanced on me with their hands outstretched.

Harriet fled from the room, but I saw that she was smiling.

"Touch *it*? No! I want to touch your titties," Horst growled, still advancing. "They're teasing me!"

I turned and fled, holding up my skirts and shrieking with laughter as they chased me through the castle.

They caught me as I was trying to climb the corkscrew staircase to the East Tower and carried me up the rest of the way to the tiny room at the top. Once there, they expertly stripped off the beautiful dress – without damaging it, thank goodness – but left on the kid gloves. And then I noticed the shackles and chains attached to the walls. There were two overstuffed chairs and a narrow table, not unlike the one at Bucyrus' house, and a big cabinet with doors on top and drawers underneath.

"What is this place?" I asked, equal parts intimidated and turned on by the possibilities presented. I realized I hadn't been in this room since I first came to the castle to live.

"We just finished it yesterday." Caspian shut the heavy oak door and began to attach a pair of leather cuffs to my wrists over the gloves. "Not all dungeons are underground."

Horst opened the large cabinet and I gasped when I saw the assortment of whips and toys displayed. My pussy throbbed, positively dripping with excitement.

"We heard all about Bucyrus' toys and wanted you to be as happy as you were when he flogged you. Our informant says you like a bit more pain than just spanking. Is that true, Cinders?" Horst inquired.

"Who told you that?" I realized they had known about me being flogged before I told them this morning. These men had mad acting skills.

"Actually, it was Betsy. She visited the harem a couple of days ago with Sam and they got the whole story of your visit. Horst and I want you to have everything you need, and we absolutely *love* a little BDSM." Caspian attached the cuffs to a chain that was just the right height to hold my arms over my head.

With my back to the room, I could only see the contents of the cabinet when I turned my head to the right, but I saw Horst pick up a flogger, much like the one that Bucyrus had used on me. At once, I instinctively arched my back so my bottom stuck out and gave a small moan of anticipation. Horst's cock tented his pants and he began to swish the falls against my ass.

"Please, Sire!" I panted.

He increased the intensity and I moaned again. He pulled his arm back and struck me hard. I screamed and he stopped to stroke my dripping pussy, then grinned as he showed me how wet his fingers were. "I see our informant was right. Suck my fingers, filthy girl," he ordered, thrusting them into my mouth.

I eagerly licked them clean.

Caspian looked a little concerned. "Cinders, if you want us to stop, say red! This is for pleasure, not punishment."

I was already so turned on, I had trouble speaking. "Don't stop! I want more! And harder. Please, Sire!"

That did it. Horst's muscles flexed as he brought the flogger down on my ass, over and over. Each strike took me

closer to the place I craved, the pain increasing until I finally came with a gigantic scream. As before, everything became floaty and far away.

The next thing I knew, I was uncuffed and cuddled on Horst's lap, while Caspian knelt in front of me and held my knees.

"Good girl. We will add to the toys as we go, but we have a dragon dildo just like the one you keep hidden in your closet."

I sighed happily. I must have the best daddies in the world!



Horst carried me down the stairs to my room and Caspian carried the dress. They insisted on bathing me and washing my hair, then left me to do my make-up and get dressed. My favorite maid, Donna, came to help with my hair. She was very excited and I noticed her skirt was quite a bit shorter than the one she had worn when I glimpsed her panties in the shiny floor of the ballroom.

"Hoping to have some fun tonight, Donna?" I teased.

Donna blushed scarlet. "There's this groom. Um, he's kind of flirted with me before, and I think he may like me."

"Well, of course he likes you! You're gorgeous. Donna, are you even wearing panties?"

"Um, no? I didn't think it was obvious." Her face was scarlet.

I didn't know if it was a good or bad idea to tell her about the shiny floor in the ballroom. Then I decided to heck with it. "Donna, the floor in the ballroom is like a mirror. I could see your panties when we met there this morning. But for heaven's sake! Don't let that stop you. I'm sure your pussy is quite lovely, and why not display it? Here, lift up your skirt and let me look." She blushed even harder, but her little hands grasped the hem of her skirt and raised it. Her pussy was pink and quite hairless. I could see a drop of clear moisture sitting on her clit like a dew drop on a rose and I couldn't help touching it. I brought my finger to my mouth and tasted her and a small sigh escaped my lips.

Donna didn't appear to mind my sampling her pussy juice, quite the contrary. More moisture appeared and she licked her full, rosy lips.

I gazed at her dewy nubbin with some envy. How my daddies would love it if my pussy looked as perfect as hers! Their mouths would have a lovely time licking and sucking my bare skin. "How do you get your pussy so smooth? I tried shaving once and got the most awful razor-burn!"

"I use sugar. It removes all the hair and doesn't hurt like waxing does. Would you like me to do yours?"

"Please! It will be a surprise for Horst and Caspian!"

She ran back to her room and returned with the things she needed. When she finished, my pussy and asshole looked like a pink calla lily and it hadn't hurt much at all.

"I think we need a spa in the castle!" I decided. "Women from all over could come to have their lady-bits sugared and their hair done. Oh! And massages! We could train some of the servants to do different kinds of massages!"

"Wow! Do you think I could work there?" Donna was bouncing up and down, showing rather more of her pussy than she perhaps realized.

"You could be the manager and train the staff to do sugaring. I'm sure we could hire a masseuse." Donna looked thoughtful. "I know someone, actually. It's a man, though. Would that be a problem?"

"Not at all! He could train some of the village girls, perhaps. Does he work here now?"

"He's actually the groom I told you about." Donna got dreamy-eyed as she thought about the man she hoped would take advantage of her panty-less state. "He's really hot and good with his hands."

I giggled. "I hope he is even better with his cock. Ask him about the spa job if you get a chance. I'll be watching out for you two on the dance floor! Now help me get dressed. Horst and Caspian will be wondering what has happened to me. I can't wait for them to see my pussy!"

She helped me into my dress and I put on thigh-high sheer nude stockings and my Jimmy Choos, with a pang of regret that I had lost my glass stilettos. Then I went downstairs to find my daddies.

Horst was sitting in the conservatory – one of my favorite places in the house. It was full of plants, some of them so tall they touched the glass ceiling. There was a koi pond in the center, with a stream that meandered around between the banks of flowers and greenery. Horst appeared lost in thought, so I hesitated to disturb him, but he sensed my arrival and stood to greet me.

"There you are, pretty girl. I was just remembering how pink your bottom got this morning. How does it look now?"

"I don't know. Shall I show you?"

"Yes, please. I will be thinking of nothing else tonight."

I turned around and lifted my skirt with my legs apart and bent over so my newly bare pussy was on display. I heard him gasp and suddenly Horst grasped my hips and sank to the floor to lick my slit, from clit to asshole. When he thrust his tongue into my cunt, I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Please, Sire! I want you so much!" I begged.

He sucked my clit so hard I came almost immediately. He moved his mouth away and kissed my asshole. "So beautiful! Did you do that for your daddies?"

"Yes, Sire. Does it please you?"

He growled as he kissed and licked me. "Now I will never be able to see you without wanting my mouth on you. Your cunt is so perfect. I can't wait to see Caspian's reaction!"

"Did I hear my name? Dad, she's all dressed for the party. We should let her rest until everyone arrives." Caspian smiled at me and I carefully stood up straight and lifted the front of my dress to show him my newly bare pussy.

With a strangled groan, he sank to his knees. "Oh my god. Let me have a tiny taste. That's the most beautiful thing I ever saw." He glanced at my face and saw I was as eager as he was for him to sample the smooth delights of my sugared sex. His agile tongue licked and his beautiful lips sucked and I came again, with Horst holding me to keep me upright. They took turns, back and front, then both ate me together and I almost fainted with pleasure, my knees shaking and my pussy gushing.

It was already the best night ever and the ball hadn't even started yet!

CHAPFER 13

At last, it was time for our guests to arrive. We three stood on the castle battlements and watched the parade of coaches and horsemen wind their way through the forest roads towards the castle. It seemed endless. The clinking of bridles and the creaking of saddle leather mixed with the rumbling of wheels and the clopping of hooves. There were many unbridled horses and I saw a couple of centaurs.

"Come on, let's go meet our guests," said Horst and we went down the many staircases to the courtyard.

Before the first coach arrived, there was a beating of wings and Sam gracefully landed next to us, Betsy clinging to his back. "Very nice of you to invite us, Horst. This will be the best party since Raven's induction ceremony."

"Who is Raven?" I wanted to know.

Sam shivered and shook and assumed his human form. I could never decide which was sexier: man or dragon.

"The newest witch in the Deep Dark Forest. She's the fated mate of Hunter, one of the Sylvan Clan's werewolves. You'll meet her tonight. Gorgeous girl, that one!" Sam licked his lips and Betsy gave him a hard smack on the arm. He laughed. "Hey, no need for that! I never did more than dance with her!" Then there was another flapping of a different kind, and a huge eagle made his entrance. He also gave a shiver and shake and a very powerful looking man stood before us. I was reminded of one of the early American presidents, as he had snow white hair and a hooked nose.

"You must be Cinders, soon to be Queen/Princess Cinders, am I right?" He kissed my hand. "My name is Cuthbert."

"Welcome, Cuthbert! Thank you for coming!" I told him.

Sam looked up in the sky. "I have seven of my gas workers coming. They drew straws to be included, but I'm giving a nice bonus to the ones who couldn't make it."

Seven, no eight dragons! This would be some party!

The first coach rolled across the drawbridge and into the courtyard. Two footmen hurried over and opened the doors and out stepped two tall, dark men and two beautiful women, one with long black hair, and one with auburn curls that flowed down her back over a long, red cloak.

Horst greeted them warmly then turned to me. "Darling, may I introduce Wulf and Sylvia of the Sylvan Pack? And this is their son, Hunter, and his mate, Raven. Dear friends, how good to see you. This is Cinders. She is engaged to both me and Caspian."

I couldn't help gawking at the beautiful couples. "I'm so pleased to meet you all."

We air kissed each other. Raven, who looked to be about the same age as me, gave me a hug and promised to have a good chat later. I couldn't wait to find out all about being mated with a werewolf!

The procession seemed never to end. Coach after coach disgorged its occupants in the courtyard and trundled off to the

huge stable area behind the castle.

Bucyrus and the Numbers arrived and I realized I had never seen any of them wearing clothes before. Bucyrus was actually wearing pants, prompting me to wonder how he managed to fit his cock inside them. The girls all had long white dresses that revealed more of their bodies than they hid. I rushed over to tell them how much I missed them. "We should have a slumber party after the other guests have gone home!" I suggested.

"Oh That would be lovely, but what about our master?" Number One worried.

Horst tried to look disapproving, but he couldn't help a small smile as he greeted Bucyrus. "You would be welcome to stay, too. I understand you're fond of scotch. Macallan is my favorite, and I would love to share."

I couldn't help wondering what he meant by 'share,' but I really wanted to have some girl-time with the Numbers.

Bucyrus accepted the offer of a sleep-over and I summoned a chamber-maid and instructed her to prepare two more suites especially for our guests.

AFTER ABOUT AN HOUR, THE LAST COACH ROLLED UP AND when the doors opened, Disma and her daughters stepped out. Disma looked a bit nervous, but Prunella and Drizella stared scornfully at me.

"We hear you are having a most unusual relationship with his majesty and the prince," said Drizella with an audible sniff. "I can't imagine that will last," added Prunella. "They'll end up throwing you back on the dung-heap where you belong."

I was so tempted to say something equally rude, but I decided to take the high-road and merely gave them a chilly smile before I turned to Disma. "I see your daughters haven't learned any manners since we last saw each other. But you are all welcome to our home, nonetheless."

I turned to Horst and Caspian made the obligatory introductions. My daddies bade them an unsmiling welcome and we finally went into the castle.

The banquet room was lively, with people chatting and eating hors d'oeuvres from the platters on the tables scattered around. The court orchestra played soft classical music in the background, and there was a lot of laughter and hugging as old friends reconnected and new friendships were formed.

Horst and Caspian walked over to take their places in the center of the ring and someone started tapping on a crystal glass to get everyone's attention.

"Dear friends," Horst began in his most kingly voice. "Tonight, we present to you the love of our lives. Cinders has brought so much joy to our hearts and we are planning to marry her next month. Now you may think I'm using the royal 'we' when I tell you this, but, to the contrary, I mean me and my son, Caspian."

Caspian bowed to his father and to the guests.

"We are going to marry Cinders and share her equally between us. As you all know, the Deep Dark Forest is inclusive to all orientations and kinks between consenting parties. Our ménage is not unusual here, but in the outside world, it would be considered perverted by many smallminded and prudish people. That's why we are so very lucky to live here in this beautiful place, protected from evil and censure by the inhabitants and the forest herself."

Loud clapping erupted and Horst paused until it was quiet again. "So, enjoy yourselves tonight. Remain safe, sane and consensual and we will all remember this for a long, long time. Please join us, Cinders. These are your friends."

I blew kisses to the crowd as I walked to my place between my men. They both kissed me deeply and for a moment everyone else faded away. I was so happy, I almost wept, but I couldn't help but notice my aunt and cousins seething at me from the back of the crowd.

CHAPTER 14

The crowd resumed their chatter and Horst disappeared up the stairs towards his room. He emerged not ten minutes later dressed in a red tailcoat and carrying a beautiful black bull-whip. The orchestra began to play a tune that sounded like a circus calliope tune as he strode into the center of the ring.

"Welcome!" Horst boomed "Welcome to the greatest show in the Deep Dark Forest! I am the ringmaster and I'm really good with a bullwhip. If anyone is interested, I will do demonstrations later on in the evening and I'm looking for volunteers!"

There was a collective gasp from some of the young girls and they started whispering to each other. Horst cracked his whip and everyone went silent again. "Our first act will be the amazing Brobdingnagian Gorillas!"

Three huge apes strode into the ring as Horst furled his whip and rejoined our group. Soon the apes were performing acts of strength that seemed impossible, lifting great blocks of stone over their heads as though they were made of paper, and bending iron bars into pretzels. They finished to great applause, then with a shiver and a shake, they transformed into three enormous – and super-hot – men. Several young women hurried over to flirt with them. Soon they were paired off, the women rubbing up against the men like cats in heat. One by one, they hurried upstairs, the men carrying the girls over their shoulders, and disappeared into the alcoves, pulling the gauze curtains closed behind them.

THERE WERE A LOT OF INTERESTING PEOPLE MILLING AROUND or seated at the tables in lively discussion with each other. I was introduced to a young woman who was in a ménage with eight men! Her name was Bianca Neve and we had a lot in common. Her men were very protective of her, keeping predatory men away and even spanking a fairy-man when he snuck up and pinched her breasts. Bianca didn't look bothered by the fairy, but some of them were quite unashamedly asking for sex, and her men were constantly on the look-out.

Seven of the men were very short — none of them were even five feet — but the eighth was at least six and a half feet tall. His name was Alistair, and he was her actual husband. The other seven men were her consorts and they ruled her kingdom as a group.

Alistair stood right behind Bianca in a possessive stance, which clearly made her uncomfortable. "Darling, I can take care of myself. And you're breathing down my neck," she hissed at him.

He gave her a sexy grin. "Behave, or there will be consequences after the party."

She pretended to pout, but he whispered something in her ear that made her blush scarlet. "Now?"

"Now," growled the beautiful man.

Bianca hurriedly told me she'd see me later, and they went off, almost running, to a private alcove. Her other little men followed them and they all went into a room together and pulled the curtain.

THE NEXT ACT WAS ANNOUNCED: "THE TRANSUBSTANTIATING Tigers!" and into the ring pranced five beautiful Bengal tigers. They paraded around, flirting with the female humans in the audience. Then four great hoops descended from the ceiling and, when they almost reached the ground, they burst into flames. Each tiger ran to a hoop and leapt through, and as he emerged on the other side, he was transformed into a man. Then he'd jump through the next hoop and turn back into a tiger. Tumultuous applause followed this act, then the chatting and flirting continued among the guests.

The tigers, like the great apes before them, soon paired off with some of the female guests and I noticed that when they went off to the alcoves, they didn't resume their human forms and they didn't close the curtains!

Caspian saw me trying to get a glimpse of what was going on in there and chuckled. "Want to watch?"

I tried to look as though the thought had never crossed my mind, but he knew me too well. Taking my hand, he pulled me up the stairs to the balcony, and I admit I gave him no resistance. We came to the alcove where one of the tigers and two women were already fucking. I got as squirmy as when I first saw Sam morph into his dragon form. The tiger's penis was very long, and it was thrusting rapidly into the pussy of a blonde girl who was, if her expression and the sounds she was making were any indication, loving it. His huge paws were on her shoulders, claws sheathed so they looked like furry baseball mitts. The other girl had the tiger's balls in her hands and was sucking and licking them.

"Tigers can fuck as often as 250 times a day. They are relentless," Caspian informed me, watching the scene as avidly as I was while his hands pinched my breasts. "God! I want to fuck you so badly. But we had better wait until a bit later when everyone will be doing it."

"You're no fun. Why wait?"

"We are the hosts of this party. Don't worry, filthy girl. Your turn will come!"

We went back down to the floor where a troupe of four tiny girls in short, sheer tunics were walking into the ring to tumultuous applause. Four ropes descended from two high platforms and the girls climbed up, their bodies writhing and twisting in a very erotic manner. When they reached the two platforms, they stripped and stood naked, waving to the crowd below. One girl from each side grabbed a trapeze and they swung towards each other, their hands holding the bars. When they met in the middle, one of them somehow managed to catch the opposite trapeze with her knees and position her pussy over the other's mouth. Despite the fact they were fairly high up, it was obvious what they were doing and the crowd below became very quiet, so they could hear the sounds of sucking and licking and the occasional moan. Then the girls switched places with the other one of the pair clasping the trapeze. They also swung apart and rejoined, getting their pussies pleasured. They maneuvered back to the platforms and the feat was repeated by the other two girls.

"They're actually fairies," Horst whispered to me. "They're among the larger ones, but they can fly just like the ones in the garden."

"How can they fly if they have no wings?" I wondered.

"They do. Look closely, they're translucent," said Horst.

Sure enough, when I looked again, I spied the dragonflylike wings that Cowslip and Thistle had. They were just so clear and fluttered so fast, it was really hard to see them.

Next, one of them began to walk on the high wire that stretched across the ring. She had perfect balance and moved effortlessly, even when another girl came along behind her and reached around to grasp her breasts. The first girl sank down so she grasped the wire and rose into a handstand, her legs spread wide apart. The other girl straddled the wire behind her and began to play with her body, licking and stroking her, particularly between her outstretched legs, eliciting deep moans and finally, shrieks of pleasure.

The audience was mesmerized. The only one who moved was a female guest who, overcome by the show, dropped to her knees and ducked her head under her friend's skirt.

As for the high-wire artists, after everyone had a turn, they put their tunics back on and shimmied down to the ground, twisting and turning and rubbing their crotches against the ropes. Once they landed, they were swarmed by several men and were last seen heading to a couple of the alcoves on the second floor, where they drew the gauzy curtains, much to the disappointment of their fans.

THE GUESTS CONTINUED TO GREET EACH OTHER AND GOSSIP. I realized the Deep Dark Forest was a community of very kinky

people and creatures, and they all knew everyone's business.

Spying Bucyrus and his harem across the room, I pulled Caspian to his feet so he could get to know them. Horst joined us and the three men conferred as to how we should all behave after the party.

"I have no problem with Cinders and the Numbers. That's the correct way to address you ladies, yes?" Horst asked the women.

"Yes, your majesty," said Number Two.

"So, what you girls do together is your business, although I would love to be a fly on the wall!"

I grinned at Horst. "You three *could* be in the room, you know!"

Horst looked at Caspian and they both looked at Bucyrus. "Will there still be scotch?" queried Bucyrus.

"For us men? Yes. Perhaps the ladies would prefer champagne?" Horst asked, eyeing Number Seven's breasts. I didn't mind, as it was impossible for any red-blooded male to ignore them, but I elbowed him and giggled when he looked suitably abashed.

So, it was settled. We would all meet up after the party and who knew what might happen?

The guests were obviously enjoying the ball, eating the delicious food and dancing to a selection of disco hits played by the court musicians. A hush fell as a group of fairies, male and female, walked to the center of the ring. I waved to my friends Cowslip and Thimble and they waved back.

When they reached the center of the ring, the fairies formed a circle. Facing outwards and holding hands, they rose into the air and danced, ten feet off the ground, in pairs and trios and singles. They were mostly naked, but it resembled ballet more than erotic dance and was quite beautiful. The court orchestra changed to classical music – Strauss, I think – and the fairies danced to it so gracefully, I could hardly believe they were the same ribald imps I had met that morning.

Then the music changed again. A sensuous drumbeat began, with clarinets and saxophones chiming in. The music was so sexy, it had me aroused in seconds and I saw the guests were starting to touch each other and themselves. First one couple kissed, then another began to dance, their arms wrapped around each other's bodies, hands slipping inside of clothing. Meanwhile, over our heads, the fairies were fucking in midair. Cowslip's cunt was gaping open, wide, wet and pink, as a male fairy – not Thistle – thrust his large cock into her as they continued to dance. One tiny girl fairy had two cocks in her pussy and another in her mouth!

Several guests headed upstairs to the alcoves, opening their clothing as they went, and others were on the tables and even chairs, their faces expressing ecstasy and their bodies writhing under the ministrations of multiple hands and mouths.

Entranced by the fairies, I failed to notice that Horst and Caspian had wandered off to talk to a couple of friends on the other side of the room until I became aware of someone standing quite close to me. When I looked, it was Disma. Prunella and Drizella stood nearby, and something about their expressions alerted me that there was danger afoot. Disma smiled, but it looked more like a grimace.

"Dear Ella," she cooed.

My misgivings grew. She never called me Ella.

"I hope there are no hard feelings. I never meant to make you feel... unwanted. And see! I did you a favor. If it hadn't been for me, you would never have met your..."

"Daddies. They're my 'daddies.' And you may be right. I wouldn't have met them if it hadn't been for you."

Disma smirked. "Well, as your only living relatives, it would only be right for you to invite us to live here at the castle! You aren't married yet, and you need a chaperone – or three," she said, gesturing to her daughters, "who can keep your reputation from getting even more sullied than it already is."

I gaped at her in total shock. "Are you for real? Do you think for one moment Horst and Caspian would let you live here with us? No. Absolutely not."

I stood firm, but I had forgotten she had the balls of a brass monkey. Her scarlet lips twisted as she stepped right up and hissed at me, "Well, that's your answer to my generosity, is it? Beware, Ella, or should I call you 'Cinders?' I have friends in the forest who could make you disappear so you're never heard of again."

"Are you threatening me?" I asked incredulously, too angry to be scared.

Her eyes went wide with feigned innocence. "Of course not! Just be reasonable and you'll be just fine. Now, which rooms are ours? Oh! and I have something that belongs to you." She reached into a pocket in her wide skirts and pulled out a paper bag, shoving it into my hands.

I opened it, expecting venomous snakes, and gasped when I saw my beautiful glass slippers! "You should change into them in your room," Disma suggested. "You wouldn't want your fancy stilettos to get lost."

"But where did you find them? I lost them in two different places!"

"I have my resources, Ella. Now go and change."

I had actually needed to pee and had considered going to my room to freshen up, so I stood, but glared at her. "You stay here. You will never stay a night in this castle," I said firmly.

Disma openly smirked.

WHEN I REACHED MY ROOM, I WAS EVEN ANGRIER. THAT bitch! Thinking she could move right in, just like she did at my daddy's house!

I tugged off my Jimmy Choos and opened the sack. The glass stilettos were so pretty! I carefully slipped them on and stood up, ready to head for the bathroom, when I suddenly felt really faint. The floor rushed up to meet me and my whole world turned to pitch.

CHAPTER 15

When I awoke, I was naked and completely unable to move. My arms were tied behind my back and my legs had rope wound around them so tightly, I was losing feeling in my feet. Wherever I was, it was dark and smelled horrible. I tried to scream, but the darkness swallowed the sound. I was afraid I was somewhere deep underground.

After what seemed ages, a light appeared way off in the distance and I heard the tramp of heavy footsteps coming closer. As I stared, what appeared to be a huge man carrying a lantern walked towards me. When he got close, I saw he was grotesquely ugly, with a face only seen in nightmares. His big mouth opened in a half-grin, half-snarl and I tried, without success, to shrink back from him.

He put the lantern close to my face and tipped my chin up with his big hand, squinting at me as I shrank back against the wall.

"Pretty enough," he muttered. "Not that it matters. You'll bring a good price at the auction, I dare say."

"Who are you? And where am I?"

"I'm Grimmalt, one of the last remaining ogres here in the Deep Dark Forest," he growled. "My brothers were driven out a few years ago by Horst. This is my dungeon and by this time tomorrow, you'll be sold to the highest bidder on my website. Now, I need to take some pictures of you to post online."

"Ogres have computers? I thought you all had terrible eyesight," I blurted, remembering the story Number Seven had told me.

Grimmalt shrugged. "They don't have to be good pictures. My fellow ogres don't care much what you look like, just how fat you are."

I remembered the tricks Number Seven had done to escape from them and was determined to do the same. "I'm pretty skinny. Not enough for a real meal."

"Well, I'm sure you'll do. Beggars can't be choosers, and I was paid to get rid of you as quickly and quietly as possible."

He took an ancient cell phone from his pocket and began to take photos of me. The flash blinded me for a moment and when I could see again, I was relieved that he had turned and was heading back the way he came, taking the lantern with him.

I was feeling pretty desperate when I heard a tiny squeak, and a little mouse came out from behind a bucket in the corner of the cell, holding a flashlight.

"Don't worry, Princess. I'm going to gnaw through those ropes and free you."

"I appreciate it very much, but how will I escape from the dungeon?"

The mouse scuttled behind me and began gnawing on the rope around my wrists, taking a break every now and then to explain the strategy to me: "Once you're free, I have a fairy friend who will temporarily shrink you so you can follow me out through the drain over there." He pointed to a pipe set in the base of the wall.

"But how will the fairy get in here? They wouldn't fit in that pipe!"

I had to wait for the answer as he was gnawing busily again. I felt an easing of the pressure on my wrists and suddenly, they were free.

"Fairies can be any size they want. They can shrink themselves to a point where you can't even see them," said the mouse, beginning on the rope around my legs.

"And here I am," said a familiar voice. I looked up, and there was Thistle, his cock as proud as ever and his hat on his head.

"Thanks, Algernon. I'll take it from here," he said and the mouse scuttled away, having chewed through the rope binding my legs.

I carefully got to my feet, my legs sore and shaky from the bindings. "I am so glad to see you, Thistle! How on earth did you and Algernon know where to find me?"

"Well, we – the fairies that is – are friends with the mice you brought with you from your other house, so we know a bit about your charming aunt. The mice have been worried she might try something like this, so we put a magical tracker on you. Hope you don't mind."

"I certainly can't complain, seeing as what just happened," I told him. "But you got here so fast!"

"Well, we've been keeping an eye on you," Thistle told me. "So when you didn't come back to the party right away, I went to your room, rather hoping to catch you without that dress, I'll admit, but all I saw was this one glass stiletto lying on the floor. It absolutely *reeked* of bad magic. So, I checked in with the fairies who were tracking you and voilà. Here I am."

"Thank you both," I said with gratitude. "Especially you, Algernon. I'm lucky you were here."

Just then, I heard a noise coming from the long passage the ogre had disappeared down, and I could see a faint light coming back towards us. Thistle waved his hands in the air, and suddenly, everything in the dungeon was enormous as I shrank to the size of a thimble. Thistle had shrunk too, and he grabbed my hand and pulled me into the drain with Algernon on our heels. There was a great roar as the ogre discovered I had escaped, and the light from his lantern shone into the pipe. We scampered away, and were shortly outside the walls of the dungeon, in a clearing in the Deep Dark Forest. Thistle grew to his normal— not very large—size and I quickly followed suit.

I was catching my breath and wishing I had some clothes on when a rushing of wings announced the arrival of Sam the Dragon.

"Quick, get on my back," Sam ordered, crouching down and lashing his tail. "That ogre is not one to trifle with."

I scooped up Algernon and Thistle and I climbed on Sam's scaley back. Thistle's sat behind me, his cock pressing hard against my bottom, his little arms clasped around me, squeezing my breasts. He fondled me all the way home, but I was so grateful to him, I didn't say a word.



Sam the Dragon flew swiftly back to the castle and managed a fairly graceful landing in the courtyard. My men were waiting with a blue velvet cloak in which they bundled me up and carried me to my room. I found my beautiful dress wadded up on the floor, but it seemed to be unharmed and, after a quick wash and makeup touch-up, I quickly put it back on, along with my Jimmy Choos. The glass slippers were nowhere to be seen and I didn't trust them, anyway.

"Are you okay, darling? We were so worried!" Horst couldn't keep from touching me as though he was making sure I wasn't an illusion.

"I'm fine, thanks to Algernon, Thistle and Sam! I guess my aunt was behind all this?"

"Yes! She had it all planned. You were to disappear and her daughters were to marry me and Horst," said Caspian. "They had a wizard give them a potion that would have made Prunella look just like you, and she was to coax me into marrying her and Horst into marrying her sister, Drizella. Of course, that would never have happened. Just because she looked like you, didn't mean she could act like you. Those three are not only wicked and ugly, they're also stupid."

"So, where are they now?" I wanted to know.

Horst looked very kingly all of a sudden. "Ogres aren't fussy. In exchange for a permit for a few of their clan to be able to stay in the Deep Dark Forest – provided they behave themselves, mind you – that ogre will escort Disma, Prunella and Drizella to the lair of the Deep Earth Goblins where they will spend the rest of their lives. Cleaning fireplaces? Ha! They'll be cleaning much worse than that, I assure you! Now, we should go back to the party. You missed the horse and centaur shows, I'm afraid."

We rejoined our guests in the ballroom, where it seemed everyone was having a wonderful time, chatting and drinking, and several were openly having various forms of sex.

It was getting late and I saw no end to the festivities. "Horst, I'm really tired. What if I snuck away for a nap? Twenty minutes would do it."

"Of course, darling girl. I'll take you to my room and come wake you in a half hour." And he was as good as his word. When he came and woke me, I felt much better.

"Some of the guests have left and a few have bedded down, either here in the castle or out in the fields and woods. Bucyrus and the Numbers are in their suites, so I suggest we send the other guests home and join them there, with Caspian."

"Has Sam gone home? I wanted to thank him."

"Sam is in a suite in the West Tower and he has about seven girls in there with him. I say we wait until tomorrow to thank him."

I giggled. Sam was incorrigible. "Where is Betsy?"

"She's in the paddock, having fun with the centaurs. That girl has an iron pussy."

I tried to imagine what that would be like, but my brain couldn't make sense of it.

WE FINALLY WAVED GOODBYE TO THE LAST OF THE HAPPY guests and climbed the staircases to the huge suite where the Numbers were staying.

As soon as I walked through the door, my friends were hugging and kissing me and asking all sorts of questions. Number Two insisted on helping me out of my clothing and, as the other girls were all naked, I was quick to help. When I was bare, we all got on the enormous bed, ready for some girl time. I had asked the staff to put two king-sized beds together in the suite to mirror the set-up in Bucyrus' house, so we had lots of room to sprawl and chat. There were umpteen bottles of champagne and tiny cakes and pastries.

After a deep discussion of the party and a lot of gossip about the antics of the guests, we heard the door open, and Horst, Caspian and Bucyrus came in, carrying a bottle of Macallan scotch and three glasses. They sat themselves down on the couch across the room from the great bed and grinned at us.

Bucyrus' cock was so engorged and heavy it was plastered against his thigh, almost reaching his knee. "You girls are a sight for sore eyes. I was hoping, however, you would be doing something more interesting than talking. My hosts are quite interested in seeing a bit of girl-on-girl if you catch my meaning."

Number One knelt up and thrust her breasts at him. "Only if you promise to join in... Master."

Bucyrus growled, "I make the rules, slave, and I want to see you licking some pussy right now! But be assured we will be 'joining in' as you put it."

Number One giggled and sank back on the bed, wriggling over between the legs of Number Five, whose red pubes matched the hair on her head. Number One not so gently spread Five's thighs and began to lick and suck her pussy, until the flaming curls were drenched with arousal fluids. Number Three got behind the gorgeous bottom of Number One and began to lick her asshole, her tongue thrusting in and out like a piston.

As each girl chose a pussy to pleasure, I hoped one would choose me and my hopes were realized when Number Six grabbed my ankles and spread me wide, quickly lowering her mouth to my sex and latching onto my clit. I reached for the nearest breast and latched on to Number Two. I pinched and pulled Two's nipple as Six thrust three fingers in my vagina. She had me screaming in short order and when I got my breathing under control, I looked around at the amazing sight of eight girls all pleasuring each other.

The men were transfixed, their scotch forgotten as they rubbed their erections.

"Fuck me! That's the hottest thing I've ever seen!" groaned Horst. "But I need my girl's pussy on my cock." He got up, with some difficulty as his cock was so engorged, and made his way to the bed. In seconds, his pants were discarded and his cock in me.

Bucyrus stood up and pulled Caspian up with him. Both men got on the bed and began to fuck the nearest pussy as the other girls continued to lap and suck each other. I was on my hands and knees with Horst's cock so deep in me it was hitting my cervix. The pain was nothing compared to the ecstasy as his hands gripped my hips for leverage. Number Two reached between his legs and began to stroke his balls and I climaxed at the same time his cock erupted in my pussy. He stilled for a moment, then withdrew and I saw he was still hard.

"Darling, do you mind if I...?"

"Fuck Number Two?" I guessed and smiled. "Of course not. Will you mind if I...?"

"Fuck Bucyrus? Hey, as long as I'm here, it's fine. That was our agreement."

Bucyrus had just come in Number Four's mouth, and his amazing cock was still as hard as ever. "My turn, Cinders. I want your ass this time."

"Please, Bucyrus. I want that too," I said.

He grabbed the champagne bottle, placed his thumb over the opening and gave it a shake. He quickly inserted it into my ass, the bubbles shot up my rectum and I shrieked. It felt amazing, but when he popped his cock into my tiny, fizzy, hole, it was pure heaven. His cock was so long it couldn't fit all the way in, but it was like a steel piston, and I came with a scream, then came again and again.

"Best orgy ever!" exclaimed Bucyrus, and we kept at it for a long time until we were all sated.

Eventually, Horst, Caspian and I crept away from the now slumbering Numbers and their gently snoring master and went back to Horst's bedroom. He carried me in his arms and I was half asleep, just barely aware of being tumbled into bed and spooned by my lovers. What a night!

When we awoke that afternoon, The castle was restored to its former pristine condition. There was nary a trace of the circus left and it all seemed like a dream until Sam wandered downstairs with seven young women, followed shortly by Bucyrus and the Numbers. Betsy wandered in from the fields, quite a bit of hay sticking out of her hair. We ate a hearty breakfast, even though it was well after noon, then our guests summoned their coaches, or, in Sam's case, shifted into his dragon persona, and set off for home. Finally, we were alone.

We went into the garden, to the same bench I had sat on when I met Cowslip and Thistle. Horst pulled me onto his lap and cuddled me. "Now we need to plan the wedding."

"Darling Horst, could we please not have a huge wedding? One party like that a year is enough, and we have talked about getting married soon."

"Dearest, our citizens demand a proper royal wedding. However, it will be quite different from the ball. And our honeymoon will be whatever makes *you* happy. Now let's look at the calendar. I see a winter wedding followed by a romantic getaway to the most remote tropical island available. Do you agree? Caspian?"

Caspian stretched his gorgeous arms over his head and flexed his pecs, making me almost break out in a sweat. "That sounds about right. The wedding will be a bit of a pain, but getting Cinders alone on a tropical, clothes-optional island is okay with me!"

"I'm definitely up for that," I said.

So, we discussed the dates and details for the nuptials and Horst summoned the royal travel agent to help us choose the location for our honeymoon.

We decided on a tiny island in the Caribbean that was owned by a powerful wizard named Morgenstern.

"He's a distant cousin and he owes me a favor anyway," Horst explained. "I was able to secure the release of his favorite sub. She fell into the hands of one of the ogre clans."

"Not them again?" I couldn't believe how much trouble they caused in the Deep Dark Forest.

"Yup. They're a menace, but they are better than the trolls, and they keep the trolls from attacking the Deep Dark Forest," Horst told me.

"My daddy was killed in the last troll war," I said wistfully. "They must be awful if the ogres are nicer!"

"Ogres are not exactly nicer," said Caspian. "Ogres love to eat maidens. Trolls are just more likely to wage a war against you. Rape and pillage are their favorite activities. The ogre clan has a treaty with the trolls that keeps the trolls out of the forest. In return, the trolls get a large payment every year from the ogres, and the money comes from us, the kings of the forest."

"But, what about the maidens? Do you let the ogres eat them?"

"Certainly not. Ogres are almost blind, so they don't very often find victims," said Horst. "We try to make sure no maidens get anywhere near them, but that's not all we do. The fairies have magical trackers on all the ogres and monitor them closely. That's partly how we knew *where* you disappeared to during the party. So if an ogre ever does manage to catch a maiden, we usually know about it fast enough to sneak in and substitute an old, dead pig. The ogres can't tell the difference." "But, back to our honeymoon," Horst declared. "This island is perfect, with hot springs and waterfalls, blue lagoons and golden sands. And Morgenstern has a beautiful guest house with a magical, invisible staff. We can make love all day and night and not have to see another soul. They can see us, of course, but that's all right."

I sighed, thinking of how wonderful it would be to have my beautiful men all to myself. "Okay. How does it work? Who gets to come to the wedding? Is it going to be all formal with yards of velvet and ermine? Oh god. Do I have to send out a billion invitations to people I don't know, again?"

Horst glared at me. "Bad girl. Sending out a few invitations isn't much to ask. You don't have nearly enough to keep you busy. I'm going to think up jobs for you, starting tomorrow."

I was sure he'd forget about the jobs if I gave him something else to think about, so I slowly raised my skirt and rubbed my pussy. "My favorite job is keeping you two happy and well fucked. How am I doing at that?"

As predicted, Horst quickly knelt on the emerald-green grass and buried his head between my legs. And no more was said about jobs.

CHAPTER 17

The wedding was actually very beautiful and not at all stuffy. We had to behave ourselves for a day, with no sex at all and a minimum of public groping, but we managed it, and our flight left from the DDF Airport that same evening.

I had no idea the Deep Dark Forest even had an airport! We flew on a very odd plane that looked as though a dragon had had designed it, which turned out to be accurate. Apparently, Sam had an engineering degree! He had come up with the original design and, though it had actually been built at Boeing in Washington State, it was quite fantastical, with wings that looked quite a bit like Sam's, and a fuselage that had a hint of golden scales. Inside, there were couches and rugs and a huge bed, big enough for the three of us to take a nap during the flight. That wasn't all we did, of course.

Morgenstern's island was everything he promised. It took a day or two to get used to the invisible servants, but we became quite comfortable with doing anything we wanted to each other and not worrying about being observed.

The blue lagoon was our favorite place on the island. The water was exactly the right temperature and it was silky and perfect as a lubricant when my men wanted to fuck my ass without warning. We stayed a week, wishing it was longer, and when we left, there was a baby prince or princess in my belly.

BABY SOPHIE WAS BORN NINE MONTHS LATER AND HER fathers were ecstatic. They even took turns getting up in the night to change her nappies or bring her to me for a feeding.

And we all lived happily ever after.

THE END

ABOUT BRONWYN JUDDE

Hello. I started writing erotic romances at the beginning of the pandemic, and found writing made me happy. Honestly, I wish I had started years ago. Erotic Romances are so much fun to write!

In my life I've run a tiny weaving company on a Greek Island, starred in a movie that never got released (just as well!) worked in a head shop, prepared taxes, and been a stay-at-home mom. My two adult children are my finest accomplishments.

I live in Buffalo, NY.

Connect with me for updates, cover reveals, sneak peeks and more by joining my reader group, Bronwyn's Coven, <u>here</u>

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OMEGA AND THE BEAST BY SINISTER ANGE

A Twisted Retelling of Beauty and the Beast

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.



Callista

Hot NEED FLARED AND CRAMPED HER INSIDES AS HER MUSCLES clenched. Biting down hard on the knotted cloth in her mouth, Callista whimpered and curled into a tighter ball. Tears streamed down her face as she pulled the blankets more firmly around her.

Being an Omega was a curse. For more reasons than one. If anyone found out what she was, she would be thrown out of the village – or worse. But even with her and her father keeping her secret, she'd suffered monthly since her first heat. It felt like her cramps were becoming more and more painful with each one.

Panting through the worst of it, more tears spilled as the cramps receded, tears of relief, although she knew the cycle would start again soon. At least for now, her muscles could loosen, and it didn't hurt so much.

The sound of the door opening made her tense all over again, fear pulsing through her, nearly drowning out the arousal that wracked her body, but it was her father's voice she heard next, soothing her anxiety with his whisper: "It's me, sweetheart."

Footsteps followed his soft announcement, heavy treads down wooden stairs, all the way to the stone floor where she'd made her nest. Peeking out, she saw him carrying a tray, his creased face lined with worry. As he set the tray down beside her nest, he picked up a glass and held it out to her.

"You need to drink something," he urged. "Drink, my little Callie."

Unable to speak, Callista reached out and took the glass from him, greedily guzzling the cool water. It did little for her heated insides, but it did clear the parched feeling in her mouth and throat.

"Thank you, Papa," she whispered, now that she could. Her throat felt sore from all the muffled screams she'd uttered.

Dark liquid eyes met hers, tortured because he knew she was suffering, and there was nothing he could do to ease her. Not without putting her very life in danger. If Father Conal knew she was an Omega, there was no telling what he would do. The village priest would likely punish her father, and as for her...

Sacrifice.

She shuddered.

Her father put both of them in danger by protecting her, providing her with the suppressants that kept her Omega nature at bay most of the time. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to retrieve any on his last trip, so she was now suffering through her very first heat — and she never wanted it to happen again. It was even more painful than she'd imagined it could be, but the fear of being discovered was even greater. They were taking every precaution they could, but when she wasn't shaking with the hot need that overpowered all of her senses, she was quivering in terror of what might become of them.

"As soon as the worst has passed, I'm making a trip. I *will* return with more suppressants," Papa whispered, anguish in his voice. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I'm so sorry. I should have tried harder."

"It's okay, Papa," she whispered back, reaching out with one hand to take his. The only blessing was, even though her body ached for a male, she was not so far gone she wanted him.

Father Conal taught that when Omegas went into heat, their lust was so complete, so sinful, they would take any male, no matter their age or relation. But Papa was more welltraveled than Father Conal, and once he'd realized what she was, he'd taken pains to hide her nature. Suppressants kept her heat at bay, and when that failed, hiding her in the basement with blankets and pillows to make a nest, caring for her through the pain and ensuring she ate and drank.

Callista had never been particularly fond of Father Conal and was even less so now that she realized he hadn't been speaking the truth about Omegas. For so long, she'd worried she was an evil, lustful, sinful creature at heart, only to discover, while her body might have certain demands, she remained unchanged. And she certainly didn't lust after her own kin, no matter how urgent the needs of her body were.

Papa gave her hand one last squeeze for comfort, then released her, lifting his head up to the ceiling.

"I have to get back upstairs to mind the shop," he said quietly. "I will return later with more food and water for you. Eat and drink something."

"Yes, Papa," she answered, wincing as she felt a small cramp twinge inside her. She might be able to drink something, but eating right now was out of the question. Maybe later.

She took small sips of water as Papa went back upstairs, shutting the door firmly behind him. He'd told her that he would tell anyone who came in that she was sick.

Which she was. Just not in the way they would assume.

She risked another small sip of water, cringing as her insides twisted again.

Part of her wanted to run out into the woods and let the Beast tear her apart. At least that would end the pain.

Only another day or two... it doesn't last forever...

That was what Papa said.

She trusted him more than she trusted anything Father Conal said about Omegas. Maybe after this, she'd finally be able to convince him they should move somewhere else. Somewhere there wasn't a Beast roaming the forest or an Omega-hating Beta preaching lies about her.

Papa always insisted they were safer here, where they knew people, where everyone had known her since she was born, rather than with strangers... but Callista didn't feel so safe. Not anymore.



Callista

Three years later

PAPA WAS SUPPOSED TO BE BACK BY NOW.

It was the same thought she'd had every morning for the past week.

Worrying her lower lip between her teeth, Callista stared out the window at the road as she washed the dish she'd used for lunch, as if by staring hard enough she could make him appear. It wasn't just that she worried about him or missed him, although both of those things were true. She had run out of her heat suppressants this morning. If he didn't return soon, she would have to shut herself in the basement and hope no one disturbed her.

She'd only run out twice before — once when she was eighteen and once last year, and both times, Papa had been there to see her through it and cover for her absence. This time, he'd been sure he'd be able to get them and return home before she ran out.

Something had gone wrong.

Her stomach twisted, and even though she knew her heat couldn't possibly be starting yet, a little spurt of fear trickled through her.

A lone figure appeared on the road, one she instantly knew, but it was not her father's carriage.

In his long, white robe, rather than the trousers and shirt the rest of the village males wore, Father Conal's imposing figure was unmistakable. Callista grit her teeth. He'd appeared on her doorstep every day for the past week, an unwelcome reminder that her father wasn't home yet, and every day he became bossier. The first day she'd invited him in for tea; after that, she'd found reason to keep him outside.

"Blast," she muttered under her breath, as if afraid he could hear, and punish, even from this distance.

Rinsing her dish, she set it on the counter to dry, hurrying over to grab her shawl and wrap it around her dress. Picking up her leather gloves and bucket of gardening tools, she ducked out the back door. She had just enough time to kneel down and start digging in the dirt before she heard the faint sound of knocking at the front door.

Getting back to her feet, she quickly took a handful of dirt and cast it against her apron and layered skirts. There, that looked convincing enough. Walking around the side of the house, she waited until she saw Father Conal turn his head and see her before she began taking off her gloves.

"Father Conal!" she greeted him, acting as surprised as she could. "Back again? Has there been news of my father?"

It was the same way she'd greeted him every day, and as always, he shook his head, lifting his chin pompously. The fabric of his robes was a bit discolored at the bottom, but the fact they were white at all was a reminder that he did very little work. By contrast, Callista and the rest of the villagers wore darker colors in heavier, sturdier fabrics that didn't show the wear and tear as much.

"No, Callista, no news of your father yet," Father Conal announced in his usual supercilious tone, but there was a new note in it as well, one she hadn't heard before. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I... what?" She blinked, taking a step back. There was something about his posture she really didn't like, that made her think *danger*. He wasn't behaving in a threatening manner, but he was looking at her with an odd light in his eyes she'd never seen before.

"You're a young woman, living alone—"

"I live with my father," she said sharply, not caring that she was being rude by interrupting him.

"Your father, who has not returned... and who may not return." His lips twitched minutely at her flinch before he adopted a more placating posture. He reached out to comfort her, but Callista took another step back, avoiding his touch. He smiled at this, too, collecting these signs of unease the same way he collected coins from the already-impoverished villagers, and likely for the same reason, to count and recount as he sat alone in his lavish chambers, reveling in his superiority.

"I do not wish to distress you, my dear, but certain realities must be faced. Your father is one of the brave men of our town who has chosen the dangerous profession of traveling, and while such men are needed, sometimes... things happen, and they don't return. We've been blessed by the Gods that it has been so long since we've lost one of our own, but it may be the time has come again."

"He's fine, he's just... late." Callista's throat felt tight. Scratchy. Her eyes watered, but she blinked back the tears, refusing to let them fall under the gaze of the cruel priest, who didn't look at all upset at implying her father was dead.

"Of course, my dear," he said, his voice dripping with false sympathy that grated painfully over her ears. "I just wanted to offer you my support... and also assure you that you will have my protection, no matter what has happened."

"Your protection?" Her voice was starting to sound shrill, her thoughts struggling to understand what he was saying. Why would she need his protection?

"A female living on her own... it can be dangerous. There are many males in the village who have been interested in approaching your father, offering themselves as your mate. So far, he has kept them all at bay."

Callista blinked. Her father had never mentioned such a thing to her, but then he wouldn't have. "And are you offering to keep them at bay?"

"In a manner." Father Conal smiled in a way that made her want to take another step back. "If you were my wife, then, of course, they wouldn't bother you."

"Your wife?" Her voice came out as a squeak as her hand flew up to her throat. She'd never sounded like that before in her life, but then she'd never been so horrified, either.

Father Conal was older even than her father, not to mention smug, patronizing and self-important. Not someone she would ever want to marry, even if he had been closer to her age. Her disdain for this offer could not have been more evident, yet he bared his teeth in a smile, enjoying her reaction. "I can see you're overcome by my offer."

Callista was frozen in place, unable to force herself to smile back, yet too smart to do something so stupid as deny his interpretation of her reaction.

He glanced up at the sun in the sky. "Would you like to make us some tea while I take the necessary inventory of your father's household? And I shall be happy to take any small requests you may have for the ceremony into consideration," he added graciously.

"I am sorry, sir," she said, finally finding her voice. "I'm busy in the back garden right now. I was there when I heard your knock..."

He looked down, his gaze slithering over her body as if it was already his to do with as he pleased, until he saw the dirt on her skirts.

"Ah, you are a hard worker, my dear. Something I always wanted in a wife." He winked at her, and no longer frozen in shock, Callista managed to smile weakly. "Well then, I should be getting back to my duties. Perhaps tomorrow."

Perhaps never.

Callista kept her smile pasted on her face as he turned to leave, waiting until he reached the gate to hurry around to the back of the house where she collapsed against the sturdy wall, panting for breath as the emotions she'd been holding back rushed over her.

Fear. Panic. Worry for her father.

Worry for herself.

Whatever had happened to her father, she had to believe he was safe somewhere. Delayed, but safe. She couldn't let herself believe otherwise. However, his long absence had repercussions neither of them could have ever anticipated.

Marry Father Conal?

Impossible. The very thought made her body run cold. Even if she didn't find him loathsome, it was out of the question, but she had no authority to refuse. Only her father could refuse a suitor and if he was... absent, she needed a man willing to stand as her betrothed, perhaps even willing to lie to the priest and claim a secret marriage, and who would ever do that? Who in the village would dare defy Father Conal? More importantly, who would do so without asking questions? And... And if it came to that, who was she willing to marry? Who could be trusted with her secret? Who would help her keep her Omega nature hidden away rather than turning her over to Father Conal for judgment?

Judgment. As if there were any doubt as to his verdict. Alphas and Omegas were inherently sinful creatures — Alphas killed, Omegas lusted, and neither could be controlled. Their perversions were the reason the Beast roamed the woods, or so Father Conal declared from his pulpit, and all the villagers knew it to be truth, or at least, did not dare to question him. Callista could not judge her neighbors too harshly; she had believed him until she'd discovered for herself that what he said about Omegas wasn't entirely true.

But whatever else he said, Father Conal preached that sin was as weeds in a garden, and that only by plucking sinners up and casting them out could the crop flourish. And so there was only one outcome when an Omega or Alpha was discovered in their midst, and whether the Beast devoured them or they succumbed to exposure or misadventure, it didn't really matter. Those sacrificed to the woods never returned.

According to Father Conal, this was why the village flourished when all others wallowed in lawlessness, famine and plague. He was so certain of it, that every three years, a lottery was held, wherein a young woman was called to be sacrificed to the Beast in the woods (although the daughters of Father Conal's enemies had a way of being called more than others). But no matter what day it was, if the village knew her nature, they would turn her over to Father Conal, who would sacrifice her to the Beast. Callie would have accepted her fate if her name had been called in the lottery, as it was her duty to keep the village safe, but she didn't want to throw herself at death if there was any other way.

But was that really what awaited her in the woods? Father Conal was wrong about Omegas, so... maybe what he said about the Beast, the Alpha in the forest, wasn't entirely true, either?

Callista closed her eyes, taking deep breaths as she tried to calm her racing heart. Unfortunately, while Father Conal's words hadn't been *entirely* true, there was quite a bit of truth to them. Her heat was awful. If a man other than her father had approached her while she was in her nest, she would have begged him to fuck her. To defile her. Just like Father Conal said.

Which meant there was likely quite a bit of truth to what he said about the Beast.

It left her with a choice. Should she wait here for her father to return and save her both from heat without suppressants and a forced marriage to Father Conal? Or should she brave the outside world and try to find him herself, risking not only the Beast, but a thousand other ways to die in the woods?

Either way, she knew Father Conal would likely appear again tomorrow... and the next day and the next... and at some point, her heat would hit. Then she'd be thrown into the woods, a sacrifice to the Beast, regardless.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at the sky where the sun was hanging low, though not setting yet.

She had this afternoon and tonight to prepare.

Tomorrow, she would leave to go look for her father. Truthfully, there was no other choice.

Callista

THE FIRST CRAMP HIT MIDDAY, CAUSING HER TO SQUEEZE HER legs together around her horse's middle. Poor Beauty obediently leapt forward, and Callista had to rein her in hard to keep her from pelting down the road. She'd been moving at a decent clip since before dawn, but she didn't want to wear out the poor horse.

"Sorry, Beauty," she said, patting the horse's side, trying not to let her worry overwhelm her.

It seemed her heat was coming on faster without the suppressants than it had the last time, and she wasn't anywhere near out of the woods. At least it was the middle of the day.

The Beast was said to roam only at night, allowing safe passage to and from their village while the sun was in the sky. Her father had confirmed he'd never seen anything to suggest otherwise. It would be easy to think that the Beast was just another lie the priest used in his sermons to keep the villagers obedient, save that the one time her father had come home at dusk, he'd been sure something had followed him at the very end. Something big in the woods. Too, several young men, foolhardy and drunk on their own youth and strength, had gone out into the woods at night to hunt the Beast. None of them had ever returned. Their families had been distraught, of course, but there was nothing to be done. They'd scoured the forest during the daytime and found signs of a chase, of a struggle, and several times they'd even found blood, but never a body.

Callista wasn't looking for trouble and wasn't planning on staying after dark. Her father had told her there was a small outpost on the other side of the forest. If she followed the path and didn't stray, she would reach it before the sun went down.

Not that he'd ever expected her to have to leave the village, but he'd told her, anyway.

She was glad he had, or this journey would be much more frightening. Despite the brightness of the day, the tall trees had shaded the path all morning, and she had no doubt the afternoon would be the same. She wasn't sure she'd be able to tell when the sun actually set because of the trees.

And now she would have to worry about the cramps... though, hopefully, it would be a while before there was another. Riding out her heat in the outpost might be easier than at home, where Father Conal was coming by to check on her.

She'd left a note on her door to tell her neighbors that she'd gone to search for her father, and not to worry, that she would be back soon. Father Conal might be upset, perhaps even enough to retaliate in some way, but she couldn't bring herself to care right now. That was just one more thing she would have to deal with once her own father was back, along with what to do about Father Conal's desire to marry her.

She knew he wouldn't stand for it, but what was their other option? Leave the village? She wasn't sure they were ready for

that, either. Her father had traveled to many places, and so far, had not found a place where he thought she would be safe as an Omega. It wasn't her fault she'd been born this way. Sometimes, she wondered why she'd been so cursed, but she tried not to think about it since it wasn't something she could change.

About an hour after the first cramp, when the sun was no longer directly over her, she brought out the apple she'd packed for her lunch — and nearly choked on the first bite.

A wrecked carriage on the side of the path, the horses gone, no one on the seat. It lay on its side, the wheel spindles cracked and broken, the body of the carriage shattered beyond repair, but even so, she recognized it at once. Her father's carriage.

A cry rose up in her throat. She slid off of Beauty before the horse had even come to a halt and run toward it, a stream of "No, no, no, no, no," emanating from her lips unheard. Crashing up against its broken belly, she looked inside.

Nothing. No body, but it looked like there was a bit of blood on the seat. Callista bit back tears as they sprang into her eyes. She wouldn't cry. She didn't know her father was dead. Not yet.

I might never know. Maybe I'll never find him, just like the other families whose sons disappeared in these woods.

Pain wracked her. Not the cramps of her heat, but the pain of grief and fear.

"Papa," she whispered. Then she took a deep breath. This wasn't going to help.

There was no way of knowing how long the carriage had been here, but it couldn't have been long. Braden Murphy had returned home from his own trip two days ago, and surely he'd have told everyone if he'd seen her father's carriage in this state. A search would have already been done. It was far more likely that her father had been rushing back home today, driving his horses too fast in his hurry to get back to her before her heat came on. One turn taken too fast, one root pushing up through the rain-softened road... one moment's ill-luck, and the carriage upended. But she would not believe her father was dead, so what did that leave? He'd stumbled out, perhaps injured and disorientated...

Callista looked over her shoulder into the shadowed woods and shivered, then gasped as her wandering eyes lit on a boot print. A man's size. Her father's? She had to believe it!

Should she rush back and gather others to help her?

No. She'd already traveled half a day. If she went back, it would be nightfall. They'd have to wait until tomorrow. And with her heat was already coming on...

She had no time.

Squaring her shoulders, Callista straightened and turned around. She was relieved to see Beauty had followed her, clearly curious why her mistress had decided to dismount.

"Good, Beauty," Callista murmured, going over to give the horse the rest of the apple she was still clutching in her hand. She was very suddenly *not* hungry, and Beauty deserved a treat for good behavior. Especially since she was about to make Beauty do something very dangerous. Taking the horse's reins, Callista stepped off the road and into the woods.

"Let's go. We have to find Papa."

At the very least, she had to look.

What she would do if she didn't find him? Well, she wasn't sure she cared what happened to herself anymore. Without her father, she wasn't sure she would have much of a life left, anyway. Her village would sacrifice her to the Beast, so perhaps this was her fate. Perhaps, as an Omega, this was always the way her life was meant to go.

The tree cover made everything seem darker and more foreboding. Breathing faster, Callista paused several yards in and looked up at Beauty. Guilt flooded her. It was likely she was leading Beauty to her death, but she couldn't let the horse go. If she did somehow manage to find her father, he could be injured. She would need Beauty to help transport him.

And if the Beast did appear, hopefully, he would not be able to outrun a horse. If it looked like the situation was hopeless, she could always make herself the sacrifice and send Beauty on her way. According to Father Conal, Alphas were more interested in their own kind than in animals. She could only hope that was one of the parts that was true because she couldn't stand the idea that she'd be the cause of her horse's death. Not on top of everything else.

"Let's go," she said again, more to herself than to Beauty, who seemed unperturbed that she was being led into a cursed forest. At least one of them was unbothered.

It wasn't a hard trail to follow, even for one unversed in such things. Broken plants, an occasional boot print in the ground that had since hardened. Deeper into the forest it led her, her focus so dedicated, her fear began to drift away, especially as nothing more than a bird or squirrel disturbed her senses. She was dimly aware of the light beneath the trees growing darker, but it didn't matter anymore. At the very least, before she died, she wanted to find out what had happened to her father. If she was to meet the same fate as him, then so be it.

Her insides cramped again as she walked, and Callista doubled over, gasping, her free hand on her stomach as though that would do any good. The urge to find a safe, secure place was growing within her. Safe and soft. A place she could burrow into.

A nest.

If she died tonight, she wouldn't have to suffer through another heat. That seemed like a blessing as well.

Beauty whickered nervously as Callista straightened, and she looked over her shoulder at the horse, who had been happily following behind her for so long. The animal's eyes seemed a little wider than before, and her nostrils were flaring.

"What's wrong, Beauty?" Callista stepped toward her, but Beauty stepped back, tossing her head anxiously.

A low growl ripped through the air, turning Callista's insides liquid. In the same instant, the reins ripped from Callista's hands as the horse reared, hooves beating at the air in front of her, forcing Callista to move back or have her head bashed in.

"Beauty!" Her voice was lost beneath Beauty's cries of fear and the growling that was growing louder and coming closer behind Callista.

She didn't look over her shoulder. Callista bolted at the same time as Beauty, running back to the path, even though part of her knew there was no safety to be found there. It didn't matter. Every instinct she had screamed at her to *run*.

Brush and wood cracked and snapped behind her as *something* followed.

Callista

A CRAMP HIT CALLISTA AS SHE RAN, CAUSING HER TO stumble. She cried out in pain as her hands and knees hit the hard ground. Yet even as she cried out, she surged to her feet.

The low growl that rumbled through the air sent another cramp through her, and she fell again, panting for breath as liquid heat pooled in her lower body. Her heat had never felt like this before. It hurt, yet it didn't, and she didn't know what to make of it.

Lifting her head, she whimpered when she saw it.

The Beast.

In front of her, only a few feet away.

On all fours, it peered at her, tilting its head. It had a snout, not quite like a dog's or wolf's, much shorter, and a mouth filled with what looked like razor-sharp teeth. Atop its head, two thick, pointing horns curled up and outward, devilish and unnatural. But it was its eyes that caught her, held her, stole her breath even as she sucked in a gasp. Yellow eyes, glowing in the dark, terrifying, yet too intelligent to be a beast's. It didn't simply see her, it was almost like it *knew* her.

A long, red tongue escaped to lick its chops... then it stood on two legs. Callista stared at the humanoid figure. Its legs were bent oddly, more like a goat's than a human's, and it was covered in short, reddish fur that emphasized rather than masked its muscled frame. Between its legs jutted a huge, thick erection.

Callista had seen farm animals breeding, and she knew what a male's member was, but this...

The liquid heat inside her pulsed, and she cried out, pressing her legs together as need shot through her, stronger than she'd ever felt.

The Beast purred.

She gasped. Not only because of the sound the thing was making, but because of the effect it had on her body. The pain receded, leaving her with intense arousal and growing pleasure that didn't hurt, but still left her aching.

"No..." she whispered.

The Beast tilted its head and flexed his hands.

He purred again.

Callista moaned as pleasure surged, her hands pressing between her skirts against her aching body. Fluid gushed, wetting her thighs. Shocked, she looked up at the Beast.

It stepped closer, tilting its head back and forth, studying her even as its purr turned into a croon. Callista whimpered. Her body was betraying her, heat filling her skin, plumping her nipples and her womanhood, making her ache in throbbing demand. The Beast reached down, gathering some of the pearly fluid leaking from the tip of his cock onto his finger, and he held it out to her. She should have recoiled, but she found herself leaning forward instead — the scent like nothing she'd ever smelled before. Musky and yet woodsy and entirely edible. Her mouth watered.

She couldn't control her body as she found herself leaning forward even more, her hands reaching for the ground as her lips parted. The Beast smeared the fluid across her lower lips, pushing his finger into her mouth. His claw scraped against her tongue, hard enough to hurt, but she didn't taste blood.

All she tasted was him.

Salty. Sweet. Delicious.

Her body demanded more, and she found herself crawling forward — crawling to the Beast. The Alpha. The violent creature Father Conal said would slaughter them all if they were caught outside the safety of the village at night.

How much was truth? How much was lies?

His visage was terrifying, but he smelled so good... and she was too aroused to be frightened.

Was this how all the other sacrifices had died? Crawling to their doom because of instincts they couldn't ignore?

Or was this because she was a sinful Omega, unable to resist any male other than her father when she was in heat? Because there was no doubt, Alpha Beast or not, the thing was male. And her body wanted him.

The flavor of him coated her tongue, and she wanted more. Craved more. She stared at the liquid shimmering on the tip of his cock, her mouthwatering even as her mind screamed at her that this was wrong. So, so wrong. He dropped to all fours again, moving around her as agile as he was on two legs, but she didn't have the strength to get to her feet. The need pulsing inside her kept her frozen in place, unable to flee, unable to move as he grew closer. Heat seemed to emanate from his body, warming her outsides as his purring growl stoked the fire inside.

Hot breath wafted against the back of her neck, and she shivered, an odd whining noise making its way up the back of her throat.

Something hard and sharp gripped her shoulder, right where it met her throat, and she froze as she realized he was biting her. Her pulse pounded through her, loud in her ears, yet he didn't break her skin. The sound of something tearing made her flinch, but his teeth held her in place, and as cool air wafted over her legs, she realized he'd torn her skirts.

He was going to mount her, like the beasts in the fields... and she wanted him to. Gods help her, but she did. Her pussy was swollen, aching, the cramping inexplicably eased by the noises he was making, but she could feel them growing stronger. She needed something inside her.

Needed *him* inside her.

Hot, furred muscles surrounded her, caging her. His arms were on either side of hers as his furred front brushed against her buttocks. The tip of his cock sought out her opening. Callista moaned as she felt it prod between her slick lips, more fluid leaking from her, coating her thighs. His teeth tightened on her flesh, and she whimpered, going still as he thrust into her.

It hurt.

The stretch.

The sting of having something pushed inside her where nothing had ever been before.

It hurt, yet it felt so good. So right.

A low growl met her moan, then he was pulling back before shoving in again, making her quiver around him. The feeling of fullness was overwhelming, the deep ache inside her wanting more, even as her muscles squeezed, trying to push the intruder out.

More... more...

"Please... more," she whispered.

Perhaps she was a sinful, lustful Omega, exactly the way Father Conal had said. This was the first time she'd been around a male other than her father during her heat, and it didn't matter that he was shaped as a beast — humanoid and intelligent, but a beast—her body ached for him.

She didn't care what he looked like, only how he felt as he burrowed deeper inside her, his thick cock splitting her open. Crying out, she dug her fingers into the dirt beneath her, doing her best to stay in position, terrified that his teeth might actually tear through her flesh if she moved, yet so aroused, she almost didn't care if he did as long as he didn't stop what he was doing.

Another thrust and he was fully inside her, the soft fur covering his skin pressed against her bottom, his limbs caging her as he throbbed within her. Callista moaned again, her muscles clenching, and another gush hot slick coated his groin.

Releasing her from his bite, she felt him straightening, his hands no longer beside hers. Instead, they slid over her body, down her sides, to grip her hips and hold her in place as he began to ride her. Despite the fur, despite the claws, with his hands holding her like that, she could almost pretend he was a regular male, and her fear receded further.

"Oh... oh... please," she begged as he moved, pumping back and forth inside her. Arching her back, she braced her forearms against the earth and dropped atop them, pressing her ass back against his pounding thrusts.

The heat didn't hurt at all now. It felt good. So good. Panting and moaning, Callista gave herself over to the sensations. They were irresistible, the ecstasy rising inside her unavoidable as he held her in place, using her body for his pleasure and sending her on her own as well.

This was what was meant to be.

She cried out her rapture to the night, the sound swallowed up by the forest. Her body spasmed around his, squeezing the cock sliding in and out of her. It went on and on and on, leaving her breathless as he rode ride her through the waves of bliss until she was limp, held up mostly by his hands on her hips.

Something began to swell inside her, adding to the piercing ache of pleasure that was rolling through her. It hurt, but not in the way her cramps usually did — it was a throbbing sting as she was forced open, wider and wider. The feeling of fullness amplified as his thrusts became shorter, deeper. She could feel something pushing into her that was far too big for her body... yet it was exactly what her senses craved.

"Please!"

Whatever it was pushed in, locking her against him, and she heard the Beast howl as hot liquid poured into her. She could feel every pulse, every throb of his cock as his own climax spurted, flooding her with his seed. Callista whimpered, her muscles squeezing in time with his spurts, massaging his cock, milking him, as if she couldn't get enough of him.

They fell onto their sides, and his warmth wrapped around her, holding her tightly in place against him. She couldn't move if she wanted to. His hard cock was still locked inside her, pulsing as he released again and again, shuddering with his pleasure. His clawed fingers moved down between her legs to stroke her swollen nub, setting off another round of pleasure as she pressed her face against his furry arm.

If she'd had the wherewithal to think, she would have wondered what her life had come to.

Instead, she panted as she lay limply against him, her mind hazy with pleasure. She was too tired to do anything but quiver as he stroked her body until the swelling inside her finally subsided, and he pulled away. Instead of tearing her limb from limb, like he was supposed to, the Alpha picked her up in his arms, wrapping her torn skirts around her legs, and carried her off into the dark forest.

Callista was barely awake. She didn't know where he was taking her and didn't have the energy to care.

CHAPTER 4

Callista

The BED WAS SOFT, THE SHEETS SILKY AGAINST HER SKIN. SHE purred, curling into the little nest she'd made for herself. Something nuzzled against her thigh, and she parted her legs, moaning softly as a soft tongue began to lick her swollen folds. Her body clenched, and slick slid from her opening, an offering of ambrosia to the supplicant worshiping between her legs.

A purr vibrated through her. Not her own. A low voice, male.

The cramps that normally accompanied her heat were beginning again. She could feel them, but at a distance. Hazy. As though they couldn't quite touch her.

"Please..." She opened her eyes and realized it wasn't a dream. She really was lying on a soft bed, not her own. This one had silky sheets, and above her was a dark red canopy.

Looking down her body, past the swells of her breasts tipped with hard, pink nipples, she saw a male between her thighs. Yellow eyes stared up at her from beneath a fringe of reddish blond hair. The same color eyes as the Beast, his hair the same color.

But he was a *male*, not a beast. The short snout was gone, replaced by a straight nose and mobile lips that he licked as he lifted his head, staring at her. The sun was coming in through a huge window to their side. As he moved, the light on his eyes changed, and she realized his eyes were not actually yellow, but amber. They were brighter in the sunlight.

"You," she whispered.

His purr stopped.

"Hello." A smile moved on his lips. "This is not normally the way I introduce myself, but—"

He was cut off as she cried out. Without his purr, without his cock, a cramp twisted her insides.

Immediately, he began to rumble again.

She took a deep, shuddering breath as the cramp eased. Then his head dove back down between her legs, his mouth and tongue doing magical things that pushed back the pain even more. Callista moaned, reaching down for him, her fingers tangling in his hair as he feasted on her aching flesh. She wasn't sure exactly what he was doing. All she knew was how it felt.

Was he the Beast?

She didn't know.

The only thing that remained completely the same was how his touch, his purr, eased her. Mostly. As good as his mouth felt, even as she cried out in climax, her pleasure pulsing through her, it wasn't quite enough. She needed something inside her. Needed to be taken, filled. Craved it. "Please... more!" It was the only thing she could think of to say and even that brought embarrassed heat to her face.

How could she say such a thing to a stranger? Her sinful Omega nature was coming through again, and there was nothing she could do about it. At least he didn't seem to think there was anything wrong with it. Or her.

He rose up over her, still rumbling with that growling purr. Broad shoulders, muscled chest... in many ways his body was similar to the Beast's, but instead of fur, he had curls of dark auburn hair across his chest and below his naval, down to his erect cock. It looked just as big as the Beast's had.

Taking her by the hips, he pulled her toward him, his eyes glowing with lust as she squeaked in surprise. The new position tilted her bottom up toward him. His strength was as great as the Beast's as he positioned her, the tip of his cock began to push into her.

Suspicion stirred in her mind, but... no... it couldn't be...

It didn't matter who — or what — he was as he thrust into her. The needs of her body rose and her heat billowed outward as hot slick gushed from between her thighs while he sank into her. He groaned with pleasure when her back arched, pushing her breasts upward, her body clenching around him as he filled her.

It felt so good. So right.

"More." She wasn't pleading this time — she was demanding.

She ached. She hungered.

She needed more of him.

And he gave it to her.

Gripping her hips tightly, he pounded into her, hard enough to move her on the bed, shaking the heavy wooden frame with his thrusts. Callista's muscles tightened, her legs closing around him as he moved. Of their own accord, her hands slid to her breasts, squeezing them, trying to ease some of the ache she felt there as well. Her nipples throbbed, and she pinched them, gasping as the pain and pleasure sliced through her.

"Do that again," he demanded, his golden glowing gaze fixed on her breasts where her hands were.

She pinched her nipples again, moaning, her muscles shuddering as he moved inside her, thrusting deeper, harder.

Callista whimpered as his body rubbed against hers, the musky scent of her slick and his arousal combining to saturate the nest he was mounting her in. She was utterly wanton, a mass of need and sensual pleasure, caught in the throes of her Omega nature, yet unable to rise above it.

This was what she had been denying herself all this time. This was what her body had needed. It didn't feel unnatural or wrong.

It felt so, so right.

"More!"

She pinched her nipples harder, twisting the little buds as he leaned into his thrusts. His groin rubbing against her swollen nub and sending bursts of pleasure shooting through her. Her need swelled as her thighs tightened around him, trying to hold him inside her as she began to writhe in rapture.

He growled, the sound resonating within her, sending another wave of pleasure through her. She cried out when he grabbed her wrists, pinning them down on either side of her head as he began an assault of thrusts between her thighs. Pinned in place, Callista screamed as her climax reached a crescendo, crashing over her and sweeping away any rational thought.

Something pushed at her, stretching her open, the same way the Beast had. Her body ached, squeezing, shuddering, yet craving the hot fullness. Her pleasure grew as he pushed into her, the thick bulge opening her. She cried out again as it locked in place inside her, his roar of triumph ringing in her ears as he pumped his seed inside her.

Collapsing atop her, he groaned, his grip on her wrists loosening, then releasing so he could move his arm to brace his head next to hers. She shuddered, clenching, feeling him inside her, a little wave of pleasure running through her as fluid gushed within her.

It still wasn't enough.

As soon as her pleasure crested, it subsided only long enough for her to take a few breaths before it began to rise again. She reached up, dragging her nails over his shoulders, her heels digging into the backs of his thighs, as a new wave of need assaulted her senses. Her insides squeezed him, clenching as her arousal flowed through her again.

"Oh... no..." She shuddered. "I can't... I feel..."

"Shh, I've got you." He moved inside her, both of them groaning at the sensation. "I've got you."

Apparently, what he meant by that was he was there to bring her to pleasure over and over... and over again. She moaned and writhed beneath him, before him, and atop him, bouncing and grinding on him as she worked herself to another glorious climax. When she thirsted, when she hungered, he fed her the fluid leaking from his cock, which satisfied her in a way water and food never had... and it aroused her, too.

There was a joy in giving in, in letting her true nature rule her actions, without thought for the future, without fear of repercussions.

The day went on, an entire day of pleasure. Of depravity. When he slid his fingers into her bottom while she moved atop him, she nearly exploded from the sinful sensation, the extra feeling of fullness. And when he whispered that he planned to 'fuck' her there, she climaxed at the very idea, clenching and squeezing his knot inside her pussy while his fingers continued to invade her bottom.

Finally, she couldn't take anymore, and she went limp, curled up in the nest with his body around hers. The sun was hanging lower in the sky. That was the only rational thought she had before she fell asleep.

When she woke several hours later, it was to the howl of the Beast.



Adonis

Female.

Smells good. My female. My Omega.

The one he'd found last night.

The one that made it less of a struggle to maintain his thoughts, to maintain himself, while in this cursed form. He suspected it was because she was an Omega. Or perhaps because she was in heat.

The moment he'd scented her in the woods, his mind had cleared without the usual fight. She was hardly the first to enter the woods, but she was the first he hadn't had to chase to the safety of the castle to keep from tearing her apart.

As soon as he'd scented her, tearing her apart was the last thing he'd wanted to do. He'd scented her, and all of his Alpha instincts had gone on full alert, the way his father had told him they would. Now, all he wanted was to be buried inside her. Pleasuring her. Listening to her moans. Feeling her soft skin against his. Filling her with his cum as she milked his knot.

He'd hoped having her at last would lift the curse, but he'd returned to the form of the Beast even as he lay beside her with his seed in her womb In a moment of frustration and anguish, he'd lost himself in an animal howl.

So, he'd howled in frustrated anguish.

Now she was awake and frightened.

And oh, the scent of her fear was delicious.

"Oh my God... it *is* still you!" She sounded shocked but as though a suspicion had been confirmed. Then she moaned, pressing her legs together and shuddering as a spasm wracked her body.

Adonis purred. Her muscles relaxed, and she panted for breath.

She was still in heat. The scent of her arousal, of her slick, was making his cock ache. It didn't matter how many times he'd already cum in her. He wanted more. Craved more.

It also didn't matter what form he was in. He'd wanted her as much this morning as he had last night and still did. Rubbing his face along the outside of her legs, he wasn't surprised when they parted for him again. His appearance might be different, but he was still an Alpha, and she was still an Omega.

They were made to fit together.

The only thing that could assuage the cramping heat in her body was the knot on his cock.

Her pussy was pretty, dark pink, puffy and swollen from use. She moaned when he dragged his tongue up the center, tasting her. In this form, his tongue was longer, rougher, but she didn't seem to mind. Reaching down, she grabbed hold of his horns and wrapped her fingers around them, pulling his face against her.

No one had ever touched his horns, not even those who had fought him in this form. Far more sensitive than he'd realized, the slight tug sent pleasure down his spine as his body reacted.

Cupping her thighs, he pushed them apart, careful not to dig his claws into her soft flesh. She whimpered as he pushed her knees up nearly to her ears, giving him complete access to her most sensitive parts. The grip on his horns tightened and his cock throbbed beneath him.

Heat. Need. Want.

He lapped up as much of the sweet oils painting her thighs as he could, craving it as much as he craved shoving his cock back inside her. She writhed for him, wriggling, pushing against his hands, pulling on his horns, until she came for him, crying out with sensual abandon.

Her cries shredded the last of his restraint. Releasing her legs, he flipped her over onto her hands and knees before him. With his body in this form, it was a much easier position.

She didn't fight, didn't try to get away.

No, she bent her head down, pushing her heart-shaped ass back at him, and he took the offering as his due. Wrapping his hands around her body, his monstrous thumbs nearly meeting in the middle of her back, his claws pressing against her soft lower belly, he shoved his cock in deep. She cried out, her pussy spasming around him as he pulled back and thrust in again, burying himself completely inside her as the molten heat of her slick covered his length and soaked his groin.

Growling, he fucked her hard and fast, unable to control his baser impulses. Unable to go slowly or give her time to get used to his cock again.

It didn't seem to matter.

She cried out, pushing back at him, wanting him just as badly as he wanted her, and Adonis let his bestial needs take over. Growling, purring, he fucked her harder and harder, her cries punctuating the air around them.

His knot began to swell, aching, filling with his seed, and he shoved it into her, working it in deep before it expanded and erupted within her while she screamed and writhed for him. With a howl, he came, filling her with more of his seed as her inner muscles worked his knot in the way only an Omega could, pummeling it until every last drop of his cum had spurted inside her.

Just like during the day, that didn't fulfill her, either.

She was insatiable. Hot. Needy.

Adonis fucked her into oblivion, his claws scraping across her skin, his fangs aching to be buried inside her along with his cock. He didn't dare bite her shoulder the way he had the night before, he didn't think he'd be able to keep from biting down this time and claiming her as his mate. It was the last vestige of himself he could hold onto in the maelstrom of his body's urges, this form's demands.

Callista

CALLISTA AWOKE TO THE SENSATION OF A MALE'S HOT BODY pressed against her, his front to her back, and his hard cock already inside her. She groaned, feeling his thickness slowly working back and forth, rocking her against the mattress. It was day; she knew even without opening her eyes, solely by the feel of his smooth, muscular body.

Shuddering, she moaned, and felt one of his hands come up to cup her breast, squeezing it gently, toying with it. The difference between when he was male or beast had gotten a little blurry, but he was only gentle during the day. At night, he didn't seem to be able to keep himself under control.

After three nights of heat in his arms, she had quite a few long, shallow scratches across her skin. She didn't mind. Not really. Every single one of them had been made in the throes of her heat and had felt good when they'd happened.

Today was different.

For the first time, even with his cock inside her, his hand on her breast, the most urgent, driving need had disappeared. She was aroused, but it didn't feel quite the same. Her heat was over.

She wanted to sag with relief... but she couldn't because he was pressing hot kisses along the back of her neck, his cock starting to thrust a little harder.

Part of her felt she should push him away. They didn't actually know each other. She didn't have the excuse of her heat to blame for her wanton behavior, but she didn't want to push him away.

Deep down, what she really wanted was this.

His touch. His cock.

All for herself and not because their instincts, their natures, were driving them to it. She wanted to know what it was like without that.

Pushing her hips back against him, she moaned as he squeezed her breast tighter, pinching her nipple and moving his hips a little faster. Then his hand slid away, down her side to her leg, and he lifted it, the move faster than she could track. One moment, he was lifting her leg, the next he had swiveled, so she was on her back, and he was on top of her. His cock had remained inside her the entire time.

Golden eyes met hers, a smile curving his lips.

"Good morning," he said, flexing so his cock moved within her.

She clenched around him, her muscles sore but willing.

"Good morning," she whispered back, blushing. Somehow, now that he was looking down at her, now that he was no longer behind her, a feeling of shyness was creeping in. What must he think of her? Even as she had the thought, her mind rejected the idea he thought badly of her. He wasn't looking at her like she was a whore or a slut. He wasn't looking at her like she was a sinful devil who had tempted him to dark deeds.

Then again, he was an Alpha. The Alpha Beast. Just... not as she expected him. Not as Father Conal had warned the village about. Once again, the priest had lied. Though... she didn't know what had happened to the others. They hadn't had a chance to talk.

And they weren't going to talk now.

She moaned as he began to move, thrusting inside her, her ankle braced against his shoulder, his fingers holding it in place. His other hand slid beneath her bottom, lifting her, and her leg curled around his back to help support her.

"Oh!" She arched her back, lifting her hands over her head to grab the spindles decorating the headboard, bracing herself as he pounded into her. The bed shook under the force of his thrusts, and her body rejoiced in his deep thrusts, the way each stroke stoked the fires of her passion.

Her slick lubricated his cock, allowing him to move harder and faster within her as any friction vanished. His growling purr reverberated through her body, and her nipples plumped.

She cried out as he leaned forward, bending her in half, to suck a pert nipple between his lips, his hips still thrusting, still fucking her. Her swollen clit rubbed against his groin even more firmly in this position as his head moved back and forth between her breasts, teasing her nipples with his tongue and teeth.

"Oh... oh, please!" She tossed her head back and forth, shuddering as her pleasure mounted with every pulsing thrust

of his cock. Her muscles clenched around him, trying to hold him in place.

The bulge in his cock swelled, pushing into her, giving her the ecstasy she was so desperate for. Her body ached as she stretched to accommodate him while pleasure exploded within her. The spindles she was holding onto creaked ominously as she strained, her pussy clamping down on him. It didn't matter that she wasn't in heat anymore. Her body reacted the same way, her sensual rapture peaking just as high... the only difference was she was in control of her mind.

She'd chosen it this time.

Wanted it.

Crying out as he thrust into her fully, filling her completely, she felt the bulge on his cock lodge in place in her body. Liquid heat pulsed, the bliss of her climax unfolding like a flower opening its petals, spreading through her from her core out to her limbs.

He growled, deep in his throat. Head bowed, he shuddered before he let her leg slide down to the side, releasing her lower body and planting his hands on either side of her. She sighed as he laid down atop her, the sensation of his body on hers feeling familiar and reassuring at this point. His cock still pulsed as her pussy squeezed him.

As they breathed together, she became all too aware of the wreckage they'd made of her nest. The impulse to put it back together was present, but small. She didn't need it. His body atop hers, around hers, was like a nest of its own, keeping her secure and safe, an odd feeling to have about a total stranger.

He rocked his hips, moving inside her slightly. She moaned as her body clenched and squeezed another stream of

fluid from him, causing him to groan with pleasure as well.

"What is that?" she murmured, panting for breath. With his weight atop her, the fullness of his cock within her, she felt as if she barely had room for air.

"What?" he asked, lifting his head enough to look at her.

"The... inside me." She blushed, averting her gaze, which was ridiculous, considering everything they'd just done. Yet now that her body's needs had subsided to less urgent levels, she couldn't help feeling shy.

"My cock?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

She shook her head, her blush deepening.

"I've seen the animals breeding, cows and horses, but why can't I... move?"

A slow smile grew on his lips. "That's my knot."

"Your... knot?"

His eyebrow lowered as his brow furrowed. "Has no one told you of the way it is with an Alpha and an Omega?"

Shaking her head, Callista bit her lip. She didn't like feeling ignorant, but he wasn't being mean about it. He seemed only confused and a little concerned. "My father and I hid my nature," she confessed. "Father Conal—"

A rough growl cut off her words, and if she wasn't connected to him, she might have tried to scramble away. That kind of growl wasn't at all like the others she'd heard him utter. Seeing her reaction, he immediately changed the noise, softening to a purr that calmed her and soothed her ragged senses. "Do you know him?" she asked softly. She still felt safe and wasn't frightened of him, despite his growl, but she didn't want to upset him.

"In a manner." His voice was harsh, but she knew it wasn't directed at her. "You and your father hid your nature?"

Apparently, he didn't want to talk about Father Conal. His fingers slid through her hair as she spoke, telling him about her father's realization that she was an Omega, the suppressants he'd acquired for her, the heats she'd gone through when he hadn't been able to get them, and finally Father Conal's description of the Beast in the Woods and her determination to find her father, regardless.

The only thing she didn't tell him about was Father Conal's marriage proposal, such as it was. She didn't want to think about it, much less talk about it. It hardly mattered, anyway. Hopefully, everyone back in the village would think she was dead along with her father.

By the time she was done, his knot had subsided inside her, and he was able to roll off her — not that he went very far. Wrapping her in his arms, he kept her pressed against him, as though loathe to let her go. His possessiveness reminded her that she still didn't know his name.

"I... I am Callista. Where are we?" she asked. "And who are you?"

"I am Adonis, Alpha of this territory, and we're at my castle," he replied easily, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

Alpha of this territory? His castle? Callista blinked. Nothing of what he said made sense.

Adonis

FATHER CONAL. ALWAYS FATHER CONAL. THE TREACHEROUS male had had an Omega right under his nose without knowing about it for years. If it hadn't been for the hardship the vile priest had put Callista through, Adonis would have crowed with triumph. As it was, he could hardly celebrate when he'd heard how Callista had been forced to suppress her nature due to the power-hungry Father's preaching.

He'd hoped an Omega would break the spell.

That's what Father Conal had said all those years ago. That it would take an Omega to keep his bestial nature from overtaking him. Sadly, it didn't seem to be true, or he wouldn't have turned every night of her heat.

Though her presence did help him to retain his mind, and that was more than he'd had in years.

"What does it mean that you're the Alpha of this territory?" she asked. "What *is* this territory?"

"Your village is in my territory. It is one of many villages that are in my territory." Telling the story had become a thing of rote at this point, something that no longer spurred his anger, only resignation. "Years ago, my parents were called away. I was too young then to undertake the proper duties of the castle they left me under Father Conal's guidance." The bitterness in his voice could not be disguised, and her reaction on hearing it showed she must share some of his feeling for the evil priest. "Don't think too poorly of my parents. They didn't know him well, but they'd always had a special relationship with your village, being the closest to our castle, and Conal's predecessor was a good man. No doubt they thought Conal his equal, that he would care for me and give me guidance while they were away. Instead, he betrayed us all."

Callista's gasp of shock made him feel a little better. He'd been a young teenager the last time he'd been able to touch his parents, that they'd been able to see *him*. That was the part that hurt the most.

"He gathered other leaders from the other villages within our territory and brought them together to cast a terrible curse. If I leave the castle, I take on the form and mind of a ravenous monster, mindlessly stalking anything that enters my territory. Only within the castle walls, am I myself, and only during the day."

"And every night?" she asked softly.

He hugged her a little tighter, hoping she did not hate him for not having the strength to leave her when he'd changed forms. In her heat, she'd still wanted him, but she was no longer mindless with base need. She did not pull away or attempt to put any space between them, which reassured him.

"Every night, I become the Beast, and the Beast needs to hunt. I have very little control when in that form. It's a struggle even to think... until I met you."

She blinked. "Me?"

"I don't understand it either. I think it must be because you are an Omega." He laughed shortly. "Father Conal said an Omega would be the cure to the curse. I had hoped that would mean the curse would end, but... even if it only meant clarity of thought when I'm with you, I am grateful. I can be violent when in my other form."

She stiffened in his arms, a tremor going through her body as thoughts passed through her eyes.

"Have you... have you hurt many people?" she asked tentatively, her voice full of fear—not of him, he realized, but of what he might have done. Who he might have hurt.

Callista. Callie. Of course.

His newest resident of the castle.

"I have... but your father is not... well, he was not badly hurt," Adonis said quickly, speaking over her sharp intake of breath.

"My father?" She sat up, pulling away from him, hope and joy crossing her face followed by worry and fear.

Despite the beauty of her swaying breasts, Adonis could hardly be aroused when she was so clearly anxious over her father's fate—just as her father had been over hers. He pushed himself up to a seated position beside her, anxiously watching her expression for her reactions.

Thanks to the curse and his inability to always control his actions in his other form, there were people in the village who would have real reason to hate him. "An older Beta male named Broderick with a daughter named Callie? I assume that must be you."

"Oh!" She put her hands over her mouth, tears springing to her eyes. "That's him! He's here?"

"He is. He hurt his arm when the carriage crashed, but I was able to herd him to the castle without harming him." Adonis cringed as he spoke, realizing how they sounded, but truthfully, it was an achievement every time he managed to bring someone back to the castle safely.

Nightfall brought out his most violent instincts and urges. He wanted to hunt in his Beast form, and only a small part of him cared what he was hunting. When he reverted to his true form, he'd wept with relief every time he'd managed to save someone.

Several times he'd killed, knowing that those hunting him didn't realize who or what they were actually hunting. But he'd done his best to herd innocents to the castle rather than harming them. Once they were within the castle, they were safe as long as they were within its walls.

Although none of them had cleared his mind in the same manner Callista did, something about having them in his home made his instincts recognize them as 'his' and therefore, not prey.

The light in her wide eyes seemed to flicker as she searched his face, like her voice, trembling as she whispered, "Have you harmed others?"

He had. Was he to tell her so? He could not consider himself a murderer, for all that he knew he had killed. Neither did he blame those who had come to the woods to hunt him. If one of them had succeeded in striking a mortal wound, still he could not have hated them. He was a monster, and monsters must be slain. Even as his fangs sank into their throats, he'd howled for them to honor their lives even as he took them. But that was the Beast, not himself, not Adonis.

Yet looking into her guileless eyes, such excuses withered. It must be the whole truth with her, his Omega. And so he told her, haltingly at first, with long silences roughly broken that slowly, slowly took on the cadence of a man's speech. He had never spoken of such things before – he rarely spoke at all in recent years – and he had to suppress a wince at how callous the words sounded in his voice, as if doing harm were only his nature. And perhaps it was, but only half.

In this form, under sunlight, harm could still be abhorrent to him, but nightfall brought out his most violent instincts and primal urges. As the Beast, he was not only capable of harm, he yearned for it. To hunt, to chase, to seize and rend and bite... and that small part of him that still cared what, or who, wandered in the woods cared less and less the nearer he came to his prey.

But he did still care. And as the years passed in this cursed form, he had somehow taught the Beast within him to see those who walked on two legs as a different kind of prey, and to take some small satisfaction from driving them before him back to his denning place, his castle. There, they would be safe. Something about having them in his home made even the Beast inside him see them as 'his,' as possessions to be protected, and therefore, not as prey.

"Your father is here," he told her at the end of it, taking her hand to seal his words with a comforting squeeze. "His injuries are not severe. He should heal and he will be safe so long as he remains within these walls." She nodded, her eyes still bright with worry, but she did not ask to see him. Instead, softly, she said, "How strong you are, to suffer such a terrible curse without succumbing to it."

He huffed out a breath that could have been a laugh if his mood were lighter. "If only it were mine alone. Don't you see? It is everyone's curse. All the village is affected, even you suffer it."

"By believing the tales of the Beast in the woods," she said sadly.

He shook his head. "I don't mean that metaphorically. You are cursed, Callista. How long do you think the Beast has roamed the woods? How long do you think you've heard these tales?"

"All my life. Longer. I..." Her voice died away and her eyes rounded as she looked at him and saw a male near her own years. "Does the curse... keep you young?"

"No."

"But that's impossible! I remember! I... No, I know I do!"

"You do," he agreed heavily. "But your memories are false. You remember only what Father Conal–" The word was a curse in his mouth. "—desires you to remember."

He could see her struggling to accept that even as her own mind worked against her, and in the end, she shook her head.

"No. I'm sorry, but no! There have been sacrifices and those females are still gone! Females I knew! My childhood friend was one of them! Do not tell me I imagined Deirdre, that she's nothing but a... a figment of that perverted priest's imagination! He is incapable of imagining such goodness!" Deirdre. He could not be surprised hearing that name in Callista's mouth. She truly was his Omega, bringing all the threads of his life together.

"She's real," he agreed, almost smiling. "She was the first sacrifice."

"No, there was a lottery. It was tradition. There were many before her. I remember... I..." Callista's brows slowly knit. "I do remember! But... I can't see their faces clearly. I don't remember their names. I..." Slowly, wonderingly, she turned her eyes up to his. "I'm cursed?"

"As all the villagers are cursed, to hear the priest's words and make them memories. I didn't know either," he admitted. "Not until Deirdre came to the castle."

"How did she escape?" Callista wanted to know. "Sacrifices are bound to the Blood Tree. How could you come close enough to free her without..."

"Because she was bound," Adonis said, his lips twisting at the thought of the evil priest inadvertently sabotaging his own efforts. "The Beast doesn't want to be fed. It's not a dog, to take scraps from his hand. It has to hunt. When I saw her, I was... repulsed by her captivity."

"And you freed her."

"Not intentionally, I must admit. The ropes angered the Beast, so the Beast 'killed' them. I bit and clawed, then prowled away when the ropes lay 'dead' on the ground. Deirdre fainted. With distance, some sliver of reason returned and Deirdre awakened. She stumbled away, but didn't run, so the Beast couldn't chase. And so I was able to follow her, to herd her to the castle, where I hoped she'd be able to lock a door against me until the night was done. She did, and in the morning, when I was... myself again, we were able to speak. It was only then that I learned about this 'ancient' lottery, and all the other lies Conal preached as truth. That she, you, everyone... had forgotten."

"Forgotten... you?" Callista guessed.

"Me. My parents. The castle. That your village has always stood in our territory, protected by our family, by the Alpha and Omega he banished with his curse. Now he claims that Alphas and Omegas are the embodiments of sin, and you are all compelled to believe it, but I tell you, just ten years ago, your winter festivals were held in our halls! There was no priest's tithe, and no sin in discovering one's true nature!"

His voice had risen steadily, ending in a shout, and he had to turn away to collect his thoughts and his temper, which had not cooled in all the time since learning this from Dierdre. He'd raged all that day and the next, terrifying the poor female. Now she was one of his closest friends, but at the time, she'd been half out of her wits with fear, whether he stood before her as Man or Beast. It had taken a long time to earn her trust after that bad beginning, but as more and more villagers had joined her – female sacrifices and male would-be Beast-slayers – their distance from the priest had weakened Conal's influence over them, and they had come to know the truth.

Over time they'd learned the parameters of the curse.

If anyone left the castle at night, the Beast in him saw them as a threat and attempted to hunt them again. He had never killed one of his friends, but there were scars upon one of his protected to remind him not to rely upon the power of friendship to keep the Beast at bay. Mirkon claimed not to mind it, that every monster-hunter should have a few good scars, but Adonis still felt the pangs of guilt whenever he saw them, and Mirkon insisted upon short breeches and ankle boots. He wanted them seen, as a warning to newcomers: Remain in the castle, where it is safe.

"Are there many here?" Callista asked, looking around the bedchamber as if she expected them to pop up and wave.

"Quite a few, yes," Adonis replied, marveling at it a bit himself.

They'd built up their own little community there—tending the gardens, doing the essential work of the castle, hunting during the day while Adonis remained inside, and eventually, falling in love and having children, as Deirdre and Mirkon had done. They'd even had a marriage of sorts, with Adonis presiding in place of a priest. He could not be happier for them, even as he was filled with envy.

"But why have none ever returned?" Callista wanted to know.

His reminiscing smile faded. "Several have tried. I thought at first they had succeeded... until their bodies were found, hung from the trees, torn..." He took a breath and let the rest go unsaid. "Clearly, Father Conal and those village leaders under his power aren't willing to risk anyone countering their version of the 'truth.' Be assured, they were mourned and buried here, with respect and care."

"That's terrible!" Callista breathed, clutching a pillow to her chest, as a child might shield herself against the horrors of the night.

Adonis closed his own eyes. "Yes. It is." Especially because he'd been unable to help with any of it until the others had gotten the bodies back to the castle. He'd dug the graves personally, as it was the only thing he *could* do. That, and do all he could to convince any other restless guests not to return to their homes.

"Father Conal." Callista swallowed hard and her trembling voice firmed. "I always knew he was foul, but he's a monster. Something needs to be done about him."

The fierce determination in her gaze sparked something in his own heart. Adonis felt the same. He didn't know how, he didn't know when, but Father Conal would pay for his evil.

"What about your parents?" she asked suddenly. "You said they went away, but they've not returned? Did Father Conal... did he..."

"They're alive." Despite that fact, his words were mournful. "I've seen them, when I run the perimeter of the territory. They've tried to come back so many times over the years, but whatever barrier keeps me in, keeps them out as well. Only Betas seem to be able to pass through, and they rarely do, as far as I can tell. I don't know for certain why, but I do know that a curse has a... sense about it, and the darker the magic, the fouler it feels. It could easily be that travelers no longer come here simply because the woods of my territory have that ill feeling about them. Travel is dangerous enough even without dark magic and hungry Beasts. If something feels wrong, it's easier to simply stay away than to venture in, just to peddle ribbons and spice."

"I wonder if my father has ever traveled beyond the borders," she murmured.

"No." Seeing her surprise at his swift answer, he had to smile, despite his mood. "I was able to speak with him after Mirkon and the others told him of the way of things here in the castle. He's only traveled between the other villages within my territory. I suspect this, too, is part of the curse. Father Conal's power is strongest over his village and notably weakens with distance. Whether he keeps the other village leaders under his control with dark magic or just with coin, I don't know, but I do know that they, too, have solidified their power over their own villages by demonizing innocent Alphas and Omegas."

This was not all he'd learned from Callista's father. He'd also learned of Lachlan, a Beta male in Shining Village, the village closest to the edge of his territory, who, although outwardly loyal to Conal and his lackeys, remained sympathetic to non-Betas. He even produced a kind of suppressant that Broderick thought might help Adonis. Now, having met Callista, Adonis fully understood why Broderick had known about the suppressants.

Although Lachlan was not brave enough to stand against Conal and the rest of his compatriots, he was helping. How they might be able to use that to their advantage, Adonis had not yet decided, but it was an encouraging thought.

"May I see my father now?" Callista asked.

Adonis came out of his thoughts with a start and squeezed her hand again "Of course."

Hopefully, the male didn't try to kill him when he realized what Adonis and Callista had been up to the past few days. He liked Broderick. He didn't want to have to hurt him.

Callista

CALLISTA WRAPPED HERSELF IN BEDSHEETS WHILE ADONIS clothed himself, then left her alone with a promise to swiftly return. Venturing away from the bed, she opened the heavy curtains, letting in more light, by which she was able to locate a basin with a little stale water in it. As she gratefully washed, a knock sounded. Adonis, with a clean smock and woolen kirtle in a pretty shade of blue. He left her alone to dress, which she appreciated, but he stayed right outside the door, and soon she was following him through the castle, her head spinning. The past few days felt like a haze, a dream. Her body still ached from the exertions, but she also felt replete, completely satisfied in a way she never had before. Between her legs, there was a dull ache, but she didn't mind. It was like a pleasant reminder of what she'd done with... well, with a perfect stranger.

A very handsome, very kind, very thoughtful stranger, who had done very filthy things to her that had felt very, very good. She truly wasn't sure what to make of him. Yes, he was dangerous, just as Father Conal had claimed. However, Father Conal was the one who had made him so. Though looking at the way he moved and his powerful muscles, Callista could absolutely believe he didn't need to be a Beast to be dangerous.

In bed, she had felt small beside him and beneath him, but somehow, she felt even smaller walking next to him. He loomed over her, easily the tallest male she'd ever met, and he walked with the grace and power of a predator.

"I live in the south wing, away from the others... for their safety," Adonis explained as he escorted her through the halls.

"I thought you said your Beast doesn't see people as prey once they're here," she said, and was immediately sorry to see his expression cloud.

"I don't, but I never know if that will change." A muscle in his jaw tightened, his amber eyes flashing. "I don't know enough about the curse to be sure of anything. You must understand, everything I do know has only been learned through trial and... and terrible error. I don't want to risk anyone."

He would be a good leader. A far better leader than Father Conal, who often put himself before everyone else. After all, as he so often said himself, what would the village do without him? That was why he ate first and best, why he was clothed in the finest fabrics while children shivered in the cold, and why he took a tithe for nothing more than preaching about how terrible they all were and how the Gods would punish them if they did anything other than what he told them to.

It wasn't enough that he made others suffer for his comforts, Father Conal was also sacrificing young women every three years, knowing the only reason there was a Beast at all was because of the curse he'd laid upon Adonis. Not just him, either. The other village leaders, too, each of them in turn so they didn't have to send a woman from their village *every* year. And if any of their victims should dare to return after judgment, they were killed as if they were criminals, for no reason but to preserve the illusion of infallibility of those in power.

All of them using lies and fear to keep their position, to make the villagers so fearful, they had sacrificed their own to stay safe. Anger bubbled up inside her, but she pushed it back down. She didn't want Adonis to think she was angry at him.

It wasn't his fault. He hadn't asked to be born an Alpha or to be cursed.

Ahead of them, at the end of the hall, were two huge ornate wooden doors. Adonis strode forward, pushing one open, revealing a bustle of activity on the other side. It felt almost odd not to be alone with Adonis as she stepped through.

The ceiling was just as high as the hallway's had been, but the room itself was the biggest yet. Callista's jaw dropped as she looked around, taking in the columns, the stained glass, the stunning decoration. All of this in the middle of the woods, and no one had any idea!

No wonder Father Conal didn't want people roaming too deeply into the woods. She wondered what he would have done if anyone had come back talking about the castle.

She doubted they would have lived long.

Callista's lips firmed. Something had to be done about Father Conal and the other leaders. This wasn't right.

"Adonis!" Several voices called out at once, greeting the Alpha, all of them apparently happy to see him. Callista hovered shyly as he returned their greetings. She saw no fear, no hesitation as he moved among them, only the respect of a vassal for their lord, tempered by genuine friendship and high regard.

"Callie!" Her father's familiar voice made her jerk in surprise, her head whipping around. Relief flooded her as she saw him. His face was bruised and his arm was in a sling, but otherwise, he looked exactly like himself, limping toward her with open joy on his face, his unbound arm open wide.

"Papa!" Running to him, Callista slammed into him as carefully as she could, doing her best not to hit his injured arm but unable to hold back her exuberance completely. She was so relieved to see him alive. Even though Adonis had told her father was there, she hadn't been able to fully relax and believe it until she saw him for herself.

"You're here. I can't believe you're here!" He hugged her as tightly as she hugged him, obviously uncaring of his injury in his relief to see her.

Knowing what she did about the castle now, she couldn't help but wonder if he'd been sure he would never see her again. He couldn't have gone back to the village once he knew the truth. Not without risking his life.

She thought he probably would have eventually made an attempt, knowing her Papa, and she was so glad she'd followed after him instead.

"You're here, and..." His voice trailed off as he inhaled, and she realized what he was doing. A blush heated her cheeks as he pulled away enough to take a good look at her face, his dark eyes narrowing as he studied her expression, then his gaze cut away behind her to where Adonis was standing. *He* knew she would have run out of her heat suppressants.

"Adonis." That was a tone she'd never heard Papa use before. It even had a hint of a growl to it.

She didn't look over her shoulder to see how Adonis took it, just put her hand on her Papa's chest.

"Papa, I am fine. Adonis saved me." He'd done all manner of other things to her as well, but she wasn't going to talk about that.

As things went, she would much rather spend her heat with Adonis than on her own. Or, worse, with Father Conal. Adonis had explained how an Omega's heat actually would have sent the males into a frenzy if they'd scented her, Betas or no. The only reason it didn't bother her father was they were related.

The Beta males didn't have knots, though. They would have worn themselves out trying to relieve her and been unable to. And she would have let them because something was better than nothing. Only an Alpha could give her what she truly needed.

Only him.

Which was why she blushed. She didn't know how much her father knew, but he'd obviously guessed something of what had happened, or he wouldn't have spoken Adonis' name like that.

Papa took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his gaze met hers rather than looking past her.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "You weren't sacrificed?"

"No, she was looking for you," Adonis said, stepping up beside them. Something about the way he stood made her think he wanted to put his hand on her back, but he refrained. "Come, we need to get some food and water. We can talk as we break our fast."

For a moment, she thought her father would refuse or perhaps insist on talking to her alone, but after another deep breath, he nodded stiffly. Callista was relieved. She didn't want the two males fighting. Besides, she truly was hungry. She'd been too busy to eat for the past few days.

Thinking about that made her blush again. The things she'd done with Adonis...

She looked up at him as he flanked her, setting her between himself and her father as they moved to the front of the room, where long tables were set with food. He looked back down at her and smiled before she hastily glanced away.

Despite everything they'd done together — or maybe because of everything they'd done together — she didn't really know how to act around him. What to say. She was the only Omega there, but that didn't mean he would *like* her.

She *wanted* him to like her, she realized. Because she liked him. Even though she knew so very little about him, what she did know, she admired. She *wanted* him to like her.

CHAPT

Adonis

INTRODUCING CALLISTA TO HIS BETAS — BECAUSE THAT WAS how he thought of the Betas who lived at the castle — was an exercise in patience. The possessiveness he felt over her was unwarranted, yet he couldn't get rid of it. When Westian held her hand for too long, Adonis growled at him.

Westian immediately released her, his eyes dancing with amusement.

Adonis worried it was the Beast rising up inside him because he hadn't been growling in play — he had been ready to rip Westian's hand off if he didn't back away. Fortunately, they didn't need to test his self-control in that manner since Westian had gotten the message.

He was glad the male wasn't afraid of him.

Mostly.

He didn't want his Betas to be afraid of him.

Mostly.

Except that little part of him that did when it came to Callista.

Even though her heat was over, her scent was divine. Tantalizing. The unmated Beta males were entranced — and Adonis couldn't blame them — but his instincts were to keep them far away from Callista.

Mine, mine, mine.

The word pounded in his head in time with his heartbeat. But she wasn't his. Not truly.

Not yet.

There were many things they would need to talk about. He also wasn't sure Broderick approved. Not that he would let her father keep them apart, but he was beginning to see how close Callista and her father were, and he did not want to be the wedge between them.

He was also very aware of the sun getting lower in the sky. Soon he would need to go to the forest and run. The urge had hit him every evening, but he hadn't been able to leave Callista while she was in her heat. Now that the heat was over, he didn't think he'd be able to resist, no matter how much he wanted to remain by her side.

"And *then*, Adonis said that he could harvest the most apples," Deirdre said, yanking his attention back to the conversation at hand.

"Must you tell this story?" Adonis groaned. He hated the apple story. Deirdre said it made him seem less intimidating to newcomers, but Callista already wasn't intimidated. She didn't need to hear a story that made him look stupid in order to feel less threatened.

"Did he?" Callista asked as if he hadn't spoken, ignoring him as thoroughly as Deirdre did. He glowered at Deirdre, but it was like glaring at the sun. There was absolutely no discernible effect.

"Oh, he did. He shook the tree harder than anyone else could, and the apples dropped down hard and fast... and so did he after five of them landed on his head, one after the other!"

Laughter rang out. Deirdre never ceased to be entertained by the story, and everyone else joined in, including Callista.

Adonis gave in with a chuckle, the others' mirth infecting him, despite the fact he was the butt of the joke. Shaking his head, he sighed deeply, glancing at the window where the glow was becoming noticeably less bright.

"I have to go. No more embarrassing stories while I'm gone," he warned, pointing to Deirdre as he got to his feet. To his surprise, Callista stood as well, concern on her face. Beside her, her father caught her hand.

"Where are you going?" Callista asked.

From the tone of her voice, she didn't like the idea of him leaving her, which made doing so both easier and harder. Easier because he knew she didn't *want* him to go, which perhaps indicated she reciprocated some of his feelings. Harder because he wanted to remain by her side even more.

Impossible. Once he turned into a Beast, the urge to run would hit him, and he'd abandon her either way.

Besides, if she was close, he wasn't sure how the Beast would handle the presence of other males around, and he didn't want to hurt anyone if the Beast became possessive or protective.

"The sun is going down," he said gently. "I'll be out in the woods. I'll return not long before dawn."

"Don't worry about him. He does this every night," Deirdre quipped, though her smile was tighter than it had been. They all worried that one night he might go out and not come back, but they couldn't protect him, because the moment they left the castle, he saw them as a threat.

Adonis didn't think Father Conal or the others would ever put together a concerted effort to get rid of him. If they did, how would they keep their villages afraid and under their tight control?

"I'll be back," he repeated. Deciding he didn't care what anyone else thought, including Callista's father, he bent down to press a kiss on the top of her head. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see everyone exchanging knowing glances or openly smiling in approval. Well, everyone except Broderick.

The male's jaw tightened, although he didn't seem to be directing his glare at Adonis. Rather, he appeared unhappy with the situation at large. Adonis agreed it wasn't ideal, but surely, Broderick had to know that, as an Omega, his daughter would need an Alpha mate. For the foreseeable future, Adonis was the only option.

Broderick would just have to learn to live with Adonis.

But Adonis didn't have to make that harder.

He gave the other male a nod, acknowledging not only his watchful presence, but his importance in Callista's life, and collected a nod of resignation in return. It was a start.

As the Alpha child of Alpha and Omega mates, deeply rooted in purely Alpha and Omega bloodlines, it was difficult for Adonis to fully understand Broderick's resistance, but he was not without sympathy. It had been the two of them for so long, and now, Broderick not only had to give up his place as his daughter's only protector, he had to give it up to an Alpha who was going to become his daughter's mate. Between Betas, a father would expect to have suitors present themselves, to have the final (and often only) vote of approval. Perhaps he was having trouble accepting the fact that he had no control over this part of his daughter's life.

And he didn't. Beast or no Beast, Adonis wasn't going to let Callista go.

It was too late to entertain these thoughts. The sun would not wait. The urge to remain with Callista was strong, but he forced himself to keep moving, to head to the doors leading to the courtyard.

One of the guards at the gate shouted when he saw Adonis, and the huge doors opened as he approached. He had almost left it too late. He could already feel his instincts rising, the urge to run and to hunt pushing through his rational thought as easily as he pushed through the doors.

There was a new urge tonight, brought on by Callista's presence.

Protect.

As he'd feared, the Beast wanted her as much as he did.

Adonis ran into the forest as the castle doors shut and locked behind him, aware of the setting sun disappearing beyond the horizon as his vision changed. It didn't matter that the forest hid the view, he knew the moment it crossed the horizon.

Bone crunching, muscles sliding, fur growing, he howled at the night sky.

Ran back the way he'd came.

Ran around the stone walls, scrabbling at them, looking for any weakness.

Mate.

Protect.

Mine.

Deep within, he was relieved to be locked out.

The danger to the others within the walls was greater than ever. The Beast within wanted Callista, and he didn't know if he'd be able to control his impulses when it came to her... especially with other males around her.

Finally, the urge to run through the forest outweighed the desire to find a way into the walls, and he gave up.

Being denied his mate added to his frenzy, and he howled as he tore through the woods, letting loose his frustration.

There.

Panicked, fluttering heartbeat. The smell of fear on the wind.

He changed directions, running for his prey.

It bolted, fleeing before him, but its speed was no match for his.

He pounced, claws tearing out its throat. Hot blood gushed over his claws, the scent of fresh meat filling his nose, and he crouched over the fallen deer, gorging himself as he traded one hunger for another.



Callista

SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE, MANY OF THEM FRIENDS AND neighbors she'd thought lost, Callista couldn't understand why she suddenly felt so bereft. She was reunited with her father, which was all she'd wanted when she entered the forest the other day. Now, watching Adonis leave, she knew that wasn't true anymore.

Slowly she sat down.

"So, you and Adonis?" Deirdre asked, tilting her head and sweeping her long braids over one shoulder. They were decorated with little beads at the end that clicked together as she moved. "Does that mean you're an Omega?"

There was no point hiding it, despite her father's sudden intake of breath. They would all figure it out if she was here for any duration of time, especially since there would be no way to acquire suppressants now.

"Yes," she admitted, aware of her father sitting stiffly beside her. Certainly not how she'd pictured their reunion. The joy at seeing him alive and well was beginning to crumble under his disapproval at... well, everything as far as she could tell. He had to know that Adonis knew, and if everyone here knew Adonis was an Alpha and how Alphas and Omegas actually were, it was already fairly obvious.

"Good," Deirdre said, smiling widely. "He's been alone for far too long."

She might have taken umbrage at Deirdre's assumption that the two of them would automatically be a couple if she hadn't liked Adonis so much. And, well, Deirdre had a point. From what Adonis had explained, an Alpha was really her only choice. A Beta male wouldn't be able to give her what she needed during her heat.

Beside her, her father made an unhappy noise.

"He's a good male," Deirdre continued, ignoring her father to focus her gentle smile on Callista. "He saved my life, you know. All of our lives."

"From the Beast?" her father asked pointedly.

Behind Deirdre, Mirkon, the male who had been introduced as her mate, put his hand on her shoulder. His skin was even darker than Deirdre's, and they had the same long braids, but where she was talkative and friendly, he was much quieter and more reserved. He did not speak now either, but his thunderous expression made his feelings clear.

"Forgive me," Broderick said, raising an open hand in a show of peace. "I'm grateful to him, as much as anyone. He's given me shelter and hospitality, but saved my life? You could as easily say *I* saved your life, simply because – I say this only as an example," he added to Mikron, before concluding, "because I haven't stabbed you yet."

Mirkon did not appear pleased by that comparison, but Deirdre put her hand atop her mate's, smiling as if they were merely exchanging pleasantries over tea. "I might, if you were cursed to go about stabbing people. Adonis fights the curse every day. I've seen the toll it takes on him. I was the first sacrifice. I saw the Beast, felt his breath on my skin. I felt his claws tearing at the ropes that bound me to the Blood Tree. He could have killed me at any moment," Deirdre said, almost fondly. "Instead, he herded me here to keep me safe, the way he does with everyone, fighting against the violence the curse instills in him."

"And once you're in the castle, you're safe?" Papa asked, badly disguising his skepticism.

"So it would seem, but it isn't as if we were given a book of rules for the curse," Deirdre answered, confirming what Adonis had told her. "His greatest fear is that the curse may grow and change as time passes, that one day his will won't be enough and he might turn on all of us, unable to help himself."

Remembering the Beast's form, his strength and swiftness, Callista could well understand that. Never mind he'd be outnumbered twenty to one, he would still likely kill most if not all of them. One blow from those clawed hands, one snap of those powerful jaws, was all it would take to end a life, and there was no knowing how magic might play into any battle.

"He said some of you have tried to return to your villages?"

Deirdre sighed and nodded "I'm sure you must think poorly of us. We've considered going to a single village, all of us, but we're... we're not sure what happened to those who tried to return. I watched from a distance when Vance tried to return to my village. Mirkon and I both did." Her expression solemn, she met Callista's gaze squarely. "He disappeared before our eyes before he could reach the walls of the village. The next morning, they found him hung from the trees."

More magic at play.

It was almost too fantastical to believe, except she'd seen it at work with her own eyes. Magic wasn't real, except it was. She couldn't help but wonder if the same curse that had made everyone forget the truth about Alphas and Omegas had also made them forget about the existence of magic. The curse was diabolically ingenious.

Talking with Deirdre and the others, Callista learned as much as she could about the community that had grown here under Adonis' care. Her father remained by her side the whole time as the night grew later, and her eyelids became heavier.

Eventually, the others left them alone, understanding they might need some time to themselves. Her father told her of his travels, how he'd delayed his return waiting on Lachlan's suppressants, then tried to make up the lost time by driving the carriage too fast over the rough road, only to end up staggering through the woods at night, fleeing in a daze from the sounds of the Beast all around him until he'd arrived at the castle. She told him about Father Conal's last visit and his offer – his threat – of marriage. Her father's face darkened with quiet rage, as expected, but he said little, apart from, "No doubt he seized our home before the hearth had cooled, but at least you are well away from him." She hadn't thought of that, but supposed it didn't matter what happened to their few possessions and a scratch of land.

Now more than ever, she was glad to have escaped Father Conal's clutches.

"We should get to bed," Papa said, yawning and glancing around. The great hall had mostly cleared out except a young male who was tending the fire. "Tomorrow, we will find something for you to do. I've been helping in the gardens as much as I can with my arm like this."

Nodding, Callista got to her feet, happy to walk beside him until he tried to turn to the North Wing and take her with him.

"I... My room is that way," she said, pointing to the doors she and Adonis had walked through together so many hours ago.

Papa scowled and gruffly said,

"No, I've been told we're not to go there. That's his wing."

"And mine," Callista said firmly. Although Adonis hadn't expressly invited her to share his bedchamber, it was where he'd brought her and considering the way he'd looked at her, the way he'd kissed the top of her head when he'd left... Unless he came back and told her he didn't want her there, that was where she was going to be.

"Callie—"

"Papa." She held up her hand, stopping him from whatever he was going to say. Then letting her hand drop, she reached for his. He took it reluctantly, clearly realizing he wasn't going to like her decision. "I want to be there, and it is my decision. I like Adonis. I want to know if there can be more between us than just the instincts of an Alpha and Omega. I cannot discover that if I am sequestered in my father's room."

Sighing, Papa raised his eyes to the ceiling, a familiar gesture that meant he was asking for patience. It also meant she had won. Callista hid her smile before he dropped his gaze again so he didn't see it and have a reason to dig in heels longer.

"Very well." He smiled at her, though it was only halfhearted and held more resignation than happiness. "I suppose I will have to accept that you are all grown up now and don't need me."

"I will *always* need you," she replied immediately, stepping in to give him a giant hug. "That's how I ended up here in the first place."

Her father sighed as he hugged her back just as tightly. "I want to scold you for making such a dangerous choice, but considering Father Conal's interest in you and the way everything worked out, I am hard-pressed to do so."

"Good, because I couldn't have stayed there," she replied, shuddering as she remembered the expression on Father Conal's face when he'd spoken with her. Even if he had been an Alpha or she a Beta, she wouldn't have wanted anything to do with him. She couldn't imagine being with him the way she had been with Adonis — and didn't want to try. The very thought made her feel ill. "I never want to go back."

Well, that wasn't entirely true. She didn't want to go back until they had some means of bringing Father Conal to justice. What good would approaching the villages do if magic was protecting them? It was something she would have to think about... and talk to the others about. She doubted she was the only one to have ever entertained thoughts of retribution.

But that was for tomorrow when Adonis returned.

"We never have to go back," her father reassured her, smoothing her hair down with his hand. The fact was they couldn't go back, but it felt better knowing they wouldn't choose to, even if they could. The only thing Callista regretted was not having Beauty with her, but someone would look after the horse. She was too good of a steed to waste. They hugged for another long moment, then Callista pulled away.

"Good night," she said with a wan smile.

"Good night." Her father's worry was written all over his face, which was what gave her the bravery to turn and walk through the doors to Adonis' wing on her own. She didn't want him to see her second-guessing herself now that he'd accepted her decision.

Walking away from everyone else felt a little scary, but she knew Adonis wouldn't hurt her. She believed that — from the very bottom of her heart.

Making her way back to his room, she was surprised and a little embarrassed to see someone had been by to change out the sheets while they were gone. Whoever it was would know *exactly* what had happened. It also made her a little agitated because, stiff and sullied as they'd been, those sheets had also been her nest.

The urge to make the bed into her own rose up inside her, and Callista found herself arranging pillows and bedding to make a cozy little place where she could curl up and wait for Adonis. By the time she was done, she was exhausted. Nestling down into the center, she fell asleep long before the Beast returned.

CHAP

Adonis

THE CASTLE WAS QUIET AS THE DARK SKY BEGAN TO LIGHTEN. Adonis paced outside the walls far earlier than usual, long before the sun rose. The urge to be inside, to be near his Omega, rode the Beast hard once its hunger was sated, and once again, Adonis was in complete agreement with the instincts he so often had to fight against.

He wanted to be as close to her as he could, though he didn't expect to see her again until later in the day. When he returned to his room, weary from the long night of running as well as the frenzy the Beast had been in after not being able to reach his Omega, he was astonished to find said Omega asleep in his bed. He hadn't expected her to be there. Hadn't even dared to hope she might be. At best, he'd thought she'd be in her father's rooms, close but not within touching distance.

Yet there she was as the dawn lit the sky, comfortably curled up in a little nest she'd made for herself.

Naked.

Adonis stared for a long moment, drinking in the sight of her. He couldn't remember ever being greeted by anyone but the guards upon his return, and they stayed up on the wall, carefully keeping back in case he wasn't fully himself yet. But his Omega had no such fear. She had come to his bed, not only waiting for him but asleep and trusting he wouldn't harm her.

The emotion that welled up inside him was nameless and overwhelming. He didn't know how to categorize it. So, he didn't.

Instead, he followed the impulse to be beside her.

Carefully adjusting the bedding, Adonis slid in next to her, doing his best not to disturb her as he moved. Despite his best efforts, she roused, mumbling in her sleep as she rolled over, giving him space beside her. The brush of her silky skin against his made his cock stand at attention, and he bit his lip against a groan as his arousal flared.

He wanted to say he hadn't meant to wake her, but he knew that wasn't true. The moment he'd walked in and realized she was there, that she was in his bed, this had been inevitable.

It didn't matter that her heat was over or how many times he'd climaxed in the past few days, a few hours away from her, and his body was ready to go again. The curve of her buttocks against his groin, rubbing against his erection, pulled a sound from him that was half-groan, half-growl. She was irresistible.

Pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck, he slid his hand up her side to her breast and felt her little gasp as he closed his fingers around the soft flesh. Her nipple perked between his fingers, the tiny bud hardening at his touch. Rocking his hips forward, he slid his cock between her cheeks while he toyed with it. He could feel the smooth skin of her bottom rubbing against his cock, stimulating him without giving him any real relief, but the tease was almost as enjoyable as actually sliding inside her.

He could scent her arousal filling the air as he touched her, growing stronger with every caress. Sliding his other hand beneath her, he toyed with her other breast as he moved to lift her leg, giving him space to adjust his cock and rub the tip along her wet slit. She moaned as he rubbed the thick head over her clit. He pinched her nipple at the same time, teasing and toying with her body. He wanted her to desire him as much as he did her.

Hot slick gushed over his cock as he rocked his hips forward, pushing his cock inside her. The silken heat enveloped him – hot, wet, and heavenly.

"Adonis!"

Her body clenched around him as he filled her, shuddering from the pleasure. A purring growl rumbled through his chest as he thrust again, going deeper, feeling the stretch as more hot liquid coated his cock. They were probably going to need new sheets again soon.

His teeth ached to bite down on the tender flesh of her neck. As she writhed, he couldn't stop himself from doing so, though he didn't break the skin. He just held her in place that way, enjoying her helpless whimpers as he slowly fucked her from behind, gripping her with hands and teeth while his cock moved in and out of her hot pussy.

Part of him wondered if the instincts of the Beast were still driving him. He'd never thought of biting another woman this way, but it didn't matter. He pinched her nipples with his hand, moving back and forth between them while he fucked her, his urge to pin her down and do what he wanted with her growing harder to ignore. Her hands clutched his arms, trying to hold on as her pleasure grew. Adonis shifted, turning her more onto her stomach than her side, giving him greater access to her body. Braced on her forearms and knees, her bottom high in the air, she dropped her head, moaning as he kept moving, riding her from behind.

Looking down, he could see the thick stalk of his cock glistening from her slick, splitting open her swollen pussy lips. He watched it move within her, sliding in over and over again, the crinkled rose of her anus right above. The urge to fill that tight hole rose, as it had several times over the past few days.

Releasing one hip, he dipped his fingers along her slick, lubricating them before pushing them into the little hole. It gripped him tightly as she moaned, both holes clenching down around him. He could imagine how it would feel around his cock. The very perversity of the act only made the idea more appealing.

"Adonis..." She moaned his name again, thrusting her hips back at him as if trying to impale herself farther. He felt his knot beginning to bulge.

"I want to fuck this pretty little ass," he growled, adding a third finger, stretching her further. She cried out, her back arching at the sensations. "I want to claim every part of you."

He meant someday. In the future. The way he'd spoken of taking her there before.

Callista had other ideas.

"Do it," she whimpered, shuddering. "Do it now."

Slowing his stroke, Adonis' hand flexed on her hip as disbelief and shock rolled through him.

Callista looked over her shoulder, tossing her dark brown curls out of her face. Her eyes were wide open, and she was fully awake, fully aware of what she was saying. What she was asking him for.

"It will hurt," he warned her.

Her little pink tongue darted out and licked her lips, her eyes shining with nervous anticipation, but no fear.

"I don't care," she whispered, her eyes half-closing as she clenched her muscles around him, squeezing his cock and fingers. "I want it. I want you."

Fuck.

Unable to resist, he pulled his cock free from her pussy and placed it at the smaller entrance. His fingers had loosened her while she was in heat, but he didn't fool himself into thinking this would be easy for her. He would need to go slow, especially since his knot had already started to fill.

Gritting his teeth, he began to push in, slowly and steadily, groaning as he felt the tight, hot grip of her ass. She cried out, panting for breath as the head of his cock moved beyond the ring guarding her entrance with a small popping sensation. Adonis shuddered, holding himself in place as the pleasure washed over him, enjoying the sensation while also giving her time to adjust — or to change her mind.

She didn't.

Her head dropped even lower, her upper body pressed against the bedding, offering her bottom to him to do with as he pleased.

Adonis groaned. Tightened his grip. Thrust forward a little, pushing a few more inches inside her stretched orifice.

It was her trust more than anything that shredded his selfcontrol. Her trust and her desire to please him, to take the discomfort and the pain of having her bottom stretched open for his cock because it was what he wanted.

Moving as slowly as he could, Adonis began to work the rest of his dick into her willing, straining channel, watching as her tiny hole swallowed inch after inch of his thick cock.



Callista

WAKING UP TO ADONIS TOUCHING HER FELT LIKE A DREAM AT first, a very good one. Then it got even better when he started touching her *that* way. Part of her wondered if the previous morning had been spurred by some kind of aftereffect of her heat, but surely that would have worn off by now.

She might be sore, but her body still yearned for him.

When he pinned her in place, holding her where he wanted her with not only his hands but also his teeth on her neck, she couldn't stop whimpering as pleasure flooded her body. She felt helpless and tiny against his strength, his body around hers, invading hers, which aroused her further.

Then when he'd turned her onto her knees, his cock still embedded inside her, and slid his fingers into her bottom, it was like a fire ignited inside her when he said he wanted to fuck her there.

No longer in heat, she was in her right mind, and she wanted him to. She didn't want to wait until she was out of control, thanks to her body. She wanted to make the choice.

Right here.

Right now.

When he pressed his cock against her bottom, fear trickled through her. It was going to hurt. Part of her wanted it to. She liked it when he made her feel helpless, when his fingers pinched her nipples hard, when his teeth bit down on her flesh... but this was different.

It stung as she opened for him, the same way it had when he'd first put his fingers in there, but even more so. His cock was thicker and longer than his fingers, stretching her wider and going deeper. Whimpering, she dropped her head, panting to deal with the throbbing ache as he slid inside her. There was a bump where his knot was, making her moan as it pushed past the tight, clenching ring of her opening and slid inside her.

The sensation was intense, more than she'd anticipated. She shuddered as he retreated and then thrust back in. There was very little friction, thanks to the lubrication of her slick, but the raw sensation was enough to make her fingers and toes curl.

Despite everything else they'd done, the feeling of having him inside her bottom was exquisitely, almost painfully, intimate. There was no reason for it other than pleasure. No purpose beyond giving him something he wanted. And she did want to give that to him.

She moaned as he pushed all the way in, his fingers flexing on her hips, his growling pure easing some of the stinging ache that his movements were causing inside her. When his groin finally pressed against the rounded cheeks of her bottom, it felt as though he was so deep inside her, she could feel him in her throat, as if she couldn't get enough air in her lungs because there wasn't room for it. "Oh Gods... Adonis..." She squirmed against him, her muscles clenching and unclenching, massaging the length of his cock. Beneath her overly full bottom, her pussy ached with emptiness.

"Good girl. Don't worry, you're my Omega. You were meant to take this."

He'd called her *my* Omega — not just that she was *an* Omega.

But she didn't have time to think about it, much less question it, as he dragged his cock out, then shoved back in. The thrust was slow but firm, wrecking her senses with the combined pain and pleasure as he moved.

And she took it for him.

Took the pain. The discomfort. The deep ache in her bowels. Took him deep within her over and over again as his pleasure grew.

She could feel his knot thickening inside her, pressing against the walls of her channel. She cried out as he moved the growing bulge in and out of her body, forcing it through the tight ring of her entrance until it was too big. It hurt so good, she could barely hold herself up, but it didn't matter when her muscles went weak. He was holding her, keeping her hips up and in place so he could fuck her as hard as he wanted, using her bottom as roughly as he had her pussy.

"Adonis!" Sobbing his name, she scrabbled at the bedsheets as ecstasy billowed within her and exploded outward, just as he shoved in deep, burying himself inside her.

The thick knot pulsed, sending a stream of hot fluid into her bowels as her body cramped and spasmed around him. His fingers slid down her hip between her legs to stroke her clit, and she screamed as the shock of erotic rapture unraveled her.

His growling roar reverberated through her as he spurted, filling her, throbbing within her. The sensation was similar to when he came in her pussy, but it wasn't quite the same, and her deprived pussy cramped with need, despite his fingers circling her clit over and over again.

Bending over her so his front was completely pressed to her back, he moved his free arm around to cradle her, holding her as he rolled them onto their sides. His cock still embedded within her, he kissed the back of her neck as he rocked slightly, rubbing her clit with his fingers.

With slow strokes on the swollen nub, he kept her shuddering and clenching as he filled her with slow spurts of cum, his knot shrinking inside her as it drained. Panting, limp in his arms, Callista closed her eyes, resting her head on his bicep.

She felt stretched but satisfied, full and empty at the same time. Her body ached pleasantly.

"Good girl," he murmured, purring as he rubbed his nose against the back of her neck. The arm she was resting on moved so he could caress her breast. Callista whimpered, her bottom clenching around him again, milking him of the last of his hot fluid.

"Oh Gods..." She shuddered again. "This wasn't what I was expecting to do this morning."

"Me, either." He chuckled, and she could feel the rumble of his purr through her back. "I have no complaints about the change to my plans. This was much better than falling asleep alone in my bed." Yawning, Callista moaned again as his fingers stroked her clit. Despite the sunlight trickling in through the window and the thick cock still impaling her, she felt lethargy stealing through her.

"I wanted to be here when you got back," she admitted, too tired to try to hide the truth.

"I'm glad you were." He nuzzled the back of her neck. "I didn't realize how lonely it was to come back to a home where everyone was on the other side of the building. If I'd known you were thinking of being here, I would have told you to go there as well, with your father. It would be safer."

If she could have turned around to hug him, she would have. While she understood why he felt the need, she didn't believe he would hurt her. Well, unless it was in a way that felt good. His cock in her bottom was already shrinking, leaving her sore and aching in the best way.

"I've already faced your Beast," she reminded him, stroking her fingers over his hands and forearms. He wasn't nearly as hairy in this form. "I know I'm safe."

He chuckled, the sensation vibrating against her back. "I suppose that's true."

He fell silent then, but she heard the unspoken words — he still worried. Well, Callista would have to prove it to him. Yes, she'd been in heat in the woods when he'd first come upon her, but she wanted to see if he would still recognize her outside the castle even when she wasn't.

Of course, she didn't want to put herself in danger, but anything they could do to fight against the curse was information they could use to break it. She didn't want to live the rest of her life in this castle, knowing Father Conal had condemned all of them while going unpunished for his lies and crimes. She didn't know the other leaders who had conspired with him, but they shouldn't get away with it, either.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became until she let out a little growl without realizing it.

"What's wrong?" Adonis asked, tensing.

She could feel his cock finally returning to its normal size, slipping from her body, as he went from aroused to alert.

"Nothing... I mean, everything, but nothing right now." Callista huffed out a breath. "I was just thinking about the curse, Father Conal, and what we can do."

She felt him relax behind her.

"Ah. Yes." He sighed. "That's always on all of our minds. So far, we haven't come up with anything, but I live in hope." He didn't sound hopeful, though. He sounded resigned.

Callista wasn't sure what she could offer that was new, but she was an Omega, the first to arrive at the castle since the curse began. Maybe being in heat had been the deciding factor that allowed the Beast to keep from wanting to hunt and kill her... or maybe it was just her different nature.

One way or another, she was determined to find out.

Perhaps an Omega was the missing piece of the puzzle.

CHAPFER 13

Adonis

ANOTHER DAY AT THE CASTLE. ADONIS SLEPT DEEPER THAN usual through the morning, waking around noon. He was dimly aware of Callista waking up mid-morning and slipping from the bed, pressing a kiss against his forehead before she left. He grumbled, but let her go. She would want to see her father again, not lay in bed with him all morning.

It wasn't her fault he ran as a Beast all night.

When he truly awakened later, the first thing he wanted to do was hunt her down. Not in a violent way, exactly, but he didn't like her not being by his side. Didn't like not knowing where she was.

Thankfully, Mirkon was in the great hall and knew where she was. After catching the deer last night, Adonis wasn't hungry yet, ignoring the tables of food in favor of finding his mate.

Callista.

Not his mate.

He needed to stop thinking of her like that.

Just because he wanted her didn't mean she was his mate. He would not bite her without her agreement — no matter what his instincts told him to do. He would not trap her here the way he was trapped.

Heading out to the orchards, Adonis waved at those he passed without stopping to talk. Deirdre smirked at him when she saw how quickly he was moving, but she didn't get in his way. He mock-scowled back at her, but didn't slow. He knew his infatuation with Callista was a source of amusement to the others here, but he didn't care.

The bright sunshine shone down on the castle, illuminating the blossoming orchard. With Betas moving around in and out of the shade, putting down fertilizer and pulling weeds, he could almost pretend everything was normal. That everyone had chosen to be there and was happily at work.

Picking up a bag of fertilizer by the entrance, Adonis hefted it over his shoulder, wrinkling his nose at the smell. It wasn't terrible, but it was strong when he was carrying it right next to his head. Striding into the orchard, it didn't take him long to find Callista. Everyone who saw him pointed him in her direction.

There she was, standing under the apple trees with her father. Those trees wouldn't bloom for another month or so. As he approached, her father said something to her, and she turned around, her expression brightening as soon as she saw him.

"You're up!" Unlike the Betas, she came hurrying up to greet him, and Adonis dropped the bag of fertilizer to the ground. He wasn't sure what her intention had been, but his would not be denied. Catching her by the waist, he pulled her in for a thorough kiss. When he let her go, she was blushing hotly.

"I'm up. How are you?" The question was loaded with extra meaning, considering their activities that morning.

Her blush deepened, but she tilted her chin up, as if physically rising above the embarrassment the question had obviously caused.

"I'm fine, of course."

Her tone was a little challenging, tempting him to draw her back into his arms and see if he could kiss her into submission, but not with her father hovering just a few feet back, listening.

"Morning, Broderick," he said easily.

Broderick tilted his head back, squinting slightly at the sun coming through the trees. "More like afternoon, I think."

"Just about," Adonis admitted.

"They told me you were an early riser," Broderick remarked, his lips twitching.

"I am, usually." He'd awakened later today because he hadn't gone to sleep the moment he'd returned last night, and he had a feeling Broderick knew the reason, but it wasn't something any of them wanted to talk about.

They got to work, Adonis helping them in the orchard. Other Betas came and went to say hello and introduce themselves to Callista throughout the day, and it pleased him that she already knew several by name. Deirdre made her rounds, offering cool water to those sweating with labor, and herbed bread stuffed with scraps of meat and vegetables from last night's dinner to quiet their empty bellies until dinner. It was like a moment out of time, a waking dream of the life he might have had without the curse.

If not for Father Conal, none of the others would have been trapped there, but it was not impossible that some would have come to work at the castle by their own choice. Even those who lived happily in their own villages would have come to the castle on festival days, and during times of poor harvest. He might not have the same close feeling for all of them that these cruel circumstances had forced upon them, but he would still have met them, and all their friends and neighbors. He would have met Callista long before now.

He tried not to think about the reality too much and just enjoy this moment for what it was: today, he was a normal Alpha, spending an afternoon with his Omega, surrounded by Betas who were laughing, flirting, talking... living, and living happily, regardless of the circumstances.

At last, sweaty but satisfied with a good day's work, feeling better than he could ever remember, Adonis slung his arm around Callista's shoulders as they made their way back into the castle. They would wash and come back to eat dinner... then the sun would fall, and the dream of an ordinary life would be over, but he was determined to pretend otherwise for as long as he could.

"So? What do you think?" he asked her as they walked inside side by side, just behind her father. It was no idle question. He awaited her answer eagerly, wanting to hear that she felt she could be happy here.

"It's beautiful," she answered immediately, assuaging some of his worries. "Everyone has been so welcoming, and it's clear they've all worked together to turn this into a real community." Broderick fell back into step beside them once they were through the door, shooting his daughter a fond look, which only crimped a little at the sight of Adonis' arm around her.

"Now that you're here, I think I could be happy here," Broderick said. He reached out to take her hand and give it a squeeze before dropping it again. Adonis couldn't help wondering if the male would be even happier if Adonis wasn't there, but he didn't say anything. It was always going to be a difficult situation for Broderick because of Callista's nature.

"I wish we could reunite the other families," Callista murmured, softly enough that Adonis wasn't sure she realized she'd spoken aloud the wish that was practically engraved on his heart. Though everyone made the best of the situation, they all had someone they missed.

"One day," he promised her, as he had promised himself every day since the curse befell him, ignoring that leaden weight in his heart that reminded him he had no idea how to keep his word.

They set such matters aside as they joined the others inside the castle walls. He was sure everyone had such thoughts, but voicing them made it too easy to wallow in them. Instead, they went to clean up and returned to the great hall to eat with everyone else.

As much as Adonis wished the evening would never end, he could feel the sun sinking in the sky, and the urges he kept pushed down during the day beginning to rise. Clearing his throat, he got to his feet. Sympathy showed in every expression, but he didn't get the chance to take his leave.

"Adonis! Alpha!" The doors to the great hall burst open, a young Beta guard named Lionel running through them, his face pale. "A large group is coming through the woods toward the palace! We can see the torches through the trees! We think Father Conal is leading them here!"

Father Conal?

Leading them *here*?

Why would he...

As if everyone in the room had the same thought at once, they all turned to look at Callista.

"Me?" Her eyes widened with horror. "Why would he come here for me?" Even as she said the words, something flickered in her expression, as if a thought had just occurred to her.

Adonis didn't have time to ask.

"I'm going to kill him," he growled, turning to storm out the door. "I'm ending this once and for all."

This was his chance. Father Conal had never come into the woods before. Adonis didn't care how many Betas he'd gathered to bring with him, Adonis was going to take him down if it was the last thing he did.

"Adonis!" Callista rushed after him, her hand seizing his. "You can't go out there. You're going to change soon."

"Which will make it easier to kill him."

"Or to get killed!"

Coming to a halt, Adonis turned to face her. Behind her, everyone else was spilling out of the doors as well, their expressions hard.

"Why is he coming after you? Did he know you're an Omega?"

"No. At least I don't think so." She took a deep breath. "He came to me before I left, saying he would take me as his mate if my father didn't return, but —"

"I'm *definitely* killing him." Adonis didn't wait for the rest of her sentence as white-hot rage consumed him, fueling the aggression of his rising Beast. Father Conal wanted his mate?

Adonis would die before he let that filth touch one hair on her head.



Callista

NO, NO, NO, WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

Panic ripped through Callista. As much as she wanted to confront Father Conal, now was not the time. The sun had nearly set, and it sounded like the entire village was outside. They would not have come in peace.

"Open the gates!" Adonis roared at the guards. Callista yelled at them not to, but her voice was lost, drowned out by the roaring cheer that came from behind her, the creaking of wood and metal as the gates were opened, and the shouts coming from beyond the wall.

As the gates opened, she could hear Father Conal, his voice louder than ever, shouting something. She couldn't quite make out his words at first, so she turned to hush the Betas behind her, swinging her arm to indicate they should quiet. They fell silent immediately, some of them frowning, but their expressions cleared when they realized what she was trying to hear — the voice of Father Conal ringing out as though he was at the pulpit.

The opening doors revealed a large crowd armed with torches and pitchforks. Despite the anger and fear twisting their faces, she recognized many people from the village — the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, the bookseller, the blacksmith – and their eyes all widened with fear as they stared through the open gates.

Father Conal had planned his moment perfectly.

While she'd been looking behind her, then at the doors and the crowd, the sun had set completely, and Adonis had shifted form. He no longer stood before her as himself — he faced the villagers as the Beast.

And he was angry.

Without giving them a moment to collect their nerve, the Beast reared, seeming to double in size as he spread his clawed arms, making even the hulking blacksmith seem childsmall. His mane bristled; his horns raked the darkening sky. Massive jaws stretched, ropes of drool shaking from his teeth like banners from spears, caught in the wind of his roars. As the Betas without the castle drew back in fear, Callista threw herself forward against the Beast's side, doing what little she could to shield him with her small body. He stilled, snarling and panting, but didn't try to dislodge her.

She might be the only thing holding him in place, but she wasn't afraid. All she knew was she couldn't let him go out there. The villagers would scatter, and he would chase them down — or worse, they wouldn't, and he could be killed. Neither option was one she could stomach.

"Hold your ground!" Father Conal ordered, spreading his own arms, sleeves flapping like the wings of a bone-white carrion bird. "There he stands! The most foul beast! Evil! Savage! We must kill him and take our vengeance on... take our vengeance on..."

The male's voice trailed off once he'd turned his head and met her gaze.

She bared her teeth at him.

"You're alive! Good! You..." His voice trailed off again as he blinked. Realized. His face twisted. "No, you're supposed to be mine! You weren't supposed to —"

The Beast snarled at him, cutting off his words, and Callista tightened her arms around him.

"I was *never* going to be yours!" she shouted, her voice almost as harsh as the Beast's. Something about the way Father Conal said it, the way he looked at her, made her skin crawl as suspicion wormed into her head. "You knew, didn't you? You knew I was an Omega. You thought once my father was gone, you could claim me! You didn't expect me to run, and you came here to kill Adonis and 'rescue' me, didn't you?"

Her words caused a ripple of reaction in the cowering villagers, even more than the priest's orders had. Their fear visibly receded, eclipsed by confusion as they listened and saw the Beast was being held by her rather than attacking them, even though she was clearly no match for it. Some of those she faced were beginning to look beyond her, their confusion growing as they realized she and the Beast weren't alone. That others stood behind them. Their friends, their neighbors... their children.

Father Conal paled before rage flushed his face. He straightened, pointing at her. "She's as foul as he is! A monster

and a sinful slut Omega! She's seduced him! Kill them, kill them both!"

No one moved. Not at Father Conal's command, anyway, although Callista was dimly aware of the castle residents coming forward, filling in the ranks at either side of her. She never took her eyes from the priest, grim satisfaction like hot coals in her heart as she watched him take one step back, then another as he realized his power over the villagers was fraying. He might have made them forget about Adonis and the castle, he might have preached about the evils of Alphas and Omegas, but he could not make them blind to the evidence of their own eyes. The vicious, bloodlusting Beast... harming no one. The wicked, wanton Omega... holding him. All their lost loved ones... standing tall and fierce beside them.

"You're the monster!" Callista shouted, shifting to stand firmly in front of Adonis, which the Beast apparently didn't like because he growled and tried to push her aside. "You put a curse on Adonis and everyone else, made us forget, but he's no Beast, no matter how he looks! And all the innocent people you've sacrificed, they're here! Look!" Callista gestured at the Betas behind her with a sweep of her arm. "Adonis took in everyone who you cast out, so who's the monster?"

"Father?" A young Beta female stepped out of the crowd at Callista's back. Her name was Diona, and she came from Callista's village. They hadn't known each other well; in fact, Callista only knew her as the village's most recent sacrifice. "Father, it's me!"

"Diona!" A male named Norin started to shove past Father Conal, who tried to grab him, but the other man jerked away, too intent on his living daughter to care about anything else. He had never gotten along well with Father Conal, like many of the families who had ended up sacrificing their children. "You're alive!"

Diona surged forward while Callista pressed back against the Beast, keeping him in place. She could hear the low undertone of his growl, but he stayed where he was. The amount of willpower it cost him must be monumental; she could feel his hard muscles shaking with the effort not to attack.

But it was worth it.

Father Conal caught again at Norin, babbling out the first words of the sort of hellfire speech that had always brought his village under control before, but Norin would not be denied his reunion.

"Let go of me!" he yelled, bulling forward. When Father Conal would not be shaken off, Norin seized the priest by his cassock and threw him down over the threshold of the gate.

The very instant Father Conal hit the ground, he screamed.

It wasn't a human-sounding scream.

Norin spun around, clutching his daughter to his heart even as he stared. They all watched in horror as Father Conal thrashed onto his hands and knees, his back arching... then buckling and bubbling beneath his robes. The sounds of bone crunching filled the air as he seemed to swell — no, not seemed to. He *did* swell, growing unnaturally larger, fur sprouting through the fine weave of his clothes where it did not tear away by the monstrous bulk of his changing body.

The curse had rebounded on him the moment he'd stepped on castle ground, turning him into a Beast as well. White fur over mottled grey flesh, like bones poking through cemetery earth, gaunt and twisted, with an elongated head bristling with too many teeth for his new jaws. He threw back his head and howled with pain and terror, eyes rolling in his sunken sockets.

This time when Adonis snarled, Callista didn't stop him. She'd known he would never forgive himself for harming the villagers, even if they attacked him, but she wasn't going to get between him and his vengeance. She scrambled out of the way, grabbing Diona and pulling her along until Norrin took her into his own arms.

Their tearful reunion would have tugged at Callista's heartstrings if she hadn't been so preoccupied watching the two Beasts battle. Adonis had the greater size, but Father Conal had longer reach, which made them equally matched to her eye, and fear filled her heart.

Adonis was accustomed to his form, which gave him some advantage, but Father Conal had rage and cunning, and when Adonis drove at him, he deftly leapt aside, then came in from underneath to savage at the Alpha's throat.

"Callista, get back!" her father shouted in her ear, his hands pulling her away from the fighting Beasts. She hadn't even realized she'd taken a step toward them.

Adonis reared again, only to slam himself against the ground, crushing Father Conal beneath him and then slapping him away. Father Conal flew back, but twisted in the air to land on his feet and dart in again, snapping and tearing at Adonis' leg. Adonis raked his claws across the other Beast's face; Father Conal shrieked and retaliated with a series of slashing attacks, each one as swift as a snakebite, too fast for her human eyes to follow. Blood and fur flew as they fought, wrestling, clawing at each other, biting. Callista covered her mouth with her hands, unable to look away, terrified that if she even blinked, Adonis would be overcome.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see other Betas filtering in through the gate, wary of the fighting beasts, but compelled to watch. Even amongst the bellowing thunder of battle, she could hear glad cries and sobbing as families and friends were reunited. Callista wished she could celebrate with them, but all of her attention was on the fight.

On the lover she'd found.

On the lover she was terrified she might now lose.



Adonis

GIVING IN TO THE URGE TO KILL, TO SLAUGHTER, FELT SO good. His mate had held him back at first, and he'd stayed, aware of her fragility even as animal thought clouded his own, but now he didn't have to.

Fight.

Kill.

The Beast's bloodlust was hot, pumping through his veins, and more than that, the sliver of self he retained in this form knew who he was fighting, his two halves united in rage and revenge.

His wounds throbbed, but it hardly mattered. He was familiar with pain. Pain was something he could take.

Not so the other Beast. Though his bloodlust was as high as his own, Conal was clearly unused as unused to pain and it made him sloppy. Conal's shrill howls were a constant, announcing each attack, each injury taken... running on pure instinct, whereas Adonis had long years of practice in the fine art of restraint, using his Beast's power rather than allowing it to use him. Not only that, but his Beast was an Alpha. Father Conal was still a Beta, no matter what form he was in.

From deep inside the well of instincts, he was still thinking, still pushing his own agenda. Still influencing his Beast, even through the bloodlust and the fight. He could see Father Conal's weaknesses, note his injuries and tactics.

When the moment was right, he pushed through and made his own Beast back off a bit, whining as if Father Conal had seriously injured him. The other Beast was too gone to think twice — he advanced, roaring in triumph, his neck outstretched as he lunged for Adonis.

It was a fatal mistake.

Adonis rolled, seizing the other Beast by the throat, then pinning him to the ground under one massive paw. His claws dug deep into the other's flesh, his jaws tightened, crushing his enemy's cries first and then his bones before ripping it all away.

Blood gushed into his mouth and splattered over the ground as Father Conal collapsed. Pale fur soaked up mud and blood as he lay, sides heaving and small bubbles gurgling as he tried to breathe through a throat that was no longer there, then he went still.

Adonis threw back his head and roared his triumph as he stood over his prey. Vindication filled him. He'd had his revenge.

A loud clap of thunder filled the air, and everyone dropped to their knees, hands over their ears, including Adonis, whose hearing was especially sensitive in this form. After a moment, he cautiously raised his head, then looked down at his hand, still a paw, blood shining on his flexing claws. He'd hoped that killing Father Conal might break the curse, but apparently it wasn't so.

"Adonis!" Callista slammed into him from the side and he wrapped his arms around her, breathing in her scent, hoping it would help keep him calm... only to realize he didn't need to.

The urge to hunt, to kill, was gone.

His instinct to mate with Callista was still there, the knowledge he would kill for her in a heartbeat remained, but the animal bloodlust that had been with this form since his first turning had utterly left him. Staring down at her, he felt like he could even...

The watching villagers, some wary, some concerned, let out a single communal gasp as he shifted, shrugging off the Beast's form to stand before them as Adonis. He gasped along with them, staring at himself with wonder. The change had never been so quick before, so painless, and never at his own will.

"Adonis?" Callista breathed out his name, gazing up at him as he lifted his hands into the moonlight. *His* hands. Not the Beast's.

"I'm me again..." Except, he could still feel the Beast inside him. The night air tugged at him. He felt sure he could shift back — if he wanted to — but he didn't have to. He hadn't realized how much he'd resigned himself to his half-life until the weight of that hopeless existence left him. His heart leapt in his chest as he dared to think he might even see his parents again.

The curse was broken.

"No more Beast?" Was it his imagination, or did Callista's tone sound a little disappointed?

Mate, growled a familiar inner voice, rough and hungry... but not monstrous.

The growling voice in his head certainly still sounded like the Beast.

Yet it was dark night, and he wasn't the Beast — unless he wanted to be. If that was as broken as the curse could get, he would take it. Deep down, he'd resigned himself to living as the Beast for the rest of his days... this was better.

"Adonis?"

"I can still feel him, in here." He thumped his hand against his chest and grinned down at her. "But it's not controlling me anymore. I think I could shift if I wanted to, but Callista! If that's broken, maybe the barrier around the territory is, too!"

He didn't have to say anything to make her understand — her eyes lit up as bright as the moon.

"Your parents!"

"My parents." After so long, he was almost afraid to hope. If the curse was only partly broken, maybe he would still be trapped in here while they were out there... or maybe not. Maybe at long last, he would be able to do more than gaze at them through an invisible wall.

It had been years...

He swallowed hard, looking down at the monstrous corpse of Father Conal.

All around him and Callista, the others were talking. Some with their families or friends, many of them being introduced to each other for the first time. More than one curious look was being sent his and Callista's way, along with expressions of shame. Confusion. Several Betas were rubbing their heads. "Do you remember me?" he asked and everyone else immediately quieted. "Do you remember my parents and the truth about Alphas and Omegas?"

"We do." Diona's father stepped forward, his arm around his daughter. She clung to him tearfully, but there was a huge smile on her face. "I'm so sorry. I... I don't know how..."

"It was the curse," Adonis said. "It was not your fault that you did not remember the truth. I know many of you, especially those whose children ended up here, still fought against the depredations of Father Conal and his ilk."

As he said the words, he wondered what had happened to the other villages. That was going to be one of the first things they needed to take care of.

Fortunately, there were more than enough volunteers willing to jump in and ride through the night. Not necessarily to bring news to the other villages, but to find out what had happened to their leaders when the curse rebounded.

It made for a long night, but report after report came in the village leaders who had aided Father Conal in casting his curse had also succumbed to it, transforming into Beasts who were then slain by those formerly under their power. Everyone's memories had returned. Miraculously, although there had been many injuries, no one had been killed, apart from the corrupted leaders, among them, Lachlan, whose transformation to a Beast betrayed his true nature. He had not truly been sympathetic to the plight of Omegas and Alphas, but profiting off them as he peddled suppressants that wouldn't be necessary if not for the curse he had helped to cast. Although there were some who mourned him, even Broderick agreed he'd gotten what he'd deserved in the end.

With every report back in, Adonis' heart got a little lighter.

Perhaps it was wrong to be glad the curse had rebounded, but he couldn't help feeling grateful that fate, and the other villagers, had taken care of them, especially as the burden of judgment would have fallen to him had they lived.

Adonis didn't mind killing Father Conal, the ringleader, but he would rather not start out this next period of his life with executions.

The only thing he didn't do was test the barrier at the edge of the territory. He wanted to, but it wasn't as though he could go searching for his parents tonight. It was enough for now just to know what was happening in the other villages.

That night he went to sleep not long after midnight, wrapped around Callista, still in his human form. He could feel the tug of the shift, but could resist it. And, for the first time in a long time, he slept completely peacefully, knowing justice had been served.



Callista

ADONIS' PARENTS MET THEM ON THE MAIN ROAD TO THE castle, rushing along it mid-morning, just as she and Adonis had been rushing to the edge of the territory to find them. She hung back as Adonis ran forward, his arms outstretched, and the three met in the middle of the road in a massive hug.

Callista felt her chest constrict at their pure joy. She could hear the two Alphas, Adonis and his father, purring — though it was a very different purr from the one Adonis directed at her. This one brought nothing but platonic happiness bubbling up inside her. She didn't want to intrude on the happy reunion, though she was glad she'd been there to pay witness to it.

As Adonis and his parents pulled back, their arms still around each other, she could hear their soft speech. Although she couldn't make out their words, she had an idea what he was telling them when his parents both suddenly looked at her.

Being the focus of their gazes was more than a little intimidating.

Adonis' father was an older, greyer version of his son, though Adonis got his chin and his eyes from his mother. She was close to Callista's height, only coming up to the males' shoulders, though her presence was one that couldn't be ignored, no matter her short stature. They both smiled as Callista approached, her heart fluttering in her chest.

"Mother, Father, this is Callista. My mate," Adonis said proudly.

Callista gaped at him. That wasn't how she'd expected to be introduced!

Though, truthfully, they hadn't discussed *how* he would introduce her. They hadn't discussed what would happen if they met his parents at all. She got the feeling he'd been too afraid to talk about it, in case it didn't happen. He hadn't wanted to get his hopes up.

"Does *she* know she's your mate?" his mother asked, amused. Turning to her own mate, she added, "He is definitely your son."

"As if there was ever any question of that," his father scoffed, wrapping his arm around his wife's shoulders. "It's wonderful to meet you, Callista. I am Adam and this is Belle."

"It's so nice to meet you," Callista replied. She pressed her lips together as Adonis wrapped his arm around her shoulders in a mirror image of his father, and tried not to laugh. There was something incredibly cute about the mimicry, though she knew better than to say so aloud. Males such as Adonis took great umbrage at compliments like 'cute' for some reason.

As they walked back to the castle, the conversation flowed fast and furious. Callista mostly listened. The reunited family had a lot of catching up to do, and her presence in Adonis' life was mere days old. Both sides had been stymied and frustrated by the inability to reach each other. The Alpha and Omega listened to the tale of Father Conal's demise with relish. They weren't particularly sorry about the other village leaders, either.

"We think when I killed him, the curse broke, then rebounded and turned all of them into beasts," Adonis explained.

"From the little I know of magic, that would make sense," Belle said thoughtfully. "I've heard people say that the use of it tends to rebound upon the user threefold."

"Which was no less than they deserved," Adam growled. Callista got the feeling his only regret was that *he* hadn't been the one to tear Father Conal apart. Unlike Adonis, he'd had no avenue to vent his frustrations.

They returned to the castle amid shouts of joy and welcome and a few hesitant hellos. There were still those who felt guilty about their actions, even though the spell had been cast so they wouldn't remember their Alpha. Adam and Belle set about putting everyone at ease.

While they were distracted, Callista finally got a chance to confront Adonis.

"Mate?" She narrowed her gaze at him. "You didn't even ask me!"

"Of course not." He grinned down at her, clearly unrepentant. "You might have said no."

She made an exasperated sound. "I wouldn't have!"

"Good to know."

He was infuriating. Not that she minded so much when he pulled her in for a kiss. She could practically feel the joy vibrating from him. Everything he'd wanted, everything he'd hoped for had come true. The curse had been broken, the Betas' memories restored, and his parents had returned to him.

Far be it from her to ruin his day with an argument about technicalities, especially since she had no argument against being his mate.

He was everything she wanted and more. Her body hummed with happiness as their tongues danced, rousing her desire, despite being in a courtyard full of people.

"Hey, you two, break it apart," Deirdre called. "We don't need that kind of display where the children can see!"

Callista and Adonis reluctantly obeyed, although Callista stung her tongue out at the other female to show how she felt about it, and Deirdre walked off laughing.

"So, now what?" Callista asked, looking around. "Everything goes back to the way it was?"

"Well, not quite everything," Adonis said. He curled his arm around her back. "But yes, I think for the most part... things will go back to how they were. I hope you and your father will stay here, though."

"Of course. I'd already decided I'm moving in."

"Decided, huh? Without asking?"

"Well, you might have said no," she said cheekily, then had to run for the castle as her mate chased after her.

EPM

It was the night of the full moon, which hung fat and heavy over the darkened forest. Everyone knew to avoid the woods on the full moon. The Alpha and his mate did nothing to prevent the Beast from roaming on those nights. They'd been returned to their rightful place in the territory once the barrier had gone down and things had returned to the way they once were...

Except on the night of the full moon.

Then the forest cleared out, the same way it had when the territory had been under the curse.

Because on the night of the full moon, the Beast still hunted.

His howl rent the air.

The female ran through the forest, her heart pounding as she heard the crashing of branches behind her. Her legs pumped, aching from exertion, and her breath pulled at her chest as she began to tire.

The sounds behind her were getting louder. She could hear his snarls on the breeze, too close for comfort.

She was out of time. The hunter had reached his prey.

Furry arms closed around her, taking her down to the forest floor, careful not to bruise her in any way. The fabric of her dress tore, exposing her breasts, as the hot breath of the Beast wafted over the back of her neck. Callista rolled onto all fours before him, her fingers digging into the dirt as she panted, trying to catch her breath.

She cried out as the huge, clawed hands cupped her breasts, squeezing them hard enough to hurt. Adonis was always so much more forceful in this form, his size and instincts making it impossible for him to be gentle — which was what made it so exciting.

One hand released her breast while the other remained, then more fabric tore, leaving her skirts in shreds around her legs. Hot slick gushed, coating her inner thighs, and she moaned as she felt the blunt head of his erection rubbing between her lips.

Pushing her hips back, she whimpered as his hand returned to her breast, covering both of them, squeezing as he pushed into her pussy from behind. The hot stretch of his thick cock eased some of the ache inside her, the thick shaft sliding in, then receding, only to shove back in again even deeper.

He mounted her like the beasts in the fields, rocking his hips forward, pushing his cock deeper with every stroke until she was filled to the brim. Pressing her hands into the dirt, she rocked back on him, wanting to feel him pounding into her, filling her over and over.

The thick knot on his cock began to swell, stretching her as he forced it inside her while it grew a little bigger with every thrust. Moaning, Callista cried out at the erotic discomfort, pleasure and pain mingling as he fucked her hard. Her pussy clenched around him, spasming as his knot became too large to move, lodging his cock deep inside her as she screamed in climax. She could feel his knot swell, then the throbbing pulses as he began to cum, releasing streams of hot fluid inside her while she clenched around him, milking his knot of cum.

Both of them moaned, shuddering as he pulled her onto her side, curling his large furry body around her. His teeth nuzzled her shoulder where she wore his mark, denoting that he'd claimed her as his mate. His body kept her warm while she drowsed in his arms, feeling his cum fill her.

Once his knot had shrunk, she would struggle free, then run again... make him hunt her again...

The way they did under the light of every full moon.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sinistre Ange is a USA Today Bestselling author and the alter ego of Golden Angel. She explores some of the darker sides of romance and erotica - kink, fetish, supernatural creatures, breeding fantasies, etc. You might find some love in these books, but they are not necessarily romances; the focus is on the fantasy and the physical interactions between characters. Come to the dark side... we have cookies.

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BEOWULF'S BAKER BY MINETTEMOREAU

A Twisted Retelling of Beowulf

BLURB

Llyr

Something is killing members of his pride of lion shifters, but that's the least of his worries.

His lion is desperate to find the woman who left him after a night of passion he'll never forget. It doesn't matter that she's human, or that he can't claim her with a mating bite.

Llyr might not know her name, but he will find her. She won't escape for long and will soon learn what it means to be claimed by an Alpha.

Eva

Hold my beer.

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CHAPTER 1

Llyr Barstow might have less than a month left to live, but he was a great dancer, and his scent of mountain air and sandalwood had both me and my beast ready to take a bite. Unfortunately, I couldn't afford to get attached to anyone—least of all him.

He pulled me close and looped a long arm around my waist to keep me pressed against his significant erection as the thumping bass of club music pulsed into my body. My beast perked up in interest, but I wasn't sure if she was intent on us fucking him, or if she saw an opportunity to kill him.

Join us for a game of Marry, Fuck, Kill!

Her alert attention convinced me it was the latter, but it wasn't Llyr's turn yet. This was a research excursion.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

"What do you say we get out of here?" His husky voice feathered past my ear, somehow perfectly clear over the noise, and my core spasmed with need.

As much as I hated what he represented, he was the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on. No longer the gangly teen from my memories, he oozed pure sexy sin. His thick dark hair had turned gray at the temples surrounding eyes the color of spring leaves. Rounded cheeks had become chiseled with bones sharp enough to cut glass, and lean muscles of youth were now solid bulk straining against the sleeves of his white dress shirt.

His physical beauty hid a monster, but there was something about him...

EVA

I almost said no, then reconsidered. Did it really matter if he went out of turn? He'd still be dead, and it would be easy as pie to rip out his throat while he recovered from an orgasm.

"Where to, cowboy?"

"I'll get us a hotel room, so you don't have to show me where you live." With his arm still around my waist, he escorted me from the club. "And I'll drive away first to keep me from seeing your car."

"Wow, okay." I tried to wrap my head around his words, but they didn't make sense coming from him.

"Oh, yeah." He fumbled for his wallet and took out his driver's license. "Take a picture and send it to someone."

Fates. Did the man read a woman's safety manual, or what?

I took the picture and pretended to send it, then made a note to purge it from my phone. There was no point in having the evidence tying me to him.

It didn't escape my attention that he didn't ask for my ID. Why would he? As the most powerful Alpha lion in North America, he wouldn't need protection from a human.

Too bad for him I wasn't.

"Thanks. Where am I meeting you?"

He considered me for a moment, then said, "The one south of town on I-25 near the outlet mall. It's not great, but I'm pretty sure they'll have a room. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes. That's not even very far."

"Right." He traced a gentle finger along my jaw, then sank his hands into my hair and kissed me. Fates damn him, the man kissed like a fucking god with just the right amount of pressure. He teased and tempted with his tongue until I had to force my canines to recede before I nicked him. Unable to help myself, I whimpered and tried to climb him like a tree to get more of his delicious taste.

He laughed softly and eased away from me but made sure I was steady on my feet before he let me go. "Let's move this to the hotel before we get arrested for public indecency."

"Okay. I can't wait."

"Me either." He stole one last kiss and sauntered to a black sedan, then got in and drove away.

"Shit."

I trudged to my car, wondering if I could actually do what needed done. How could such an evil man be so... considerate? I didn't understand, but I wasn't sure it mattered. All I had to do was let him fuck me, then swipe a claw across his throat.

Easy peasy, lemon squeezy, right?

Why did it feel so wrong?

When I reached the hotel, I parked as far as I could from his sedan, then dotted my pulse points with scent blocker. It was pricey on the open market, but I had a witch friend who would take baked goods in trade. As long as it kept Santa Fe's shifter population from knowing what I was, it was worth as many cupcakes and macarons as she wanted.

After taking a deep breath to soothe both me and my beast, I went inside and found him sitting at one of the tables where a continental breakfast would be served. Giving me a brilliant smile, he stood when I approached, then took my hand to kiss my knuckles. "I was afraid you were going to blow me off. Thank you."

"No. I wouldn't do that." I glanced at the somewhat shabby décor. "This is perfect."

"It's clean anyway. I checked the room first." He laid my hand in the crook of his elbow and escorted me down the corridor.

I hid a smile at his words. Llyr was probably used to staying in five-star hotels.

When we reached our room, he unlocked it and held the door for me before following me in. The minute the door shut behind him, he swept me into his arms and carried me to the bed. I squealed and giggled like he probably expected as he laid me on the somewhat saggy mattress and stripped off my jeans.

Unfortunately, his abrupt movements made my laughter sound forced. I wasn't sure I liked how he manhandled me, but whatever protest I might have made died when he yanked my panties away and buried his face between my legs.

Gotta love a man who goes downtown without being asked.

Such a waste.

"Fuck, baby. I've been wanting to do this since the moment I saw you."

She moaned and lifted her hips in demand, and I happily obliged. Fates, I didn't even know her name, and she was obviously human.

It didn't matter how much her beautiful gray eyes drew me in, or how much my lion demanded that I sink my fangs into the smooth skin of her shoulder.

For her, I'd consider giving up the idea of creating an heir to the Southwestern Prides. I could marry her and fuck her for days on end until she was screaming my name.

Unfortunately, she'd never be able to carry my offspring. Humans and shifters didn't work like that. The prides wouldn't accept her either. Well, they might have if I wasn't the Alpha, but I'd worked too long and hard to give it up. I couldn't allow the prides to return to how things used to be.

Deciding to take what I could get, I licked her sugarysweet pussy, trying to get every last drop of her delicious wetness.

When I pushed a thick finger into her core and curled it to tease her g-spot, I was rewarded with another cry of pleasure as I sucked her clit into my mouth.

"Oh, shit!" She clenched around me and spasmed, nearly sobbing with her climax. "F-fuck, please! I need you to fuck me."

Thankfully, I'd remembered to stop for protection on the way. I might not be able to get her pregnant or transmit

disease, but she didn't know that. She was a fates-damned human, and humans used condoms.

"Shh," I finally said. "Are you sure I can't make you come on my tongue again?"

"Now, please." Her nails pricked my shoulders as she tried to pull me from between her legs. "I need you."

"I love it when you beg." I slid up to kiss her and reached across to the nightstand. After grabbing protection, I slid the latex over my aching erection.

"Tease." She smoothed her hand over my chest, then reached down to cup my balls. I groaned, making her laugh softly.

Fuck, even her laugh was gorgeous.

Slowly, I eased myself between her thighs. To my surprise, she wrapped her legs around my hips and positioned my cock at her entrance.

"Fuck, yes." Her head fell back to the lumpy pillow, and she keened her pleasure as I worked my shaft into her wet heat.

My canines ached and I barely managed to catch a trickle of drool before it hit her in the face. I had no idea why my lion was reacting so strongly to her, but I resolved to keep my teeth to myself—no matter how much he begged.

The dew of our passion slicked her body, turning it gold in the dim light from the cheap lamps. I buried my face in her neck and snaked a hand under her so I could fuck her even harder.

To my shock, a faint whiff of unfamiliar cat drifted through the room before vanishing like it had never been. My lion roared and I pressed my lips together to hide my fangs. It meant nothing. Maybe the last occupant of the room had been a shifter, because the woman in my arms certainly wasn't.

Too soon, she cried out and shuddered under me as her channel rippled around my cock. The sensation was too much, too fast, and I surged into her one last time before filling the condom with my spend.

Wrong. We should have given it to her. Our mate will want cubs.

"So, so good," I crooned, ignoring my lion. "You okay?"

"Better than." She snuggled against my chest and let me spoon her as my eyes drifted shut.

"Stay with me. Please."

She hesitated for a split second, then said, "Sure, cowboy."

When I woke, she was gone like she'd never been. I didn't even know her name.

CHAPTER 2

LLYR

"There's been another murder."

I pinched the bridge of my nose to ease a burgeoning headache and glared across the desk at my beta, Ty. "The last body isn't even cold yet."

At least learning about another death in my pride managed to distract me from the woman I'd met in the club. It wouldn't last long, but I'd take it—especially since remembering her wouldn't do either of us any good.

Unfortunately, my lion wasn't so quick to forget, and his constant demands for us to go look for her were growing tiresome.

Fates. I still had the taste of her honey and salt cum on my tongue.

"I know. Still no evidence, no witnesses, not even a fatesdamned scent trail." Ty slumped into a leather wingback chair and rubbed his weary face. "Just another body that looks like it's been through a meat grinder."

"Who was it this time?"

"Jerome Niven." Ty wrinkled his nose and snorted. "It saves us scheduling an execution, but this is the third member of our pride in as many weeks. People are starting to question their safety and your ability to lead."

I drummed my fingers on my desk and scowled at the portrait of my parents on the other side of the room. My father had been weak, but not particularly evil. My mother, on the other hand... Thankfully, they were both dead. I kept the picture as a reminder of what I didn't want to be, and also because it made a handy target when I wanted to throw darts. It was easy enough to have another printed whenever it got too damaged to use.

"They were all members of my parents' inner circle," I mused. "Who else is left?"

I already knew the answer, but I wanted to hear their names. They were an additional reminder of why I was standing behind an oversized mahogany desk built on the backs of people who couldn't protect themselves.

"Five more. Amanda and Peter Unwin, Cecilia and Donald Lee, and Jerome's wife, Sally."

Scowling, I grabbed a dart and sent it flying into my mother's forehead. "I guess it'll look bad if I wrap bows around their necks and stake them out for the killer."

"Especially Sally," Ty muttered. "She's trying to drum up support for the reintroduction of Tithes."

I let out an ugly laugh and sank another dart flight-deep into my mother's throat. "Call it what it is, Ty. At best, it was indentured servitude."

Dozens of lions, plus more than a few humans lived and died at my mother's whim. She once had one of her Tithes tortured to death for missing a single monthly payment of fifty percent of her earnings. It didn't matter that the lioness was almost destitute and trying to raise a cub. Instead of supporting her, my mother gave her to Sally for a spectacle.

As long as I lived, I'd never forget the fear in that poor lioness's eyes every time Martha Barstow so much as frowned. Two more committed suicide rather than face her capricious moods.

Sally had been the one to wield the knife when the young lioness was forced to shift and was publicly skinned alive. Sally and Jerome's daughter, Chloe, had been barely six, so I took Sally's ear instead of the hand she'd used to hold the blade. I claimed Jerome's right eye because he watched and cheered her on.

I wanted my people to have a constant reminder of what Sally and Jerome had done. They wouldn't have been an object lesson if I killed them.

"Maybe she wouldn't be so quick to promote Tithes if she was the first one to get a collar. She clearly doesn't remember it's what started the revolution."

"Why would she?" Making a note to have another photo printed, I let a dart fly into my mother's chest. "She was so deep up my mother's ass; I'm surprised her fur isn't brown."

"You'd think she'd grab a clue when she looks in the mirror at where her ear used to be." Ty grabbed a dart and landed it expertly between my father's eyes.

"I really should have executed her," I muttered.

"You were too softhearted to kill a woman with a young child, remember? Unfortunately, we can't drag our feet and let the killer take care of our problem without the whole pride questioning your leadership."

"More's the pity." I went to the sideboard and poured brandy into two glasses. "The killer doesn't have a pattern we've been able to figure out, so we'll have to put guards on the survivors and hope we can catch them." Ty arched a brow and snickered. "Catch the killer, or those fuckwits working themselves up to treason?"

"Both?" I gave him a brief smile and set the decanter aside.

"We have learned a few things, but they don't make a lot of sense." Ty accepted his glass and warmed it between his palms. "I don't even know if I should share it."

"It can't hurt." I pulled the darts from the photo. "It's not like I'm going to turn you into a Tithe for being wrong."

"You might have me committed though. It's really weird." He set his brandy aside and retrieved his phone from his pocket. After a moment, he turned the device to show me a photo of a human bone exposed in a mass of pulped flesh. The killer hadn't even given Jerome enough time to shift. "Darius and I thought the killer used a knife, but Niven's body was fresh enough to notice things we missed on the first two. This is his femur. Do you see how the bone is cracked there?"

Frowning, I nodded. "A knife can't do that."

"Nope. What does it remind you of?"

"An animal bite. It's like something split the bone to get the marrow."

Marrow was delicious and I loved it as much as the next cat. However, if Ty was suggesting the killer was another shifter...

Was it a member of my own pride? Unfortunately, I'd have to execute them instead of giving them a medal. Then again, I could always bury the information until the rest of my mother's cronies were dead.

There's a thought.

"Except it doesn't look like any of it was eaten. Now look at this." He pulled up another picture revealing a puncture wound. "We measured the depth of penetration, and whatever the killer is has eight-inch serrated fangs. Do you see how the flesh is torn on the edges?"

"Is this a joke?"

"No, Alpha. Darius and I both measured the wound and two others just like it. The other bodies had the same punctures, but we didn't think to check until we saw that cracked bone."

I toasted him and took a sip of my brandy. "I won't have you committed, but no animal has canines that long. Maybe the killer used something other than a knife to make the wounds."

"Well"—his jaw tightened and he swiped to another image —"this does."

I burst out laughing, nearly spilling my brandy when I saw the artist's rendering of a saber-toothed tiger. "You're kidding, right? You think a prehistoric cat is preying on my pride? Ty, the only place we're going to find a Smilodon is in a museum."

Although the odds were infinitesimally small, throwback species did sometimes happen. I knew of a small pack of wolf shifters which had a female dire wolf in the early twentieth century, and there were unsubstantiated rumors of a cave bear living in Russia in the mid-eighteenth century. If our killer was indeed a throwback, we'd have known of their existence already.

"I told you it was weird." He drained half his brandy in one gulp. "Honestly, I don't know what to think, and there's something even stranger than that."

"This I have to hear."

"I wasn't entirely truthful when I said there wasn't a scent trail. I did smell something."

"What? Who was it?"

"Not a who, Alpha." Ty's cheeks reddened and he lowered his brown eyes. "I smelled cake."

"Excuse me?" I frowned, reconsidering the idea of having Ty committed. "Cake?"

"It was chocolate with a touch of serrano pepper." He hunched and shuddered under the weight of my gaze. "I've never smelled anything so good."

"Oh, my goodness! This raspberry and white chocolate is to die for!"

"No! We have to have the dark chocolate with..." Chloe Niven, the bride-to-be, moaned and snagged a second cake pop. "Oh em gee, this chili-infused ganache. I'm going to have the seamstress put elastic in my wedding dress."

"You're all philistines," another bridesmaid said, "It's the blueberry with lemon."

"Bullshit. I vote for the cherry and dark chocolate."

"I want the salted caramel..."

"Ooh, the praline ones. Those are so good!"

Before the rest of the bridesmaids could claim their favorites, I smiled and held up a hand. "Ladies, cake pops are an excellent choice for a casual outdoor wedding. The great thing about them is that you can have as many different kinds as you want."

Chloe blinked and gave me a wide, beaming smile. "Oh, duh! Sorry, I have wedding on the brain. Anyway, let's do two dozen each of all of them. No, actually four dozen of the chili ones. Raphael is going to love them, so we'll need extras. I also want whatever you have on hand today, for, you know, science."

Everyone laughed and applauded, making me smile. Well, everyone except Sally Niven, which didn't surprise me at all. There was no pleasing the monster of the bride.

Maybe I should have been more understanding about her attitude. After all, she'd just lost her husband.

Heh.

I boxed up the remaining cake pops and gave my beast a calm word of reassurance to let her know I was listening.

Neither of us liked having one of our enemies so close, and my fingertips tingled as my claws threatened to erupt. Shifting in the middle of my bakery wouldn't end well—not for me, and not for the four figures in revenue from Chloe's wedding.

The tiny office where I held my tastings certainly wasn't big enough for a thousand pounds of bobtailed cat. It would have been like parking a semi in a shoebox.

I was three times the size of the lionesses in the room with me, and they would have bushed their tails and been up a tree like a household tabby faster than I could blink.

Sally caught me looking at her and pulled a lock of lowlighted blonde hair down to hide her missing ear. As if realizing she was spoiling the party, she smiled brightly at her daughter as she wiped a crocodile tear with a manicured forefinger.

"Your father would have loved the blueberry ones."

"You say that like I should give a shit," Chloe snapped. She lifted the bakery box, then let out a slow breath and lowered it. "We're not talking about him. Ever."

The bridesmaids quieted and exited the room. I didn't blame them a bit, but the scene was hilarious to watch.

"Darling, he was your father and—"

Grimacing, Chloe recoiled from her mother's touch. "Sperm donor, Sally. He wouldn't have been invited if he was alive, so stop pushing me." "Chloe! I am your mother, and you need to have some respect."

"The only reason I'm including you is... fates, I don't even know why, so piss off." Without another word, Chloe grabbed the bakery box and swept from the room, making me choke down my laughter.

Despite Chloe's parentage, my beast and I both liked her. Of course, nobody was ever their parents. Case in point... me.

Thanks to Sally and her bloodthirsty friends, my mother was dead. I couldn't prove it, but she was probably the reason why I'd grown up without a father too. He died before I was born, and my mother would only say he loved me. She said it was too dangerous to talk about him.

"Ms. Andrews, I am so sorry for the unpleasantness."

Sally's words were appropriate and professional. Too bad they didn't match the sneer on her unlined face or the animosity in her scent.

"It's no problem." I held the door for her and inclined my head to give her the respect she thought she deserved. "Weddings are joyful, but also stressful. I'm sure Chloe will have time to relax during her honeymoon, and everything will be fine."

"Of course." After straightening her shoulders and what I hoped was a faux-fur stole, Sally walked out.

Fates, the arrogance of the woman for wearing it in the first place. Any shifter with a lick of common sense wouldn't touch imitation fur, much less a real one.

As much as I hoped it was fake, it probably wasn't. I closed the door behind her, but resisted the urge to chase her down and ask if the golden pelt was my mother's. After so

many years, there was no scent aside from Sally's overpowering designer perfume.

Even if the fur wasn't Mama's, it was somebody's. It belonged to someone who left people who loved them behind —someone who died because Martha Barstow decided they should.

For the moment, Sally didn't know I existed. She had no idea who I was, and no idea she wouldn't live to see her daughter's wedding.

She didn't know about the cub who hid in a tree as she...

I let out a breath and twisted the deadbolt before drawing the shade to show I was closed. There was no point in tipping my hand until I was in position to rip out her throat.

She wasn't even next on my list. I still had four to go before her.

Llyr would be last. I didn't give a shit how much he sang and danced to the tune of a better, brighter world for his dumbass pride. There was no way I'd allow Martha Barstow's son to continue breathing—no matter how much I wanted to make love to him again.

Sighing, I flipped off the lights in the dining area and returned to my kitchen. So what if he took Sally's ear? It was a fucking ear. It would never make up for what the Barstow pride cost me.

And the bill was coming due.

CHAPTER 3

LLYR

"That takes care of Amanda and Peter Unwin."

Ty tossed a handful of photos on my desk, and I tried to arrange my face into an expression that wasn't a smirk of satisfaction.

"And then there were three," I murmured. "Did you smell chocolate cake again?"

Ty rolled his eyes and poured two glasses of scotch from the decanter on the sideboard. "It was lemon this time, but definitely still cake."

"It wasn't artificial lemon either. It was like somebody mixed a citrus grove with sugar and baked it." Darius, my omega, and one of the kindest men I knew, sighed and accepted the glass from Ty. "This isn't random, Alpha. It's purposeful, and the killer is targeting your parents' friends."

"We know that," Ty replied. "We don't know how to stop it."

"Or if we want to." I sat behind my desk and considered the photos. As Ty mentioned, the bodies looked like they'd been through a meat grinder. "Do we know anything about Chloe Niven? She might be next."

I might have wanted to see Sally dead, but her daughter was a sweet girl who didn't deserve to be torn to shreds.

"The families of the victims haven't been targeted, but it's possible the killer is following a list," Darius said. "Chloe is the only one of the victims' offspring who stayed with this pride, but I think that was because of Raphael." "Did you reach out to the others and let them know their parents are dead?" I asked.

"Yes, Alpha." Darius smiled faintly. "The general consensus was that it was about time."

"Chloe's relationship with Sally isn't much better. According to Hannah, Chloe's best friend, she unloaded on Sally at the..." Ty blinked, and his lips parted. "Fates. I think I know where the cake might be coming from."

"Ty, there isn't any cake," I said, shaking my head. "You imagined it."

"I didn't imagine shit, and it doesn't explain why three of the bodies were covered in the smell of baked goods."

"Ty wasn't the only one who smelled it, and we don't know about the first three either," Darius said. "We didn't find them until several days after their murders. The cake scent might have been around them too."

"Just listen." Ty spun to face me. "Chloe took her bridesmaids to La Dolce Dolce in Santa Fe for a tasting, and Raphael mentioned she brought him some samples."

I threw a dart at my father's left eye, but it bounced instead of sticking. "That isn't the greatest lead. I'm still not seeing the connection. A lot of people bake, and there are probably dozens of bakeries between Taos and Santa Fe."

"It's only an hour away," Darius murmured. "We can stop for supper after we check out the bakery."

"Fine." I tossed the darts into a drawer and drained the last of my scotch. "We'll have a waste of time road trip and eat at the tapas place north of town." "Wait a second." Ty bounced to his feet and sent a text to someone. "Raphael said one of them was chocolate with chiliinfused coating, exactly like I smelled when we found Jerome Niven. I just texted him to see if he has any left. If he does, we won't have to drive all that way."

His phone chimed a moment later and he sent a quick reply. "He'll be here in a few minutes with the samples but says he and Chloe already ate most of them."

"Hmm." Darius went to the window looking out over Elk Mountain. "I guess the bigger question is the relationship between the killer and the bakery."

"Maybe they have a sweet tooth?" I laughed and sat behind my desk. "You know, one of the eight-inch ones."

"Ha ha." Ty glared sourly at me and went to answer a tentative knock on my office door. "Hear that, Darius? Our Alpha is a comedian."

"I came as quickly as I could, Alpha." Raphael hurried into the room with a large white box clutched protectively to his chest. After setting the box on my desk, he added, "I'm sorry we didn't save them all for you."

I sighed and wished it was possible to kill my parents a second time. I hated seeing a lion in his prime cower before anyone—much less the person who had vowed to protect him.

"I just wanted one of the chocolate ones. Ty told me how much Chloe raved over them, and I'm thinking I'll use the same baker for the next pride party."

"Oh, of course, Alpha. There are two left, and they're yours."

He opened the box, filling the room with the scent of baked goods. Ty inhaled sharply and jerked his head in a nod as I swallowed a mouthful of drool before it ran down my chin.

Fates. It took all my self-control to stop myself from devouring all of them. "Which is Chloe's least favorite?" I finally asked.

"Er... the blueberry, Alpha."

I plucked one from the box and closed it. "Thanks for bringing these by. They look delicious."

"You don't want the rest?" Raphael blinked, then glanced at Darius and Ty. "It's your right to—"

"I might be Alpha, but I'm not crazy enough to steal cake from a woman. Give me just a moment to copy the phone number from the label, and you can take them home before Chloe notices they're gone. Do you remember the baker's name?"

"Yes, Alpha. It's Eva Andrews. Chloe says she's human."

The same surname as... I shook my head. Andrews was a common last name. A human baker wouldn't have anything to do with a murdered lioness.

When the door shut behind him, Ty studied the cake pop on my desk. "Both the lemon and the chocolate are matches for what we smelled, Alpha."

"Meaning the killer goes there frequently," Darius replied.

I picked up the cake pop and ate it in one bite. If I were a bear, it would have sent me into paroxysms of joy. It was like sitting in a blueberry patch on a warm summer day.

"What should we do?" Ty asked.

"We're going to order some cake pops." I smirked at their matching expressions of surprise and dialed the number. "Eva might have a lead for us. If the killer is in her shop often enough to smell like her food, she might be able to give us a few names."

"And if not?"

"We'll have cake."

I loaded several boxes into the back of my delivery van for the trip to the Barstow compound in Tererro, wondering if I was making a mistake.

Considering I'd be walking into the proverbial lion's den in less than an hour, it couldn't be anything but a mistake. Then again, it would give me a chance to examine their security for when I went back to kill Llyr.

Best of all, he was paying me to do it. Besides, he'd never put the woman in the club together with me. Instead of club wear, I wore jeans and a chef's coat, and my hair was secured in a tight French braid. He wouldn't even know my scent because of the blocker.

Unfortunately, I couldn't get rid of the twinge of unease building in my gut. Revenge was a messy, ugly business, and I was already halfway through it. There were only four to go, including Llyr, but he wouldn't die until the eighteenth of August.

It seemed only fitting to take his life on the same day Martha Barstow took my mother from me.

By the time I reached the expansive mansion in the shadow of Elk Mountain, my nerves had settled—more or less. As I parked by the front door, two men hurried down the steps to meet me. I got out and pasted a smile on my face as they reached my van.

"Hi! You must be Eva." He held out a hand for me to shake. "I'm Ty, and this is Darius. We're Llyr's... coworkers."

It was close enough to the truth and would be something a beta could say to a human.

EVA

I shook Darius's hand, and to my shock, a warm wave of peace swept over me. I hadn't touched an omega in years, and he was the real deal instead of some poor soul with low status in the pride. I'd honestly thought Martha killed them all.

Hopefully, he wouldn't sense that I wasn't human.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both. If you'll show me where to set up, I'll get everything unloaded."

"We'll help," Ty said.

"Um... okay. Thanks." I went to the back of my van and opened the doors, then started passing out boxes.

"These smell so good," Darius said as I filled his arms. "I can't wait to try them."

"Especially the chocolate with chili-infused ganache. Chloe Niven raved about those," Ty added.

Something in the tone of his voice woke up my anxiety, but I pushed it down. I had a life in Santa Fe. I had a business and a cute little cottage well outside any Alpha's territory. Not bad for a chick who had lived the better part of a decade in human foster care.

Although my foster parents were amazing and I still had dinner with them at least once a month, they couldn't make up for not having a pride. Martha Barstow had stolen that from me too.

None of these people knew me. The day my mother died, I got out, and nobody bothered to look for one cub when there was an execution party going on. I doubted any of them remembered I existed as anything but the awkward little girl who hadn't managed to shift.

Not until that day, at least.

It was probably for the best, all things considered. If any of them had learned exactly what my beast was, I'd have been next in line for Sally's knife.

Hiding a smile, I followed Ty and Darius through the massive carved front door and into an expansive vaulted foyer. I wasn't a cub anymore, and if Llyr thought for one second that he could intimidate me with excessive wealth... well, he'd learn otherwise before the end of summer.

His scent of sandalwood and male teased my nose as we passed a sweeping marble staircase toward a corridor leading deeper into the house.

He smells good.

My beast's words shocked me almost bad enough to drop the bakery boxes, and I stumbled. Llyr Barstow did *not* smell good. He smelled like a dead lion walking. That was it.

"You okay?" Ty asked. "I'll have the housekeeper secure that rug. Sorry."

"It's no problem. I'm just clumsy sometimes."

Thankfully, he returned my smile before leading me past several closed doors to an open one at the end of the hall. Llyr's scent grew stronger with every step until it was choking and thick with clean male and a touch of sandalwood.

For a brief moment, I considered dropping the bakery boxes and running, but my beast took control and forced my steps to quicken.

Not now, you crazy hairball! We have to wait!

No waiting. He smells good.

I had no idea what was up with her, but until I could regain control over our body, I was helpless to resist her determination to get closer to the source of the scent she wanted so badly.

Fates. I couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken in a complete sentence. I'd get a word or two sometimes, but she communicated with images instead of speech.

Llyr strode across the room to meet me, tearing my attention from my struggles with my beast. It didn't seem possible, but he was more gorgeous than I remembered.

His face lit up with a beaming smile, and my heart sank when I realized he knew exactly who I was. "Ms. Andrews, it's a pleasure to see you again. Thank you for coming all this way."

Their eyes filled with curiosity, Ty and Darius glanced at him as he eased the boxes from my arms and set them on a large mahogany table surrounded by four chairs. A silver coffee service was already laid out, along with plates and several cloth napkins.

"No problem." I gave him what I hoped looked like a genuine smile and eased toward the open door. "I'll leave you to it, but please let me know if there's anything else you'd like to try. I included a menu with your bill."

"I'm afraid not." He jerked his chin at Darius, who promptly closed the door and locked it. "We're going to have a little chat."

That niggling anxiety I'd felt throughout the entire drive blossomed into outright fear. Although I was more than capable of taking one of them at a time, the presence of three adult male lions in the prime of life made even my beast sit up and take notice. If they worked together... in a desperate attempt to quell my panic, I tried for another smile.

"Certainly. I'm happy to help in any way I can."

"Good." Llyr held my chair, and I sat as Ty filled a coffee cup and placed it in front of me. After sitting across from me, Llyr opened the box of chocolate and chili cake pops.

He studied them for a moment, then laid one on his plate. "We'd like to discuss your customers."

"Okay, what about them?"

"I'd like to know who buys these chocolate ones, plus the lemon pops."

Darius moved to stand behind me while Ty took a position blocking the door. Claws pricked my fingertips when my beast and I realized they were closing us in.

"They're my best sellers. A lot of people buy them," I finally said after swallowing the sand filling my throat.

"I'm thinking it's someone who buys them fairly frequently," Llyr replied. "Can you think of anyone like that?"

"No. I... no, I can't."

"She's lying," Darius said softly.

"I know." Llyr picked up the cake pop and ate it. "The serrano has a very distinctive odor and works beautifully with the bittersweet Ecuadorian chocolate ganache."

"We've smelled it before on a dead body," Ty added. "As Llyr has noted, it's quite unique."

"Would you care to try again?" Llyr ate a lemon cake pop but didn't drop his gaze from me. "Tell us why a killer would be covered in the scent of your baked goods." "I..." I glanced at the door, wondering if I could make it before they caught me. Fates, when would I learn to listen to my instincts? "I don't know."

"Another lie." Leaning close to my ear, Darius whispered, "I'm a real omega, Eva, and I know you're a shifter. All I have to do is touch you, and I can make you tell us whatever we want to hear."

Straightening, he smiled and added, "And I promise it will hurt."

CHAPTER 4

LLYR

I hadn't believed Ty or Darius about what they thought killed my mother's cronies, but watching Eva knock the door off its hinges on her way out made me rethink my former opinion. The three inches of solid oak was more or less intact, but the doorframe clearly hadn't been built to withstand half a ton of agitated Pleistocene-era cat.

Maybe I should have cut Darius off before he mentioned using his omega gifts to extract the truth from her, but those wide gray eyes and rosebud lips knocked me off my game.

Fuck, that perfect, plump ass. My lion was setting up a clamor to chase her down, and he wasn't interested in punishing her for her crimes.

Oh, no. The fool cat took one sniff of her chocolate and sugar scent and demanded to claim our mate. I wasn't entirely displeased. Aside from her unfortunate tendency to commit homicide, she was perfect.

And she was a shifter, meaning she'd used blocker to hide her scent. If I'd realized it the night I met her, she wouldn't have escaped without a claiming bite.

Was it possible Eva was Lydia's daughter? It would explain why she was killing off my mother's cronies, but Eva would have been a child during the revolt. As twisted as my mother was, she rarely bothered with cubs.

It also meant Eva hadn't managed to shift before I took control. If my mother had seen her...

I pushed the appalling thoughts out of my head and studied the damage. The antique mahogany table was on its side with two of its legs broken off, and the chair she'd occupied was in pieces and had been tossed aside like a child's toy. Her white chef's jacket was in tatters, as were her jeans, and she'd clawed the fuck out of the hardwood floor, leaving gouges where she'd dug her hind claws in to launch herself through my door. One of the boards was split down the middle and rose up drunkenly in a jagged spike.

The only thing she'd left intact were the white sneakers she'd been wearing and the shelves containing my whiskey collection. Thank the fates.

Even the frame around my parents' photo was reduced to a pile of matchsticks, as if she'd taken the time to demolish it on her way out.

Darius had been quick enough to get out of the way, but she'd caught Ty with one of those wicked claws, leaving a deep gash across his chest that revealed the white bone of his sternum. I didn't believe she'd purposely harmed him though. He'd simply been too close when she morphed into the most magnificent cat the world had ever seen.

Fuck, those teeth...

Ty's estimate had been conservative. Those gorgeously serrated canines were closer to ten inches long.

Grunting softly, Ty shifted to his lion form and shook his luxuriant black mane, then back to human again. "That's gonna leave a mark," he slurred, fingering the healing wound.

"Move faster, babe." Darius brushed Ty's hair from his eyes, then took his mouth in a slow, lingering kiss as he offered his omega gifts to speed his mate's healing. "She about took your heart."

"Fuck you."

Laughing, Darius helped him into a pair of sweats and a Tshirt from the stock I kept for such emergencies. "Maybe tonight. We need to catch our killer first."

"And try not to die." Ty cracked his neck, then stumbled to the wet bar for a drink. "Big, scary cat. Look at the bones, man!"

I rummaged through the cake boxes and found one that hadn't been too damaged by Eva's exit. After cutting the tape with a thumbnail, I withdrew a dark-chocolate one covered with glittery salt crystals and ate it in a single bite.

Eva might have been one of the rarest shifters to ever exist, and so freaking hot my balls ached despite the murders she'd already committed, but her cake...

Fates, the woman could cook.

Darius reached for one of *my* snacks and nearly lost a hand. Scowling at me, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Great way to treat your omega."

"Sorry." I pushed the box toward him. "But damn."

Ty finished his scotch, then ate one of the raspberry ones. His moan of pleasure matched mine, making me scowl. "So… we have to catch her, figure out how to get her to stop killing people, pray she doesn't eat us in our sleep or commit any more accidental architectural adjustments, and then we might get these on the regular?"

Still glaring at me, Darius took another. "It'll be like taking candy from a velociraptor."

"She might be a little bigger than that," I murmured.

"She's a little bigger than your Mercedes." Ty threw his stick into the wastebasket and parked his ass in my chair. He was still healing up, and it was the only chair she'd left in one piece. "That brings up another question. How do we stop her?"

"Do we want to?" Darius asked. "I'm thinking she'll stop killing after she takes care of the Lees and Sally Niven."

"It's not like anyone will be sorry to see them gone." Ty grabbed his third cake pop, making me want to break his hand. "Maybe we should thank our lucky stars she ran off."

Before my so-called friends could eat them all, I took one more, this one vanilla with sprinkles. "She'll come back. We have her van."

Darius rifled through the remains of her jeans and came up with a key ring. "Do you want me to move it to the road? Maybe if we're lucky, she'll take it and her teeth far away."

"No. Leave it where it is. You can go."

Ty groaned and got to his feet. "Are you sure? Maybe with all three of us—"

"I'm fine. Oh, and take the cake pops with you before I eat them all." It was a wrench letting go of my treats, but worth it if they wandered off.

Thankfully, they took the bribe and left.

I straightened my shirt cuffs and strode from the demolished office. Eva Andrews would come to heel, accept my bite, and bear my cubs. Although our offspring would most likely be lions, I imagined dozens with her black-tufted ears, honey-colored fur, dorsal stripes, and bobbed tails.

And they'd all have those magnificent teeth.

Keeping to the scant concealment of the trees, I circled the mansion, and prayed I could convince my beast to let go so I could shift. Unfortunately, she had zero interest in helping me return to our human form.

Although I liked to think I wasn't entirely unappealing, I wasn't anything to write home about on a good day. My light gray eyes tended to unnerve people, and I was plump to the point of chubby. I had nice hair though. The rich sable waves always seemed to behave, and I wasn't plagued by frizz.

I looked down at one of my big-ass paws. It was easily the size of one of my larger cake platters with semi-retractable claws about six inches long. Standing on all fours, I didn't have to stretch to look over the hood of my van. My coat was a weird creamy yellow with black stripes, and I had a stupid bobbed tail about half as long as it should have been. Muscles bulged and rippled under my hide, and I almost wanted to laugh. I looked like the cat version of the Hulk.

Keeping my footsteps quiet, I slunk behind my van, then remembered I'd left my keys in the pocket of my jeans, which were still in Llyr's office—the same office I'd wrecked in my hurry to get away. If I didn't have a price on my head before, I certainly did now.

Even if I'd had my keys, they wouldn't have helped. I couldn't shift back, and it wasn't as if I could have driven the way I was—or fit my huge ass behind the wheel in the first place.

Fuck. My. Life.

I hoped they choked on those cake pops.

EVA

On the other paw, despite Darius's threat to force me to tell the truth, none of them had touched me. I was certain three adult male lions could have stopped me, yet they hadn't restrained me or even tried to keep me from escaping once I shifted.

I sat on my haunches, then licked a paw, trying to decide what to do.

Growling softly, I chewed a splinter out from between my toe beans, wishing I knew how to make it to the end of the day without being dead. I couldn't go home unless I could shift. Even if I managed to get back into my human form, I didn't have my keys.

The front door opened, revealing Ty and Darius, who strode toward a blue SUV. I hunched in a vain attempt to make myself smaller, but there was nowhere to hide.

I opened my mouth to catch their scents and smelled a faint whiff of blood from where I'd accidentally clawed Ty, but no anger or animosity.

"Do you think she'll come back?" Darius asked.

"We have her van," Ty replied. "And we know where her bakery is."

"Yeah, I need to call my mother about that. You know how she is about supporting women-owned businesses, and those cake pops are to die for."

Straightening, I ruffled my fur in pleasure at the compliment. Maybe if I kept baking, it might save me from execution.

"I can't believe Llyr gave them to us."

Darius glanced at my van and... *winked*? "It was a bribe. He wanted us gone."

"Probably not a bad idea, actually. She might be more willing to come back if there aren't three of us."

They got in the vehicle and drove away. Maybe Llyr would leave too, and I could sneak in, get my keys, figure out how to shift, and...

Oh yeah. They knew where my bakery was. Fuck. I settled down, turning my bulky body into a catloaf as I tried to decide what to do.

I'd always wondered why cats found the position so comfortable, but after trying it, it made sense. It was a position of alert rest. If I wasn't about to get my ass dead, I could have dozed, but been up and running in a split second.

The breeze changed direction and the scent of flowers and female caught my attention.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Andrews."

I leapt into the air and spun to face the new threat, my fur standing on end. Baring my fangs, I growled. Not only was I a gigantic beast, but I sucked at being a cat. She'd gotten within ten feet of me before I heard her coming.

"Now, none of that, young lady." The woman was human, and very old. She pushed a cart toward me, filled with huge platters of both cooked and raw meat separated to prevent cross contamination. "I'm Rebecca Johnson, Llyr's housekeeper, and he's asked me to give you a snack to tide you over until supper."

I was too frozen with shock to move, and nearly fainted when she scritched the itchy spot at the base of my tail. It was unfathomable that a human—or anyone else—would willingly touch me when I looked like... a monster.

"There's a good girl." She smoothed my fur and gave me a pat. "When you change back, I have a pink sundress that should fit and look gorgeous with those pretty gray eyes. I also collected your shoes."

The scents emanating from the cart were nearly overwhelming. I licked my chops but didn't dare approach. Was it poisoned? Had Llyr decided I wasn't worth the trouble of a personal execution?

When I didn't move, she arched a brow and plucked a roasted chicken leg from the cart, then took a bite. "It's perfectly safe, dear. I would never allow anything unwholesome in my kitchen."

She propped a hip against my van and finished the chicken, seemingly accustomed to carrying on a one-sided conversation. "I understand your nerves though. You must be scared silly after all the unpleasantness, but Llyr won't harm you. He's a good boy."

Giving the house a beady glare, she dropped the bone into a bowl, then wiped her hands on a tea towel tucked into the waistband of her apron. "He'd better be. He's not so big I can't take a switch to his backside."

The image of such a tiny old woman spanking Llyr Barstow would have made me laugh if I'd been human. I settled for letting my tongue loll from my mouth in a feline approximation of a grin.

I had a feeling she and I had wildly different definitions of what constituted good in regard to Llyr. I just had to remember his face between my legs. "Ah, that's better. It's good to see you have your sense of humor." She gave me a bright smile, then picked up a pair of tongs and an honest-to-God Wedgwood plate. "What shall it be? I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I have an assortment. How about this lovely beef filet?" CHAPTER 5

If there was one person in my household who could make anyone feel safe and welcome, it was Rebecca.

Still chattering up a storm, she fed Eva the choicest bits from her cart, and didn't let up until Eva fell to her side and groaned. Knowing Rebecca, she'd already made notes of what Eva preferred.

Once I was sure Eva was relatively calm and satiated, I approached, ensuring she saw me coming. Unsurprisingly, she leapt to her feet and bared her teeth.

I held up my hand and tried for a winning smile. "Before you have me for dessert, I owe you an apology. I shouldn't have let Darius threaten to use his omega gifts on you, and I'm sorry we scared you."

She blinked at me and cocked her head, then pawed at the ground, her claws digging furrows in the gravel driveway. Huffing out a breath, she turned her back on me, then lashed her bobbed tail.

Scowling, Rebecca passed me a neatly folded bathrobe, then took her cart into the house.

"Trust me. Rebecca already gave me an earful."

Although Eva kept her attention on Rebecca, she flicked an ear back, then sat on her haunches and washed her face with a massive paw.

"I think this conversation would go a lot easier if you shifted." I laid the bathrobe on the hood of her van, then turned my back. "I'll give you privacy, of course. Just let me know when you're decent." As much as I wanted to peek at her gorgeous body, I kept my word and waited patiently. Finally, I heard the cracking of bone and tendon, along with a few softly muttered curses. Shifting always hurt a bit, and I doubted she was an exception.

"It's not like you haven't seen me naked already." When I turned to face her, she asked, "May I have my keys, please? If you're not planning to execute me, I'd like to leave."

"I'm not going to execute you, but I also can't let you leave until you answer some questions for me."

"Fine." She huffed irritably and crossed her arms. "Yes, I killed them, and yes, I have four more to go. After that, I'll be done, and you'll never see me again."

"Let me guess. Sally Niven, and Cecilia and Donald Lee, right?"

Eva blinked and dropped her arms. "How did you know that?"

"They're the only ones left of my idiot mother's inner circle." I frowned and cocked my head. "But who's the fourth?"

Lifting her chin, she studied me as she played with the sash of her robe. A shimmer of dark stripes played across her cheeks, making me wonder if she was planning to shift again.

To my surprise, a faint smile appeared on her rosebud lips. "You."

"Well, then..." Ignoring my cat's yowled encouragement that we take her and make her ours, I swung her into my arms and carried her toward the house.

Mates couldn't kill each other—even if they wanted to. It was an evolutionary failsafe to ensure the continuation of the

species. Besides, there would be plenty of time for wooing her after I figured out why I was on her kill list. Oh, and it might also be wise if I convinced her to let me keep breathing without the benefit of a mate bond.

She struggled, making me tighten my hold on her before she fell. "What are you doing?"

"Carrying you inside so you don't hurt your feet on the gravel."

"Are you nuts?" She squirmed again, then sighed when I wouldn't let go. "I just told you I planned to kill you, and you're carrying me up the damned stairs?"

"Of course. Despite my mother's best efforts to the contrary, I grew up to be a gentleman."

She turned to look at me as I carried her through the front door. One of the maids was already hard at work collecting the shredded area rugs from the foyer, and I presumed someone would come shortly to repair the rest of the damage.

"At least put me down. Your crazy might be catching, and I'd hate to see you throw out your back before I kill you."

The maid gasped and laid a hand over her mouth. Her eyes widening, she dropped the rugs before scampering away. Presumably, she intended to tattle to Rebecca.

"I'm enjoying carrying you, although I doubt I could manage it if you were in your cat form."

She snorted and shook her head as I carried her into a small sitting room. "You'd need a forklift for that."

It was one of the few rooms in the house I actually liked, with comfortable leather furniture, a fireplace, and an expansive picture window with a view of Elk Mountain. I could have had the place renovated, but I'd chosen to use the funds to support the pride instead of my own comfort. I'd deal with it eventually. Then again, maybe Eva's destruction of my office was a decent excuse to do a couple of rooms, at least.

Although I didn't want to let her go, I put her down and stepped away, leaving a clear path between her and the open door. The last time I tried blocking her exit hadn't ended so well. "Have a seat. Do you want anything to drink? Tea, a cocktail?"

"I wouldn't say no to a brandy, if that's okay." Keeping me in her line of sight, she perched on the edge of the leather sofa facing the window.

"That sounds good." I sent a quick text to Rebecca asking her to bring a bottle and a pair of glasses.

Within moments, she appeared with a tray and set it on the coffee table in front of Eva. She'd even provided a small charcuterie board. After wiping the bottle with her apron, she poured for us, then warmed the glasses in her palms before setting them on the coffee table.

"I must see to supper." She winked at Eva and smiled. "If you feel the need to kill Llyr, please do it outside, or in his office. It will save time if we don't have to clean two rooms." "You all think this is a huge joke." Ignoring my drink, I got up and went to the window. My sinuses burned with the force of the tears I was desperate to hold back. "I don't understand you."

Why had I been so damned stupid? I could have sent one of my assistants to deliver Llyr's order, but no. I'd had to come myself, despite my instincts telling me to stay away.

My beast wasn't helping matters, and my gums ached with the urge to drop fangs and set my bite to his muscular shoulder. She didn't seem to care that I couldn't mate him even if I wanted to.

If I did... if I was weak enough to let it happen... I'd never be able to keep my promise to my mother.

"No." He laid his hand on my arm but took it away when I flinched. "Nothing about this is a joke, Eva. It might seem as if I'm not taking it seriously because I don't actually care that the people you killed are dead."

"What?" I spun to face him, and despite my instincts telling me not to, I let him lead me back to the couch. "That doesn't make sense. They were—"

"The five you've already dealt with, plus the three remaining, are the last of my mother's inner circle. Nobody, least of all me, is sorry to see them go. The only thing I wish is that you'd taken care of Sally Niven first."

"She won't live to see Chloe's wedding," I muttered under my breath. "Why do you think Sally should have been first?"

EVA

His full lips tightened, and a tic worked its way across his jaw. "I'd rather not say. It's an unpleasant memory I prefer to forget, and I'm certainly not going to share it with a lady."

I almost asked what could put such a pained look of devastation on the face of Martha Barstow's son but decided to keep the question to myself. Maybe I didn't want to know.

Giving me a smile that didn't reach his eyes, he leaned back against the couch cushions. "Sadly, Ty and Darius caught the scent of your baking before you could finish the job, but that leads us to another issue."

"Aside from the one where you die at the end?"

He chuckled softly and shook his head. "Yes, aside from that one. Unfortunately, my pride is starting to question my leadership and their safety. A few are even beginning to make noises about reintroducing Tithes, and—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I jerked to my feet and crossed the room, then spun to face him. "What the fuck kind of whack-ass Nazi bullshit is that?"

"They say people weren't being murdered when the pride had Tithes."

I laughed at his quiet reply. "Sure, if they weren't Tithes. But I guess it isn't murder if you kill a slave, right?"

"I see you know what happened before the revolt." Instead of trying to catch me, he crossed his leg over his knee and didn't move. "You must have been very young. Do you remember who started it?"

"I was barely ten. I just remember..." I shook my head, unwilling to tell him how much of that time was burned into my brain. "I don't care who started it. If I ever meet them, I want to tell them they have free cake pops for the rest of their life."

He threw back his head and laughed, then wiped a sheen of tears from his beautiful green eyes. "A priceless gift."

After rising to his feet, he bowed. "My first act was to cut off my mother's head with that saber over the fireplace. After that, I drove it into my father's throat."

He straightened and all amusement left his face. "After that, I shifted and tore apart anyone who got in the way of me freeing the Tithes. The rest got the choice to swear fealty to me or die."

"What?" My knees buckled and I grabbed the fireplace mantel before I fell. "No. I... that can't be."

Everything I'd done... all the blood. My fangs sunk deep into screaming victims. Had I been wrong all along? Fates. What if I'd killed innocents?

No. They were all guilty. I'd watched them, and I remembered everything they did. Except...

If what he said was true... tears scalded my cheeks and I collapsed to the floor. If it was true, and I hadn't been caught...

He wasn't a sadistic murderer. Llyr Barstow was just a nice guy who let a one-night stand take a picture of his driver's license to make her feel safe.

"Would you like to hear the truth from someone who was there?" he asked.

I couldn't answer, and after a moment I heard his footsteps as he left the room. Thankful for the respite from his presence, I relaxed, but he returned too soon. "Oh, sweetheart..." Rebecca's scent of flowers and her soft voice embraced me. "It's going to be okay."

I burst into ugly sobs as she cradled me. Between knowing my mother wouldn't get the vengeance she deserved, and my beast's constant push to Llyr, I couldn't deal with another single thing. Before I could stop it, my body prepared for another shift. I needed out.

"Eva, do not shift."

Llyr's words forced my beast back, and as hard as I tried, I couldn't shake off the order of an Alpha. I scrubbed my hand over my eyes and looked up at him. "Please, just let me go."

He sighed and picked me up without so much as a grimace at my weight, then sat on the couch with me in his lap. "That's the one thing I'll never do."

His words thrilled me almost as much as they scared me.

CHAPTER 6

LLYR

I nodded at Rebecca to sit across from us. To my surprise, she grabbed Eva's untouched brandy and took a deep swallow.

"I was one of the Tithes who Llyr freed."

"What?" Eva looked at me, then returned her attention to Rebecca. "But you're human."

"I was a runaway, and it was much easier to get lost back then. Some shifter clans watched bus stations and other places where runaway children congregated. They offered food sometimes, or money."

"That's disgusting."

Rebecca nodded. "Of course, the clans would sell their own too, either to pay off a debt or curry favor with a stronger Alpha. Sometimes"—her voice trailed off and she looked at her hands— "sometimes, it was punishment."

"I know." Eva scowled. "The Barstows Tithed a lot of people who couldn't pay fifty percent of their earnings into pride coffers, but I don't remember humans being enslaved."

"Our fates were worse," Rebecca replied.

"I don't understand. How was it worse?"

"We were kept like livestock for pride hunts. After all, runaway teenagers are very quick, and... disposable. Anyway, one day, I just stopped. I was on the wrong side of forty, and running was getting to be a challenge. I decided who would catch me and when, then parked myself on the trail and waited."

"You still led me a merry chase," I replied. "It took me two days to find you." "You had to earn it," she countered. "Besides, I'd never been caught before, so I couldn't make it too easy."

I lifted my glass into a toast, making her smile. "So cruel!"

"Someone has to keep you honest." She turned her warm smile on Eva. "In any case, whoever caught the humans were allowed to kill them, so I fully expected to die. After almost thirty years of living in a cage and running for my life, I was ready."

"Fates, that's awful!"

Thankfully, Eva had stopped crying to listen. My lion was beginning to be unmanageable at the sight and scent of her tears.

"Yes, but this one decided to spoil my plans and keep me as a servant. I've been with him ever since."

"I keep trying to make her retire," I murmured. "She's got a beautiful house in Santa Fe and enough money socked away to live like a queen."

"And just who would keep you on the straight and narrow if I did that?" She reached across the table and patted my knee. "When my boy made the Tithing stop, I couldn't have been prouder if he were my own son."

"Unfortunately, it seems I wasn't quite successful," I muttered.

"You'll have it managed in good time, especially now that you have someone to help you." Rebecca stood and straightened her apron. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get back to the kitchen before I burn your supper."

"I had no idea," Eva said, once Rebecca had left. "Humans. I don't even know how the pride thought that would work. What if one of them had escaped and told someone?"

"I'll never know what went on in my mother's head when she started doing that. She risked us all for her insane thirst for power and sycophants."

"So, where does that leave me?" Eva tried to get up, then sighed when I wouldn't let her off my lap. "I can't exactly kill you if I owe you a lifetime supply of cake pops, but I can't let the others keep breathing. Especially Sally."

"Why is it so important to you?"

She didn't answer for several seconds, then said, "Because I made a promise. Because if I don't make sure the innocent get the justice they deserve, nobody else will."

"Eva, look at me." Touching her chin, I forced her to meet my gaze. "I don't exactly disagree with you about killing them, but I need you to tell me why it's so personal for you."

"No."

"You're going to tell me," I repeated. "And you're going to stop killing people."

"I'm not going to do that either. There are three more."

"Sally has already been punished."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" She rammed her elbow into my gut and scrambled free. Her robe parted to reveal the inner swells of her breasts, making me lift my gaze to her eyes before I gave in to the urge to bury my face between the succulent mounds.

Rage turned her cheeks pink, and a tracery of dark stripes flowed up her chest as her cat made its presence known. "You took her fates-damned ear, and you think that's a punishment for being your mother's favorite torturer? Do you even know whose hide she wears as a stole when she goes to Santa Fe? Do you?"

"Excuse me? She wore... fur?" I swallowed hard, wishing I didn't believe her. Unfortunately, it was something Sally would do the minute she thought she was out of my sight.

"She wore a lion's pelt to my shop," she snapped. "From a lioness with golden fur, whom I suspect she skinned personally. Do you not think that lioness's family deserves their relative's remains back?"

"I—"

"You know the worst thing?" She laughed bitterly and shook her head. "People would call me a monster if they saw my beast, but not even her own daughter said a word. This is your pride, Llyr Barstow. I want no part of it except to watch those last three die."

Slowly, I walked to the mantel and took the saber from its mountings. "Tell me why you want her dead."

"I told you." She glanced at the sword, then licked her lips. "She—"

"No." Knowing I was making her nervous, I tested the edge with my thumb. "Why her, specifically? The others were equally heinous. Tell me."

I added a thread of command to my voice and gritted my teeth when she flinched. I hated compelling her, but she wasn't telling me what I needed to know.

She screamed and put her hands over her ears. "Sally skinned my mother alive for missing a payment into pride coffers, you fates-damned bastard! One single payment, and I'm pretty sure Sally is wearing her hide on shopping trips." It was the confirmation I needed, even though deep down, I already knew she was Lydia's missing daughter. I remembered a shy little girl who hid from everyone because she couldn't shift like the other cubs. She'd vanished afterward, but nobody bothered to look for her.

I dropped the point of the saber to the floor and strode to her. Without giving her a chance to protest, I cradled the back of her neck and kissed her hard. Despite her struggles, I wouldn't let go, and eventually, she softened and let me in.

She tasted like honey and mint, and it was the most delicious thing I'd ever experienced. When she whimpered and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, I softened my touch and drew away.

"I will give you Sally's head on one condition."

"I don't understand." She blinked the haze of arousal from her eyes and touched her swollen lips. "What condition?"

Eva needed to know her mother's death meant something. It meant the return of safety and prosperity to shifters all over the western half of America. She needed to see that I kept my word.

I smirked and saluted her with my saber. "I'll tell you soon. Don't wander off."

Without giving me a chance to do more than touch my tingling lips, he walked out with his dumbass sword. He didn't even need to lock me in because of his stupid order.

The minute I approached the threshold, my legs stopped moving. It would wear off in a few hours, but I was stuck until then.

I also wanted to change into something besides a bathrobe. After tightening the sash, I snorted and went to pick at the charcuterie Rebecca had left. Apparently, she'd forgotten the dress she promised me. Still pouting, I curled up on the couch and tucked my legs under me.

"Eva?"

I turned as Chloe rapped on the doorframe. Instead of the cute, summery dress she'd been wearing at her cake tasting, she wore black trousers and a white polo shirt. Strangely, her eyes were red and swollen.

"Hi, Chloe. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good." She cleared her throat and tried to smile. "The Alpha asked me to get you. Will you follow me outside, please?"

"I'd like nothing more than to follow you outside, then keep on walking until I'm as far away from Llyr Barstow as I can get. Unfortunately, he used his alpha voice to keep me here."

"Oh." She glanced at the door, then took a few steps backward. "I'll get Ty to let you out. Give me a few and he'll be right with you."

EVA

"Thanks. Could you also bring me something to wear? Sweats and a T-shirt are fine."

"Yeah, okay. I'll see what I can do." She hurried away before I could reply.

Frowning at her odd behavior, I returned to the couch and ate a slice of sharp cheddar with a cracker before pushing the tray out of my reach. I'd already stuffed myself, and if I kept eating, I wouldn't have room for supper.

Then again, with luck, I wouldn't have to stick around that long.

"I hear you've been a naughty girl and need me to spring you," Ty said as he strode into the room. Thankfully, he was carrying what looked like a long-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, along with my sneakers. "I'll show you to a powder room, so you can change before I take you outside."

"Fine." I let him take my hand to lead me through the door, but hissed at the slight sting as Llyr's command snapped at my nerve endings before it broke.

What an asshole.

When we reached the powder room, he said, "I'll be waiting right outside." Sobering, he touched my shoulder, then added, "It's going to be okay, and I promise you won't be harmed."

"The fact that you feel the need to tell me that isn't exactly comforting." Without waiting for an answer, I shut the door in his face, then dressed quickly.

Everything was too big and smelled like Llyr, and I hated how much I liked it. I took my time washing my hands, using the opportunity to think about what Llyr might want me to give him in exchange for Sally's head. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind. What did he need from a lowly baker when he already had everything he wanted?

Ty rapped on the door, startling me. "Sorry to rush you, but we need to get outside."

"Keep your shirt on." I dried my hands on a plush towel and finger combed my hair into submission, then took a deep breath before opening the door.

"Thank the fates." Without appearing to worry about whether I'd shift and chomp on him, Ty grabbed my arm and hurried me outside, forcing me to jog to keep up with his long strides.

To my surprise, a crowd formed a ring around Llyr, Chloe, and... Sally. Also surprising was the fact that Sally wore steel shackles around her wrists and ankles and was on her knees at Llyr's feet.

She glared up at him with a mixture of anger and fear on her face, then said something I couldn't hear.

"Yes, Sally, this is actually a trial, and I am actually the Alpha, remember?" Llyr asked as he rested the point of his saber on the ground. "Or did you think my not so dearly departed mother was still in charge?"

Although she looked like she wanted to reply, she said nothing and turned her vituperative gaze on Chloe, who held a painfully familiar stole over her arm.

"Let's go," Ty murmured. "You're the guest of honor."

"What?" I jerked free before he could pull me through the crowd. "Fuck no. I don't want anything to do with this unless Sally is bleeding out."

"So impatient." He grinned and took my hand once more. "Come on, I swear, you don't want to miss the fun."

I sighed and nodded but kept my head down as he led me into the circle of lions surrounding Llyr.

He brightened when he saw me and against my better judgment, I approached and laid my hand in his.

"Thank you for joining us, Eva." He kissed my cheek, drawing speculative murmurs from the crowd. "As I was saying, we gather here today to witness the execution of Sally Niven for crimes committed against the pride. Chloe Niven will present our first piece of evidence."

"Yes, Alpha."

I gritted my teeth when she stepped forward and shook out the stole.

"This is my mother's, and she wears it when she's away from the pride. We all thought it was fake, which is gross enough, but..."

Using an extended claw, she tore the lining to reveal the sueded inner surface of a hide. The crowd noise grew into angry murmurs until Llyr held up a hand to quiet them.

"Who does the pelt belong to, Sally?" he asked quietly. "I also want to know what went on in your head that made you think it was okay to wear the skin of one of your pride mates."

"It was just a Tithe," she muttered, dividing her angry glare between Chloe and Llyr. "I executed it on the order of the true Alpha."

"Uh huh." He turned his back on her and faced the crowd. "I like to think of myself as a democratic sort, and I know Sally has been talking about it to everyone who will listen. Who wants Tithing to make a comeback?"

Claws burst from my fingertips, and I tightened my fists to hide them as tears burned. Firming my jaw, I blinked them away, and tried to give Llyr my trust.

"Come now. I've heard the whispers." A shard of darkly vicious command laced his words. "Don't be shy. Raise your hand if you want to collar your friends and families. Let Sally start a new fashion trend. We'll all wear clothes made of our victims."

The bitterness and rage behind his words stole my breath, and I laid a hand over my abdomen. How did no one see it? Of course, I'd missed it too. I'd been too focused on revenge to learn if what I'd done had been the right thing to do.

When nobody obeyed, he took the stole from Chloe and strode to Cecilia and Donald Lee. Keeping his face devoid of expression, he laid it over her shoulders and ignored her moue of distaste. "Smashing, don't you think, Donald?"

Llyr glanced at me, so quickly I almost didn't believe it happened, then returned the stole to Chloe. "Maybe it's not Cecilia's color."

"Alpha, sir"—Donald cleared his throat and averted his gaze—"perhaps your predecessor got a bit carried away, but __"

I never saw Llyr move, but a spray of blood welled up from Donald's throat. Choking, he collapsed to his knees as Cecilia screamed. Her cries cut off abruptly as Llyr whirled and slashed a line across her neck, nearly severing her head.

After wiping the saber on her shirt, he bared his teeth and said, "Two down, one to go. Now, I will ask this one last time.

Who wants Tithes?"

CHAPTER 7

LLYR

"Nobody?" I asked, sparing a quick glance at Eva's shocked face. "Okay, here's an easier question. How many of you would rather die than see Tithing return?"

Unsurprisingly, every hand went up as I knew they would. There were very few in attendance who hadn't lost a friend or relative to my mother's bloodlust, and the scars went deeper than the surface. It would probably take another generation before people stopped pissing themselves when I spoke directly to them.

"What about Sally?" someone asked. "She killed my sister, then—"

I held up my hand, asking for silence. "I have someone I want you to meet."

My pride mates glanced at each other but were quiet as I strode to Eva and wrapped an arm around her waist. "This is Eva Andrews, and she's the woman I hope to convince I'm worth a claiming bite."

"She smells weird. It's like cake and... something wild," a teenaged cub said. "What is she?"

"Shh!"

Eva snorted out a laugh and shook her head.

"She is most definitely a shifter, and perhaps she'll allow you to see her animal soon." Keeping my arm around her waist, I added, "But first, story time. Who remembers how the revolt started?"

"It was Lydia..." Raphael, Chloe's mate, paled and his eyes widened when he made the connection with Eva. "Lydia

Andrews. They never found her daughter."

"We didn't look," Ty replied. "Sally wanted her too, so we hoped to give her a chance to get away."

Eva quivered in my arms, and faint stripes blossomed on her cheeks. I'd have done anything to comfort her, but this needed to happen first.

"What Sally did to Lydia sparked a revolution," I said, making sure I had everyone's attention before I turned to Sally. "Now, tell me who that pelt belongs to."

Sally cried out as the full weight of my order struck her. Veins pulsed in her forehead and her face turned red, but I wouldn't be denied.

Finally, after one last tearing scream, she shouted, "Lydia Andrews!"

Growls filled the air as my pride mates shifted into their animal forms. Thankfully, they held their position, but I didn't think it would last long.

I let out a calming breath as I held Eva's quivering body tightly to me. "Baby, listen to me," I murmured. "I'm giving you a choice."

She didn't seem to hear me and laughed bitterly. "All these years, that bitch has been wearing my mother's skin like some whackadoodle Buffalo Bill."

The acrid salt of her tears stung my nose, enraging my lion. Claws popped from my fingertips, and I could almost taste Sally's blood on my tongue, but I wouldn't steal Eva's retribution.

"Sweetheart, listen. Please."

"What do you want, Llyr?" The words were forced past tight lips and she kept her gaze on Sally's face.

"I can take her head right now. It will be over before you know it. Or..." I let the sentence trail off and waited for her answer.

"Or, what?"

"I let you have her in exchange for a claiming bite."

"It's not like you could stop me from tearing her apart."

She had a point, and although it drove my lion mad, I let her go when she wriggled free of my embrace and strode to Sally. "I'm to mate the Alpha," she murmured. "Imagine that."

"As if something like you could ever be an Alpha's mate," Sally snapped. "I should have skinned you too, but you're worthless and can't shift."

Eva laughed softly, then turned to face me. "Llyr, I accept. Come here."

The surrounding lions quieted at the nascent pulse of command in her voice, and I smirked as I obeyed. Even Sally jerked forward and caught herself with her bound hands on the ground, her eyes widening.

When I reached Eva, she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me hard, inadvertently nicking me with those glorious fangs. She sucked the trickle of blood from my tongue, and my cock hardened into steel. I eased back before I got carried away and claimed her in front of the entire pride.

Her palm slid down my chest and she smiled. "Let her go. If she shifts, it'll be much more entertaining."

"Ooh, I love it." I snapped my fingers, bringing Ty running with the keys to Sally's restraints. Within moments, she was free.

"My mate is both beautiful and generous," I said. "Sally, if you can defeat her in combat, you get a stay of execution."

Obviously convinced of her superiority against an unknown shifter, Sally glanced at Eva and smirked, then shifted into her lioness. Her muscles bunched as she prepared herself to attack.

"Go, sweetheart. Our mating bed is calling our names." After giving her one last kiss, I backed up several feet to give her space.

Between one step and the next, Eva morphed into her giant, gorgeous cat, sending my pride scattering with yowls of terror.

Her canines flashing in the sunlight, she roared, forcing me to cover my ears as birds lifted from the trees in a mass exodus from the enormous, scary thing come to take dominion over the mountain.

Sally froze and a trickle of urine coursed down her hind leg as Eva slowly stalked her. Without warning, she spun and took off at a dead run with Eva bounding after her.

Eva's bobbed tail stood straight up, communicating her joy of the chase as Sally zigzagged to avoid her. Her efforts were in vain. Eva snarled and launched herself at the smaller cat, tumbling Sally end over end. Blood spray erupted as Eva dug her hind claws into Sally's belly, and ropes of bluish intestine fell to the ground from the massive wounds.

The snap of bone echoed in the sudden stillness as Eva crushed her throat between powerful jaws. It was a more humane end than Sally deserved, certainly more so than she'd delivered to her victims.

I made a note to ask Eva why she'd ended Sally so quickly instead of savaging her as she'd done to the others.

"And then there were none," I murmured, smiling when Eva trotted back to me. Her chest and muzzle were coated with blood, and she sat on her haunches to clean her face with a huge paw.

"Fates..." The whispers were soft, but easily heard, and I smiled as my pride mates returned to their human forms. "What is she?"

"Mama! She's a saber-toothed tiger! How cool is that? Can we touch her?"

I frowned, knowing I'd made a point of asking everyone to leave their children at home. An execution was no place for a cub, but I couldn't stop them from watching from a distance.

"No!"

A terrified cry echoed as a cub raced for Eva, then took her paw and shouted gleefully about her claws. More children erupted from the crowd to swarm her, and I held back a laugh as a little boy reached up to grab one of Eva's fangs.

Eva laid her ears back and held her mouth open while the cub put most of his forearm between her jaws. Giving me a look promising retribution and a weary grunt, she dropped to her belly and let them play. I sighed inwardly as another cub climbed on my belly and went to town tickling just under my ribs. Squeals of delight rang as my hind leg kicked.

Fun!

No, humiliating. At least a few of the older cubs had the presence of mind to get damp towels and clean the blood off my fur before the babies got too close.

Even the adults seemed to have lost their fear, but more than a few mothers kept a wary eye on their offspring.

Not that I blamed them. I was ginormous, and none of them knew me.

Unfortunately, I couldn't move without risking harm to the cubs. With luck, the solar-powered little monsters would get tired and let me up from my ignoble position on my back.

Of course, their giggles and happy shrieks went a long way toward erasing the memory of my mother's fur in Chloe's arms, so I wasn't too unhappy about being turned into their jungle gym.

Maybe it was more that the cheerfully fearless cubs were clear evidence of how healthy the Barstow pride had become under Llyr's guidance.

I swiped my tongue across the tiny girl sleeping on my chest, smoothing her wispy blonde curls. They were cute too. Sort of. Maybe, just a little.

Cute! I want.

I reminded my beast that we weren't getting cubs without some help of the male persuasion, but I wasn't sure she got the

EVA

message.

"All right, kids!" Smirking at me, Llyr clapped his hands to get their attention. "It's time to let Eva up."

"No!" En masse, they growled and bared their teeth at him as a few of the older ones shifted.

I chuffed out a laugh, then carefully rolled to my side and deposited my sleeping charge on the ground, so she didn't fall. With the rest threatening Llyr, I could safely stand, and nodded respectfully to the little girl's mother when she picked her daughter up. Surprisingly, I got a shy smile and a thank you.

"I have a robe for you, Eva," Darius said as he approached with the aforementioned garment over one arm. "Shift before the cubs catch you again."

After arguing with my beast for a few seconds, she finally relented and let us return to our human form. Darius settled the robe over my shoulders almost as quickly as my fur receded.

"Thanks." I tightened the sash and smiled at him.

"My pleasure." Shrugging, he added, "We're having more clothes delivered for you. The Alpha's mate shouldn't be wandering around in a bathrobe all the time."

"I didn't exactly pack for an extended stay."

Chuckling, Darius offered me his arm and escorted me toward the house, leaving Llyr to the depredations of the advancing army. Judging by the sound of his laughter, I didn't think he minded.

As we reached the entrance, Chloe approached, still carrying my mother's skin. Without looking at me, she laid it in my arms. "Eva, nothing I say will make up for what Sally did, so for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I know I'm the last person you want to talk to, but Raphael and I want to plan a memorial service for your mom. Sally—" She sniffed and blinked rapidly before rubbing her eyes. "We never got to do that for Lydia."

I stroked the brittle fur, remembering how soft and silky it once was. Mama always had the nicest coat, and I needed to remind myself it wasn't her. Her pelt had been turned into a serial killer's trophy, but it was all I had left. Hell, I didn't even have a picture, and the memory of her face grew fainter every year. It was almost like losing her all over again.

The only thing that helped was knowing I'd killed everyone responsible for her death. Well, everyone except Donald and Cecilia, but I supposed Llyr had just as much reason to want them dead as I did.

Would have been nice if he'd taken care of them in the first place though. If he had, I might not have believed him to be like his mother.

"You were so little when it happened," I finally said. "Even younger than me. Nothing Sally did is your fault."

After wiping away the last of her tears, she gave me a watery smile. "Thanks. My head knows it. My heart... not so much."

"I think a memorial service is a wonderful idea. It will give everyone some closure." I held the fur out for her. "I'd like you to keep this in a safe place until it's time."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I don't know of anyone more qualified to take care of her."

"I won't let you down." Fresh tears trickled down Chloe's cheeks, but she smiled and cradled the fur in her arms. "Also, your cat is freaking amazing."

"Wow... um... thanks!"

As she hurried away, Darius cleared his throat and held the door for me. "You sounded like a real Luna."

"Please. I'm just a baker." Despite my words, I couldn't help preening at the compliment.

He sobered and slowed his pace as we entered the house. "We... I owe you an apology too, Eva. I shouldn't have threatened to violate your personal space like I did."

"No, don't." I smiled wryly, then added, "I mean, I was killing members of your pride."

"None who didn't deserve it years ago," he muttered. "We couldn't figure out how to give you a damned medal without letting everyone know."

"I also owe you an apology right back because I was planning to kill Llyr too." My face heated as he led me upstairs into a bedroom that smelled like my mate. "I thought he was like Martha."

"Why wouldn't you?"

He touched my cheek, and the powerful surge of his omega gift almost dropped me to my knees as it muted the pain of what had happened to my mother.

"Fates." I staggered and grabbed his arm before I fell. "Warn a girl first."

The grief wasn't gone, and probably wouldn't ever leave me, but Darius made it bearable and let me focus on my upcoming mating. "Sorry. I wanted to make you feel better. The important part is that you escaped and made a fantastic life for yourself."

I laughed and wiped a few stray tears from my cheeks. "Sure. I'll now be known as the prehistoric purveyor of pastry."

"Hon, you need to put that on business cards." He kissed my cheek, then squeezed my hand. "Llyr asked me to tell you to wait for him. I doubt he'll be long."

When the door shut behind him, I took scant notice of the opulent bedroom as I raced to the ensuite. I blinked and my mouth fell open like I was trying to catch flies. Fates, the man's bathroom should have been declared a national landmark. The gigantic soaking tub was calling my name, but I didn't have time. Of course, it wasn't like the marble and glass shower would be a step down.

Then again, we could share a bath. The tub was more than big enough to get up to all sorts of debauchery...

Deciding to save that game for later, I forcibly turned my gaze away from the tub and stepped into the shower before taking a moment to figure out the electronic taps. To my surprise and delight, the overhead fixture had colored lighting. I spent a few minutes playing with it before remembering what I was supposed to be doing.

If I was going to be mated, I didn't want to smell like blood and dirt. Humming in pleasure, I basked under the rainfall showerhead as I rinsed his shampoo from my hair.

Stilling, I cocked my head as a whisper of sound caught my attention. It was the barest hint of a footstep, followed by a low, male chuckle.

"Is this a private party, or can anyone join?"

Smiling, I turned and about swallowed my tongue at the sight of him without a shirt. Fates, the man was *cut*. "Can I make a new rule?"

"Rules already?" He slowly unfastened his trousers, revealing a trail of hair leading to exactly where I wanted to be.

"You are no longer allowed to wear a shirt in my presence. Also, I love this bathroom."

"Thank you. This suite and the kitchen are the only things I've been able to afford to remodel since I took over."

I frowned as he dropped his trousers and stepped into the shower with me. His thick cock almost but didn't quite distract me from the questions racing through my head.

"I thought the Barstow pride was, well, you know."

"Rich?"

"Um... yes?" My cheeks heated and I grabbed the body wash to hide my embarrassment.

"The pride is. Me, not so much, but I promise you won't have to live on peanut butter and white bread." He hesitated and squirted soap into a net pouf, then gently washed my back. "Does that disappoint you?"

"No. I mean, I live modestly, so even this bathroom is more than I've ever had, but the last I heard, you had high seven figures in assets. What happened?"

"I draw a small salary from the interest on investments, but all that money went back to the pride, like it should have all along."

"And the monthly payments from the pride members?"

"Three percent of their earnings. It's paying for college tuition, business loans, mortgage underwriting, emergency funds for people in need, and"—he turned me to face him and gave me a wry smile—"well anyway, you get the idea. So, what do you think?" CHAPTER 8

"Fates. Three percent is barely enough to keep the lights on. I shouldn't even be here." Turning away, Eva finished rinsing the soap from her curvaceous body, then stepped from the shower. "I can't imagine what possessed you to ask me, of all people, to mate you."

"Why not you?" I let her go, even though my lion wanted to use our alpha voice to compel her to stay.

"I'm not a lion for one thing. For another, I did actually plan to kill you, which would have been a huge mistake."

"I've been wondering about that." I turned off the taps and grabbed towels for us. "Why didn't you kill me in that hotel room? I was asleep, and even if I hadn't been, I don't believe for a second you couldn't have."

"It's kind of weird."

"What is?"

"I always saw myself as Grendel from *Beowulf*. Do you remember that story?"

"Vaguely. Wasn't that the one where the knight killed a witch? Her son swore revenge, and"—I cut myself off, then nodded—"ah, that would make me Beowulf, but you, my mate, are no monster."

"Sally would probably disagree. Anyway, you're Beowulf because you sort of did kill a witch. Of course, my best friend Letitia is actually a witch and would probably object."

"Let me guess. She's the one supplying you with scent blocker."

"I trade macarons and orange cupcakes with Frangelico frosting for it."

I barked out a laugh and patted her dry. "Since you took care of Sally, I think we're even on the witch killing. We'll skip the dragon slaying part. I doubt either of us would fare very well against a dragon shifter."

Thankfully, the dragons kept to themselves, for the most part. They had their own hierarchy and didn't involve themselves in shifter politics.

"Good choice."

"So, why didn't you kill me?"

She shrugged and squeezed the water from her hair with a towel. "I decided I didn't want to. Maybe something inside was telling me it was wrong."

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"What secret?"

"If I hadn't been convinced you were human, you wouldn't have left that hotel room without a claiming bite." I took her hand and pulled her close, then wrapped my arms around her waist. "And I have no intention of repeating my mistake."

Without giving her a chance to reply, I swung her over my shoulder and carried her into the bedroom. She wriggled to get free, and I slapped her backside hard enough to leave a reddened palm print.

She gasped and froze, and I inhaled the rich perfume of her arousal. "What are you doing?"

"Taking you to bed. No more arguments, no more trying to say you don't belong. I'm not listening to any of it." I laid her on the bed and straddled her hips, then kissed her hard. "We're going to make love. A lot. And then we're going to claim each other like we should have done that first night."

"But what if—"

I climbed off her, then flipped her to her stomach and delivered several hard spanks to her delectable bottom.

"Llyr! Ouch!"

"And no shifting." I delivered one more slap to her tender sit spot, then turned her over once more.

Instead of anger, I saw a flicker of need in her gorgeous eyes, and she licked her lips. "You didn't make that an alpha command."

"If you shift, you might break the bed."

"Hey! No body shaming allowed!" Despite her words, her lips curled into an impish smile. "It's not like I'm the size of a minivan or anything."

"Every part of you is gorgeous, my mate." I kissed her until she gasped for air and whimpered. "And we're going to be in this bed for a very long time. No condoms, no scent blocker. Just us."

Her natural perfume of feminine salt and sugar was mouthwatering. Thankfully, she'd never need scent blocker again.

"Llyr, I wanted to kill you. I'm not sure why you're still ignoring that."

I wedged myself between her thighs and captured her wrists, then positioned them over her head. Her eyes widened at the confinement, but she didn't protest. Before I answered, I stole a kiss. "If you hadn't added me to your hit list, I wouldn't have met you. I wouldn't have my mate, and that is unacceptable." I kissed a path across her collarbone, scant inches from where I'd soon set my bite. "Now, you can stop arguing and let me make love to you like you deserve, or..."

"Or what?"

I loved the challenge in her icy-gray eyes. I rose from the bed and smiled, baring my lengthening fangs, then threaded a hint of compulsion into my voice. "Get on your knees. Ass in the air, elbows on the bed."

The order didn't have enough power to truly force her. She was more than strong enough to ignore it. I needed Eva to obey because she wanted to—not because I compelled her.

She'd come to me of her own free will, and I intended to keep it that way.

We will keep our mate.

My lion sent me images of wrapping Eva in the sheets until she couldn't move. I ignored him, as covering her beautiful body was the last thing on my mind.

"Yes, Sir." She gave me a sweet, sexy smile and rolled to her stomach and got on her knees. Her back arched into a sinuous curve as she lowered her forearms to the mattress. "Have I been a bad girl?"

Fates. The woman was determined to make me lose control. In an effort to keep my mind on business, I got my play bag from the closet and opened it without letting her see any of the surprises inside.

"Do you know what happens to naughty kittens who commit multiple murders?"

"I prefer to call them long-overdue executions."

"Eva..." I gave her a frown of warning I didn't mean. After all, she wasn't wrong. Not for the first time, I wished I'd taken care of my mother's revolting toadies years ago, but if I had, I might not have met Eva.

Ignoring my lion's growls of disapproval at the thought of never knowing her, I thanked the fates she hadn't managed to shift as a child. I didn't need to imagine what my mother would have done to such an unusual cat.

With luck, one of the pride elders might know who her father had been.

"Oh, I know! They get mated to the Alpha of the Southwestern Prides. Do I win a prize?" She smirked, then stuck her tongue out at me.

"Hmm." I pulled a leather paddle from my bag and slapped it against my hand. "I believe your smart mouth has definitely won you a prize."

I flinched at the sharp crack of leather against his hand, but my pussy wept. Although I'd never played games of dominance and submission, I was sure I wasn't the only woman who got off while imagining being bound and spanked.

Liquid heat trickled down my inner thigh and Llyr's nostrils flared when he caught the scent of my arousal. A deep growl rumbled in his throat as he tossed the paddle aside and dove to the bed, positioning himself on his back with his face under my core. His claws biting into my hips, he pulled me down, forcing my pussy against his mouth.

"That's right," he growled. "Sit on my face, so I can eat this delicious cunt."

"Llyr, I'm too big. I'll smother you." I tried to lift myself off him and heard the slap of his hand against my butt before the pain registered. "Ouch!"

"I'm going to paddle your ass later for saying such a thing." He licked my folds, then added, "If you still plan to kill me, I want to die with my face buried between your legs while I'm eating my pussy."

He spanked me again, forcing me to lower myself. The sting morphed into pleasure as he pushed his tongue into my channel. After catching my breath, I asked, "Your pussy?"

"Mine." His growl vibrated through my body as another blistering spank landed on my ass. "All mine. I want this sweet honey all over my face."

Fates. Greedy lion. It wasn't like I was going to complain though. If he died, he died. Oh, wait... If I killed him, he wouldn't be able to do that *thing* with his tongue. His

EVA

continued growls were better than any toy I'd ever owned, and my belly cramped with desire.

It didn't seem possible, but this time was even better than our first. Maybe it was because I finally knew Llyr for who he was.

He could have taken Sally's head. As the Alpha, it was his right. Instead, he'd shown mercy until she proved she didn't deserve it. Even then, he'd given her to me just so I could keep my promise.

My shriveled little heart burst open, and I swallowed a few tears mixed with a breathless cry as he pushed a thick finger into my channel and curled it to press on my g-spot.

When he sucked my clit into his mouth, my vision faded, and I could barely hear the sound of my screams as I shattered into a thousand pieces of joy.

"So good."

The words vibrated against my sensitive flesh, making me shudder weakly as I tried to remember how to breathe.

Apparently, Llyr wasn't interested in anything so mundane and got back to work. Using my wetness as lubricant, he eased a finger into my ass as he licked my clit.

"Llyr!" I stiffened at the unfamiliar sensation and clamped down, desperate to ease the burn of penetration into my virgin hole.

I was on top. He was on his back under me. How the fuck did he make me feel so submissive? It didn't even cross my mind to get up.

"I'm going to claim every inch of you, Eva." He nipped my inner thigh hard, and I felt a trickle of blood before he swiped it away with his tongue. "This pussy, your ass, your mouth. It's all mine. Now, be a good girl and relax so I can fuck this pretty rosebud until you come for me again."

The filthy words sparked another surge of arousal, and I cried out and spasmed when he added a second finger to my ass. He placed a gentle kiss on the tender skin just above my clit, then added, "Maybe I should put my bite here. Did you know a claiming mark becomes a new erogenous zone?"

"Fates..." I jerked in a desperate attempt to get free, but he wrapped an arm around my hips and scraped a sharp fang over the spot. I stilled before he decided to be true to his words.

As entertaining as his idea sounded, I wanted my mark where everyone could see it—not in a place where even walking would exacerbate my need. My canines dropped and I closed my eyes as I tried to keep myself motionless.

Instead of sucking on my clit, he traced circles around it with the tip of his tongue, going everywhere except where I needed him the most. His fingers plunged in and out of my ass until the burning sting became penetrating need. Unable to help myself, I rocked against his hand, desperate for more.

"That's right." He licked my inner thigh but didn't bite. "Be a good girl and fuck yourself on my fingers."

"Fuck." I tightened my fingers on a handful of the bedding, feeling fabric tear under my claws as his arm tightened around my hips.

Dark pleasure welled into an incoming tide I couldn't control even if I wanted to. The lewd sound of Llyr lapping at my pussy with his roughened tongue sent me over the edge into a cataclysm of sensation and pulled me under as I screamed my delight. My bones and muscles turned to jelly, and unable to hold myself up, I collapsed to the bed and hoped I managed not to crush him.

"Oh, sweetheart, don't tap out yet." He chuckled softly and positioned me on my stomach with a pillow under my hips. "I'm not even close to finished with you."

"You're not?" Fates, the man was going to give me a heart attack, and we hadn't even gotten to sharing our claiming bites.

"Nope." He reached for the leather paddle and stroked it across my upturned bottom. "It's later now, and I promised you a spanking."

"For what?" I wiggled but didn't have the strength to protest when he laid a hand on my lower back. My whole body quivered with aftershocks, and I was lucky to remember how words worked as it was.

"Five for leaving me after our first night together, and five more for saying you're too big to sit on my face. Ready?"

Rebecca was so, so wrong. Llyr was not a good boy. At all.

And I was down for everything he wanted to give me.

CHAPTER 9

Her gray eyes warmed almost to blue as a thicker, impossibly sweet surge of her sugar and chocolate scent filled my lungs. I wanted to coat myself in her delectable perfume until I couldn't smell anything except her.

My lion was right. I should have hunted her down the minute I found her gone from our hotel room, and it was all I could do to stop myself from shredding my trousers so I could sink into her wet heat. Fangs aching, I swallowed hard and forced them back before my control snapped.

Told you so.

Ignoring my lion's smug comment, I moved until I could look into Eva's eyes. "Baby, if you're not okay with a funishment spanking, we'll skip it."

"Funishment?" Her plump lips curved into a smile as she wiggled her ass. "That must mean I wasn't a bad girl."

"Oh, you definitely are, my merry murderess, but you're my bad girl."

I let the paddle fall to the lower curve of her ass, keeping the blow just hard enough to bring a touch of pink to her luscious flesh.

She moaned and arched her back, lifting her hips for another. "I really prefer the term executioner."

"So naughty." I gave her two more, one on each side, then a fourth to make things even.

Instead of the pained cry I expected, she sang the first few lines of the chorus from "Cell Block Tango," then asked, "Can I have a black hood and a giant axe?"

LLYR

My sinuses burned from the force of holding back my laughter as I delivered the last of her spanks in rapid succession. When she moaned in pleasure, I couldn't wait another moment to claim her.

I launched myself from the bed and fabric tore as I wrenched off my clothes. She rolled to her side and tossed the pillow away, then licked her lips, clearly enjoying the show.

"I changed my mind." She bent her knee and stroked her succulent pussy. "Nobody gets to see you without a shirt except me. I might have to get homicidal again if they do."

My lion preened under her avid attention, the vain creature. "Last chance, babygirl."

"For what?" She licked the tip of her fang and a droplet of her sweetly scented blood fell onto the sheets.

My vision darkened and I shuddered with need, but I had to give her one last chance to refuse. "You can leave now, and I'll let you go." I forced the words from my dry throat. "If you don't, you're not getting out of that bed without a claiming mark."

She rolled to her back and bared a hint of fang but didn't stop touching herself. "What are you waiting for?"

"Your consent."

"I should be asking you that question." Her cheeks turned pink, and she glanced away before returning her gaze to my face. "I mean, I'm not exactly a pride princess. You still have a chance to escape."

How could she possibly doubt her appeal? I'd have chosen her even if my lion hadn't already been after me for days to find her. "You know, if you want another spanking, all you have to do is ask."

"I didn't realize giving you a chance to get away was asking for a spanking."

"I have no intention of escaping." Resisting the urge to find the paddle, I added, "If I'm very lucky, you'll agree to our mating, and I won't have to learn if I'm strong enough to let you walk away because I don't think the answer will be yes."

She blinked in surprise and as her lips curved into a smile, she got to her knees, then lifted her hand and beckoned me to her. "Come here, Llyr."

My gut tightened and I took an involuntary step toward her, unable to resist the sweet command in her voice. I tried to shake it off, but the sound seemed to reverberate through my body, forcing me to kneel before her.

Obey and let me soothe you.

Although just as compelling, Eva's power didn't have the bitter edge of agony my mother's energy once had. It was temptation and the promise of ease, and just as decadent as her baking.

Eva was everything a Luna should be—protective, yet vengeful when she needed to be. I couldn't have asked for a better mate.

She cupped my cheeks in gentle hands and brushed a kiss over my mouth. "Make love to me, please. I need you inside me. I need your mark, and"—exhaling a ragged breath, she rested her forehead on mine—"please, Llyr. I need you."

"You've had me since the first time we met."

She melted against me as I laid her down and covered her with my body. As much as I enjoyed our games, I wanted to look into her beautiful eyes and watch her come apart.

I refused to let our first time as mates be anything less than perfect.

Instead of falling on me like I wanted, Llyr simply gazed at me. His avid attention was both disconcerting and... actually, I had no idea what to call the expression on his face, and nobody had ever looked at me the way he did.

Like I was the answer to his prayers.

My throat clicked as I swallowed hard. "Llyr?"

Without warning, he snaked a hand behind my head and kissed me almost brutally. The crown of his magnificent cock prodded at my opening, and I gasped into his mouth as he devoured me. Even without a mating mark, I'd never felt so... claimed.

Breathing hard, he gentled his touch, but didn't let go of my hair. His beautiful green eyes glittered in the late afternoon sunlight peeking around the edges of gray silk drapes covering the expansive windows.

"I need to take this slow and make it good for you, but fuck, Eva." His breathing steadied and he cleared his throat. "You undo me."

"Same, cowboy." I let my nails lengthen into short claws and scratched his back gently before digging them into his taut backside. "Let's take it slow next time."

He hissed at the slight sting and positioned himself at my entrance before slamming into me.

"Yes!"

My shout echoed with his growl of pleasure. If I hadn't already been so wet and needy, it might have hurt, but I was

EVA

too far gone to register anything but the feel of him surging into me.

His sandalwood scent thickened in my lungs until I couldn't smell anything else and sweat slicked our bodies as I wrapped my calves around his hips, desperate for everything he had to give.

The muscular expanse of his shoulder glistened, calling me to sink my fangs into his decadent flesh, but I forced myself to wait.

"Eva…"

He said my name like a catechism, over and over as he thrust into me. His pubic bone hit my clit on every downstroke, driving me to madness. It was too much, but not enough at the same time.

My vision darkened as my channel clamped down on him and an electric pulse of desire surged through my body, forcing me to close my eyes.

"Eva, look at me." He tightened his fist in my hair and his lips crashed against mine in a searing kiss. "Open those beautiful eyes. I need to see you when I make you come."

"Fates, I—"

"You're going to look at me when you scream my name."

Llyr's words were almost, but not quite a command, and helplessly, I obeyed. His pupils were blown, and I could barely see the green of his irises. Desperate for more, I lifted my hips to meet his punishing thrusts.

Tendons stood out in his neck, and he drew his lips back to reveal lengthening fangs. The sight sent another gut punch of need into my core, and I couldn't hold back the powerful surge of my climax.

"Llyr!"

He struck like a snake, and I barely felt the slide of his canines into the base of my neck. I cried out as his heat filled me to bursting. The strength of an Alpha male overwhelmed me, and I gasped his name as he slowly eased his teeth from my flesh and licked the wound.

His thrusts slowed, but were no less powerful, and every touch was a shock to my system. Although the bite didn't hurt, it throbbed, sending fresh waves of desire into my core. My beast roared in my head, desperate to mark Llyr as he'd done to us.

"Please..."

"Not yet." He slid a hand between our bodies and circled my clit with his fingertips. "You're going to come again before I let you claim me."

My fangs ached from the pressure of holding them back and I sobbed his name. Another climax blasted through me, more powerful than anything I'd ever felt before, and my heart pounded in time to the throbbing from my mating bite.

"Llyr, I can't... fates!"

"One more." He slammed into me, his cock swelling. "Fuck, Eva. Give me one more."

His hand still in my hair, he tugged my head to the side and sucked on my bite, sending a painfully intense shard of lightning into the very center of me.

"Come for me."

Too powerful to resist, the command made my breath stall in my throat and my vision went dark as I exploded for him. I didn't even have time to be annoyed about the painfully forced orgasm—not that I would have.

"Fuck, yes," he growled as searing cum flooded my channel.

My fangs dropped before I could recover, and I yanked him down to sink them into the meat of his shoulder. Sweet, heady, and rich with life, his blood filled my mouth, sealing us together.

As I licked the wound, the mating bond snapped into place, allowing me to hear our cats' triumphant roars. I also heard the fainter calls of our pride as they lifted their voices in celebration of their Alpha and his new mate.

Tears welled in my eyes as I experienced a pride connection for the first time. It was like being surrounded in silken threads of energy, both powerful and comforting, yet also frightening when I realized how far the bonds reached.

Although I knew he was the Alpha of the Southwestern Prides, I didn't understand that he was connected to most of the lions in America. I would be responsible for nurturing those threads for the rest of my life.

It scared the fuck out of me, but my beast was perfectly content, and purred happily.

"Holy shit."

"Yeah." Lines of tension around his eyes smoothed as he rolled to the side and pulled me into his arms. "No words."

"Llyr, how long have you been carrying the prides by yourself?"

I was sure I'd get used to it eventually, but the pressure was intense. It wasn't a physical weight though. Instead, it was more like... unspent potential.

He sighed and kissed my mating mark. "Fourteen years, eleven months, and twelve days."

I counted the dates and nodded. "Fifteen years will be August eighteenth. The day my mother—"

"Yes." He kissed my mark again, making my pussy flutter. Chuckling softly, he added, "I bet it's the day you planned to kill me too."

"How did you know?"

"Lucky guess."

CHAPTER 10

LLYR

The bed was a wreck of tangled sheets, sweetly scented with my mate's cum. Empty food trays littered the floor, and a pile of dirty towels rested in a basket next to the bathroom, all evidence of a week spent doing absolutely nothing but making Eva scream my name.

Although we'd spent days in each other's arms, I couldn't stop looking at her. Her dark hair was a mass of tangled curls, and her lush lips were parted in sleep. She'd never looked more beautiful with the flush of our love decorating her freckled cheeks.

There was no question about it. I was head over heels for my glorious mate. We talked about everything under the sun, laughed a lot at each other, and did all the things a mated couple should have done before mating.

Well, aside from actually going out in public. Other than phone calls to manage our respective businesses, our only contact with the outside world was when Rebecca left trays of food by the door. I'd have been happy to spend the rest of my life like that, but we needed to rejoin the living.

We'd both been feeling our pride's delight and anticipation for our mating party. Eva also needed to get back to her bakery.

As if feeling my gaze on her, she stirred from her nap and blinked at me, then rolled to her stomach and yawned.

"I swear to the gods, Llyr, if you use your alpha voice to make me come one more time..." Her words trailed off on a weary sigh and she laughed softly. "Actually, I won't do a damned thing because holy shit, I'd say that's using your powers for good."

I traced a fingertip down her spine, smiling when she shivered. "We should probably clean up and give Ty and Darius proof of life."

"Don't wanna." She threw a pillow at me, then buried her head under the covers.

"Nope. It's time to put on clothes and go outside." I pulled the sheet off the bed, meaning to toss it into the basket with the towels. Before I could do so, she growled, then hissed at me.

"Give. That. Back." She held out a clawed hand and hissed again.

"Eva?" Carefully, I held out the sheet and blinked when she snatched it away. "Are you okay?"

Still growling, she arranged the sheet in a circle, then positioned herself in the middle, along with my pillow and a few of my shirts from the laundry hamper.

"Eva, honey, tell me what's wrong."

Her growl cut off and she sat up, then gazed at the sheet she'd arranged. "Shit. I have no idea. I'm sorry."

"Do you want me to call Darius?"

"No, I—" Her eyes widened, and she scrambled to the bags of clothes I'd had delivered for her. "Get dressed. He's coming up the stairs."

She yanked a pair of jeans and a T-shirt free and dressed quickly.

Frowning, I checked the pride bonds, then nodded and grabbed a clean pair of pants from my closet. A knock sounded, and I hastily pulled on a shirt.

"It's Darius. I've been elected to chase you outside."

After checking to make sure Eva was decent, I opened the door. "Come on in. We were actually just talking about—"

Eva snarled, making both of us look at her in surprise.

"Fates, no!" Darius paled and backed away from the door. "No way am I going into Eva's den. I like my head right where it is, thank you."

"Eva's... den? What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You gave her cubs. This is her den now."

As a true omega, Darius was never wrong about the health of my pride members and used his gifts to help them through illness and injury, up to and including the birth of cubs.

I froze and tried to keep my lion contained before our shared joy forced us into an unwilling shift. The constant hum of life rushing through the bonds with my pride went silent at my deafening inner roar of happiness.

Instead of swinging her into my arms and shutting the door in Darius's face, I forced myself to remain still. Eva needed time to come to terms with how much our lives would soon change, and she wasn't ready to believe it yet.

"That's ridiculous. I can't possibly be pregnant." Eva laughed and rolled her eyes. "Even if by some stretch of the imagination I was, this is Llyr's room. Come in, Darius."

"Uh huh." He smirked at her as he took two steps into the room. Before he could take a third, Eva hissed and bared her teeth. "Like I said, you're pregnant. I don't know why I didn't catch it earlier, but I can smell it from here." Smiling, he backed out of the room before pointing at the bed. "And that is a nest. I'd say make it bigger. You're having at least three, and you'll deliver sometime in late March or early April."

After counting the days since the night we shared in that cheap hotel room, I burst out laughing at Eva's shocked face. She shot me an angry glare, then said, "That's impossible."

"Improbable, but not impossible," I murmured. "Condoms aren't foolproof."

"The plot thickens. Ty and I wondered how Llyr knew you. I guess we have our answer." Whistling softly, Darius retreated down the corridor to the stairs.

"Wait! Get back here!" Eva shouted.

"Nope!" His footsteps on the hardwood stairs echoed over his shout. "I'm not talking to you until you're out of your den, Luna."

She spun on me, eyes wide in her pale face. "Is he right?"

"Darius is never wrong." I strode to her and cupped her beautiful face in my hands. "And I am the happiest cat in the world."

Blushing, she closed her eyes as her lips curved into a delighted smile. "No, you're not. I am."

Still in a daze, I let Llyr lead me into the bathroom and undress me. After turning on the shower, he urged me under the spray and washed me.

I wasn't sure what to think about being pregnant. Considering I'd never dared to show my beast to a soul, I hadn't thought I'd be in a position to have cubs. Even when I'd been exposed to male shifters, none of them had made me consider what I'd given up.

Well, not until Llyr anyway.

It seemed almost too good to be true. Actually, everything did. Instead of a solitary life, I had a gorgeous mate, a pride, and cubs on the way. I couldn't help but wonder when the other shoe would drop and rip everything from me.

"I guess the universe was determined to get our mating started early," he said as he rinsed conditioner from my hair.

"Yeah." I frowned and rubbed my ear. "Hey, off topic, but do you hear something weird? It's like crowd noise at a concert, but soft."

"It's the pride." He turned off the taps and handed me a fresh towel. "They know we're coming out and want your attention, but I'm muting it until you get used to it."

"Muting it how? I don't understand."

"They'll quiet down once they see us," he promised. "You basically use your Luna strength to put a blanket over the pride bonds. I'll teach you soon."

I winced and wrapped the towel around my hair. "We shouldn't have stayed away so long. I don't think ignoring our

pride is in the Alpha instruction manual."

"Hey." He brushed a kiss over my mating mark, then gathered me into a tight hug. "No feeling guilty over doing what newly mated couples do. The pride understands, but they're also feeding off our emotions and are excited."

"Does that mean everyone knows?" I laid a hand on my belly, unsure how I felt about that. "Did Darius tell them?"

"No. He'll let us make a formal announcement."

"That's not scary at all," I muttered, following him into the bedroom.

Laughing, he carried one of the bags of clothes he'd bought for me to the bed, then pulled a cute red sundress free. "What do you think?"

I swallowed hard, remembering his mother always wearing fancy clothes and heels. To this day, I couldn't hear the sound of high-heeled shoes on wood without having a mini panic attack. Although I could probably tolerate the dresses and suits, I'd be wearing them with flats.

His nostrils flaring, he bared his teeth and laid his hands on my shoulders. "What just scared you, Eva?"

"I... um"—I tamped down my fear and tried to smile—"a sundress is a little too casual for meeting with the pride for the first time, isn't it?"

He studied me for a moment, then laid the dress on the bed. "I haven't worn a suit in fifteen years, Eva. I threw every tie I owned into the trash. I don't need a thousand-dollar suit to be an effective Alpha, and neither do you."

"But—"

He laid a gentle finger on my lips. "You are Luna. That will never change. Would you prefer jeans and a T-shirt instead?"

"I really like the dress. I just... I don't know." I rested my head on his chest and took a deep breath of his sandalwood scent when he wrapped his arms around me. "I feel like a damned teenager wanting to make a good impression at my first job interview."

"I have a feeling your teeth already did that." He tipped my chin up and kissed me. "And also letting the cubs play with them. That's what people will remember—not what you're wearing."

"I... okay. I can do this."

"Good." He turned me to face the dress, then swatted my butt. "I'm going to get dressed. I'll be done in a few minutes but take your time."

I watched his gorgeous ass until he disappeared around the corner into his walk-in closet, then grabbed underwear and a bra. After putting on the dress and a pair of cute sandals, I twisted my wet hair into a messy bun and secured it with a clip. Sooner or later, I'd have to put things away, but we'd been too busy with each other to worry about anything so mundane as emptying a few dresser drawers for me.

"How do I look?" Still fussing with my hair, I didn't turn around when he came back.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

My cheeks heated, but I couldn't help smiling as I turned to face him. At the sight of him, I burst out laughing.

"I thought you threw away your ties," I said after catching my breath.

"All but this one." He straightened the dark blue silk patterned with dozens of yellow emojis. "The cubs gave it to me for Christmas a few years ago."

"I love it." I wrapped the tie around my hand and pulled him close, then kissed him. "Very convenient."

His eyes darkened and he sank his hands into my hair, pulling it free of the clip. "Definitely convenient."

I moaned into his mouth as his thick erection prodded my stomach. Needing to feel him in my hand, I fumbled at the zipper blocking me from my prize. Instead of letting me have it, he took a step back, then brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles.

"Fates, Eva." After taking a deep breath, he zipped his pants and straightened his tie. "You're making me forget we have Alpha things to do."

"Curses, foiled again." Knowing he was right, I picked up my clip and fixed my hair. "I'll try harder next time."

"You don't have to work that hard. Trust me." He offered his arm, then added, "Shall we?" CHAPTER 11

As I opened the door, Eva's hand tightened on my arm, and she froze.

"It's okay," I murmured, giving her time to adjust as I drew on Ty's beta energy to put a stronger damper on the noise for her. "It's just our mating party."

"How big is this pride?" She turned to me, her eyes wide and filled with panic. "Fates, Llyr! There must be a thousand people!"

Her scent turned bitter with fear, and I tried to soothe her with a rumbling purr as I gazed at the multiple party pavilions and endless tables set up and laden with food. Commercial grills and smokers sent the delicious aroma of cooking meat into the air. A live band was already playing, and the portable dance floor was filled with people.

Children played under the watchful eyes of their parents, and I caught more than a few couples sneaking into the pool house on the hunt for privacy.

"These are the Southwestern Prides," I finally said. "Looks like they're here to meet you."

"I can't do this." She spun on her heel, nearly stumbling over the step leading back inside. Before she could escape, a child's voice rang out over the din.

"Uncle Llyr, look at me. I'm doing ballet!"

"Hello, Daphne." I swept her into a hug, then put her down when she wiggled to get free.

To my surprise, Eva's fear faded, and she smiled as she turned and went down the stairs toward Daphne Kostas, my childhood friend Teresa's daughter. "Look at what a great dancer you are, and your dress is so pretty!"

"Yaya helped me pick it out." The little girl twirled in a circle. "We had to go into the city and took a train, and we had tea in Russia, and then we went to the ballet, and I got to ride in a carriage. The horse got scared, but only a little."

"Wow, you went all the way to Russia for tea?" Eva asked, hiding a smile.

"No, silly. It was a restaurant. You know, in the city."

"Daphne is from the Seattle pride," I murmured softly. "Her grandparents are part of the New York pride."

Eva nodded her understanding, then crouched to Daphne's level. "That sounds like a wonderful time. I'd love to do that someday."

"Come on," Daphne said, taking Eva's hand. "We'll have our own tea party."

I let them go, silently thanking Daphne for distracting Eva from her anxiety as Teresa approached with one of her infants on her hip. "Hey, mangy cat. How's it hanging?"

She held out her free arm for a hug, but I shook my head and backed away. "Sorry, mated now."

"Newly mated," she corrected. "Which means your brains are even more scrambled than usual. I need to sit down with your new Luna and tell her all the embarrassing stuff you did when we were kids. Where is she, anyway? I feel her everywhere, but..."

Her eyes widened and she spun to watch Eva lift Daphne up on a bench. "Fuck's sake, my hellspawn just kidnapped the Luna of the Southwestern Prides, didn't she?" "Looks like it."

"Fates." She shivered and let out a happy sigh. "She's like a warm blanket. I love her already."

"Same here." I smiled as Eva poured juice for Daphne, then held her pinky out as she sipped from her own cup.

"Hmm. They say men mate women like their mothers, but I think you mated the anti-Martha. She's not a lion, but nice work, mangy cat."

"No, she's definitely not a lion." I hesitated, then added, "Her mother was Lydia."

"Holy shit! Are you kidding?" She frowned and cocked her head. "I kind of remember her, actually. She couldn't shift, and then she disappeared when... anyway, what is she, and where has she been hiding all this time?"

"She's been living as a human in Santa Fe and owns a bakery."

"And? What is she?"

"She's a throwback Smilodon."

After studying me for a moment, Teresa barked out a laugh. "Good one, Llyr. You had me going there for a second. Seriously, what is she?"

Her disbelief didn't surprise me, but I wondered why my pride hadn't spilled the beans already. Maybe they were waiting for permission.

"I wasn't kidding. She's about a thousand pounds with teninch serrated canines. Ask anyone in the Tererro pride."

Teresa divided her gaze between me and Eva, then shrugged. "Well, I guess we finally found someone strong enough to keep Daphne contained. When will you tell the rest of the prides?"

"I thought I'd let it be a surprise." I smirked, imagining the reactions.

"You don't have enough trees for everyone to climb." She grinned and jostled her son on her hip. "Gonna be funny as fuck though."

"I thought so."

"Do you mind if I tell Jason?"

"No. You can also tell anyone who might not react well."

"Good idea."

Neither of us mentioned the Seattle pride existed because she led refugees north and set up her own. At barely fifteen, her Luna gifts had been strong enough to lead them through an underground network to escape Martha Barstow.

Teresa had been the one who needed the escape though. After the revolt, I found notes in my mother's desk outlining her plans to demand Teresa as a Tithe the minute she turned eighteen. There was no way she would have let such a powerful Luna survive.

"Speaking of nasty things like Martha, where's Sally One-Ear and her posse of fuckwits?" she asked.

"Dead."

I very carefully didn't mention Eva's killing spree, but decided to tell Teresa and her mate when we had more privacy. Although my pride had witnessed Sally's execution, they didn't need to know the rest. Then again, there were probably more than a few who suspected it.

"Fates! Is it my birthday, or what?" Teresa giggled and swung her son into the air. "Hear that, Lucas? The wicked witch is dead, and Mama didn't have to kill her."

When I laughed, she smiled, and said, "Come on. Introduce me to Eva properly, then I'll rescue her from the depredations of Daphne, so you can have your mate back." "You smell funny," Daphne said. "Not bad, but weird. What are you?"

"I'm a..." I considered my words, unwilling to frighten a child. "I'm a cat, but a little different."

It felt good to focus on her. Talking to Daphne let me ignore the constant push of a thousand people all wondering about their Luna. Even with Llyr's help at muffling the sound, it was almost overwhelming.

I had no idea how they'd react to me, and it was scary as fuck. What would happen when they figured out what I was?

"Okay." Daphne spread mustard on a massive slice of smoked prime rib and ate it with her fingers. "My friend Todd is different too. I heard someone call him the r-word at school, and then I got expelled for fighting, but Mama said I did the right thing."

Thankful for the distraction, I said, "You absolutely did do the right thing. It's not nice to call people names."

"You're not as special as Todd though. I like him a lot."

Note to self: when in need of an ego check, call Daphne.

I kind of hoped the cubs growing under my heart were just like her.

"All right, monster," a woman said, giving Daphne a loving smile. "You've had the Luna long enough, and it's time to let her go back to Uncle Llyr."

"Oh, no, it's okay," I replied. "We're having a tea party."

The woman laughed and plucked Daphne from the bench. "It's wonderful to meet you. I'm Teresa Kostas, Luna of Seattle. Daphne is my spawn."

"Eva Andrews." I held out my hand, but instead of shaking it, she pulled me into a tight hug.

"Welcome home, Eva. I"—Teresa took a step back, then blinked moisture from her eyes—"seriously, welcome home."

Before I could reply, Llyr laid a hand on her shoulder to comfort her, and I hissed, baring teeth. Teresa seemed nice enough, but she didn't get to touch my mate. To my surprise, she gave me a warm smile and moved out of reach.

"Don't worry. I'm already happily mated." She took Daphne's hand and cocked her head toward Llyr. "Besides, I've known that mangy cat from when the biggest thing he could hunt was chipmunks."

"Hey!" Llyr smiled, obviously not offended.

"Do we need to give Uncle Llyr mange medicine?" Daphne asked. "I don't want his fur to fall out."

I let out a surprised laugh and studied Teresa. She was gorgeous, with silky blonde hair and vibrant blue eyes. My beast rumbled a bit, but clearly didn't see her as a threat. "I think I remember you. You left when I was little, right?"

"Yeah." She sobered and pulled Daphne close, making me wonder what put the look of bleak resignation in her eyes. "Anyway, I'm going to scare up the rest of my brats and put them to bed. It's great to see you again."

"You too."

As Teresa strode away with her children, Llyr bowed and held out his hand. "Care to dance with a mangy cat, beautiful Luna?"

"I thought I was the mangy one." I moved into his arms, and he swept me into a box step as the crowd moved out of our way.

"No." Lowering his head, he kissed me as the music swirled through the night air. "You're still the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen, and I'm wondering if this is all just a dream."

I pinched his arm and smirked when he yelped. "I'm not a dream, but I get it. It's like... I don't know. Too good to be true?"

"Shh." He touched his forehead to mine. "It's not. It took me fifteen years to make these prides ready for you, and I had no idea what I was working toward."

"Fates, Llyr." I sniffed and blinked back tears, then hauled in a breath. "They're calling for me. I don't know what to do."

"I know." He spun me, then carefully eased me off the dance floor until we were hidden behind one of the party pavilions. "You don't have to out yourself though. They're happy knowing you're here, even if they don't know who you are. Go at your own pace but let them enjoy you. It's been a long time since they've had a real Luna."

"Ooh, where is she?"

He laughed and found a bench, then pulled me into his lap. "I couldn't say, but I know she's going to be screaming my name later."

"Mmm. Can we sneak away early?"

"Hmm." He studied the crowd, craning his neck to find something, then eased me off his lap. "Wait right here. I'm going to find Ty and tell him we're leaving."

"We really shouldn't—at least not this early."

As much as I wanted to return to our den for another week of seclusion with my mate, we had responsibilities. At the very least, I needed to introduce myself to the other Alphas and Lunas.

"Eva, it can wait." He caressed my cheek and kissed me. "I can already feel your anxiety."

"And? Are you suggesting we make them come all this way a second time? Or a third?"

"If necessary, yes. They're not important."

How could he even think that? I climbed off his lap and straightened my dress, then pinned him with a steady glare. "That sounds like something your mother would have said, Llyr, and I don't appreciate it. All these people should be important to both of us."

"That's not what I meant." His jaw tightened and he exhaled through his nose. "You know better than to accuse me of that."

"Then what did you mean?"

His expression softened and he relaxed his shoulders. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply they aren't worthy of our attention, but it's driving me and my lion crazy that you're nervous and scared. I can't help but want to keep you safe and kill the thing that frightened you."

"Oh." I closed my eyes and tried to let go of my irritation. Although I hadn't grown up in a pride, I knew it was hardwired into shifters to protect their mates. "I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions." "Not that I blame you, given your experience," he muttered. "Let's go inside. We'll invite the prides one at a time to give you a chance to get used to them."

"You can't protect me from everything."

"Wanna bet?" He bared a hint of fang and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. "Watch me."

Swallowing hard, I tamped down a surge of arousal and tried to focus. As much as I wanted to, taking Llyr into a dark corner so he could do unspeakably dirty things to me wasn't on the evening's agenda.

"That's a pretty good *fuck around and find out* face." I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on his chest to let the steady beat of his heart soothe me. "I need to cowboy up and do this before I lose my nerve. Show me to the Alpha I should meet first."

CHAPTER 12

"I want my dislike of this plan to go on record," I muttered, guiding Eva to Devon McAllister, Alpha of the Albuquerque pride. His mate Lisa carried two of their newest cubs in a sling and Devon had a third strapped to his abdomen.

I very purposely chose Lisa and Devon because of the cubs. Eva seemed to relax in their presence, and if she was determined to meet everyone, I wanted to make the process as easy as possible.

And I had no intention of introducing her to any of the unmated males. That would push my tolerance too far.

"Duly noted."

Despite her words, her hand tightened on mine as Devon nodded respectfully and said, "Thank you for welcoming us."

"This must be our new Luna." Lisa rearranged her infants and held out her hand for Eva to shake. "I'm Lisa McAllister from Albuquerque. It's wonderful to see you again."

The skin between Eva's brows wrinkled with confusion. "Again? I'm sorry?"

Lisa smiled and leaned closer. "I'm an addict for your cherry cordial cupcakes. They're totally worth the trip to Santa Fe, but you're naughty for making me think you were human."

"Oh, well, thank you. I'm glad you like them. It's always nice to meet a happy customer, and I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

"Why would you? I mean, I can only make it every other month or so, but I'd love to take you to lunch sometime when you're free." Devon glanced at several approaching Alphas and took Lisa's hand. "Llyr has our phone numbers. Please let us know when you'd like to survey the Albuquerque pride."

He led Lisa away to allow others access to Eva, and my jaw tightened when I saw how many unmated males surrounded my woman. My irritation must have shown on my face because they kept their distance.

Eva didn't miss a beat and took every introduction in stride. Her anxiety seemed to fade with each greeting, helped along by the general sense of wellbeing and happiness emanating from the crowd.

Surprisingly, there were even representatives from other clans. The wolves and bears had both sent their respective leaders, and Eva seemed charmed by the family of cheetahs from South Carolina.

Against my lion's wishes, I gave her space to wander and get to know the prides. As much as I hated to admit it, she'd been right about needing to present herself.

The life of an Alpha wasn't easy. We had to do things we didn't like sometimes, but I didn't want that for her. Unfortunately, the choice wasn't up to me.

Eva was a grown-ass woman, and I admired her even more after a week of getting to know each other. She was the owner of a successful small business and walked her own path. She'd sent herself to culinary school, and most surprisingly, maintained a relationship with her human foster parents—all while hiding her dual nature.

It was one thing to take power by force, but quite another to grow one's own. Even as a child, she'd been strong enough to get to safety without help. As much as I hated stepping back, I wouldn't undermine her. Instead, I tried to force myself and my increasingly agitated lion to let her stand on her own.

Fates, I didn't even know why my lion was fussing. Eva was perfectly safe, and I knew better than anyone that she could take care of herself. All I had to do was remember what she'd left of her victims—and my office, which was still undergoing reconstruction.

"You're causing a disturbance in the force," Darius murmured, surprising me. I'd been too focused on Eva to notice his presence. "What's up?"

"Nothing." One of the Texas Alphas and his Luna blocked my view, and I growled as I tried to get her in my sight again.

"Bullshit. What's got your fur in a bunch?"

I glared at him and sighed. "My lion doesn't like to be separated from her."

"Let me help." Darius touched my shoulder and sent a wave of calming omega energy to my lion. "Is that better?"

"Yes. Thank you." Although Darius's gift settled my lion somewhat, he was still restless.

"Liar. It's a good thing Eva's here. I wouldn't be able to keep everyone calm without her." He sent a stronger surge of his power toward me, then frowned. "Something's got him worked up for sure, but you need to settle down before she catches on. The last thing we want is Eva going into beast mode because she's feeding off your emotions."

"I think something she said in passing has him worked up. She mentioned that our mating seemed too good to be true."

"It's like that for every mating." He smirked and glanced at Ty, who was acting as a buffer between Eva and several Alphas waiting their turn to meet her. "I still think Ty is too good to be true, and we've been together over ten years."

Ty was doing exactly what he was supposed to. As beta, his job was to stand by the Alpha or Luna and facilitate meetings with pride members. I couldn't take his position without undermining them and myself. It would be a slap to their faces and would be taken to mean I didn't trust them.

"You're right." I tried for a smile as I concentrated on keeping my lion in check. "It's just newly mated jitters. I'll be fine."

"I'm always right." Darius squeezed my shoulder in another attempt to soothe my lion. "This is a great party, we haven't had a single fight, and everyone loves Eva already. Relax and enjoy yourself." Although my cat was driving me crazy with her perplexing attack of nerves, I smiled at the youthful bear Alpha and shook his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Eric. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for inviting us, and congratulations on your mating. It's been a long time since the Tererro pride had a party."

"I—" I coughed to hide my beast's low growl. "Sorry, excuse me. I hope we'll have lots more things to celebrate soon, and I know Llyr will be delighted to attend your parents' retirement celebration. Thank you for the invitation."

"We look forward to seeing both of you there."

When Eric returned to his clan, Ty asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah. It's all good." Noting a lull in the makeshift receiving line he'd created, I added, "I'm going to the powder room. I'll be right back."

"Take your time. It looks like everyone is headed toward the buffet anyway. Want me to get you a plate?"

"Ty, you're not my servant. I can get my own."

"The Luna of the Southwestern Prides does not stand in line at a buffet, Eva. We've discussed this already."

I stuck my tongue out at him, making him laugh. "Fine. If there's any left, I'd like some of that smoked prime rib. I'm not picky on the sides. Just whatever looks good."

"You got it."

EVA

When he left me, I scurried to the powder room, and prayed I could get my beast under control. The introductions were becoming easier, and my social anxiety was almost gone. There was no danger, and all my enemies were dead. She had absolutely no reason to be stressing so hard, and refused to tell me why she was upset.

After splashing cold water on my face, I took a deep breath and patted myself dry with a plush towel. Everything was perfectly fine. The goodwill and happiness of the prides enveloped me in a blanket of comfort, I had my mate close by, and the pride bonds were calm silken threads with no hint of distress.

There had been only a few veiled references to Martha Barstow from the older Alphas, and I was fairly certain several of them had come to make sure I wasn't like her—not that I blamed them. Nobody wanted to return to the bad old days with someone like her in charge, but it still didn't explain my beast's behavior. I pasted a smile on my face and left the powder room, knowing I'd wasted too much time already.

As I opened the door, I heard a shrill scream. My eyes widening with horror, I watched a nightmarish winged beast pluck a woman from the crowd and lift her high in the air.

Covered in black, glittery scales, it had a reptilian head with a long muzzle filled with pointed teeth. A line of spikes ran down its spine and a barbed tail acted as a rudder for flight.

Where the fuck did a dragon come from? I knew they existed, but I'd never seen one, and I couldn't remember them ever engaging with other species.

At about twice the size of my shifted form, it might give me some trouble, but I was sure I could make it sorry it fucked with me while I gave everyone time to escape.

The lioness shifted, but the dragon didn't let her go. Instead, it sent a burst of flame into the air and circled overhead, seeming to laugh at us.

A deep, feral growl rumbled up from my throat and I raced to the expansive lawn, keeping my distance from the frightened partygoers. Llyr had already shifted, along with several other Alphas and their Lunas. Thankfully, they herded everyone under the party pavilions. I didn't think the canvas would protect them from something that breathed fire, but it was better than leaving them out in the open.

"Hey, asshole!" I shouted, waving my arms to get its attention. "Pick on someone your own size!"

To my surprise, the dragon soared down and dropped the lioness safely before arrowing toward me. It snatched me up in sharp claws, and I did indeed hear rusty laughter over Llyr's panicked roars.

Praying he kept everyone protected, I let my beast burst free. The dragon let out a surprised cry and fell to the ground, obviously unable to carry my weight. I dug my claws into its belly and rolled us until I was on top, then roared in its face.

Mist formed under me, and a split second later, I was staring into the face of a terrified teenaged boy.

Someone cleared their throat behind me, and I snarled as I lifted my head to meet the sardonic gaze of an older gentleman with expertly clipped dark hair. He wore a blue dress shirt buttoned to his chin and dark trousers with expensive loafers.

Scowling at the boy, he tossed a pair of pants and a black T-shirt on the ground next to us.

"I beg your pardon, Luna. As much as I think the whelp needs a lesson in manners, his mother will be quite upset if I bring him home in a body bag. Rest assured, he'll be apologizing for the disruption."

The *or else* went unspoken, and the tone of his faintly accented voice left no room for argument. The boy scrambled behind him and dressed the minute I let him up. I growled in reply, and the man chuckled as Llyr strode toward us, still buttoning his pants.

Every hint of kindness was wiped from Llyr's stern face, and I shivered when he turned his furious gaze on me. Annoyed, I bared my teeth at him. He didn't get to be mad at me for protecting my pride, but we'd have to discuss it later. CHAPCER 13

"What is that?" the boy asked, peeking around Padraic's tall form.

"The Luna is a Smilodon," Padraic replied, smiling at Eva. "I haven't seen one in years, well, give or take a millennium or two."

So furious I couldn't see straight, I called on every ounce of self-control I possessed to stop myself from dragging her to our den so I could turn her over my knee. Even worse, she met my gaze with challenge in her eyes, then yawned widely before cleaning her face with a giant paw. Her blatant insouciance sent my temper soaring.

Her actions were instinctive for a true Luna. It was bred into her bones to protect her pride. I knew it on an academic level but seeing her taunt a dragon—even a young one—into attacking her enraged my lion.

"Padraic," I murmured, keeping my gaze on her. "What brings you out this way?"

"Chasing this one, I'm afraid," the elder dragon replied. "We received news of the new Luna, and he took it upon himself to attack without waiting for all the information."

Padraic didn't need to say he'd wanted to see if Eva was like my mother, who had nearly exposed the shifter clans to humans in her quest for power. He'd been gathering his forces for an attack long before I took control.

He stepped to the side and gripped the teenager's arm. "Scott, you will stand on that dance floor and offer an apology to every person here. One at a time, and you'd better make them good." "But, Sir, there are hundreds!"

"I suggest you get started then." Padraic winked at Eva, then added, "The lovely Luna hasn't shifted to her human form yet. I'm sure your mother won't mind if there are a few pieces missing when I drag you home."

The boy glanced at me as if hoping for a rescue I had no intention of providing, then slumped and trudged to the dance floor.

"I am very sorry for the disturbance, Llyr," Padraic added. "Completely my fault for not watching the little idiot more closely."

Ty approached with Eva's bathrobe, then handed it to me before taking up his position in front of her to protect her modesty while she shifted. Always the gentleman, Padraic turned his back until she was covered.

I never cared about casual nudity before, but I couldn't stand the thought of anyone seeing my mate naked. Fortunately, Ty was familiar with the behavior of a newly mated male and made sure I didn't have to kill anyone over it.

"Teenaged boys are universally idiots," she murmured as she tied the sash around her waist. "You can't blame yourself for that."

"Truer words have never been spoken. Thankfully, I've never mated, so I won't be exposed to it directly." He turned to face her, then bowed and held out his hand for her to shake. "Padraic O'Connor at your service."

"Eva Andrews at yours."

I bit back a growl when he touched her. Although we had a cordial relationship, Padraic was too urbane, too charming, and far too unmated for my liking. "It is a pleasure." He bowed over her hand, then smirked at me as he released her. "I'll leave you to your celebration while Scott finishes his apologies."

"Help yourself to the buffet," Eva replied. "You might as well add to his punishment and enjoy a good meal."

"I will, thank you. You're very kind." Hands tucked into his pockets, Padraic sauntered toward the food, seeming to ignore the shifters giving him a wide berth.

Trapping her with my arm around her waist, I forced her to walk toward the house. "Inside. Now."

"Good idea. I need to put on real clothes, then—"

"Then you'll be lucky if I don't beat your ass raw," I interrupted. "Don't push me, Eva."

She shut her mouth, but her eyes narrowed dangerously. Ignoring her growing temper, I hustled her inside and up the stairs to our den. After slamming the door behind us, I whirled to face her.

"Don't you ever do that again, Eva. Are you fucking crazy?"

Instead of replying, she rummaged through the shopping bags and retrieved a pale pink T-shirt and a pair of jeans, then dressed.

"I don't believe my mental health is in question," she finally said as she plaited her hair into a long braid. "What part am I not supposed to do?"

"Let's start with not baiting dragons into attacking you. Do you have any idea—"

"Yes." She spun to face me and crossed her arms. "I do have an idea. Fuck's sake, Llyr, did you honestly expect me to

hide while my pride was under attack?"

"You could have died!"

"And so could you. So could Daphne, Teresa, and the elderly bear couple who gave me a jar of honey as a mating gift. Maybe it would have been Lisa and Devon's fucking newborns, or the rest of nearly a thousand innocent people relying on us to protect them. How dare you ask me to leave them in danger!"

Knowing she was right did nothing to improve my mood, but I couldn't stand the idea of her putting herself at risk.

"Fates, I want to blister your butt until you can't sit for a week, woman."

She strode to me, completely unafraid as she got into my face. "You can do that if it makes you feel better, but I won't ever apologize for doing what was right."

I flinched as the door slammed behind him, then pinched my brow to ease a burgeoning headache. If Llyr Barstow thought for one single second that I'd bend before his autocratic bullshit...

Screw him. I was the largest feline predator on the planet. Very little had the power to truly scare me. Of course, Padraic O'Connor might have been an exception to that. I knew absolutely nothing about him but sensed his vast age. He was probably gigantic in his shifted form.

Pulling myself together, I took a deep, calming breath and put my game face on. Fighting with Llyr didn't mean I could shirk my duty, and regardless of our disagreements, we needed to present a united front to the prides and clans in attendance.

There was no doubt in my mind that we'd kiss and make up. We were well and truly mated, and I was already carrying his cubs. Our reconciliation would just have to wait a bit.

Before I could return to the party, the door burst open, revealing Llyr. His hair was disheveled, as if he'd run his hands through it, and his green eyes pinned me with laser focus.

"Llyr, I—"

Instead of letting me finish speaking, he swung me into his arms, then carried me to the bed and laid me down. My T-shirt parted like paper under his claws, and a few seconds later, my jeans met the same fate.

Almost roughly, he wedged my thighs apart with his broad shoulders, then pressed a reverent kiss to my mound. Without

EVA

a word, he licked my pussy, using his mobile tongue to collect my juices.

"Llyr!"

"Come for me. I want to hear you scream my name."

Fear and panic turned his alpha command into something broken, yet no less powerful, and my tears fell unchecked as I felt his ragged emotions reverberate through our bond. I was helpless to disobey, despite wanting to wrap him in a tight embrace and never let go.

I wanted to promise him all the things he wanted, but I couldn't. As much as I loved him, I loved the pride too, and the world he'd created where our cubs could grow up safe and protected. Although I hadn't grown up with a pride, and had once hated everything they stood for, I couldn't lie to myself anymore. It might break Llyr and I apart, but I'd protect them and him with my life.

The climax scoured my soul, harsh and unrelenting when I did as he demanded and screamed his name.

His lips crashed against mine in a kiss so searing, my toes curled. When I wriggled under him, desperate for his touch, he grabbed my wrists and held them above my head with one hand as he clawed his trousers apart.

Our fight forgotten; I cried out in delight when he slammed his thick cock into me. Unable to move my hands, I wrapped my calves around his waist and tried to hang on for the ride of my life.

His scent surrounded me until I didn't want to breathe anything unless it was him. I needed the taste of his skin on my tongue even more.

"Come for me."

The rough thread of his alpha command pulled me under, and I cried out as my belly contracted with the most powerful orgasm I'd ever felt.

Before I could catch my breath, he said, "Again."

And again, until I lost count of how many times he wrenched orgasms from my quivering body.

By the time he finished with me, it was nearly dawn, and I couldn't move. I heard the sound of people moving outside and wondered how many had camped out on our front lawn, but I didn't have the strength to lift my head, much less play hostess.

"Rest for a few minutes," he crooned into my ear. "I'll run you a bath."

"Ungh."

He laughed softly and extricated himself from my nerveless arms. I couldn't even open my eyes to watch his ass as he walked into the ensuite.

I let myself doze and lost track of time. Murmuring a few soft words, he lifted me from the bed and carried me into the bathroom before settling us both into steaming water smelling of peppermint and vanilla. Holding me up to keep me from sliding under the water, he washed me carefully, easing my tired muscles.

After drying me off, he carried me back to bed and laid me down. "I'll have breakfast sent up. Do you think you can stay awake long enough to eat?"

"Will there be coffee?"

"Yes."

"Good." I sat up and stretched, then took a quick inventory of myself. Although I could have napped for another hour or six, I needed to get up. "We should say goodbye to everyone first."

"Sounds like I didn't work hard enough to keep you in bed."

Laughing softly, I evaded his kiss and grabbed clean clothes. He pouted but let me get dressed and went into the walk-in closet. When he returned, dressed in a pair of jeans and a heather-gray Henley, I patted the bed.

"Sit next to me, please. We need to talk about last night."

He grumbled under his breath, then sighed and joined me. "You're right, but before you say anything, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at you, and I definitely shouldn't have reacted so badly to what happened."

"I—"

"Let me finish." He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. "I used to think I'd do anything to keep the pride safe. Their protection was the reason for my existence. Everything I did was for them. Now, though..."

He wrapped his arm around me and tugged me close. "Now, I'd sacrifice every last soul to keep you safe. It's wrong, and I know it. No one person is more important than their safety, and it's everything I swore I'd never be."

"You're right because I'd sacrifice everything for you too." I kissed his temple, breathing in his scent. "But I don't want this to be a bone of contention between us. You have to let me be who I am."

"And who is that?"

"The biggest, baddest Luna in the world." I nestled in his arms and laid a hand on my belly. "Mother to the cubs of the biggest, baddest Alpha. We can protect them together if you let us."

"You are pretty damned scary," he replied before pressing a gentle kiss to my lips. "If I hadn't been so worried about you, I'd have laughed my ass off at the expression on that baby dragon's face when you shifted."

"I almost feel bad for the poor kid. Padraic was not a happy camper. Wonder if he ever finished apologizing to everyone."

Llyr sobered and cupped my cheek to make me meet his eyes. "I don't know, and I kind of don't care. I'm going to be too busy trying to keep my lion from wanting to cover you in bubble wrap to keep anything from happening to you."

"You should know I'll just pop it. That crap is addictive."

"And it's also completely illogical because you are literally the most powerful feline shifter in the world, but you've made my normally perfectly functional brain go offline."

I straddled his lap and laced my fingers through his thick hair. "Ooh! That means it's time to ask for presents, right?"

Laughing, he stood, making me catch myself before I fell. Taking my hand, he led me to the door and said, "All you have to do is tell me what you want. From the moment I met you, I knew I'd never be able to deny you anything."

"Awesome. We're going to my foster parents' house for supper tomorrow. Harry is going to want you to ask his permission to court me."

"You're kidding, right?"

I wrapped my hand around his elbow as we descended the staircase. "Not even a little bit. You just have to be up to the task of convincing him you'll make an honest beast out of me."

"Will there be cake pops?"

"Maybe. If you're a good boy."

Before we reached the kitchen, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me breathless. "Oh, baby. I can be very, very good. Consider it done."

ABOUT MINETTE MOREAU

Minette Moreau is the alter ego of USA Today bestselling author Raisa Greywood and writes all the things that go bump in the night. Shapeshifters, aliens, vampires, and especially dragons all find their way into her stories.

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PREY AND PUNISHMENT BY CARI SILVERWOOD

A Twisted Retelling of The Boogeyman

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Poppy

A HALF MILE AWAY, BEYOND THE LONG, DARKENED SLOPE OF our hill, the drug-dealer's burning BMW reflected flames off the wall of a shed on the outskirts of Wolstam.

Still squatting, I felt blindly behind me, checking for anything spiky on the ground. Nothing met my fingers, except for some leaves that had fallen off the shrubs around us. Sitting was probably stupid anyway. It wouldn't do to be seen sneaking through the streets in filthy, wet jeans at eleven PM. People might remember me.

A small explosion, provoked by the crude Molotov I'd left under the car, puffed skyward — the oranges, reds, and oily blacks erupting with a rumble of noise. The underside of the low clouds went orange before they faded back to gray.

"That's it then." Jack rose from his crouch. "I'm off. You come in a bit later. You happy now?"

I grunted, screwing up my mouth. "No."

Jack snorted then shook his head. "Why the fuck do it then? What if he or his boss, Finn, gets the idea it was you?"

"I guess I'll shank them?" Smiling, I turned my full attention to Jack. "Thanks for keeping lookout."

"You'll shank him?" Even in the gloom I could make out the corrugations on his forehead. Jack was barely twenty-six and I'd given him bad wrinkles. "Jesus, Poppy. I know you're joking, but I wouldn't want to meet you on a bad day. This won't make any difference, except maybe to give the garage a new customer?" Hope had crept into his voice. "Now *my* boss would like that."

My turn to snort. The vehicle was a write-off. I raised my hand in a feeble goodbye. "See you later. Maybe next week. My Renault has been making a funny whirring noise when I go over fifty."

"Sure."

I watched him pick his way down the path at the rear of the hill, heading for where we'd left our scooters. Once he disappeared, I turned back to the burning car. Sirens wailed from the incoming cop cars and fire brigade, their headlights weaving closer to their target.

No one else was anywhere near where the fire raged. No house was at risk. I'd calculated this before doing it. Maybe the best thing the army had taught me was how to light up a car without leaving evidence. Well, truthfully, it was the guys I'd trained with. One of them was an arsonist at heart. I might have been crap at climbing walls and dodging bullets, but I had been educated by those loud, beer-fueled chats at the pub.

The flames leapt, easily roaring twenty feet high before dying down again.

"You're wrong, Jack." This had made a difference. It had fed my internal rage. I could feel it stewing, churning, making my teeth ache. I'd scored some lines down that fucking car's immaculate paintwork before leaving my wee, timed bomb.

The molten *pure* satisfaction I'd gained from scratching the paint had been just the beginning. If only I could've used a sledgehammer on it. When the whole car went *bang* — fuck, yeah.

I circled the town, taking the long route back. The streets were deserted, apart from some gawkers on balconies. Using the shadowed sidewalks, I rolled back to my flat and let myself in quietly, closing the door with the mildest click. Mrs. Haversham was the only other living soul here. She rented out one side, lived in the other. It wasn't posh accommodation, but it had been the best I could find at short notice when the receptionist job came up in Wolstam.

I'd gone to high school here and it was here that my sister had returned after her try at being an actress had petered to nothing. The only thing Wolstam was famous for was being the birthplace of Gloria Shank, the murderess, and with a last name like that, who could really blame her?

I'd thought Sian might end up on Only Fans. It would have been so her, and I wouldn't have thought less of her. Killing herself with drugs though...

Okay, Jack was right. I needed to make a different sort of difference.

I showered, dressed in underwear and a T-shirt, and fell into bed. Tomorrow was a work day.

Yawning, I shuffled onto my side and hugged my extra pillow, then let out a sigh. I hadn't freed my sister from the drugs, yet, but that would require a mountain of effort, detox, therapy... and for Sian to start talking to me again. That rage had felt so good. The memory of it seemed to trickle deeper into my mind.

I smiled, watching the moon-etched shadows of leaves traipse across the floor, before letting my gaze travel over the tattered movie posters – Jaws, Nosferatu, The Collector, Dracula. The artwork blurred together as my eyes drifted closed. Horror was my favorite thing. The voyeuristic gore, the fear, yet the separation of my own self from the story world, it calmed me. The monsters were there, not here.

Except, *sometimes*, paradoxically, I liked to imagine the monsters here, toying with me, their claws about my throat or lifting aside my underwear to touch me. Them playing with my body while I slept, breathing gently, wrapped in my dreams of lust.

On the horniest days of my month, I left a vibe on the bedside table, for those small, *sometimes* emergencies.

WAS I AWAKE OR ASLEEP? HAD SOMETHING STIRRED OR clinked? Had a breeze wafted through my shuttered bedroom window? I sensed I was half awake, yet could not be bothered to rouse myself and drift higher to the real world. If something was in my bedroom... let it be. I snuggled into the pillow, my head mostly beneath the soft, smaller pillow, my ears covered, my eyes partially blinkered. Perhaps it would—

Something hard touched me, moving lightly and sedately over the skin of my ass, in a wavering path that lessened and vanished, leaving only the faint ringing of unrecognizable music that slowly died away. *Breathe out; breathe in*. The world out there was too far away. I sank again into my dreams.

Breathe...

A voice eased through my consciousness: "You have been a naughty girl, Poppy, and I am here to punish you for your sins."

Breathe in. My eyelids struggled upward. I could make out only a flicker of formless shapes, but something, some shadow loomed over me. The harder I tried to bring it into focus, the more it eluded me.

"You will not wake, for I have you taken you and keep you cradled in dreams, locked in my spirit claws, pressed deep into your bed. Do not wake."

My fingers kneaded at my bedding and I rolled, pulling my little pillow over my head as I pressed my face into the mattress. My breathing came back to me, travelling in waves that dampened thoughts.

"You will not wake."

I will not wake. But still I waited, half-here, half-there, and which was real and which was dream, I could no longer tell.

"You are to be punished for your sins this night."

Sins?

"Wrath is a deadly sin. You have transgressed and used it to ill ends."

Ill ends? Even dreaming, I smirked at those words, my mouth rubbing against the sheets.

"Your punishment is mine to decide." The rasping voice lowered into a threatening, echoing whisper. A hard hand gripped my ass, pressing me to my bed. Claws flexed, lightly pricking before abruptly digging in, deeper and deeper until a new sharpness of pain and trickle of heat told me I'd been pierced. His fingers flexed again, playfully, as if wanting me to feel the pull of his claws in my skin.

I surfaced, just a little, just a fraction of my mind ticking over and aware of being not quite *there* where the threatening being lurked.

My bedroom was invaded.

Freddy Kreuger, Dracula, and the Collector had come to take their cut of me. To lock me away and serve me up and... more.

Through the veil of dreams, I whimpered at the pain and at my arousal.

Wetness leaked from me. Some was blood, and some came from lower, between my legs, from between my lips, where I wished in that weird, hot, crazy way for someone to do to me what they wanted to. Penetration. Violation. Possession.

"You suffer not for the burning, but for the sin of Wrath." The unseen thing riding me shifted, his hand forcing me harder against the mattress even as the greater bulk of him reared up. His voice reverberated in my room, high above me and yet close against my ear, almost purring with satisfaction. "You will be whipped." My room darkened, the light flickering.

This was so far beyond my normal nightmares. I tried again to wake up and managed to move slightly. Despite the pillow shrouding me, blinding and muffling, I groped sideways, fingers surfing over cool sheets, reaching, straining to touch whatever was here with me. The room flashed orange and a whip strike coursed across my back, and more and more rained down on me, cutting, slicing, ravening my flesh. The sheer force of it should mean my bed was drenched in blood and flesh, and was I screaming?

I was caught in the dream and nightmare violence, suspended in time, crying out at the pain until...

It stopped.

Silence dropped like a guillotine, cutting off my wails, writhing and the crack of the whip. Once again, I lay paralyzed, my breath slow and steady in my ears. Was I awake now? Was it over?

"We are done," the creature snarled and its weight vanished.

Done?

Of its own accord, my hand explored across the sheet. My back and ass stung and throbbed due to the flesh being stripped away and all I could think was that Pinhead would have done it better. Hell, *Norman Bates* could whip better than that. That was punishment for the transgression of a deadly sin? Take some pride in your work. If you're going to pass yourself off as some kind of divine arbiter of judgment, show some fucking finesse.

"Amateur," I muttered under the pillow.

The agony of the whipping had already faded into the memory of a B-grade nightmare. The shuffling and rustling surely broadcast the departure of my fantasy monster through my locked and shuttered window.

Still half-conscious, half-asleep, I let my hand search some more.

No blood splattered my sheets, my hand informed me. No liquids, no sticky flesh fragments. The bed was cool under my roving fingers. I was whole, though remembering that most callous of punishments. That had been anarchic and...

"Unscary," I croaked.

The word circled my room like a seagull at the beach while I lay face-down, trying to decide whether I wanted to wake up or go back to sleep and dream a more interesting dream.

Wasn't sloth a deadly sin, too? So much transgressing in one night...

Wake up!

It wasn't fair that I'd been punished for wrath. I'd set a car on fire. Surely arson was worse than anger.

I was awake now. Definitely awake. None of this insane dreams within dreams within the craziest ever fucking nightmare. My eyes lay open as I stared past and through the thin pillowslip edge at the dull grays and blacks of my uninhabited bedroom.

What time was it? Why was it still so hard to move? Had I been eating some hallucinogen?

Such a disappointing monster — it didn't even fuck me before half-killing me.

I giggled at the thought.

And the clawed hand clamped onto my ass and squeezed, hard.

I froze. A thrillful shudder, infused with fear and watchfulness, raced down my body and centered exactly where it shouldn't go, between my legs.

It couldn't be real. I was awake. Wasn't I?

The points dug in harder, with a single claw sliding downward, into my cleft, between my ass cheeks, going around and past my asshole, then further, to my pussy... I swallowed as it played in my wetness. A second, clawed hand shoved apart my thighs.

Something, someone, leapt onto the bed, heavy enough make the mattress sink as it knelt, its legs on either side of me. I could feel the heat and texture of its skin, hear its harsh breathing.

Be still.

My clit swelled with arousal.

Be still my beating, disloyal, desirous heart. Stop thinking of how you want it to—

The claw pushed inside me, past my lips, sliding into my entrance and tunnelling deeper.

I gasped at the sensation, fearing injury, yet wanting more. More fingers, more of everything it was doing to me, just *more*. Unfortunately, I also wriggled enough to betray my arousal.

That was an automatic reaction. Crap.

I bit my lower lip to stop myself groaning as something wet and soft, yet also hard, probed at my clit and around it, circling, slobbering. *God*, the slobbering was gross, yet perfectly evil and monstrous.

"I can hear your sinful –" Its finger began to fuck me remorselessly, making wet noises with each thrust. "— *filthy* thoughts." The monster was practically purring, its breath hot between my legs, seeming to bathe and torch my clit with desire.

I may have whimpered. *Fuck*. I had. But I wanted to hump that mouth, no matter how many extra teeth it held.

As the clawed finger and that tongue moved—if it was a tongue—I groaned out loud. The tongue began to flick at speed, to rhythmically prod and toggle my sensitive clit.

Caught between the spikes of the large claws imbedded in my butt and its legs pressing on and trapping my knees, I lost myself.

I moaned louder and tried to chase that tongue.

The monster rudely inserted a second finger before extracting them both.

Then it slithered the tongue off my clit and upward, over my lower lips, to plunge it into my pussy and fuck me with it, deep, deep as a cock might reach, squirming and thickening as it bunched up inside me.

I cried out, panting, lost in the madness of an impending orgasm.

Claws kneaded my ass, threatening, holding me down as I bucked and tried to capture more of those sensations. My nipples rubbed at the inside of my T-shirt, painfully sensitive.

Gasping, I bowed my back, presenting myself for that violating, wonderful tongue. It could explore my insides, my cunt, destroy me if it wished to, and I was voting for it with a big, hard *yes*.

Another gasp escaped me as the tongue rammed in and swelled, and then... my clit decided it was done, it was ready.

A climax stormed through me. My fingers anchored into the pillow and whatever was under me. I rode the orgasm, my pussy clamping in, muscles straining, while I was hung up on, impaled upon, some fucking monster's tongue.

Glorious. Groaning out a hushed, "*Fuck*," I collapsed, breathing hard, with my head to one side and my face smooshed to the sheet.

"Good girl." How satisfied it... he sounded. Then he laughed—a deep, infuriating laugh.

As he slipped his knees from the bed, I risked a glance. A neck tattoo and the bottomless blue depths to those eyes were all I registered. The creature swung away, dark coat swirling. A thought hit: It was real. It had a coat. And the coat had pockets.

I needed to know more, but I only had seconds to act and I could barely move. An AirTag lay on the bedside dresser. I plonked my hand over it, my fist closing. How could I just let this creature go?

It might be fucking dangerous not to is how, my sex-drunk brain argued.

Pfft.

I levered myself higher. My clit was still throbbing from the release and the contact with the bed, and my panting was a bit disorderly. I flung the AirTag and prayed as it fluttered through the air...

Then it hit the coat cloth and slid downward.

Propped on my elbow, I peered into the gloom and tried to perceive if the piece of plastic had found its mark — the pocket of the coat of this thing that had claws and a tongue made for fucking.

It did not turn to look at me. It merely slid from the room as it approached the window, and then was gone.

So. I frowned, knowing I should be scared but I was still flustered from coming, and this was too weird.

My predator wore a coat, was tall and large, had made the bed sink with its weight, and was somewhat humanoid, but not human. The latter I was sure of as it had seemed to shrink between the edge of my window and the wall.

A clatter told me it descended to the ground.

I shivered.

That had been so very wrong.

"I should follow and see where it goes," I whispered, assuring myself. I flicked on the lamp. The AirTag was neither on the nightstand, nor the floor. It must be inside my monster's pocket.

I shouldn't do this, of course.

I bounced out of bed, snatched up my phone and the keys, yanked on leggings and a pair of slip-on shoes, then I ran for the front door.

Yagar

I STALKED AWAY FROM HER HOUSE, HEADING BACK TO OUR den. The few humans I encountered were dismissed with a glance from beneath my brow. Their gazes slid off me, for the most part, and I barely gave them a thought. None had ever attacked me in my night spirit shape.

A babai, a bogeyman, a night spirit — all of these described us, and I could not deny the thrill I gained from my purpose and my power.

Tonight had been an entirely different sort of thrill...

That had been wrong. Yet also exciting. The female's thoughts had been wildly inappropriate while I was punishing her. She should have been contrite. Terrified! It was not unknown for those I visited to be driven mad by the experience and she dared call me an amateur. Her scorn and her unfulfilled arousal stung at my pride, Yes, I had returned and made her have an orgasm, and yes, that was not punishment.

Though it could be. I knew humans from the inside out, quite literally, having seen them dissected and eaten, ripped to shreds by my more brutal brothers. And I knew how they mated. The sex programs I'd watched when daylight reigned had gone into sumptuous detail. Prolonged climaxing took its toll on the females. This was something to think on next time one of them dared to disdain me.

Admittedly, I had enjoyed it... watching the little thing squirm on the bed, wetting it with her liquids, squirting from her hole... wanting what I gave her so desperately that she forgot the pain I'd just inflicted.

But it had not been chastisement. She had made me corrupt my prime purpose — punishing women for transgressions of Wrath and Greed. I must take care in future. Slumming it with humans in the daylight was one thing. Perverting my purpose at night was different.

I stopped walking.

I should be wary of the next female who displayed horror movie posters on her wall. Those must have inoculated her against my darker charms.

Or perhaps more eager for them, I thought, letting my array of long interlocking fangs slide against each other in a grin.

By chance, I was passing a human as I made my wide, sharp-toothed smile. I could have made them forget, but it amused me to be seen in that moment. I snaked out my tongue and licked my eyebrow. They gasped and hugged the wall, as I walked on, laughing.

CHAPTER 2

Poppy

USING THE AIRTAG TRACKING, I CAUGHT UP TO HIM THREE streets away from my house. I slowed to an intermittent jog and slipped the phone into my leggings pocket. If only I'd had time to grab the scooter from the back of the flat. The man... thing... whatever he was, had long, pavement-eating strides.

In another minute, I was five yards behind him and could drop into fast walk.

Nothing and nobody dared to get in his way. From the back, with his tallness and his long black coat flaring with every movement, he looked like a vampire out for a late snack, the sort of figure that even the most jaded person would take a second glance at, but no one even reacted to him at all. Almost no one. The last guy he'd passed jumped like he'd been bit and was still plastered to the wall of a closed-up café when I went by. Being six-foot and a chunky, footballer type the dude was probably used to doing the intimidating, but whatever my midnight visitor had done – which was nothing, as far as I could see – it had left this guy pale-faced and shaking. His

eyes were wide and unfocused, glazed with terror, when I drew even.

I wasn't sure he even saw me, but I shot him a sympathetic smile as I kept going, wishing I'd seen whatever had scared him.

At least I was safe from male attention, sticking this close. Though the monster himself might turn and grab me, but he moved so fast, I was afraid of losing him.

I had to know what and who he was. *I had to*. My curiosity bone was fully charged. When I got like this, I would plow through everything in my path to find out the truth. My doggedness sometimes annoyed people, but I considered it my best feature.

What would he do if he found me following him? Would he shove me against a wall and turn me to ash? Possibly. At least I'd seen it happen in movies. Or he might draw some infernal weapon with which to flay my flesh... but I'd already survived that. *Haha*. He'd somehow made me imagine I'd been whipped down to the bone, just for letting my anger get the better of me and not for, you know, tossing a few Molotovs in the back of a BMW and setting it on fire. He had to punish me for my wrath, he'd said... then he'd given me mind blowing head and left through a window a cockroach couldn't squeeze through.

And I was following him. What a wise idea. This was how people ended up shut in iron maidens, hung upside-down in freezers, or used for dog food.

I paused to stare at his long, retreating shadow on the concrete, to weigh the thud of my racing heart and my desire to tail him against wanting to remain alive. Then I smirked at my own stupidity and kept moving.

Fuck being a coward. That led to boring-ville. I wanted to suck the juice from life. I had a bona-fide, inhuman monster by the tail tonight, and I was not letting him go. I might never see his like again. I might be sorry I did this or even get hurt, but I would definitely regret it for the rest of my life if I chickened out.

He skirted the town center and went down a lifeless street where half the shops were empty, and the others were only open in the daytime. The many streetlights dwindled to one lonely pole with an under-fed light at the top. The small circle of brightness it created seemed to make the outer darkness darker — a place where something unmentionable might spawn, full of crooked little hairy legs and too many eyes and sharp scimitar feetlings.

That was just a spider, my brain informed me. If spiders had sharp feet?

I shuddered and halted at the mouth of an alley and watched him walk to the very end, where he opened an ordinary, dull-looking door. I could see nothing of the inside, just a rectangle of unadulterated blackness. He went in, closed the door, and was gone.

Did I dare to follow him through there? My heart did a strange flip-flop skitter and I placed my palm to my neck to make sure my carotid was still showing a pulse. It was, but I decided that was enough excitement for one night. I was not going through that door. Despite its inconsequential appearance, it had an aura about it, some weird, unhealthy menace that triggered my most primal instincts, warning me that beyond that threshold, existed a place I did not want to see. I swallowed and turned around, double-checked my location, put a pin in the map, and then reassessed my situation. It was late — two AM – and I'd lost the dubious protection of my unseeable escort. How to get home without being mugged?

Uber time.

YAGAR

As THE DOOR CLICKED SHUT BEHIND ME, I SHUCKED OFF MY coat and tossed it onto the makeshift bar in our foyer — a slab of rough-hewn timber on a pair of old barrels. We'd kept the barrels since the gods knew when. For a century at least. When my coat landed, something tinkled and rolled across the floor. It'd fallen from my pocket.

Curious. I carried nothing in my pockets.

Styx lifted a hand in greeting from where he reposed, flaked out, full-length on our rotting leather sofa. He chugged down an amber glass of something that barely shone in the poor light filtering down through the floorboards and minor chinks in the brickwork.

Above our den was a rickety set of small apartments. The landlord knew we were here, but charged us nothing. It was an arrangement he sometimes thought to challenge but soon decided wasn't worth the effort.

"Nothing for you tonight?" I asked Styx, bending to retrieve the white plastic token from where it had rolled.

"Nope. We need to go back to punishing for Lust. The customers would be profligate. They are all fucking each other." He coughed and sat up, dangling the glass and his long, clawed hands between his knees. Ropes of tangled, white-and-black hair coiled over his shoulders.

"You'd have half the town, every night," I pointed out, rotating the token in my fingers.

"I would, but is that a problem? Blood would run. Screams would be extracted." He sighed wistfully, then eyed me. "You've been out."

"I have." I held the token at eye level, thinking I should know what this was. Although I carried no human devices, I tried to keep up with their technological advancements. During the day, our den rankled and gave me no solace, so I spent a lot of time at the local library, a great source of education. Perhaps I'd been there when I'd learned what this was, because as I distractedly mused on the library, I realized what I held. This was an AirTag.

"Shit," I muttered.

Styx pricked up his ears, zeroing in on the device before I could close it in my fist. "What is that? A human thing?"

His interest attracted Dookie, who appeared from behind the bar where he'd no doubt been napping. Climbing to his feet with obvious effort, he collapsed atop the bar, scattering several shot glasses with his horned forearms. He peered at them blearily, then reached for a bottle, yawning. His attire mirrored my own and Styx's — black and more black. All the better to blend in with the shadows, but I sometimes wondered what the others would say if I walked in wearing something colorful. Ignoring them would only draw more of their attention, so I answered, "Yes. It is a human thing," and hoped that was the end of it.

Dookie's attention had already wandered, distracted by noises from the back of the den. Grender had brought someone home to punish. They would not be leaving. It was what it was. Punishment could not be denied, though it could be... selective, if one so chose. As I had chosen.

And here was my choice, come back to bite me. This was an AirTag and there was only one possible origin for it, one female who could have placed it in my coat. I did not remember her name — we could not do so. But I remembered the consequences of my whipping. The girl had become aroused and I had transgressed.

I'd eaten her pussy. I'd fucked her with fingers, tongue, and claws.

She had come.

I twisted my lips, silently snarling at that memory. I put the tag between my teeth and thought of chewing it to pieces and swallowing them, but no. Devouring human tech might not destroy it. I might only make myself a trackable thing.

I should get rid of this before she tracked me here... unless I wanted her at our door. I indulged in a brief fantasy in which I flung open the door and seized her, then dragged her into the back. If she wanted me that badly, she'd have me. I'd show her how a bogeyman fucked.

I'd fucked humans in my human disguise before. Not often. Three times. It had been... fine, I suppose, but they were dull, uninteresting subjects, offering me little amusement and them, too much. It seemed improper to give pleasure to those I was supposed to be punishing. But in my true form, how could I help but be a punishment? I'd yet to take one while shifted, but I was hesitant to experiment here in our den. It might be considered an aberration by the others.

The inner door opened with a squeal of metal and Grender came in, closing the door once the sharp tines of his hair cleared the frame. He deliberately dragged his clawed feet on the floor for the first few steps, as humans clean their shoes of mud, and left bloody smears behind him as he padded over to join us. "Welcome back, Yagar. You missed some excitement."

Styx yawned, his throat gill-holes fluttering. He turned his red eyes on the babai. "Excitement, no. You are too efficient, Grender."

He shrugged. "Fast is good."

"So," Styx continued. "What is that small human thing? A pet tag? I have seen those."

"Almost the same." I grabbed my coat off the bar. "I have something to attend to."

As I reached for the handle, Styx yelled, "You have a pet? I've seen humans with human pets. The depraved creatures will do almost anything for sex-fun."

I sent him a sidelong scowl.

"If you get a female for a pet, make sure you share." His deep, raucous laugh burbled from his chest and made his gillholes purr. His eyes burned a vivid red. "I'm hungry."

"A pet? You'd forget to feed it." A pet, of any sort, would barely last a day with Styx. I wrenched open the door.

How irritating that this female had tried to track one of us. Make that me — she had tried to track me. Well, if she wanted my attention, she had it. I stepped out into the night, once more, slowly turning the token in finger and thumb, my claws scratching at the plastic. The stench of human sins reminded me of how much we ignored in this twenty-first century. What could one of my own wrongs do to this world that was worse?

I would make an exception with this female if she came to my attention again.

CHAPTER 4

Poppy

EVERYTHING MIGHT HAVE BEEN FINE IF THE DRIVER DIDN'T insist on a main street pick-up. Just down the street, the lights were being turned off at *Storm X*, the most popular nightclub in Wolstam. Granted, the only other club was a dive, so that wasn't a high bar to jump. I mingled with the stragglers, watching them get Ubers, beg for rides, or wander off down the road. And then a silver Mercedes Benz pulled up. A big man built like a tattooed refrigerator in an Italian suit extracted himself from the front passenger side to open the rear door for a couple just emerging from the club.

I tried not to look, I really did.

But the giggling woman in the short black dress stumbled. The bodyguard caught her and helped her into the car, but I couldn't help but notice the nonchalant asshole with her. Finn, dressed in casual pants, buttoned shirt and tie, strolled back to the club's main entrance to chat with someone. If there was one thing I knew about this town, it was how deep Finn was into drugs, crime, and stand-over tactics. Which was why messing with him would be a dick move. My Uber slid up and stopped halfway between me and the club. Finn was still chatting. The bodyguard waited, hands at his front, eyeing the crowd.

I almost managed it. I strode to the Uber, acknowledged I was his passenger, and had my hand on the door handle, when Finn noticed me. His casual glance turned to a dead-flat black stare. He glanced toward the Mercedes, then cocked an eyebrow at me.

He knew who I was, too. I'd been banned from *Storm X* a month ago, after finding Sian in there snorting something in a back booth with a couple of Finn's so-called friends.

Sighting the red, pinpoint marks on her forearm had blown my brain up like a red balloon. Reasoning with her proved pointless and dragging your sister out kicking and screaming was apparently a bannable offence. But doing drugs on the table were not. Go figure.

Finn grinned at me and made curled two fingers of his hand into a gun-shape. I thought he might mock shoot me. I was ready to eyeroll. Instead, he stuck the two fingers of the barrel into his mouth and gave it a blow job.

Anger is bad. Anger is bad, I reminded myself and then I marched over. The bodyguard reached him first and waited, ready to intervene.

I stood there fuming while Finn kept on smiling, his short brown hair perfectly combed. His jaw accentuated by that barely-there beard. The man was handsome and he knew it. His shirt was pressed, unmarked, and chic. Demonic tattoos wove up the side of his neck — his one nod toward being something other than old money. What could I say? What should I say? If looks could kill, my eyes would bore a hole through his smug face, or pop from the effort of trying.

"Got a problem, dear?" Finn sniffed then spoke to his guard. "I'll be fine, Marshall. Check on Sian, please. Wouldn't want her damaging herself before we get festive."

"Yes, sir." He turned to go to the car.

I couldn't do anything stupid. There had to be a CCTV camera recording all of this. Cracking his walnuts would be satisfying, but it would also get me charged with assault. "Fuckturd," I spat out, but quietly. "Karma will get you."

"Is that a threat, Poppy? Leave your sister alone. Last time I will say this. She's a fucking adult. Unlike you."

Don't kill him. You can't anyway.

I spun and walked to the Uber, raging and depressed. He was right, in a way. This was Sian's choice. We hadn't really spoken or emailed since our parents died five years ago and the estate became a shit-storm argument between her, me, and our brother. I hadn't been blameless, but I had thought we could patch things up.

So far that was a no.

I watched the Mercedes pull away, then opened the door of the SUV.

I might have slammed it after I sat, but the driver only shot me a cursory glance.

I might also have slammed the front door when I returned to my flat.

If I could follow some weird monster back to his lair, I could and should persist in trying to help Sian.

The monster... That whole experience seemed even more bizarre against the bleak reality of my sister in Finn's clutches. It made me wonder if I'd dreamed the whole thing after all. And what did it even matter? Sian was in trouble and even if I knew how to help her, she wouldn't let me.

I might have wallowed in self-pity. I definitely lay in bed for the rest of the night, staring at the ceiling.

In the morning, I checked the AirTag location and found it right outside. Thoughts of my sister slapped from my head, I rushed to the window and looked out.

Nothing.

Confused, I pulled on some clothes and went outside, as if the window was lying to me. I was so busy scanning the sidewalk for weirdness that I was literally on top of it before I realized. Slowly, I stepped back and lifted my bare foot to look, and sure enough, there was the AirTag.

Like someone had put it there for me to find.

Poppy

SO HOW MUCH OF LAST NIGHT WAS REAL?

If I'd dreamed it all, the tag would still be on my dresser, or on the floor after I threw it in some half-asleep fugue state. But if it wasn't a dream, wouldn't the tag be downtown, behind that ominous door? How could I have followed it there, only to find it back here?

For most of the day, that question bothered me, along with wondering what to do for Sian that she would actually appreciate. Was I just being an overbearing big sister? Recreational drugs were not an entryway to Hell all by themselves. She might be fine, even if her bf was a dick...

And was Finn her boyfriend?

With the scooter propped at my side, I waved goodbye to Helen, the cleaner, and locked the front sliding door. Everyone else at the clinic had gone home, bar the new doctor, Kean Whitehall or Whitman or something. He was even newer than I was, only two days on the roster so far, and I guess he was still orientating himself because he was staying late, working at a computer in his consulting room. I peeked at the name on the door before I left. Remembering the physician's names was possibly more important than the patients.

Whitehall... Got it.

I yawned my way out of the building, silently scolding myself for staying up all night. Falling asleep at work would be bad enough, definitely grounds for sacking, but making some stupid error with a patient's health would be unforgiveable. *Must get more sleep tonight*.

The shopping center was in a broad, U-shaped layout with seating and plants in the center, but no roof over the middle section. Only five or six people were wandering about, sitting, eating food bought from the late-closing café. I walked along the footpath at the front to my scooter and straddled it, but held off starting it while I idly scrolled through my mail and messages.

Spam. Scam. More spam. And one text from an unknown sender.

You know who I AM. And I know what you did, ARSON GIRL. Fuck up one more time and you will get a visitor. Nice talk last night.

"Shit." I eyed the traffic heading through to Main St.

That had to have been from Finn. He was the only one I'd spoken to last night, apart from Jack. Was I scared? Yes. Trepidation tightened my chest. The man was known for ruthlessness, but having the long-running mayor as a brother

made him impervious to police intervention. No charges had ever stuck.

Did he truly know it was me? How? He couldn't.

"Has to be guessing." Frowning, I tucked the phone into my shoulder-slung bag and set off. I pinched my lips, thinking some more, and took a deep breath. "Fuck!"

Arrogant, abusive men pissed me off no end. If anything, this reinforced my determination to get Sian away from him. I rode near the *Storm X* club every day on my way to and from work, although I used the back streets to avoid major pedestrian traffic. I refused to change my route, though I did halt and pull a loose gray hoodie over my jacket. I kept it for emergencies and the cooler weather.

As I passed the graffiti-covered back wall of a derelict shop, I slowed again.

A week ago, I'd surprised a teenager spraying the wall in bright pink and green. The cans he'd dropped were still there, just inside the fence where the gate lay ajar, partly hidden in the low grass. Nothing here had been mowed or cleaned up for months.

On impulse, I went inside the fence to an alcove of weeds and taller grass, where the fence went around a pole. I locked the scooter to the pole, but if it got stolen, so be it. I kept my phone and purse from the bag anyway. I looked around as I picked up the spraycans. No one was watching. Even if they were, what would they see? The hood covered my hair and, tied it snugly at my neck, obscured most of my features. I rummaged for my old scratched sunglasses and put them on, feeling better, anonymous. On the opposite side of the road, a corrugated metal wall blocked this spot from view. I gave the cans a shake to reassure myself they still had some paint in them as I looked over what had been sprayed on the shop wall, noting the unique lettering.

Did it make a difference, Jack had asked. Some things just needed doing.

I ducked into the narrow alley to the side and headed up it, squeezing between a warehouse and the unoccupied shop. No one else seemed interested in using this alley and after zigzagging a little, it split to left and right and straight ahead, which was a proper vehicle-sized alley. Go straight and I would be on Main Street.

Go right though...

I peeked around the corner of brick and there it was—a high fence, a locked gate, and a van with the *Storm X* logo on it parked inside.

CCTV wasn't likely around a disused shop, but *Storm X* would have something. I looked again and there was a camera, high up, at the corner nearest main street, where fence met building. It was angled so it *might* miss me if I circled in a leftward arc. It was probably too early for anyone to be here. Though they did serve food and food preparation might require early staff to get things cooking.

I ducked back, chewing at my fingernail as I thought, then swallowed the bits instead of spitting it out. DNA was in saliva. I had to laugh at myself for thinking like that. As if they'd comb the back alleys around the whole building for my fingernail and send it straight to Forensics. It wasn't like I was going to murder anyone. "Unless you turn up, Finn," I whispered to myself.

Should I? This was my do or die moment.

Face tucked low, I ran in a crouch to the security fence below the camera, climbed up it, and dragged one of the cans from my right pocket. I sprayed the lens pink, then jumped back down, barely catching the can as it flew from my hand into the air.

My heart was thumping as I eyed the padlock. I was no locksmith, and the top of the fence had a string of barbed wire all the way around. But I had a smart idea.

Being fast was definitely smart too. I walked around to where the van was barely two feet from the side of the fence, wormed my paint-can-armed hand through the gaps in the wire, and set to work spraying. Once both cans were empty, I stepped back and read the words of my work of art.

CockStormers!!! Get your drugs here!

I GRINNED AT ALL THE PINK AND GREEN SPLATTERS. IT WAS lame but the best I could do on the side of the van.

My moment of triumph came to a swift end at the sound of a car engine then the crackle of tires, as some vehicle turned onto the alleyway entrance. Whoever this was, I did not want to be seen.

I turned and jogged further down the right-hand branch.

This would probably run along behind a few of the shops before I could return to my back street. I needed to go get my scooter and my bag. A thought arrived like a meteor from outer space that NASA forgot to track. I was close to the same alley where my monster had vanished. I glanced back. The nose of the car edged into view, and I sprinted, zipping past a row of bins and a stack of crates. I prayed no one else had security cameras running. Shouts and angry voices told me they'd found my van graffiti.

Ahead, this alley joined another that came in from Main Street, and I recognized it, instantly.

Monster alley.

I took three more steps and found myself in almost the same place as the night before — just a little deeper in the alley. The dull-gray metal door was still here. I rolled my eyes at myself. As if it could have moved.

Was it waiting for me to dare to open it? That it was here at all surely proved I hadn't dreamed last night, and I had to admit I was dead curious.

Dead was a bad word to use. "Very curious. I am very curious," I said quietly.

The sound of a couple of people running, approaching from the direction of *Storm X*, forced my decision. I sprinted over, grasped the round handle, started to turn it —

The handle was cold, and did I hear a scream from within?

A soft wet rasp as if exhaled through a throat filled with blood? The drag of something helpless over a hard floor?

Yep, that was definitely my imagination.

Yes or no? Risk Finn's men catching me or risk whatever was beyond this door?

It would be safer to hide elsewhere, but I'd have to keep running and I had seconds, less than seconds, to decide.

"Fuck!" I whispered as I turned the handle and pulled.

The door stuck for a moment before it opened. I darted in and shut the door quickly, still trying to get my racing heart under control. I was all but blind in the darkness, and my other senses were doing their best to make up for it. What was that smell? Rum? No, that was silly. I could feel that itch on my skin that meant someone or something was staring at me, and even if that was imagination, I definitely heard movement not the scuttling of rats, nor the settling of an uneasy and ancient building, but something else. Something alive.

I drew a measured breath, considering my options. Walk forward and potentially fall into a pit that snapped off my legs, because I couldn't see my hands let alone the floor. Stay where I was and wait for whatever was out there to come to me. Or I could speak.

"Hello?" I fumbled for my phone.

YAGAR

A HUMAN HAD ENTERED OUR DEN. IT HAD HAPPENED BEFORE, but the invaders were usually quick to turn around and flee. Not this one. And she was a recent customer. Her name escaped me — if I ever knew it — but I recognized her. This was the female who had been aroused by the whipping. The one barely frightened by me invading her house in our monstrous, night-spirit form. The one who called *me* an amateur.

The light from outside limned her like one of their angels until the door closed and darkness reigned once more. With no artificial lighting, she would be close to blind. What should save her from the attention of the others was our relatively weakened state. By day, we took on human forms, and although Dookie had chosen to suspend himself from the ceiling, again, none of us were terribly lethal.

Another hour though, and it would be sunset.

Styx and Grender stirred from their chosen resting places, at bar and sofa. I was closest to the door, in my burrow of old books and blankets.

Already Styx was upright and the faint red glow about his eyes spoke of the nearness to our shifting time. "Pet?" he grunted, and even that word was almost unrecognizable. This close to shifting time, Styx tended to lose the ability to speak. "Pet?"

Dookie dropped to the floor and rose from his crouch.

I had to get her out of here. If she remained much longer, the others might think she was their prey next time she transgressed. And I had no doubt she would. Her ass was already stamped with MINE, in big letters. If I could do so without breaking any of the laws of our existence, I was going to experiment on her with punishment.

By my definition, punishment was adjustable.

I wasn't sure if I heard a voice or a couple footsteps, but I sure heard the thud. It sounded big and heavy and way too fucking close.

I switched on the flashlight option, then held up the phone and moved it from left to right, illuminating the room.

Four men met my gaze. Just men. Disheveled men with scruffy hair and clothes who glared at me as if their meal had been delivered late.

"Hi. Again." I raised a hand, trying to look harmless enough not to threaten them, while also tough enough to make them think twice about threatening me. What the hell were they doing in here, sitting in darkness, and where was my monster?

If anything, these guys unnerved me more than my fantasy monster had, because real men who were in hiding like this, when faced with a lone woman armed with a phone, might just decide to abduct me and kill me. Rape me. Or worse... and there was worse.

I backed up until I found the door, wondering if it would be safer to bolt outside and risk running into Finn's men, but before I could decide, one of them rose from a low bed and came at me, books spilling from his lap. My phone's light swung unhelpfully floorward as I flinched, and I had another split-second to make a choice: Try to blind him with the phone or put it away and free both hands for fighting.

I couldn't make up my mind in time.

"Fool!" He towered over me, paused a moment to *tsk* before he grabbed my hair and swung me around.

I gasped at the pain, but kept my head enough to shove the phone into my hoodie pocket. With my other hand, I pulled at his arm. The door fell open, unexpectedly opening outward, and I stumbled into the alley, into the light.

I was inches from a painful faceplant, only to be pulled up short by the stranger. With his hand shoved into my hair at the nape, he brought us nose to nose. I pulled back as much as I could for a desperate headbutt, then froze, staring at him. What the hell? Did I... know him? I was sure I didn't, but there was something about his features that was familiar in a distorted way.

And then I knew.

A chill spawned goosebumps through me — my arms, down my back, and yes, even my nipples chilled. His long coat that reached to midcalf and the symbolic tattoo I'd glimpsed at the front of his neck — I knew both of those from my bedroom. Nervous, I leaned backward, away from him, which only pressed my head more firmly into his hand.

Could this be my monster? He possessed no claws, for starters. I was almost disappointed. Could I be wrong? Was he just a man after all?

If so, he was an impressive specimen of a man, the textbook Tall Dark and Handsome trope. A foot taller than I was, he glared down at me with lustrous blue eyes while I scrolled through his features, from his strong nose and the shorn sides of his peppered black hair to his wing-like eyebrows, but his most obvious trait couldn't even be seen. There was just something about him, an aura of distance, as cold as the void of space, that said nothing would move him short of a nuclear explosion.

His eyes — deep inside I glimpsed a swirl of blue that came and went provocatively.

"Who are you?" I dared to ask.

"I could say the same. Your name?" He shook my head, fingers readjusting their hold.

That voice, it was the same. Fuck.

I can hear your sinful...filthy thoughts.

"You..." I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry.

"You are me? Was that your answer?"

A smartass then. I was tempted to say that aloud.

He gave a brief laugh as if he'd heard it anyway, then threw an impatient glare up the alley. "Who are they?"

I followed his gaze in time to see two men erupt from the side alley, only to come to an abrupt halt, their feet skidding on wet concrete and loose gravel, their angry faces smoothing out in fear at the sight of us.

Not of us. Just him. They were scared of this guy, but right now, I was merely confused.

Granted he had me by the neck and wasn't letting go.

"Who are they?" he demanded, if demand was the right word for that oddly soft tone, his warm breath brushing my lips.

Without thinking, I licked them and like an echo, the thought bounced back that I should have licked his lips, not mine. I tried to ignore the disconcerting arousal, but it sank into me, igniting other nerves that had no business heating up right now.

I inhaled, shakily. Okay, this was not normal.

"Who?" he repeated, his hand flexing around my neck, as if to remind me it was there.

No time for a full explanation. I cut to the chase. "Enemies?"

"Them?" He flicked his hand as if waving off a fly, and both men flinched in unison, then turned and wandered dazedly back down the side alley they'd come from. My captor/rescuer then drew me into his side, half beneath a wing of his coat and started walking toward Main Street, as if the two *Storm X* employees were of no concern or consequence.

"They saw me," I ventured, unwilling to yet try running from my monster. I was fairly certain it was him, but he'd somehow altered his appearance.

"They won't remember you, only that something made them retreat. Something bad."

"Oh. Okay." We'd reached the street, but he swung right and kept going, herding me along with him.

At the first opportunity, I tried to duck away, but his arm across my shoulder was immoveable.

"Don't," he said in the same tone one would use to bring a dog to heel. "I am walking you home. This is necessary. Also. Your name? This is the last time I'm asking you."

Names had power, didn't they? "And if I don't say?"

That seemed to give him some pause, but after several paces in silence, he answered, "Then you will require punishment."

Punishment. This *was* him, it had to be. How could this man be the terrifying figure from my bedroom?

"Oh." My god, why had that matter-of-fact statement about punishment turned me on? I did not even know what he truly *was* and I was gagging for sex.

Yagar

"I LEFT MY SCOOTER BACK THERE," THE FEMALE SAID. "I NEED to get it and my bag."

And still no name. It annoyed me to repeat myself, but I saw little alternative. Humans flustered easily and had strange priorities when panicked. And yet she did not look flustered. Flushed, yes, but hardly panicked.

I eyed her, wondering if she was actually angling for punishment. That would be novel. And exciting. This was territory I'd never explored. Humans had always seemed out of reach and only prey, even when I interacted with them in the daylight.

Only prey...or could they be more?

"Poppy." A smile danced on her full mouth and her eyebrows danced too, as if she knew what I had been thinking. "My name is Poppy Jacobsen."

"Hmm." If I hung around long enough to shift, what would happen? I could read her better then. "I will fetch this bag, after you are home. And the scooter. Are these of importance?"

She shrugged. "Yes and no. The scooter was second-hand, but I need it. I can't afford another. Ummm." She tilted her head to look up at me. "Do you have a name?"

Names have power: I sensed her thought with amusement. I'd never thought about them that way, but perhaps it was true and telling her mine would give her some power over me. Again, this felt exciting in some odd way. "I am Yagar. Though I tell people I am Samuel." The others would think me stupid, but as I'd come this far, why not go further? "Human people."

"Oh. And I'm a human." A frown furrowed her brow, though hidden partly by the hood she had pulled over herself.

"You want me to fetch your possessions..." Would she obey this? "Take off that outer garment. The hoodie, you call them?"

We stopped in the middle of the footpath, and I let her step away. She was hesitant, slow, as if wondering what I'd do if she ran. No. It wasn't that. I reached out and decided she was questioning where this was heading.

"Does revealing your hair mean something?" I asked curiously.

Oddly, that seemed to decide her.

"No." She undid the tie at the front, freed her hair, then pulled the entire hoodie over her head. "There."

"Better. I like your hair." The slanting rays of dying light washed through and gifted it a golden background. I blinked, watching as the smallest movement of her body made the light sparkle, then I reached out and let the strands that fell over her shoulder run through my fingers.

There is light and there is darkness, and we are the darkness.

"Are you... Are you the creature that I saw last night?"

"Saw?" I lifted my head slowly, smiling. "I think it was more than saw."

Her jaw clenched, but she did not drop her gaze. Annoying. Exciting.

"Yes. I am." I savored her delicious war within herself. If only I could see those thoughts in more detail. I took her small wrist and led her onward with my larger hand folded around hers. "Come. I promise I won't eat you tonight or hurt you."

She did not protest or pull away, only muttered, "Fuck." *Here I was hoping he'd eat me.*

My cock swelled, then climbed to full erection. Should I tell her I had heard that thought? Perhaps she had forgotten I could touch them.

"Fuck? That I might be able to oblige." Shifting time was near and from the flash of heat, my face had done some minor rippling.

She shot me this outraged then mildly frightened stare. I could feel her yoyoing from awe to amazement to arousal.

The surge of raw power her reaction caused within, it held me enraptured.

I could grow to like this far too much.

Poppy

I FUMBLED WITH THE KEYS, SEARCHING FOR THE KEYHOLE OF the old lock on the front door. With him behind me, I was distracted.

What was I doing? The same thoughts had been running amok since he'd been confirmed as the monster from last night, since he said he wouldn't eat me, but might... Fuck me. I was going to qualify for a Darwin Award tonight, wasn't I?

The key slid inside. All I had to do was turn it.

I bowed my head and inhaled to calm myself. He might know exactly the effect he was having. "How…" I swallowed. "How will you find my scooter?" I asked inanely, thinking if I didn't like the vibe of his answer, I could run inside and slam the door in his face.

It was a dumb idea, but gave me breathing space, time to decide.

Except he could squeeze through a gap that barely existed.

And read my mind.

His hand came down on my shoulder. That hand felt odd, and I glanced downward, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth. Was his hand longer? The fingers seemed to morph as I watched. At the tips, a hint of sharp angular blackness glinted and then was gone.

He leaned in close, his mouth just behind my ear. "By your scent I will find this scooter and your other belongings. By your delicious scent." His tongue cruised up my ear, exploring the lobe, lapping around it, then running upward.

Fuck. My knees trembled, my breathing hastened, and my nasty little clit bumped at my underwear. He bit the side of my neck, then released it.

"Open up, little Poppy. Knock. Knock."

Struggling not to pant, I whispered a curse. This was sounding more and more like a cheap horror movie, and I was going to die from anticipation, if not from being eaten. With a slightly shaking hand, I unlocked the door, swung it inward, watched him pass through. He'd been invited in, just like they said not to do with vampires.

A see-saw rattling noise broke my trance. That would be the flap on Mrs. Haversham's door. Small paws pattered on the timber floor.

"I am not a vampire." Yagar went to one knee and held out his hand. "What is this little thing?"

Mrs. Haversham's white fluffy Westie trotted forward and sniffed the offered hand.

"That's Cumberbund, my landlady's dog. We call him Bundy, for short."

"A pet then. Interesting." A smile creased his mouth as he patted Bundy, running his hand over the dog and lingering over the collar. It was a pretty red diamante one I'd bought for the cutie. "Not Cum? That seems more logical."

"Fuck, no." I half-covered my mouth with my fingers to stop myself laughing.

The nickname had actually been considered, according to his owner when I first met her. Especially since Cumberbund was white. I'd almost collapsed laughing at that. She had a filthy sense of humor and on occasion it had shocked me, but nothing like this, coming from Yagar.

"I see." He straightened and Bundy swanned about, sniffing his heels, which drew my own attention to his shoes. Yagar had shoes on. Monsters wore shoes? No, I was quite certain my monster from the night before had been barefoot, and why was I still questioning this?

"This way," I mumbled.

"I like pets." He ambled along beside me across the foyer. "You swear too much."

"I do?"

"Yes. Anger and vulgarity seem to go together."

"They probably do." I unlocked the door to my half of the house and, after only a moment, let him through. In for a penny, in for a fucking pound.

The design of this place was unusual, and the common hallway only led to my half of the house, Mrs. Haversham's half, or a storeroom at the end. But I had this small living room, a kitchen, bathroom, and my bedroom, with enough space for a window seat — if I could ever get one built. I was simply happy to be able to afford this. "The bedroom." He took my wrist. "I like it in there. Come."

I followed, barely spluttering a protest. He kicked the bedroom door open with a nudge of his black shoe.

Strange man in the house. Alert, alert.

Ever since he'd bitten and licked my ear, he'd had me eating from the palm of his hand — slurping from it maybe. I was so doomed.

Yagar drew me to the bed, patted it and I gingerly sat down, rubbing my wrist where he'd been a little too firm in his grasp. He looked around, gesturing widely at the entire space.

"I remember your horror movie posters. I love those."

"Of course you do." The side of his face showed off the precision of his haircut — shaved sides and the tattoo on the front of his neck.

And then small black pebbles bubbled and wove in waves beneath his skin, forming tendrils of black that sprouted and shrank. Long spikelike teeth erupted from his gums, shredding his lips until they...

Went back to being normal.

"What the—" I made as if to stand.

He grabbed the front of my throat. "Sit. Stay, little pet. I need you to talk."

I pawed at his wrist and budged him exactly zero inches. "Stay?" I may have whimpered, shamefully, and it wasn't because of the force. I was a little ashamed of my response. He might kill me, maim me, but my intuition said otherwise. If I wished for more of this, would it be bad? "Yes. Stay." He brought me lower until I had to kneel or fall.

So I knelt. But not in submission, I told myself, because that would be ridiculous Then I felt horrified that I'd gone there.

"What a lovely invitation." I swallowed, feeling his large hand there, firm against my neck. I ran a finger up the back of his wrist and watched his mouth twitch, his eyes narrow.

He wasn't the only one who could read minds.

"I will be shifting soon. Then we can play properly. I have fucked humans before, in this human form, but for you..." The corner of his mouth twisted. "For you I want to experiment –" His tongue slid across his mouth then he smiled. "— because you really, really want me to. Lie over my lap."

I was beginning to love that sinister smile.

"Or?"

He pulled my face close, laughed, and leaned in to kiss his way down me, from forehead to nose to mouth, way too slowly. I was sighing when he broke away, my eyes halfclosed. I shuddered, and opened them wider, both turned on and worried.

"Or maybe, would you prefer me to do something like on one of your posters and use my blood-lubricated dick on you?"

When put like that...

I mouthed an obvious no.

"I thought so. You intrigue me. Why do you like the notion of a beast fucking you and fucking *with* you? I will have that question answered. In triplicate." Lightly, he shook my throat before releasing me. "Take off your clothes then... and come here." He patted the bed.

Already he'd won.

I stood and removed my jacket, small dress, pushed off my shoes, and slipped off those business-black leggings. I hesitated.

"These little red things." He gestured. "Panties and bra? You will leave those on."

In the process of making myself naked, my nipples had crinkled in and turned into hard buttons. If I'd removed the panties, the damp crotch would be obvious. I climbed up onto the bed, aware of how my pussy felt alive and humming, as if he'd already used a vibe on me. He had in a way, using words.

I lifted one eyebrow, suddenly peeved at myself. What was wrong with me?

"Anyone else would be screaming by now. You know that?"

"Of course I do." He raised a hand and the claws on it were there, in pure, glossy black. The back of a claw was run over my mouth. "So pretty, this mouth."

Oh god. Any doubts, any reluctance I'd still had, it fled the room.

"That is why I'm here, Poppy. You pulled me in, like a... like that." He pointed to the poster with the dead man hanging from a hook. "Now lie down and tell me, what is a Darwin Award?"

Had I said that out loud?

"Did you forget I can hear thoughts?"

All of them?

"Not all, not during the day. Only those with powerful emotion behind him. But once I shift, your thoughts become clearer."

He smiled, reminding me of the transformation of his mouth, his teeth perforating his lips. "But I like your voice. You will answer my questions. Now." He hauled me down until I sprawled over him then tugged the back of my panties to below my butt. His hand landed on there in the lightest smack. "Begin to talk. Tell me everything."

He left the weight of his hand on me there.

I gulped. "The Darwin Awards are for people who kill themselves doing dumb things."

"I see." His claws probed, spreading my ass cheeks, keeping them open, and I was certain he studied me.

If I'd been vulnerable before, this was far worse. I remembered what he'd done last night and couldn't help growing more aroused. I held my breath trying not to make telling noises.

Was I about to be spanked by a monster?

He laughed, low and threatening, then pushed his hand between my thighs, spreading them. Fingers parted my pussy lips, slipped along me, while he hummed in a pleased way. Torturously slowly, one of them sank inside me.

Jutting into the side of my stomach, a hard ridge told me he really did have a cock. I pulled on the quilt, bunching it under my hands, treadling there as he dabbled and thrust. I exhaled sharply. "Talk to me some more." He pushed the finger further inside then pulled it out and spanked me, once, then thrust two fingers in. They squeezed in, fully deep in seconds.

I gasped, spread my thighs even wider. Humping him would be bad.

Even for this monster I was such a sl-

"Yes," he intoned, his deep voice grinding out the word. "You are a slut for me, and I've never had one before. I like it."

Was that a purr? A monster-ish purr?

"You will come for me again, soon, and then I will fuck all of you, in every hole..." His voice trailed off as if he were contemplating what he'd said.

Even though his fingers had halted, I gulped, my breathing stalled, because I couldn't stop thinking about how I had a monster fingering me. His nasty claws were inside me, doing things to make me come. It was awesome.

Then he shuddered, rocking us both, his body obviously doing things beyond his control.

He shifted.

Should I look?

"No. Not until I say you can." That voice, it was hoarser, scarier, with just the right amount of wickedness. I spasmed onto his fingers, moaning as he let a claw press and circle my clit. "You will not come, not until I allow it, my little human pet."

"What?"

I twisted and he tut-tutted and held my head still. "I can see what you want, somewhat. The rest you are going to tell me, Poppy. Do not lie."

I heard a leathery swish as he undid and pulled on something, then he draped a leather belt over the back of my neck. It was wide yet he managed to thread it one-handed, then cinch it snug against my neck.

"Fuck," I said quietly, lost in the moment, loving it, wondering what penalty I must pay in return for Fate for giving me Yagar.

His chuckle was low and a little evil. "Yes. I thought you would like this crude collar." He extracted his fingers from within then walked them up my spine to the belt, leaving moisture where he'd touched. He moved my hair aside. "I am almost worried. You are this flawless temptation and even I, a bogeyman, a babai, a night spirit tasked with punishment of female humans, even I feel this is too perfect. I want to keep you in a bottle, forever. But alive!" he hurriedly added, perhaps sensing my alarm. "And I won't, but still." I heard him take a long inhalation. "We talk and I play with you, and I learn to control myself. Yes?"

"I guess?" My own voice had become smaller, distracted as I was by all of him, by every single thing he did and by what he was.

Even the sound of him. The feel of his heavy body against mine, the reality of this beastly creature that planned to violate me... he'd wrapped me up like a bug in a web. His voice, his scent, his intelligence, and yes, his need to please me.

Could we be this right for each other or was this a trap?

"You are a bogeyman?"

"And all the other terms, such as babai. Night spirit is also allowable. Our task is to punish you for your greater sins. Though most of the sins have become irrelevant — envy, lust, gluttony, sloth, pride — for the world is too awash with those. We are left with only Greed and Wrath." When he spoke, I swear I heard the capitals. "The latter, Wrath, was your undoing, was it not?"

I nodded. I had been so angry. Still was, but it simmered. He'd made me lose myself, tonight. Asking him what the punishments were, well, I'd seen some of that.

"We shift at night. In daylight, we look like normal men."

I recalled Finn's employees, staring at him in horror. And still he scares the crap out of anyone he wants to.

"They needed it." His claw sliced through the strap of my bra, beside the clip. "I like this too. Your back, naked. You look so much better naked."

He sliced the sides of my panties and drew them off me, tossed them away, gave my ass three smacks. I swallowed a groan as the force pushed me onto him and the pain morphed and travelled, spreading into that ineffable thrill.

The line between pain and pleasure could be beautiful.

"Your bottom bounces when I hit it. And it's going very red." He caressed me there, purring again as I squirmed. My hip rubbed against the shaft of his cock. "And you like it."

"Mmm."

The rougher, bumpier surface of whatever was now the palm of his hand brushed along my back, up to my nape hair, where he grasped a chunk, twisting it tight. I swore as I was hauled upward, my neck curving to follow the pull. My breasts lifted from the bed and Yagar used his claws around them, cupping them both before he pulled away the torn remains of my bra. I propped myself on my hands, straight-armed.

The makeshift collar was snugged in again, gathered and held by the same hand that had my hair. Though caught by the neck, I was free to move the rest of my body.

"Talking will be difficult, but we will manage. So, you know I am a babai. Also know this. I have three brothers in the den you found. You will never return there unless I take you. My brothers are dangerous and might do you damage." He spanked me a few times while he spoke. "Understood?"

I nodded. "Yes. What would they do?"

"Very bad things. Some of them. Now you will tell me why you weren't scared of me last night."

I swiveled my eyes to the limits, trying to see him properly, but he held my neck and head in an iron grip.

"No. No. No. Bad Poppy." His clawed hand pinprickwalked over my spanked butt making me wince, making lust meander up my spine. My outthrust breasts grew heavy and when he brushed over my ass again, I groaned and squirmed, wishing for his fingers inside me. I waggled my ass, hoping. "No. First you will tell me why."

"You know why." I licked my lips, spun out by all the handling of my body. In shapeshifted form, his cock seemed larger, throbbing, and rigid, poking my side...and more dangerous.

"If you want me to be nice when I fuck you, then answer. Why?" Nice? What the?

"Ohhh... You want it rough. Understood." He leaned forward and cinched in the collar. "I got that one. What else do you like?" Something that wasn't a claw prodded then pushed into my rear hole and sank in, revolving, teasing.

Panting, distracted by his new tactic, I did what he asked, I spewed info, in between shutting my eyes and making odd noises that I was sure he loved to hear.

"Bondage. Somnophilia... ahh. Oh. Fuck!" Was that a pen slowly entering me? Too small to be my dildo off the cupboard. Panting, incoherent, I said more, barely registering the words as I rattled off my kinky fantasies. "That's ummm, being taken in my sleep. Public sex, somewhere, anywhere. Being watched by others, *oh, oh fuck*." The belt around my neck twitched. "I...I...I guess I wouldn't mind anal?"

Yagar snorted. "I know that one." He kissed me, hard, his much larger tongue ramming in and being a dick to my mouth, while he kept my head in place for his use.

I gasp-spluttered, hearing his delighted hum.

Facefucking crossed with kissing? I was there for it. Here for it? Something like that?

He released me. Drool strung between us, either his or mine or both.

At last I saw him — his shifted self. His hair had been replaced by black, twisting tendrils. His dark blue-gray face was covered in ridges and scars, with white, bony cheekbones and jaw. His teeth were a fearsome fence of spikes.

I whimpered the last of my shameful kinks. "Being taken by a beast."

"Like me." "Yes."

"Good."

I was getting driven crazy by this slow and personally targeted seduction. What could I do when the monster knew all my kinks?

There was a pregnant pause, and I was sure he'd picked up on that.

"Not all. Not yet. But I will."

I groaned.

"On your knees, pet human." He tapped the side of his own head. "You forgot that one, but I saw it. Being my pet. I like this. No wonder I lusted after you." He drew a hand down his cock then squeezed it, where it was shrouded in the cloth of his black pants.

Too perfect, my mind said. *There will be a price*. I told it to get lost.

Once I was on the floor, waiting, feeling vulnerable, curious, and hornier than any woman can surely bear without self-combusting, he stripped.

I looked up at this muscle-laden hunk of seven-foot bogeyman. His black claws gleamed with the promise of swift, dark death. His hair ebbed and swayed as if he were the progeny of Medusa. His face was a scar-blasted landscape of terror.

Godly blue eyes. And more scars covered his blue-black chest and arms — snakelike etchings that ran all the way to his cock. He looked brutal enough to wipe out a squadron of SAS troopers. "My cock is for your mouth, pretty one."

Saying *yes, sir*, would probably get me cast into Hell. I whimpered and bit back that impulse.

The belt still circled my neck. He sat on the bed and leaned in to grasp it again. Slowly, he pulled me forward, until I kneeled, a few inches from that other somewhat deadly piece of him. He let me look for a while, his predator grin full of sharp, intermeshing teeth.

His cock seemed to pulse, slowly. Ten inches long and larger than a man's, it swam with blacks, greys, and angry reds that surged from base to tip. Where come normally exited on a male, a tiny hole glowed lava-red.

"My heartbeat." He growled and licked across his teeth, let his long tongue make a mesmerizing swirl in the air before sucking it back inside. "It pulses with my heart. Open your mouth so I can fuck you there."

A little reluctantly, I opened my mouth and watched the approach of that strange cock. I slid on my knees for the final distance as he seized my head and jammed himself in, sliding as far as he could with my mouth and jaw stretched to the utmost. Even as I choked, I almost came.

My toes scrunched on the floor. My pussy squeezed in waves. My clit plumped higher.

Because this was a fantasy too—being facefucked and forced.

Yagar

OH, THE WONDERMENT OF A FEMALE SURRENDERING TO ME SO gloriously — on her knees with her own wetness dripping to the floor because my cock in her mouth opening turned her on so desperately. She writhed, struggling not to get away but to take me even deeper. Her hot breath and the scrape of her teeth had already brought me to the edge.

I gnashed my own teeth and shot her a ferocious glare.

I wanted to come in there.

It was agony to pull out. Her saliva glistened on my shaft as I extracted myself, but...I managed. I stepped away, watching this glorious creature I'd discovered.

How could I ever release her? Naked and beautifully obedient, she had my belt of ownership about her neck, and longed for me to plant myself fully inside her cunt. Whimpering, she stared adoringly at my withdrawing dick and imagined it going inside her.

"Soon," I told her. "Wait."

"Yes, sir." *Fuck* as the humans said. Had she called me her Sir? Yes, she had.

My cock bobbed upright and spurted a thimbleful of nightspirit come into my palm. I cradled my dick, cursing, growing more enamored of cursing.

I braced myself.

I winced as I hurt my cock with my claws to make it behave. It must behave.

However, I could do this again tomorrow, I reminded myself. And the next day. I could do it over and over.

I should just fuck her now. So I picked her up and bent her over the edge of the bed, batted apart her thighs, and then entered her in one mind-rending thrust that shunted her facefirst into the bedding. I'd meant to finesse this, but why not just take her?

Take her roughly, as if I were obsessed to the point of destruction.

That was painfully close to the truth.

"Fuck!" I *was* obsessed. "I hate you," I snarled, grinding my cock into her, pumping in and out, making *thwack, thwack* sounds as I hit her ass and could go no further. She took me fully despite her smallness, but I'd registered the initial fear in her mind as I penetrated her, and I loved that too.

Poppy squealed as I gave her several more short, sharp, spearing movements with my hips. "I hate you too! You are nasty and—"

I interrupted her with a powerful thrust, turning the rest of her insults to keening and gasping as she knotted her hands in the sheets. "You do? Bad girl. Though I think I lied."

"I know. I know." Her butt bowed upward as she made herself more easily entered, more easily fucked.

By me. The heat she felt, her passionate cries, were not in spite of what I was, but in part because of it. She didn't merely want cock, she wanted mine. I slammed in and pulled out, almost to the tip.

"Oh. Ohhh! Please. More. More!"

"You sure?" I smiled evilly.

I ran a claw around her cunt lips on one side, admiring the evidence of her lust. How swollen and wet she was, how much her mind had been rendered a ball of yearning chaos. She dripped with arousal.

She pushed backward, making my cock slowly enter her a few extra inches.

I should make her come. But first...

With a flurry of more ramming thrusts, I took my female and drove her into the bedding until she was limp and ready for me. Then I buried myself deep and came, roaring my triumph. My come spurted with enough pressure to make it leak from her, where my cock had sealed to her cunt entrance.

And she moaned, wriggling in a final protest. As if she could escape me. As if.

I withdrew and flipped her over, onto her back.

"Be still or you get nothing." I held down her hands and used my tongue on her, drinking in her juices and my own, reaming her with it and making her produce more wetness, more squeals. Her weak cries were the best nectar, and I began to wonder if I could stay here forever and just make her come and come until she begged me to stop.

Maybe? Maybe next time.

The taste of us both, mixed together, was heady and nothing like I'd ever thought would be mine to consume.

She came with my tongue plunged fully into her, with my breath on her, my claws holding her pussy open, and her stomach pinned. She came and jerked uncontrollably in my grasp. Greedily, I watched the arching of her body and how her muscles strained.

The face of this female, though, that was the best of it. My touch, my fucking, had awed her.

Still shaking, she curled up around my knee where it sank into the mattress.

"Rest now, Poppy. I have made you mine, tonight. You will never fuck another — human or inhuman."

Too breathless still to speak, she rolled over and looked up at me, brows furrowed.

I stroked a circle about both of her pink nipples then around each breast. I should have sucked on these.

"It is an order. I will enforce this. Do not dare take another to bed." My hair tendrils lashed, betraying my agitation. I knew she had doubts, yet she was also in awe and desired my possession.

I would take my time and convince her. I lay down with her, drew her to my chest and let her snuggle in. Her body wrapped fearlessly around mine. When I stroked her hair, I felt it soothe her. "Wow." She kissed my hand, fondling the claws. "This will take some getting used to."

"Are you okay in there?" Someone knocked on her door, accompanied by shrill barking.

"Mr. Cum?" I asked.

Poppy giggled calling, "I'm okay, Mrs. Haversham! Go to bed!"

"Okay. Have fun, you dirty girl. Say hi to your new boy from me."

"Oh geez." She hid her face. "You, a boy."

"Hmmm. Perhaps I will pretend to be this when I meet her."

"Oh!" She punched my arm. "You can never meet her!"

"It is decided then. Tomorrow, we meet."

"Fuck. Fuck-fuck." Poppy scowled. "Didn't you promise to get my scooter?"

I had. I didn't want to leave her bed. But a promise was a contract.

I kissed the top of her head and rose onto my elbow. "I will go find it, and your bag, and return it here."

She nodded, but said nothing to me about wanting me back in her bed. That made a whole new emotion well up inside my chest.

Sadness? That was a human emotion.

I swallowed and patted her hip. "I'll be back."

"I'll go have a shower then." Slowly she sat up, legs sprawled sideways. Her face contorted and hope swirled to the surface of my mind. "Will you stay with me, tonight?" Was that water in her eyes? "You make me feel safe."

Oh. My. Gods.

"Of course I will." I kissed her again. If my brothers found out a human had said that, I would never live it down. "No need for directions. As I told you, I can find it by your scent." Then I pushed her onto her back and licked between her legs. I closed them again, winked. "Got it."

Her open-mouthed stunned expression made me want to whistle as I stalked away and slid out the window.

If only I knew how to do that — whistling. My lips were the wrong shape.

I sobered up the further away I was from Poppy and her dwelling. I'd caught the signs of her doubts — how she thought we were too perfect together and that the universe would smite us for it. Were we fated lovers? I'd glimpsed that in her mind also. It had come up in a book I'd found at the library.

It wasn't possible, surely?

Yet I wished with all of my black heart that it were so.

CHAPTER o

Poppy

I LAY THERE FOR A WHILE, SPREADEAGLED ON MY BACK. HE'D left his belt behind, and I found myself stroking it as I thought about what just happened. Where was this going? This was an impossible relationship. All of the normal things were going to be tossed out the window. Dating, Valentine's Day, meeting the parents, having kids, growing old together, getting a house and a mortgage and yelling at the neighbors because their music was too loud... all gone.

I may as well marry an orc from Lord of the Rings. Granted, I had fantasized about that too.

Yagar seemed ready to protect me, strangely. To help me. Having a big, bad bogeyman here made me feel invincible. I only wished I knew the full extent of what that really meant. Did he have powers? Well, I already knew he did. As he'd done the night before, he'd exited through a gap that did not exist unless you used a microscope.

I sighed, then smiled. I didn't want to over-think this when I could just enjoy the moment. My poor pussy both hurt and felt incredible. I explored inside my mouth with my tongue. Even my jaw ached. The memories of what he'd done would feed my one-handed fantasies for a hundred years as it was.

"Shower." I bounced out of bed, then frowned at the sheets, which were rumpled and soggy in all the wrong places. However, it was definitely the best sort of mess.

I showered and changed the sheets, then switched off the light. I lay on the clean but cold bedding and began to wonder if he would return. Even with his bogeyman come on the sheets that I knew lay bundled in the laundry basket, I still found it hard to believe I'd actually found a monster lover.

He was even considerate. Maybe I was truly lying in a coma somewhere? I rolled onto my side and stared at the bedside drawers.

Shadows shifted leisurely.

"You're not dreaming me." Yagar slid into bed and hauled me into him until his heat was next to my skin, his chest scars rubbing on my back, with his teeth and tongue behind my ear... nuzzling my hair.

I wanted to purr like he did and lifted my head, my eyes closing as I shifted my ass even closer.

"Hello again, pretty one. The scooter is in the hallway. Your bag is on the floor."

"Thank you." I reached back to caress him, his thigh, his waist, then I found his face.

He pulled the sheets over us and delicately licked my fingers. "Do you need to sleep?"

"Mmm." I did. I had to go to work tomorrow, even if Yagar had rocked my world.

"And you have rocked mine. Before you close your eyes, tell me this. Why were you angry? You burned a man's car."

"I did, didn't I. Okay." Would saying this ruin anything? No. It reminded me there were more things in my life than monster dick though. "I burned his car in a sort of revenge. My sister is addicted to drugs, like heroin. I'm not a hundred percent sure of what she uses. She doesn't talk to me anymore. We had a falling out. I just wish I could help her."

I kept going, filling in more details about Finn and his club. As I talked, a thought came to me. In bed with me was a beast that could slide through walls and scare the pants off of most men. If I needed to do something to Finn to stop him supplying Sian with drugs, or to make him just leave her alone, Yagar was the perfect instrument.

That was so callous. No. I must not ask. Besides, I couldn't make a bogeyman do my bidding.

Maybe speaking at the same time had disguised those deeper thoughts because he gave no sign he'd heard me, only listened.

When I finished my long explanation, he said, "You must never get angry like that again. I cannot guarantee it won't attract one of my brothers to punish you. Promise me you will not get angry."

I had to pause and think that through. If I lied, he would know. So what was the truth? "I will try very, very hard to not get angry like that ever again. Is that enough?" I frowned and wriggled around to see his ugly, scarred face. When would he shift back to human? "I'm human, so I can't give an absolute guarantee." "Okay. I accept that. Now you must sleep." He had me turn over so that we spooned. "I shift toward dawn, of course. It varies, depending on several things. Sleep."

I'd spoken another truth before. He made me calmer, made me feel safe. I closed my eyes and soon fell into a dreamless sleep.

I WOKE TO THE FAINTEST NOISE AND STRAINED MY EARS TO detect it, still muddled with sleep. It was early morning, from the grayness glimpsed through my half-open eyes. Early light leached through the shutters. Then I remembered.

My monster. Last night. The bed seemed empty.

No sooner had the thought occurred than someone landed on the bed and grabbed my wrists where I had them near my nose. They straddled me and pinned me with their bodyweight, forced me onto my stomach. Was it him? It must be him. Panic rose.

"Yagar?" I asked, but my face was against the pillow and his name was muffled.

No answer. Swiftly, he tied my wrists together above my head, securing them to part of the ironwork of my bed frame.

"Is it you?" I was sure it was, from the roughness of his skin where he held my wrists trapped. I shook my head from side to side and wormed about trying to shake whoever this was off me. "Yagar, answer me if it's you!"

"It is I. I feel your fear increasing. Did I do this wrong?"

"Oh. Thank god." I sagged and took a few deep breaths. "You need to talk to me first! I wasn't sure, well I thought it must be you... but it could have been someone else."

He still straddled my back, but moved lower and sat on my legs. I hadn't worn anything to bed after I showered so this was skin-on-skin intimate, and I was tied up. For some warped reason, a man breaking in and raping me was dead frightening, while my monster tying me up and doing *things* was not.

What had been scary switched to being potentially sexy.

"I don't quite understand. I should release you then, though the view from here is... to die for, as humans like to say. I have seen many female butts, but...this." He smoothed his hands over my hips.

His hands moving on me sent a thrill fluttering through me, making it difficult to divide my attention between words and sensations, but I choked out a laugh. "But butt?"

"I made a joke?"

I turned my head and caught sight of him, still in full night-spirit form — big and mean looking, his torso a pastiche of murky blues, blacks and grays. He was still naked too, his cock erect and poised above the split of my ass.

If he really wanted to, he could fling me around and tear me to pieces. That he had not was a huge plus in his favor. Even his dick could destroy my insides. Being fucked to death by Yagar, was that worth adding to my bucket list?

Ugh. It was. Subtly, I humped the bed.

"You should ask me to let you go. Beg me for it."

I swallowed. He slipped his hands lower to hold my ass on both sides, his claws denting my skin.

Beg him? I inhaled softly. I wasn't even sure I wanted him to release me.

He shifted to kneel between my legs, forcing them apart. "If I stay back here..." Mesmerized, I watched, my head twisted to the side. His magnificently large erection had already captured my attention but especially now, when he leaned down and aimed it between my legs.

"Heyyy," I whispered.

My lips parted as I felt that rude but welcome pressure as he searched for my entrance, felt the first soft squeeze of the head of a dick seeking entry, but he stopped before inserting it. I hesitated for only half a second before I spread my legs wider in invitation.

"I thought so." The black tendrils of his hair lazily straightened. His face tensed as he pushed at me, and his cock parted my lips and slid inside, his focus dedicated, completely, to my pussy.

I sighed and shut my eyes, wincing as he forged deeper. The stretch on my entrance was immense, as if he might tear me if he was too rough.

He'd fucked me there already, but I clearly needed more time, more tongue. "Please?"

"Or just more slow fucking," he said, amused, clearly reading my thoughts.

It was an immense stretch, but sublime. As he began to test me, doing small shunting thrusts, with his claws wedged into my hips, I opened my mouth wider, huffing into the pillow. My hands twisted, gripping the rope he'd used to tie me to the headboard, using it as an anchor. I let out a whimper at a deeper thrust, wavering between trying to hide my ass and arching higher, to let him have me. "I see the appeal now. You can't get away and I can do anything to you, little female."

Little female. What was it about being called that by this beast that did my head in?

I twisted my hands, testing the strength of the rope, and found it impossible to tear or escape.

He pulled out, then flipped me onto my back and sat on my thighs. "But that's what you like about it, isn't it?" His black tongue emerged from that cage of sinister teeth, flicking out, curling, unrolling, as if tasting my arousal and my submission in the air I exhaled.

I watched as he bent over me and with claws began to explore my pussy lips before he pinched and isolated my clit between finger and thumb. His tongue snaked out and flicked the air above my clit, so close I swear I felt the heat of his flesh. I made a weird noise, longing, wanting him to do it, to put his mouth all over me as he'd done before.

He obliged and licked me, hard, almost whipping me with his tongue.

I jumped, whimpering as his pincer-like hold intensified and his tongue threatened again, lazily circling that sensitive nub.

"Answer me."

"Yes?" I squeaked. "What should I say?"

"Good girl. Say you want me to do whatever I want."

I hissed as he again slapped and slurped me with his tongue-tip. "Yes? I guess?"

"Not good enough." Another violent flick, directly on my clit.

I was dying here, caught between the urge to climb that orgasmic slope to heaven on his tongue, and ducking away. No matter how I tried to budge him, my thighs couldn't move his weight off me.

My ass muscles quivered. His tongue hovered, curling, uncurling.

The residual shock of the pain and my arousal merged and simmered, creating a pulsating ache that ran up through me from deep in my core to my pussy and higher. My nipples hardened to rigid buttons. Did I really trust him?

I wanted this. I didn't. I did. I was fucked either way.

Oh that wicked grin on his spiky-teethed face. The Cheshire Cat had nothing on this guy.

"Yes." I hissed. "Please?" Fuck though, what was he meaning to do?

"You see, the problem is..." Slowly, with one claw, he drew a meandering line from between my breasts and down my stomach, past my navel, leading to my recently abused but buzzing clit. There he drew a circle, around and around it. "I fantasize about making your rear end glow with redness, like I did that first night."

I found myself staring at him, at his face, his clawed finger, and at that dick bobbing above me. I'd clenched my jaw. My pussy was doing the same. My breathing grew deeper, more ragged.

"So, you're going to suffer first before I make you come."

I licked my lips and rasped out, "You know, that's not really bad news."

"I do know." His grin widened, showing even more of those long teeth.

Then he strapped my legs together with his belt — that thing was getting a work-out — undid the knot tying me to the bedhead and pulled me off the bed. My bogeyman monster showed off his strength by easily carrying me, draped over his shoulder

CHAPTER 10

Yagar

ADDING A FEW INCHES TO MY HEIGHT WAS SIMPLE AND I plucked out a back tooth, stretched myself higher, and hammered it into the ceiling at an angle with my fist. A second tooth, hammered at the reverse angle, gave me an anchor to attach her hands to. The teeth would grow back.

Slung over my shoulder, Poppy wriggled but was barely trying. I stood her on her feet, then looped the end of the rope that bound her hands around the teeth, weaving it back and forth. Only after she was secure did I stoop to untie her feet.

"There." I stepped back to drool over my little captive. Giving her a nudge, I watched her spin and sway, admiring her helplessness, then began to circle, running my fingers over her, smoothing her hair, feeling her breasts and stroking her sides, then pushing between her legs. She wormed about, screwing her toes into the floor, hissing and frowning at me, but I knew her true thoughts and she was fully into this.

I could do anything. Within reason.

Something was wrong though. The impulse to do this had been clear, but something held me back.

"I could whip you with rope," I said quietly. "Or a switch of fresh kindling. Or leather, or a cat-o-nine-tails, a paddle, or a stick." Over the many years, I'd utilized everything possible due to my job, though the marks of punishment faded as the morning dawned.

In bygone ages, humans saw little difference between dreams and divine visitation, but no longer. Now the only ones who could be said to have taken a lifelong lesson from a nightspirit's visits were those taken to the den for severe transgressions and only because their lives ended there.

I tilted her chin and fixed her with a serious stare. Her sweet hazel eyes looked back at me, and I detected concern in her thoughts and manner.

"You're not prey, not in this. I can't do this. I can't. Even though I fantasized about it." I stared at her window where the light strengthened. It would be shifting time soon. I lowered my head. "I cannot exact punishment unless it's warranted."

"Are you okay?"

"Punishing girls has been my job since forever, and I never thought I'd find someone like you." I wrapped my hand over her breast and growled as I watched her react to my claws digging in. "But I need to have it validated."

"I get it. Checks and balances? Let me go then?"

"Sure."

I undid the bindings and loosened the rope until she slipped it from her wrists. I stood lamely in the middle of the floor as she found her feet, avoiding her gaze.

"It's okay. Come and sit."

Then this tiny creature took my hand, my large sharpclawed hand that could eviscerate a tiger with one blow — or I imagined I could. Together, we sat on the edge of her bed.

"It's not the end of the world," she told me.

Maybe it was. I was going to shift to human and...

"You want a monster," I said gruffly. "I will soon look like a human."

"You are still you though."

"Yes."

"Then we are good." Poppy lay back and I joined her, staring up at the ceiling.

I leaned up on my elbow, just looking at her for a time, then I kissed her, marveling at her soft lips, her soft sighs, and how much she enjoyed my kisses. When at last I pulled away, she smiled.

Tracing the curve of her contented lips with one claw, I mused, "I can kiss and fuck you at my will, but hurting you, in any way, requires a special reason. Otherwise I violate our laws."

"*Ahhh*. I understand. It's like a technicality. But you spanked me before."

"You spray painted that van. There was some anger."

"A little." She held up her finger and thumb a small distance apart. "*Thiiis* much" She said teasingly, and then her gaze moved past me to the ceiling and narrowed in confusion. "What's in my ceiling?"

"My teeth."

"Huh. That's what they are? Mrs. Haversham might be annoyed."

"Yes. I'll retrieve them." As I did so, my attention wandered again to the lightening sky outside the window. "I'm going to shift to my human form soon. I will be boring to you."

"Hardly." She stretched and looked at me through her lashes, still smiling. "Well, so I should tell you to begone then?"

I shrugged uncomfortably. This sort of feeling was entirely new for me. Why was I doing this if it made me feel bad? The flaws in our relationship were becoming clear. We could only truly be together at night.

"If you're wondering if I want you to go, the answer is no, Yagar," she said firmly.

"No? What else?"

"I have the day off, so you and me, we are going to see *alllll* the things."

"Allll of them?" I was getting the hang of her odd use of words. She wanted me around, even when I was normal?

That was...what was the word? A game changer.

Something jangled. "Damn. I forgot to mute." She rolled over and dragged a phone off the small table next to the bed, then tapped it. Her smile died away. Though she said nothing, I could feel her dismay.

"Show me. Or else." I snatched it from her and read the screen.

"FINN," SHE MUTTERED. "GOD KNOWS HOW HE SUSPECTS. Maybe because I told him I hate his guts? Don't worry. He won't do anything."

"Now that was a partial lie. You don't know that for certain."

"No, I don't. Bugger." She turned her head and eyed me. Her mouth curved with subdued glee. "Was that enough for a spanking?"

"No." I said no more words because my claws were shrinking, and my face was making crunching and crackling sounds. I was shifting. "It has to be linked with something wrathful — like burning a car or slaughtering a family."

"Holy yikes. I won't be doing that other one. Cars though..."

I pushed her onto her side and swatted her ass."

"Ow! What happened to—"

"Fuck me if I know. It worked." I smirked at her.

"So what happens to the really bad women — the ones who kill people?" Poppy rubbed her butt, and I slid down to kiss it and sigh.

"I really like this butt. The bad women — we disappear them. A rare few. I swore off the more severe punishments."

"Oh. Okay. Good."

The casual tone with which I'd spoken belied my shame. Disappear was far too light a word. Some of them were dismembered cruelly, slain, and eaten. That had become repulsive to me, but once upon a time, I had participated. What if Poppy found out?

I wasn't about to tell her this, but still, it worried me.

What if.

What if that urge to do the worst to my prey returned?

CHAPPER II

Yagar

ALTHOUGH I WAS IN HUMAN FORM, IT STILL FELT ODD TO BE out of my den in the daytime, neither stalking my prey nor passing time in the library, but only sitting in Poppy's vehicle as she drove us to a riverside market in the next town. As she circled the streets in search of parking, a thought occurred, one almost too outrageous to speak aloud.

"Is this a date?"

"I guess so," she said after a startled moment, then laughed. "It's been so long, I can't even be sure. Here I am with you in my car, and I can't even tell anyone." Her smile died and she looked thoughtful.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I don't know. I don't think so? It's weird, is all. Is this your first car ride?" she asked while steering, talking over the noisy engine.

I lied to her and nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"You're holding on pretty tight." She nodded at my hand, white-knuckled with the force of my grip. I'd been in a car before, but that car didn't go nearly this fast and traffic had been much lighter then. Lying was getting to be a habit when I was with this human. I'd had little use for it before, but being with a human you wanted to impress made some deception necessary.

The markets were a sprawling python of covered stalls that followed the curves of a park located beside a river. I'd never noticed colors as much as I did this day — the greens of the grass underfoot and the cloudy blue sky competed with the bright colors of the stalls and their wares.

I followed along behind Poppy, content to let her lead so long as I could admire the way her little pink dress caught the breeze, sometimes flipping up to give me a pleasing glimpse of her skin-tight gray leggings. Having to wait for the fickle wind rather than take matters into my own hands was a test of my self-control, but I had to admit, it was fun.

As was seeing what she bought. Knick-knacks and food, movie mementos, artworks drawn and painted by people equally interested in what she liked. So many things I'd never thought about before. I'd often sat in their libraries and even managed to borrow books, but not this. This was exciting.

The warm sun. The chattering throngs of humans doing things such as kissing and fondling. Or shouting at children to stop them running about or feeding the ducks too much bread.

Ducks. I lived in the dark, worked in it, terrified people for a 'living,' as a human might say. This sunlit occasion where I was expected to mingle with people and say hello as I escorted my girlfriend about the market ...this was a burst of joy inside my cold, ancient bones. If I had bones? I'd never really thought about my anatomy before. But feeding ducks with proper duck food held in small packets that one carried about, this was the best of the best of human life. Apart from fucking — I'd grown to love that too.

We ate ice cream in cones and wandered across the grass before we sat on a bench beside the river with the bags holding Poppy's many purchases beside us. She threw a handful of the special duck food onto the water and two white swans cruised in and scared away all of the ducks.

"Oh, you assholes. Look at that! Bad birds! Wait your turn!" Her fiery anti-swan speech left her eyes wide, and her lips pinched flat.

"Is that necessary?"

"It was. The ducks are cuter and smaller. They need me to defend them."

I looked around. The trees at our backs mostly shielded us from people walking past on the river path. Carefully, I disarmed her of the packet of food, set it on the ground, then I grabbed her and pulled her over my lap, flipping up that short skirt that'd been teasing me all morning.

I raised my hand.

"Don't you dare!" But her wriggling and small struggles only stirred me.

I pressed her hands to her back, then hesitated at the sight of those leggings covering her.

"No! There are people. Don't you dare!"

That helped me decide. I whipped down leggings and underwear, raised my hand again. "Stop wriggling and let me do it. This is justified." I grinned at her annoyed stare. Even in human form I could feel the mix of indignation, concern, and lust that flooded her. "You swore at the swans."

"Not that much!"

"Shhh."

Poppy groaned and gave in, relaxing over my lap.

For a final second, I studied what I'd trapped — with the plumpness of her ass only partially concealed. I imagined revealing more of her and not letting her go. It would startle people. Too much, I thought.

I brought down my hand, twice. The muffled blows would not carry far.

It stirred an embarrassing thrill in her mind.

"I'll bet you are wet, Miss Poppy." Then I pulled up her clothing and allowed her to scramble upright.

"You are a danger, Yagar. I should've brought a leash."

"Hmmm. Ideas, you are giving me."

Poppy buried her face in her hands. "Fuck. What have I let myself in for."

"Great fun." Then I showed her the only thing I'd bought while she'd been browsing at another stall. I sneaked the end of a red, girl-sized collar from my bag and jiggled it. "Also, there is indeed a leash."

"Oh my. God."

"Your face is going red."

"I'll bet it is. *I* have plans for tonight, and we need to leave for my home so I can change." "This will wait." I slid it into the bag. "Where are we going?"

"To see a movie in Wolstam, in an actual cinema. *Jaws* is showing, and something called *Cocaine Shark*, but I think we'll go for the classic, for your first. The cinema is sponsoring a Week of Horror, sort of pre-Halloween? Along with some shops. Come."

We picked up all the bags, tossed the last of the duck food on the grass, and headed for the parking lot. "I know *Jaws* from your poster. A shark that eats people?"

"It eats loads of people. I will be proud to initiate you in the Way of Horror."

I already was, though it wasn't from movies.

Once we were on the road, I lay back and thought about her choices in the past, particularly her anger.

"Why do you get angry at people?"

"And swans?"

"Yes, and swans. What does it achieve?"

"I told you. It's like vengeance. It feels good."

"But did you achieve anything real? Does it change things?"

"Sometimes." She shrugged and gave me a baleful look. "Does it matter? I know it's your purpose to punish it, but still. Anger feels good."

"I read in a book that it leads to rash decisions and sometimes damaging actions. There is justice also."

"That was in the book?" She raised an eyebrow.

The trees at either side of the road rushed past for a while before I answered. "Not the last part. That part is mine. Justice is vengeance without anger."

"A philosophizing bogeyman?"

I said nothing more. I was hoping to alter her attitude and not just her clothes. Surely humans could change?

She fell silent. We'd reached the outskirts of Wolstam and soon after we drove into the garage at her house.

The small dog called Bundy met us again in the hallway, its tail wagging. I knelt to pat it, pleased at how it jumped on my knee and licked my face. "This creature has good taste."

"Or no taste at all. What's this?" Poppy asked.

At her inner door, someone had left a basket with a note attached.

"Perhaps your Mrs. Haversham left it?"

"She did. The note says, *Hope you enjoy the movie, you two. Here are some homemade chocolates for snacks.* How did she know?" Poppy looked up at me, folding the note. "Chocolates..." She rummaged in the basket and unwrapped something then held up what must be a chocolate. The shape was unmistakable, and she laughed and waggled it. "Mrs. Haversham, you are an A-grade pervert. She's given us a basket of chocolate dicks!"

THE CINEMA WAS NEAR THE TOWN CENTER AND THOUGH POPPY had apologized for it being plain and deserted, the red curtains that swept aside from the large screen seemed grand to me. The lights had dimmed, and it was dark, yet we were an hour from sunset. I would be shifting before this ended. I hadn't thought this through, but I could wing it. People would only remember me in extreme circumstances, or if I wished it to be so.

The movie showed people going out in boats and a large ocean predator was clearly going to be doing them damage. The yelling and screaming echoed in the small theater yet everyone kept watching, without the slightest worry. No one was sprinting for the exit.

"This is good. I think?" I waved a piece of popcorn before eating it. Eating this and the food at the markets was interesting, since I'd not tried it before. "I don't understand why it's better than the small screen in your house."

"It's because of..."

"I can see your frown, despite the artificially made night. That is my thing—seeing in the darkness."

"Your superpower. *Mmm*. I guess it's the big screen and the human factor. It's nice sitting with a bunch of other people and all of us watching the same thing."

"Shhh!" A few rows in front, a man turned around and shook his head at us.

I pointed at him. "Like that?"

Her giggle was cute. "No."

I sat forward and waved at him, showed my teeth, which made his eyes widen. My human form was not very intimidating, but the aura of my true nature was always with me. He stared a second longer before going back to watching the shark chew on someone and drag them into the water.

"You like all the screaming?"

"Sort of?" Poppy leaned into me and rested her head on my shoulder, speaking in softer tones. "It's exciting, yet not real. It's not me, not anyone watching it. I have no exact explanation as to why we like seeing others get—"

"Torn into tiny pieces of flesh and bone, with blood going everywhere. You read about serial killers too." All of this was in my normal worldview. Yet we used it to really terrify our prey. I hope what we did worked as a preventative. I wasn't certain it had in the past.

"We do some crazy shit, us people."

A man and a woman were even kissing in seats further along our row. Ignoring the movie and kissing. I looked down at Poppy and she looked up. There were only us and these three others nearby. It seemed a perfect opportunity.

"Sit on my lap."

She raised her head a little. "What? Are you mad?"

I considered the question. "No. Sit on me or I will tie you to your seat and take you like that. Choose." I ate some popcorn, then placed the packet on the next seat. I was fairly sure this conversation was making her horny, and with her small gulp and the hastening of her pulse, she nailed that into certainty. "Now." I kissed her once, gently. With my fingers, I traced over the bodice of her dress and the upper contours of her breasts. "Or else." I gave her one of my scary smiles.

"Yagar," she whispered shakily. "They'll see anything you do."

"That is the entire point." I trapped her nipple though the cloth, crushed it, pulled it outward. My face crinkled and whispered in small noises that it was shifting soon. *Excellent*.

Fucking excellent. I wanted to take her shifted, not as a human.

I increased the pressure on her nipple, and she looked down and whimpered, sucking in her lip.

"That sound you make." I almost gave an embarrassing groan. *This isn't punishment, it isn't*.

"They'll throw us out!"

"You underestimate me. They won't. Now, Poppy. Sit on me. You may still watch the movie, if you can remember to." I grinned. I would have preferred her to sit facing me... though maybe she could?

When she stood, crouching, then tried to back onto me, I made her turn and face me.

"I've changed my mind. Climb onto me, kneel on me. I want to be able to kiss you." That was only partly the truth.

Despite her obvious doubts and anxiety, she did as I asked. I pulled her into me, wrapped my arms about her body and kissed her, paying slow tribute to those curvaceous, soft lips, until she was moaning a little and panting into my mouth. The other couple hadn't noticed. That man below, however ...he had turned and was watching us more than the movie.

"Wait. Wait." The transforming wave of inevitability swept me, crunching through my flesh in a tsunami of small pains. By the end of it, I was fully shifted and taller by a foot. The man had ceased to eat or do anything. His popcorn packet had fallen.

Though my claws had sunk into her waist, Poppy studied me, with fascination and not terror showing in her eyes. Without much thought, I reached between her legs, snagged her leggings and panties, and tore through them. At the firm insertion of my claw, probing past her lips then inside her, her face melted into acceptance. Her wetness spilled. Her thighs quivered as I burrowed my finger higher.

"I'm going to fuck you here, now. My dick won't go as deep as it might otherwise, but it will be sufficient. That man below us is watching us... you." I withdrew my claw from her and cupped her face, anchoring the corners of her mouth open with my thumb claws. "You will take me here also. Won't you."

She nodded and her throat moved as if she tried to swallow.

When I'd told her someone was watching, the thrill that rippled through her mind had communicated straight to my cock, now pressing mightily against my pants. The belt could do with opening a notch anyway.

I undid the fly and freed my erection, positioning it at the slickened hole of her pussy. As she rose higher on her knees, the slide of cock-head and the released tension shoved my cock inside her, inches deep in a second. She stiffened and halted, thighs shuddering, mouth wide, and her fingers digging into my muscles.

Before her choked whine could reach too many ears, I covered her mouth with mine.

I fed the first part of my tongue inside her and mouth fucked her a little, while rocking myself in and out below. I kissed her then moved slowly south, sucking on her neck, her shoulder, devoting attention to her skin as I approached her breasts. I tucked her dress and bra out of my way. Nipping, kissing, I revolved my long tongue around and over her nipples before I sucked on them both. Bucking, pressing her tits at me, she hugged my head and whispered, "Gods, Yagar... that's hot."

I caged most of one breast with my sharp teeth, before I licked and sucked at her again. I enjoyed the flavor of this female, but below was the best part.

"Ride me. Fuck me, girl."

After a shocked hesitation, while treadling at my biceps she started to slide up and down, copiously lubricating my shaft as she became more and more excited.

Needing more, I pressed her downward and jerked a hard thrust into her. Then another.

Her head dropped forward; her pussy clamped onto me, hard.

"Keep going," I rasped. "Take me all. I'm going to fuck you to orgasm here, while that male watches you come all over me."

Her only reply was, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," whispered into my shoulder.

I laughed quietly, spellbound at how I'd overwhelmed her.

A theater employee wandered in, flashlight in hand. After one quick swipe of the light, he turned around and left.

Her jacket could be buttoned afterward, I decided. And so I sliced open the front of her dress and her bra, then latched onto her, my tongue roving all over both breasts even as my mouth sucked on a tip and half-suckled.

I turned her red in bites, made her see-saw on me and cry out softly until the other couple noticed. They, too, watched us, then began to fuck. Perhaps the drive to make love was infectious. More liquid spilled from her cunt and trickled down my shaft, wetting my pants.

The evidence would be all over me when we left. Excellent. I wanted it advertised — that I'd fucked her, that she was mine.

"Ride me. Ride hard." I travelled over her with my mouth, leaving more bite marks on her breasts, though ensuring I didn't draw blood. "Fuck me, while I hold your hands so you can't get away."

I grabbed both wrists and took them to her back, held them trapped. She'd have to use her legs to ride me, which would be difficult, but I loved making it harder for her, loved watching her do her best to bury herself on my dick.



Poppy

MY THIGHS WERE BURNING.

They were shaking, too. I watched myself rising up and down on him, quivering everywhere due to the strain, while he sucked on me and encouraged me with those filthy words. I couldn't believe I was doing this in a cinema, sitting on Yagar with his cock halfway to my tonsils, and another couple fucking noisily only seats away. I could feel that other man's eyes on my ass, sure that he was jerking off by now. The scent of sex must be overwhelming. Public service and an audience. Was Yagar working his way through my fantasy bucket list? I was confident I could tick the YES-box on that.

It was heaven and I was close to getting there, to an *O*, but not quite.

Every time, the extreme stretch when I hit bottom, when I'd lowered myself fully onto him, I gasped at the tightness.

Again. Again. He laughed when I groaned a protest.

His hands remained trapping mine, wrists crossed, enclosed in his fingers, while he greedily teased me with that monstrously long tongue.

"I can't," I gasped, sweat springing on my brow despite the coolness.

"Can't what?" Yagar asked, his teeth shining in the low light, his tongue curling over my well-gnawed nipple, even as he answered.

I sucked in a much-needed breath, took a few more. "I can't come."

"You will. Ride me."

Exhausted, thighs cramping, I rose again, feeling his dick slide out again, then sat again. I panted, moaning at the fullness, my lips and pussy clenching on him. He went so deep; I couldn't get free of cock even when I rose up as high as I could.

His tongue snaked lower, extending further than seemed possible, then his hips jerked upward. My lips had been parted, but my mouth gaped even wider as he impaled me.

His tongue tip reached my clit, probing, pumping, flicking.

Staring downward at what he did, I felt the impending flood of ecstasy, of an oncoming orgasm. I strained, my arms caught, my body bending with nowhere to go. My pussy clamped onto him, and he shoved me downward and speared in again, and then he groaned and came. The sudden internal pressure combined with the flick of his tongue on my clit sent me over the edge. I arched, jerking on top of him, still impaled. My eyes closed as I rode the wave to that fucking oblivion I'd been chasing since forever.

Mind scattered, I came down, down from the heights, messed up and undone.

I collapsed onto him and he hugged me, nuzzling my neck.

After some time, I whispered a question into his chest. "How are we going to leave, like this? Your come will leak everywhere." I was afraid of leaving a trail through the theater foyer.

Also. Had the shark eaten everyone yet?

"Don't worry," he assured me. "I'll fix this."

No one else could have. He did. After licking me clean, like *everywhere*, he buttoned my jacket. He escorted me out, with that ever-present, long coat he'd brought with him used to cloak me from onlookers.

Thankfully, it was early evening and the walk to my car was short. I'd never have been courageous enough to park in this unlit allotment that awaited redevelopment, if Yagar wasn't with me.

"That was supposed to be an educational movie night," I told him, playfully bumping him with my hip while I searched for the car keys.

He turned me and pinned me against the car, cradling my face in his hands. Though my breath caught at the sight of those teeth and the scars on his blue-black skin, it was momentary. I knew what he was now — scary but also nice.

"And I learned a lot about how to watch a movie." He kissed me, restraining his tongue for once. "And how to fuck in one of those tiny seats." When shifted, his voice sounded as if it were strained through gravel. I smiled and kissed him back.

As I unlocked the car, he raised his head and looked as if he were sniffing.

"Something wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Poppy. I have to go. My purpose calls me."

Then he slipped away. He paused only to turn and shout, "Be safe!" watching me start the car before he walked backward and vanished. I waited with the engine running, staring into the night.

His purpose. I knew what that was: punishing bad girls, like me.

Why did it feel like cheating?

I bowed forward until my I could press my head into my hands on the steering wheel.

This was the hitch in our weird relationship. He wasn't all mine.

Did I want him to be?

I screwed up my forehead, thinking it through. This might be the stupidest most unrealistic love affair ever. He qualified as the worst kind of boyfriend, a literal monster, a walking red flag. Despite that, of course I did.



Poppy

THE MESSAGE ON MY SCREEN WAS STILL OPEN AS I MARCHED toward the main nurse's desk in ICU.

It came from Sian's phone, yet was not her text.

SIAN IS IN ICU AT REXISTON HOSPITAL DUE TO A SUDDEN illness. If you'd like more information, please come to the hospital ASAP or phone the ward. Use the link below.

I'D GOOGLED THE NUMBERS AND PHONED THEM, GAVE THEM MY info, only to be told the news I half-expected, before sprinting to my Renault. So, here I was.

An overdose. Although she was responding well to treatment now, she'd almost died. The paramedics had revived her, but the hospital couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me where she'd been found. Heart caught in my throat, feeling dizzy but not wishing to become a patient, I grabbed the edge of the nurse's desk.

"I'm Sian's sister, Poppy. I'm here to visit her. They told me she was here. Is she okay?"

"Of course. Just give me your full name, please. Date of birth also. Relationship to the patient." The nurse sat down at a computer.

"Sister! I just said that!" And was instantly chagrined that I'd yelled at this poor nurse.

"Sorry. And the rest?"

I rattled it off, was asked a few more things, which she dutifully typed in. "You'll be pleased to know she should be okay to go home either late tonight or tomorrow morning. If not, we will be transferring her out of ICU to another ward. She is out of danger."

She was okay. The relief was almost as disorientating as the fear had been, making the room blur out of focus as I leaned on the desk. "What room is she in?" I asked. "I need to see her."

The nurse hesitated, reading something on the screen, then looked up at me. "I'm sorry. You aren't on the list of allowed visitors."

"What? Check again. I'm her closest available relative. Our brother is overseas."

"She has specifically requested that you not be allowed on the floor," said the nurse in that patiently polite tone that said if I had any questions, security would happily explain further. Or the cops. *Fuck.* I felt a mix of shame, anger, and confusion. Were we still at war with each other? This much? Sian had nearly died, and she still didn't want to let me in to see her. It sucked. It sucked so much, I felt tears welling.

The nurse's hard expression softened slightly around the edges. "I'm sorry, I can't let you in, but I'll keep you informed if... if anything changes. You should go get some sleep if you can. It will help."

Weakly, I waved a hand and walked away before she could say sorry again. My hands clenched into fists as I tried to look on the positive side. At least she was alive, but I'd lay bets she'd been found in the company of Finn. Wolstam only had one main drug supplier. Everyone knew, even the cops, even the mayor, his damned brother. Even if she'd done it all to herself, as far as I was concerned, he was still responsible.

That night, I sat up on my hill, minus Jack, with a car burning before me again.

It wasn't a real car this time, just a toy. An effigy of Finn's car, bright paint bubbling and blackening as the flames licked around it. It was surprisingly easy to imagine the screams of the man I pretended was locked inside. God knew why, but I felt better for doing this.

Yagar told me anger did not achieve much. I believed him now. Besides, even I knew that if I so much as spit on Finn's actual car, I'd never get away with it. If I was lucky, I'd just be beaten up, but that was by no means the worst he could do. If I believed the rumors, he'd had at least one rival killed. I was already on his radar for my previous stupid stunts. I couldn't afford to provoke him now and I knew it, but I couldn't stop myself from sending him one more futilely furious text:

FUCK YOU ASSHOLE.

I REPEATED ASSHOLE ABOUT A HUNDRED TIMES AND pressed send.

Tears dripped down my face. I'd been crying off and on since I left the hospital and wasn't sure I knew how the fuck to stop.

I kept telling myself she was okay, but it was cold comfort. Addicts tended to keep killing themselves unless they had intervention. Sian wouldn't even talk to me. All she had was Finn, who seemed to take some perverse pleasure in helping her self-destruct.

There must be something I could do. I'd never felt so helpless, so alone. Where was Yagar when I needed him? For a moment, I was angry he wasn't here, but that was stupid too. He was not at my beck and call, no matter how much I wished it were true.

I rose to my feet, wiped my face, and stomped out the last of the flames before pouring some water over them. I took great pleasure in burying the car, symbolically putting Finn in an unmarked grave, where he belonged, before I set off down the hill to my rather lonely home.

I checked my phone. Four AM.

Tomorrow, which meant today, was going to be a bad day. I was already so tired and anxious. I'd hoped my allegorical little fit of arson would be therapeutic, but it only felt good until it was over and I was back in the real world, where Sian was out of reach and Finn was smugly above the law. All I'd done, all I ever seemed to do, was make things worse.

CHAPTER 14

Yagar

We'D RETURNED FROM OUR DUTIES, ONE BY ONE, AND IT WAS close to morning. Five AM according to the small clock I'd bought at the market. I'd placed it next to my bunk with the neatly arranged books and a small resin duck. The packet with the collar and leash were hidden elsewhere. I hoped no one would find it before I retrieved it.

I'd been trying to forget the prey I'd had to punish earlier this night. I *would* forget her. The doubts while I administered punishment had been horribly distracting. Something must be in the air, though, since all of us had been called out, but the long night was nearly over now.

And then I felt it, the flare of wrath. By the twitches and sudden interest of my brothers, I knew they'd all felt it, though only I recognized the unique flavor of the sender. Poppy.

"None of you touch this one," I warned. "She's mine."

Dookie only shrugged and sank down behind the bar, but Styx and Grender paused to eye me.

"Yours?" Styx asked. "Is this the pet?"

"Perhaps." As soon as the word left my mouth, I regretted admitting that. "And no. I won't be bringing her here or sharing her. Her anger is not enough to warrant punishment."

"It was." Grender looked to Styx and they nodded as one. Grender's hair tines curled and uncurled and the black pits he used for eyes glowed a little purple at the edges. "I question your judgment."

Styx purred in agreement, gills fluttering, his eyes baleful embers. When excited, his claws matched his eyes. Right now, their color dripped with bloody intensity, bright enough to reflect off his thighs. "If you cannot properly assess her anger, you cannot properly administer punishment."

"And if you don't, someone else will have to." Grender's grin stretched ear to ear.

Fuck you all. But I dared not voice that.

"No. Our punishment must match the degree of transgression. I will check on her, tonight. Be still. Rest. Attend to your own duties."

I stared them down until they finally gave in, but they were slow to do so, and Grender's eyes were on me until the door shut between us.

What if they had not submitted? I did not know what else I could have done. We did not fight among ourselves. If they outvoted me, what would I do? It was a sobering question.

I HAD ASSUMED I'D FIND HER AT HER FLAT, IN THE SHARED half of that house, but it was empty of her. Poppy's scent was hours old, but as a babai, I could track her to almost anywhere

in this land. It took me some hours due to shifting to back to my human shape, and I had to follow her winding route, but I found her. She was at a nearby park, slowly pushing herself back and forth in a child's swing.

She heard me approach and I felt her recognition when I stood before her, but she pretended I was not there. I sat down before her on the soft ground, cross-legged and patient, and waited for her to acknowledge my presence. Her thoughts were a jumble of blame, anger and sadness.

And I... I was feeling sad also. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was her emotions influencing me. Perhaps it was because I had missed being with her when she needed me.

At last, I gave in and spoke. "I'm sorry."

She shot me a scathing glare. "That's what she said."

This close to shifting, I was not at my best in reading her. "Who? Did I say something bad? I had thought sorry was a way to make amends."

"It is." She sighed and her lower lip turned outward. A pout, humans called that.

"Are you about to cry?" I unfolded and went to her, went to one knee, and caught the sides of the swing. "You needed me. I can see that. I am sorry I was not present but—"

"You had your duty," she said acidly. "And of course that was more important. Did you ever, *ever* think your duty might be wrong!"

Had I ever...

I inhaled, exhaled. "Yes."

Poppy blinked at me in astonishment.

"Tell me why you were angry, then we shall continue talking about my duty. Deal?"

"Deal." For a moment she squeezed shut her eyes. "My sister, Sian, she overdosed and had to be revived. She went to ICU, that's—"

"I know what it is. Go on."

"She's okay." Poppy sniffled and pressed the back of her hand to her nose. I stroked her knee to calm her. This interaction was a little concerning, but it also made me feel good for some reason I could not understand. "They released her last night. But... she refused to let me see her. My own sister. I thought we were past that, but no."

"That is not everything, though, is it?"

"Also, I lost my job today. They just laid me off, said I wasn't reliable, but I don't know where I'm going to live, because I can't afford to stay where I am without money." She said all of that without a breath and then looked into my eyes and rested her hand on mine.

"Oh. Poppy, you are trembling. Please don't do that." I pulled her to me and wrapped my arms around her, hugging her snugly. "Yagar will make it all better." Though I had no idea how, it did calm her.

"Thank you. You're getting good at this." She found my shoulder and drew circles on me.

"At humaning?"

"Humaning?" Poppy snort-laughed, then pulled out a tissue and blew her nose.

I frowned, thinking strange thoughts. Why indeed was her finding comfort in my arms good? "I know you were very angry last night. My brothers think I should punish you." I kissed the back of her hand. "It felt a lesser anger to me. Tell the truth. Did you burn another car or something?"

"Sort of. But it was only a toy car. What you said before was right. I guess? I still don't know what to do about anything. Also I think my butt is stuck in this thing."

"The swing. Really?" I tried to lift her out, but the swing came with her.

It took a few minutes of bending parts to get her free from it, but I managed. Both of us were laughing by the time she squeezed out.

"I like you laughing. Why don't you take me to another movie? Will that help?"

"I don't know. Not to a movie though. There is a street party in town. A horror-themed one. We can wander around there, look at things. I guess we can do that?"

"Okay."

"I'll have to get my phone and some cash — some traders only take that. I did forget one other thing I did and you said wanted the truth."

I took her hand, and we walked down the street toward her flat, talking.

"What was it?"

"So, I sent Finn a text that told him he was an asshole, about a hundred times. I doubt he will care. I think that's everything."

"Then consider yourself punished." I squeezed her hand. "Bad girl." She'd forgotten to ask me about my duty. That was probably for the best.

HER PHONE LAY ABANDONED ON HER BED, BUT LIT UP WHEN she touched it.

From her frown and the jump of emotions, this was something else bad. Slowly, she sat down on the bed.

I sat next to her and held out my hand, palm upward.

"Show me. Tell me now. Or I'll spank it out of you."

"Ha. I wish." She smiled, fleetingly. "It's not completely bad? This is from Jeffrey Grantham, the mayor. He's sent it through Sian's phone number. I would never have believed it was him, but what he says sounds about right. He's like this with his brother—" She held two fingers up and squeezed them together. *"*—and the brother is Finn. Let me read it out.

"Ms. Jacobson, this is Jeffrey Grantham. You know who I am, that I am also Finn's brother. He is family, even if we disagree on some things, so when you attack him, you attack me. Stop harassing him and make no further contact with him or I will be forced to take this, and other recent activities, to a legal level. I have convinced my brother not to press charges up until this point, but your misguided efforts to help your sister is not helping either of you. Your sister is NOT with Finn.

"She is with me.

"She is fine now. The hospital released her to me. She wants nothing to do with you and your impulsive, destructive and wildly disproportionate behavior of late should give you some idea of why. While I sympathize with you to some degree, this is the last time I will help you. Do not contact us again.

She shrugged and turned off the screen.

"I see what you mean. Your sister is well. There is that."

"Yeah. Life still sucks, but let's go do something before I do my head in over this."

"Street party? You know I am about to shift?"

Poppy grinned. "Even better. People will be in costume. You'll fit right in."

CHAPTER 15

Poppy

BY THE TIME WE WALKED INTO TOWN, YAGAR HAD SHIFTED into bogeyman mode. My Renault was under the weather and if something failed on it, I wasn't certain I could afford to fix it. Plus fuel prices were scary... almost as scary as Yagar.

Main Street had been fenced off from car traffic. Hand in hand, we ventured under a banner proclaiming this *The Wolstam Horror Party*.

Lanterns painted with scary teeth and eyes hung from every lamp-post. Stalls lined both sides of the street, selling burgers with mozzarella eyes on them, hot-dogs temporarily renamed 'Frankenfingers', costume accessories and facepaintings, and enough bottles of fake blood and plastic fangs to equip a battalion of Draculas.

If you didn't know about the bogeymen, Wolstam was the most normal, boring-est town ever, apart from the murderer, Gloria Shank. Who knew it could be this bizarre?

One booth set apart from the others offered souvenir photos and a prize for the best costume. The participation was surprisingly enthusiastic. Between the bog-standard witches and lurching zombies were pro-grade cosplayers dressed up as all the icons: Ghostface, Freddy Krueger, Michael Meyers, Jason Vorhees, even a huge Chucky who had the laugh down pat. Gruesome wounds and blood splattered clothes were so common, I brushed past them with barely a glance.

I was pretty sure I was walking with the winner. Yagar had shifted before we arrived and had limited himself to six-and-ahalf-feet tall. His longer legs made him lope in an alien gait. His scarred, discolored skin would have suited a well-aged corpse, yet most people did little more than stare or a few seconds before praising his look and moving on.

When I noticed a few people aiming their phones at us, I poked his side. "You're being photographed. Is that a problem?"

He shrugged. "We cannot be seen unless we wish to be seen. This extends to those attempting to capture our likeness. Their photos will come out blurred."

"Wow." I grinned up at him.

"When I think of all the 'proof' I have evaded over the decades," he mused and sighed, looking around. "You humans say 'seeing is believing,' yet when you do see, you find some other reason not to believe. It's a costume. It's CGI. The photo is too blurry. The photo is too clear. It's always a hoax."

"Aww." I snuggled into his side. "I believe in you."

"How comforting," he said drily, then paused as a small child in fairy wings tugged at his coat.

"Can I take a picture with you?" the child wanted to know, and I was amused when Yagar merely hunkered down and posed while the child's father aimed his phone. The child touched Yagar's clawed hand where he gripped the child's small shoulder and looked up in wonder. "Are you real, mister?"

"Indubitably. Be good for your parents or I will come eat you later. Boo!"

He squealed in delight and ran back to his laughing parents.

"I'll let him have that photo," Yagar declared, waving at them as they walked away. "It's too good to be real anyway."

"Nasty bogeyman," I told him.

"I am getting lots of practice."

Was it just me or was Yagar softening? He seemed less stiff, less a monster than before. He was definitely humaning better.

Where a small courtyard had been converted into an outdoor theater, people sat on benches watching movies being screened on the side of a building. The grouting of the bricks under the paint created little blips of shadows to the imagery, as if this was a movie from the silent era and black-and-white movies.

We sat at the back. *Night of the Living Dead* was playing, though the sound was poor and only four others were watching, seated at the front.

I leaned toward Yagar, pressed my chin into his coat. "Tell me, why do you only punish girls?"

"Because we do," he said without taking his eyes off the movie.

His inattention riled me. "That's patriarchal nonsense. Gender inequality." "Oh." Now he looked at me. "I'm not sure what all that means, but I will find out next time I'm at the library."

Here I was trying to teach a beast, a monster from the depths of horror, a bogeyman, of all things, how to run his... Not business. What was the aim of what they did? "You do that. But meanwhile." I took out my phone and googled patriarchy and other terms then handed it to him.

To his credit, Yagar read it all.

"I understand now," he said, returning my phone. "But there is nothing I can do. This is what we are."

I shook my head, annoyed at myself. Yagar had been cheering me up. I'd rewarded him with criticism.

And why not? Why not? He's punishing women for being angry, but not men.

When we rose and moved on, I decided to forget it. This night was entirely the wrong time, wrong place.

"Here. I know this. It leads to the library." Yagar pulled me with him into a different courtyard, full of mature trees and garden beds with a path that ran straight to the steps.

I hadn't been here for years. Because of my job, my exjob, eBooks had been easier for me to obtain.

"I miss the smell of paper books," I murmured, as we reached the end of the paved pathway. The library had decorated the open-front foyer using fake spider webs. A fluffy pink beetle was stuck to the wall, high up. "Guess they didn't want to scare the kids."

I bent to adjust my shoe, and Yagar swept me into his arms. He carried me to a slatted timber bench in the shape of an *S*, where I expected to be deposited. Instead, he went to the back, placed me on my feet, then pushed me until I leaned over the curve of the seat.

"What are you up to?" I whispered, tense with anticipation. If anyone saw us—

"They won't. It's dark off the pathway. Now be a good girl for Yagar and stick out your ass so I can fuck it." He smacked it. "Now."

When he talked filthy, dirty... A thrill shivered through, starting at my clit. I leaned over and laid my hands on the seat. The S shape was perfect for this, which made me wonder if he'd planned this.

"Yes. I did. You keep wearing clothes that make me stare at your rear." He reached around to my front and undid the button and zip, then tugged my jeans and panties to my knees.

"They're only jeans." I was bare-ass naked and only a skip and a jump from that huge crowd. Being fucked here... yeah, it turned me on.

"Maybe it's not the clothes." Yagar chuckled. Then he came in closer, and I felt the push of his cock into my pussy. With another shove, he seemed to pop through the resistance and into my wetness, slipping in, widening me. I choked and clutched the seat slats, rapt in the sensations, not seeing anything, just feeling him inside me.

He'd found the right spot, my slit, in one go, despite the night.

"You forgot I can see in the dark?" He thrust again, then began a firm, insistent rhythm, going a little deeper each time.

Then he rammed in and began to piston into me, hard, fucking hard.

I whimpered, bowing my head, arching my spine. My throat felt half-strangled, caught in an invisible grasp.

Yagar paused, his cock half-in me, half-out. I tensed then shoved myself backward, seeking more of him.

"Uh-uh. Wait. Naughty." He smacked one cheek of my ass. Then he slid something about my neck and began to fiddle with it. He was buckling on a collar. "Yes, this is the red collar. And the leash." He clipped that on, then dropped it to the seat past my shoulder.

He grasped my throat and squeezed. "You can't get away now." He leaned in and rasped his rough face against mine, licked my ear, then thrust into me, slowly, making me aware of every inch as he forced his way inside me. Again, he withdrew almost completely, only to spear me in one thrust. I folded over with a groan, blindly trying to find another part of the seat to hold.

I spasmed around his cock, feeling every part of him, every movement inside me.

"That's it. Good pet. This time, it's all my pleasure. Take my cock and be good."

The following brutal flurry of driving thrusts made me feel reamed thoroughly, taken, used. I couldn't keep quiet, but couldn't speak, babbling nonsense, as he crushed me against the seat, my legs spread and his claws embedded in my hips.

He gave another bruising thrust, jammed himself in, pushed me flat against the slats.

As his hand squeezed my throat, he came in an explosion of come that filled me. I shuddered.

With my face pressed to the seat, I was gasping and close to coming myself. Yet, I was happy to simply be, to exist as a place for him to fuck. It was strangely satisfying. I waited for him to pull out.

After that, I stayed folded over the seat while he licked me clean, both inside and out. His huge tongue tunnelling into my cunt almost got me off. Almost.

It snaked between my legs. And he rested it over my clit. I squeezed my thighs together, to make him move.

But he withdrew it and stood, hugged me. In one hand he gathered a handful of my hair.

"You were perfect. I'd reward you and make you come, but I like the idea of you all needy, walking with me. Wet and horny." He swayed, still hugging me.

"You sure?" I wiggled my ass, inviting him back.

"Yes."

I turned in his arms, all too aware of the churn of desire, of how my pussy felt abused and overly sensitive. The slightest touch, something entering me, a few licks...

He pressed two claws under my chin and made me raise my head. "I know you like being taken and left horny."

I swallowed, closed my eyes, feeling the prick of those claws. "Bastard."

"That sounds like you begging me to spank you later. For pleasure, of course."

I took another breath, simply happy to be close to him, and I hugged him back. It was all too wonderful to have a lover so fucking intuitive. I loved it. I fucking loved it. Being left full of come and used was weirdly nice. "Hate you," I said, just to annoy him, my eyes still closed. *"Hmmm.* Definitely a spanking later. Come. I have something to show you."

He unclipped the leash and pulled up my jeans. I zipped up and tidied myself some more, until I was ready to walk out and pretend nothing had happened, but I still wore his collar.

We went toward a side street and kept walking ten more minutes, away from the street party.

"Are we leaving already? I was ready to nominate you for Best Cosplayer."

"This." He pointed at the old house we'd stopped in front of. "It's been empty a long time, so I know it must be difficult to rent."

Something about the number rang a bell in my memory, then I recalled the street name. "Uh, yeah, I'll bet it's difficult to rent. This is the home of the lady who murdered her five children."

"Yes, Gloria Shank. But now it is only an empty house. I thought you might be able to get it for a lower price?"

"They couldn't pay me to stay in a murderer's house." I suddenly stared at him, haloed by a streetlight like some kind of dark angel, so calm. "How did you know?"

He clearly didn't understand my aversion to the house, but he must have felt my mood change, because he took my hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize there would be taboo."

"No. I guess you didn't. People don't like living where people have died. Or killed." But he hadn't quite answered. "How did you know this was her house?"

"I can feel it. Babai are connected. I just knew it was hers."

I had a feeling he knew more than that. No one knew much about Gloria Shank, the quintessential quiet neighbor who'd snapped after some man left her because he didn't want to raise some other man's kids. So she'd killed them, and then... vanished. Only recently had a few bones been found at the bottom of a sea-worn cliff, identified as hers by DNA, to bring an end to her story, but there were still a lot of questions. Most people thought she'd jumped out of despair for what she'd done, and I was one of them, but now I wasn't so sure.

I said slowly, "You knew because a babai killed her."

It wasn't a question. Perhaps I too had a connection. Perhaps this went both ways. He knew me. I knew him. I just knew.

"Yes. She succumbed to Wrath and was punished." Yagar shrugged. "Let's go. I can feel your agitation."

"More. I want the truth. You demanded it from me. What do you do to women like this?"

I was digging a grave here. My question was going to unearth what should not be known.

"Her transgression was great. She was sentenced to be devoured." He glanced at me. "I did not punish her."

"Fuck." I stared at the ground between his feet. My stomach was roiling. "Not you? Not ever?"

Yagar let out a long, ragged sigh, a sound I couldn't recall him ever making before. "Twice, but a long time ago."

"And you only punish women." I turned away from him and began to walk home. I was so disgusted that I couldn't bear to talk to him anymore. I guess he would know that. He followed me all the way home. On the way, I undid the collar, dropped it. When I was within sight of the house, I felt him leave.

That was that.

How could I be with a two-faced murderer of women. Was that justice? I felt sick. What if they were wrong?

What if they got it wrong and ate some poor innocent?

Where did they take them to do the eating? I had not asked that.

Jesus. I threw up several times before I curled up on my bed.

If he dared return to me...

He'd better not.

CHAPTER 16

Yagar

I KNEW SADNESS, BUT WHAT WAS THIS OTHER EMOTION? LOSS? I thought it was loss. I felt emptiness. I'd lost my pet human and I'd no idea how to make things right again.

The next day, I followed her, subtly, in ways that I was certain she could not ken. In shifted then in human form, I stalked her after she left her house early, went to what I assumed was where she used to work. When she left there, her anger had risen. Seething was how I would describe it.

I followed her as she used her scooter to reach the outskirts of town, in the opposite direction to her rented house. This was a large two-story manor, white, with a high metal-and-brick columned fence keeping it private. After locking her scooter, she strode to the wide gateway and shouted at a man in a suit until he walked away. A few minutes later, he returned and let her inside.

Her anger worried me, but I could not follow. My powers were weakened in the daytime and I might be seen jumping the fence. Certainly I would be detected by the dog accompanying the guard who patrolled the gardens. I sneaked as close as I could and glimpsed her waiting under the roof of a vine-strewn gazebo, her small hands twisting a flower stem.

A new man joined her, perhaps the owner. He would be from the rich class of humans, judging by his house, his employees, the neat cut of his dark pants and shirt. I'd learned things over the years. His slight sneer when he approached Poppy and stood over her made me wish I could punch him.

Now, I understood human anger a little better.

Crouching in the greenery below a small tree, I listened to the conversation.

"Poppy Jacobsen, I presume. What do you want? I told you Sian wants no contact."

I could feel her smother her anger, which surprised me and made me smile.

"I know. I've lost my job, and I also know you spoke to the clinic manager and had me sacked. That's not very ethical for a mayor."

The man chuckled at her words — also punchworthy. "I expressed concerns about the mental stability of one of their employees and questioned whether such a person should have any position in public health. I am perfectly prepared to repeat those concerns in court, if that's the route you want to go. Are you?" He sat on a white chair opposite her, at a small round table, crossing one leg over the other. "Would you like tea?"

"No. Thank you."

"Finn informed me of your vandalism of his business."

He waited then, but she was silent.

"Well. Don't you think that's a bad look for someone working for a doctor? Although I resent the implication that I had you sacked. That would be an egregious abuse of my power. I do hope that's not what you're actually saying to people. I could consider that defamatory"

I could hear her think *asshole*, and I agreed. "You threatened to press charges over something Finn only thinks I did. I have the text."

"You've been harassing him. We have those texts, too."

"And so-called 'other recent activities.""

This time he waited before lifting a hand. "And?"

"And you said that you wouldn't do anything."

"That was before I saw your latest rather unhinged text. *Asshole* written a hundred times is clearly new evidence of instability, wouldn't you agree? Your manager certainly did."

"That..." She sat forward. "That was after Sian OD'd and almost fucking died."

She swore, but she wasn't yelling. This was good.

"And you knew it, because you sent your totally not a threat after I sent that text. As for whether you did or didn't get me sacked, the manager admitted what you said influenced her decision."

"Will she say it in court?" the man asked placidly.

"I will," Poppy shot back. "I'll say plenty. Test me. Hell, if you want your constituents to know what your brother's up to, I'll tell them that, too. I'll let everyone in Wolstam know you're encouraging drug use and keeping the cops from investigating."

The man sighed. I heard him slowly tap his fingers on the table.

"I wasn't aware of that timeline. I suppose you could do that. And I could easily take actions to not only dismiss whatever threat you think you're making, but see to it that you are never in a position to make another. Slander is a very actionable offense. However, you are Sian's sister. So, for that reason, I will explain to you. Just once. Sian is with me. She is a grown woman and you have no authority to control her or dictate where she stays or the company she keeps. She has gone no contact with you because of your manipulative and frankly psychopathic behavior, and you don't have to like that, but you do have to respect it. If you require a restraining order before you take that seriously, so be it, but that's the sort of thing that can ruin a person's life.

"Now I am aware that Sian has her problems. I will take care of her. She is recuperating in my house, happily. I am not letting her near drugs again and she will be attending an addiction program. Now, get this. Listen carefully." The man leaned toward her, his voice cold. ""Do not ever threaten me again or I will ensure you pay for it. Finn is my brother."

Poppy scoffed. "And a criminal and a drug pusher."

"He has his foibles. He's still my family."

"Do you love her?"

"What?"

"Sian. Do. You. Love my sister?"

"Why should I..." He heaved a short sigh. "Fine. Yes. I do. Why else would I be doing this? Now you will leave."

"Oh. That's good then."

He clicked his fingers. "Karl, escort Miss Jacobsen off the property, please. Behave, Miss Jacobsen and I will be in touch with your former employer and see if I can clear up our... little misunderstanding."

The man from the gate arrived.

I waited for her to be allowed out the gate and to ride her scooter away before I moved. I had to run through a few properties to catch her, but I knew her direction and could cut her off easily.

I stopped in front of her, planted my feet so they straddled the footpath. "Don't go around me, Poppy. I'll only catch you."

She pinched her lips, slowed, then stopped. "What do you want?"

"I listened in. Back there. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No."

"Okay." I was lost here as to what to do, what to say. *Sorry* seemed to be unlikely to make her like me again.

"Your sister is being aided. That is good?"

"It does seem so. Look, okay, I am relieved." She eyed the sky. "This Jeffrey is a slightly better man than Finn, but I just don't know him. I guess..."

I said nothing as I could feel her sorting out her thoughts.

"I'm both glad and sad she's hooked up with him. Mostly glad. Anything is better than being dead from drugs. Now get out of my way, Yagar. You and me, we have different ideas of right and wrong."

I fidgeted. Perhaps she was correct? I was a babai and nothing was going to change that.

"I'm sorry. I want to be with you, but I can see how terrible this seems to you."

She nodded curtly, but it was something.

"I agree that only punishing females is gender-biased? Right word? I cannot alter that."

"Are you a robot, Yagar? Don't you have choice?"

I frowned at her.

"If you cannot stop what you do, then goodbye. Oh. Wait. One other thing." She looked sheepish. "I can stay at the house until I find another job. Mrs. Haversham said she likes me and doesn't care if I can't pay her... and you, she told me to say she likes you." She shrugged.

"That's good then."

"Yeah."

I moved aside and watched her scooter up the street then I put my hand in my coat pocket and let my fingers trace the shape of the red collar. Touching it made me remember her — scent, softness, her thoughts, her body, but not just the sex. I liked knowing she was beside me, even when we walked down a street. I needed her.

Fixing this seemed beyond my powers.

I returned to the den. The moment I walked in, the difference was stifling.

In here was stability, a place that remained no matter how time passed. We did what we did, because it was us.

I supposed I looked a bit lost.

Styx came up to me. "We have a game happening. Grender has a game of cards to teach us. You're joining us?"

"A card game?" We'd adopted a few things like this.

The others sat on stools around a square table at the back. The other stools were brought in fifty years ago. The air had dust in it that had been here fifty years ago.

We did a job. We punished.

Bringing Poppy into this, in any way, would surely endanger her, endanger her soul and her body. I was no good to her.

I shook my head. "No. No card game for me. I'm going out again."

Then I turned and left, pushed the metal door shut behind me. The click sounded final, but it was not.

I would be back. It was my calling. I just needed some time alone to process this.

Then I noticed the cloudy sky, felt drops of rain on my skin. A girl passed the alley entry with her mother walking with her, and a brown dog on a leash. Somewhere, someone was playing music.

I sighed. I wasn't a robot, but I was a bogeyman. The problem was that the human world was colorful, fun, and so much more complex than the den and my brothers. How did I make the two fit together?

Maybe I couldn't.

A woman in a blue dress and her boyfriend went past the alley, laughing, their joined hands swaying in time to the music.

Something — a crunching sound, a scent, the scuffle of feet — brought me to another moment: Grender emerging from the back room of the den after eating a victim.

Was that me? Was that all I could be?

I groaned, "Stop it. Stop it, please."

I didn't know who I was talking to, but it didn't matter.

No one answered.

The rain intensified, splattering onto my upturned face.



Five Days Later

YAGAR

LATE AFTERNOON AND I WAS BACK AT THE DEN, AFTER DAYS OF wandering. The alley lay a few yards ahead. This was all I could be — a bogeyman. Depressing? A little. Yet another human emotion to cross off my list. I must have tried them all by now.

Poppy had shown no signs of wanting me again. I'd checked her house several times. Stalking her was simple. Going in and saying *hi*? That was difficult.

I turned the corner only to be assaulted by a small, white, hairy beast hurling itself at my boots, circling me while barking.

"Bundy?"

The dog ruffed and stood up, propping its forelegs on my leg. It wore a collar, but no leash and no human was chasing after it. I double-checked the streets again. Nobody showed anything more than mild curiosity.

Was this Fate, as Poppy liked to say?

"I need to take you home, don't I?" I held onto Bundy's collar while I undid my belt and used it to create a leash. He slurped all over my face and hands as I tied it on.

I found I was smiling, even so. I now had an excuse to go see Poppy, and I enjoyed the welcome the small dog had given me.

I placed it on the ground, but the belt was too short to use as a proper leash without strangling the dog. "Damnation." I scooped up the creature, tucked it under my arm, and set off. "Come. Your destiny, small dog, is to be my way back into Poppy's house."

Except no one was home. I could sense that from afar, but I went to the front door and knocked anyway. I couldn't leave the dog outside. Then I noticed a note on the ground. It had a blob of sticky blue stuff on the back and must have fallen off the door.

I read it and then reread it, smelled it. Poppy had touched the paper.

To the other occupant. Mrs. Haversham has had a fall. We have taken her to hospital by ambulance for assessment. Please check with Rexston Hospital for details.

PS the little Westie dog escaped out the front door. Will notify animal control and hope they find him.

Sorry,

"That's you," I told the dog. "I should put you inside."

That was when I realized I'd shifted on the way here, and the dog hadn't reacted. Interesting.

"I like you," I told it as I tied it to a post. "Wait here. Do not run. I will scent you out and find you anyway."

It wagged its small stubby tail and whined at me while I squeezed into the front hallway through a crack.

Unlocking the door from the inside was easy. I left Bundy inside, made sure his dog flap was functioning then I went through Mrs. Haversham's door and checked the water bowl was full, and that there was some food. I even sampled some kibble to make sure it wasn't stale. It was crunchy, but I wouldn't eat it by choice.

I gave the dog a pat and left. Outside on the front lawn, I paused to think.

"Hospital?" *Yes.* It was where I was sure Poppy would be, and even if she didn't want to see me, she would want to know the dog was safe at home.

When I reached Rexston hospital, I detected her scent, but I was shifted and in bogeyman form, and visitors were being screened. I scanned the waiting room, but Poppy wasn't there. Curiously, they'd let her in to see her landlady, but not her sister.

I supposed I could have simply searched the hospital, using my powers to cause those who crossed my path to forget me as soon as I was seen, but I decided against it. Even if the humans did not remember me, my presence was... distressing, and if they were already in the hospital, they were already having a bad night. Besides, it wasn't a great problem for me. If anyone noticed me climbing the outside of the hospital, I would've appeared to be a clot of darkness.

ON THE WAY UP THE BUILDING, I NOTICED POPPY LEAVING THE hospital. I was too far from her to read her thoughts, but from the speed with which she drove away, she was upset. Apprehensively, I continued tracking her to the room where she'd been.

I recognized the old woman, Mrs. Haversham, asleep in the narrow bed. She had a room to herself and the door was closed. Her white hair peeked above a sheet pulled up to her chin. The window had been designed to only open a few inches, just enough to let in a breeze... and me.

I slipped through and listened tensely to the activity beyond this room. I could hear people talking and metal rattling somewhere in the hall, but otherwise all was quiet.

I crept over, reached the single chair in the room, and slowly sat. The chair creaked due to my heaviness, and I froze.

"I'm awake, I'm awake. Unless you've come for my blood pressure, then I'm asleep, go away." The woman in the bed rolled onto her side and peered at me. "Yagar?"

"You know my name?" I put my hands on my knees and sat up straighter. It was unusual for a human not marked for punishment to perceive me.

"Of course I do. You're Poppy's boyfriend." She squinted at the bedside table, where various objects were strewn. "I've no idea where they put my glasses. Blast this lighting, I can barely see you. My you're a tall one. And you've come to visit me? Thank you."

"Are you well?" I was unsure what to say, being unschooled in talking to ill humans.

"I'm doing better. I didn't break anything important." She laughed and held up a bandaged limb. "Just my arm. I'm outta here tomorrow! If not, I'm escaping!"

I had to laugh too, imagining the frail old woman climbing down the wall I had just ascended. "I found your dog, Bundy, and came to tell you."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you. I was worried. The little rascal likes to run out the door sometimes. I tried to tell them, but I suppose they had other priorities. He wasn't hurt, was he?"

"Not a scratch," I promised.

"Good. Now we can talk about more serious matters. Poppy said you're breaking up," she said, and tsked severely. "I will not allow it. Poppy needs you."

"She does?"

"She does. She's sad and lonely. Now I don't know what you've done, but whatever it was, you apologize and fix this or else."

"She..." I opened my hands, noticing how inhuman they were and even more certain Mrs. Haversham was close to blind. I hadn't even tried to make her not see my form. "She no longer likes me."

"Oh, nonsense." She made a dismissive gesture. "If she didn't care about you, it wouldn't bother her that you're gone."

"And it does?"

"Of course it does. She's miserable. You've got to get back in there, boy. Kiss and make up."

"If only it were so simple," I sighed, slumping forward. "I want to see her. She does not want to see me."

"Yes, she does. She just doesn't want to admit it, probably because deep down she knows she's making a great fuss over nothing." The old woman's brash tone softened. "Even the best of us fight from time to time. Don't let her use that as an excuse to ruin her happiness. Or yours, for that matter. Swallow your pride and go after her."

"Going after her is not the problem."

"Then what is?"

I grimaced, shaking my head. This woman knew nothing. All the same, I was loathe to leave. Somehow, talking to her helped. "She... doesn't like my job," I admitted.

"Oh?" The old woman's near-blind eyes blinked at me, curious. "What is it?"

"I'm..." How to put this? "I'm in corrections."

"Ah. Well, I can see why she'd have some trust issues with that."

"It's not so much that she disapproves of the job itself, although she does. And she doesn't just dislike what I do now, she dislikes the things I've done, long before her time. I have already renounced those things, long ago, but it is not enough for her. I do not know what she wants me to do." I scowled, then sighed. "She wants me to be something I am not."

"Does she?" the old woman asked and squinted at me shrewdly. "Or do you?"

I frowned, unsure how to answer that.

"We all only have one life, Yagar. Even you. Be what you want to be. Be more. You can be more than your job. Yes?"

"I suppose I could try," I said, turning over her words. What did she mean by, 'even you?'

"You'll have to do better than that. If you love her, then you need to give her your heart. Say it."

This woman was a crazy human. And yet, I obediently chanted, "I need to give her my heart. And be more than myself."

"Good! Now go away and let me sleep." She turned over and pulled up the sheet. "I hope you fed Bundy!"

"I did."

I waited until the old woman's breaths had evened out into sleep, then slipped out the window and slowly descended the building.

I must be more than myself, more than a bogeyman? Could I choose my nature? No, impossible. I was a night spirit. It was easy for the old woman to speak of change. She was human, a creature of potential. I was babai, a creature of punishment. I was defined by my nature; it could not be altered.

And yet, her words did not leave me. Could I be more than I was?

I reached the ground, but stayed in the shadows, thinking. I had already changed much from what I used to be. By reading books, I had learned about more than just the advancements of human technology. I'd learned of their creativity, their curiosity and their limitless talent for change. In doing so, had I not become more than Styx, Grender and Dookie already? By talking to Poppy and learning humaning, she had helped me become even more. What was stopping me going further and getting more of the *more*? Maybe it was only me that was stopping myself.

I looked up at her hospital window and whispered, "Thank you, Mrs. Haversham."

CHAPTER 18

Poppy

"BLOOD, SWEAT AND FEARS." THE BANNER STRUNG BEFORE the Wolstam Art Gallery was looking worn these days. Not surprising. The week of horror had ended days ago and I hadn't been back. Though the display enticed me, too much had happened for me to feel like having fun.

I pushed back my shoulders and strode purposefully up the little flight of concrete stairs to the threshold. Admittance to the gallery was free. Since I had my job back, that wasn't a barrier anyway.

I had a twinge of shame at the thought of my recovered job. Mrs. Clarke had even apologized, which I appreciated, but I really hadn't been giving my best at the clinic. Even so, she shouldn't have been influenced by unsubstantiated gossip.

There was no proof I'd spray-painted the van. I had, of course, but there was no proof. Besides, even if Mrs. Clarke believed I was a little unstable, she knew, as the entire town knew, that Finn was a criminal of the worst kind and his brother the mayor was probably covering up his crimes. I didn't point any of that out during her apology, not even when she'd ended with, "I just hope we've both learned something from this experience."

It had been hard to keep my mouth shut at that. I'd learned something, all right. I'd learned I'd do it all again, if I thought it would make a difference. *If*.

Brochure in hand, I trailed through the hallways and small rooms that daisy-chained inside the building. The exhibits were gory and gross in a variety of styles, displaying copies of classic masterpieces like Goya's black paintings, Utagawa Kuniyoshi's woodblocks, and Redon's eerily cute lithographs. An entire room was dedicated to artwork commemorating the Black Death, with another preserving examples of memorial photography and funerary keepsakes made from bones and hair.

I wandered away from a photo wall documenting the Parisian catacombs and found myself in a small room with nothing to distract from the series of black and white illustrations of its exhibit: Death and the Maiden.

"Flirting with Death," showed a naked maiden, decorously riding Death's 'knee,' a raunchy but subtle variation on the theme of romantic death. I paused to admire it.

"Beautiful," said a familiar voice behind me.

My ears rang with a high-pitched tone for a moment while I adjusted, while I recalled how to breathe.

Yagar.

"Hello," I said, not turning.

"That could be you."

"Maybe. But not with anyone that... dark. I told you to stay away."

"The art drew me."

I gave a mocking laugh. "Liar."

"True. I was stalking this girl and wandered in to follow her deliciously well-rounded rear."

How the fuck did I answer that?

He continued, "What if I have news for her?"

"News for me?"

"Only if you're the girl with the cute rear."

I opened my mouth to say something about him overstepping the line, even though it was just a little, making me think filthy thoughts, then I realized it was evening. He was behind me in shifted form, with a gallery of potential onlookers likely to amble in here.

I spun, doubting my logic. Nope. I was right. My gaze travelled up his ruggedly sinister body to those blue eyes that had often made me imagine I was looking into the heart of the universe.

"You're brazen. What if someone sees you and freaks out?"

"They do." His mouth twitched into a wry smile, then he stretched it and showed his fence of teeth. "They freak out and then they decide to forget me because I'm too scary. There are only four others in the building, easily avoided. If the place were crowded, I'd be less in your face."

But he was in my face, and I had urge to share some news of my own. "I have my job back."

"That is good." Yagar studied me for a moment, then cautiously added, "Isn't it?"

"I guess so. I just... I don't know. He snaps his fingers and unemploys me, then snaps them again and fixes it. I swear he only did it in the first place to show me how easily he could... and that he could do worse, if he wanted. And now I'm back like it never happened, and what? Am I supposed to be grateful? To *him*?"

I paused to take a few cooling breaths, but I wasn't as angry as I thought I'd be. These days, it seemed like just the thought of the mayor or Finn set me off like a firecracker, but for some reason, telling Yagar helped.

I needed to tell someone, even if all I had was this big, hulking mass of evil contradictions.

On impulse, I spilled the other news I wasn't going to say. "And I texted Sian. I apologized for everything, and told her if she had to go no-contact for her own wellbeing, I'd respect that, but I'd never block her. She could always reach out to me, but I'd let it be on her terms."

He nodded sagely. "Has she responded?"

"No. Not even..." I scowled, then spat out, "She's marrying him. The mayor. And she hasn't invited me. I only know because it was in the local news." Fuck that for a joke, huh?"

"Then you have tried. You cannot change her. This is something I have learned. You can only change yourself."

That potted wisdom coming from Yagar, the pitiless bogeyman, was ridiculous. "You think?"

"Was that sarcasm?" he asked in possibly the most annoyed tone he'd ever used on me. He advanced, and I retreated until I was an inch from bumping into the painting. "Back off, you." I poked the center of his black shirt. "I told you not to bother me again, Mister Smartass."

A guttural growl erupted from Yagar and his eyes flickered with a menacing intensity.

Panicking, knowing I'd tripped something in him, I checked past him, but no one else was in here.

Without warning, he picked me up and slung me over his shoulder, knocking the air from my lungs. I scrabbled for a hold on the back of his coat.

"Come with me."

I smacked at him with my fists, and demanded he put me down, but in whispers. Ironically, I was afraid of attracting attention. *Oh, what a tangled web we weave.*

He carried me a few steps to the hallway, then kicked open the nearest door, revealing a restroom.

I wasn't afraid of what he intended. I was afraid he would be noticed.

He deposited me on the long bench to the side of the two wash basins, then glared down at me.

"You have angered *me*, impatient female who assumes things." He batted at my inner thighs and I spread my legs, stretching the skirt. It rolled higher.

Then I caught myself and tried to close them. *Why was I obeying?*

He grinned and stepped closer, forcing them wide. "Because you want me." He undid his fly. "And this."

"What?" I spluttered, but aware of my rising lust. I averted my gaze, refusing to do more than glimpse his monster cock. I was ready to fuck with his head and deny it.

Except he could read my mind.

"You? Fuck with me? Really? Ha!" His claws dug into the top of my legs. I winced and jerked backward, sliding my ass on the laminated benchtop, only to have him stop me and haul me forward again. "Stay. I have my own news. But it can wait." Casually, he tore a hole in my leggings, stuck his cock through the hole, shoved it into me.

I gasped, fumbling for a rebuttal in our game. "I should bill you for that," I snapped, grabbing at his wrists. To stop him? No. Fuck, no.

He thrust in further, his largeness widening me. I gulped and looked down, enthralled by that single thrust, the sensations blossoming as he began to fuck me.

He drove in again, his claws cupping my rear, pricking my skin through the cloth.

"Oh!" My fingers dug at his wrists.

Fully in, he stopped, imbedded to the hilt, deep enough to make me simply *want*. He kissed my mouth, then flipped up my skirt, tucked it at the waist.

I sat staring at the connection of him with me, at his shaft jutting from between my legs, the pulse of him in sync with my internal throb.

"Did I fucking give you permission?" I rasped, still holding one of his wrists.

"Do I look like I'm asking?" Yagar laughed and attacked my neck, anchoring his mouth of spiked teeth, half on my throat, half in my back, before he began a full assault, hammering himself in over and over. At each smack of flesh to flesh, I was rocked, rendered speechless.

Overcome, I leaned back and plopped my hands to the bench. My head tapped the mirror a few times; my eyes closed.

He moved his mouth lower, found my breast and engulfed all of it with his circle of teeth — shirt and all. *Fuuck*. I lifted my legs to give him access, gave in. He was taking anyway. His tongue wormed beneath my bra and rasped at me. My clit was ground into and pummeled; my nipple tormented.

After another flurry of thrusts, I was whimpering and ready to combust. He released my breast and I clutched at him. Anywhere – clothes, arms, even his face.

Grinning, he undulated that snakelike tongue across his teeth. "Show me you want it. Open your mouth wide."

Below, he fucked himself into me and his dick twisted strangely. His obscene tendrils reached higher, probing me without his hips moving. Shuddering, I felt myself squeezing onto his dick while he studied me.

"Show me."

Panting, with sweat popping up on my brow, my shirt a wet tousled mess, and with him still deep in my pussy and slowly revolving his hips, I stared back, dazed. I'd lost my will to resist.

I opened my mouth and he leaned in and extended his tongue. Yagar clamped his claws around my mouth to fasten me open. His tongue plunged in, all the way to the back of my throat while he languidly speared in below as well. Choked and moaning around his tongue, I was torn between an awareness of *that* and being fucked below.

After five or ten tongue-fucks, he pulled out and stepped back to lift me off the bench.

My legs threatened to collapse. I caught myself on his coat, then on his pants as he pushed me down.

I knew what he wanted. I opened my mouth, all too aware of the wetness on my thighs and the ripped hole exposing my pussy.

Without further words, he seized a handful of my hair in his fist and face-fucked me, then put me over the bench, bellydown. He spat and stuck something soft into my ass. As he pushed, it squeezed in, stretched me open.

Unexpected, but I was so turned on, I'd do anything.

He kneeled and licked my clit while fucking me in the ass with that object. The movement of his tongue didn't cease. Time blurred as the tension climbed, cresting, waning, teasing me. I groaned, my forearms flat on the bench as he flicked wetly at me, faster, a little faster. *So fucking hot*. The side of my face was squashed to the bench, my rear raised.

"Good girl," he crooned. "Take it. Take it all."

Teetering on the edge of a climax, I strained, feeling him push that thing in, violating my ass. I shut my eyes, and gasped. Shuddering, legs shaking, I came, while his tongue kept on licking. I bucked one last time as he extracted whatever he'd used on me and lay there, spent, only to feel him probe that smaller hole with his cock, then shove inside. It opened me, slid in. Being defiled like this... I moaned.

"Your fetishes," Yagar murmured. "I'm ticking them off, one by..." He thrust again. "One." He found my mouth with his hand and pushed his claws inside, hooking the corner. "Suck, lick me." I ran my tongue over the claws, tracing the curves and gasping around them when he speared in.

The fucking of my ass while he trapped my mouth, it was flawless possession.

My small pains were overwhelmed by how careful he was. My arousal still hummed through me. I was being ass-fucked by my monster in a restroom.

Again, I spluttered around his claws, my neck bent back, mouth cruelly trapped.

His rhythm stuttered, became rougher, then deeper, longer thrusts until he banged into me and groaned and released inside my ass.

I stayed there with my cheek to the laminate, until he withdrew. Blearily, I eyed him – I had to admit it – with joyous resignation.

If anyone barged in, they'd see everything, and I didn't even care.

Was that a hate-fuck? What was I going to do now?

He pulled the red collar from his pocket, let it swing in his hand.

"My news now," he declared. "I am changing myself. I'm not going back to the brothers or the den. I'm all yours, if you want me."

"You are definitely evil. You could have said that before."

"You were too busy teasing me. But I accept the compliment." My beast looked triumphant.

Still lying with my face glued to the bench, I barely hesitated before I nodded.

"Of course I want you."

"If you'd said no..." He smirked as he studied my ass. "I would have left you in a pool of my come. Stay ass up. I'll clean you, but first..."

Gently, he fastened the red collar around my neck before kissing me.

My phone jangled and I vaguely thought this was a reminder buzz. It'd rung while we were fucking.

Yagar found my phone and leaned his elbow on the bench while he read it, then showed me the screen. A text message displayed.

HEY, POPPY, IT'S SIAN. REALLY. UMMM. I WANT TO MEET. Coffee somewhere? Would you like an invite to the wedding? Jeffrey says okay. Let's make up. I'm not perfect. You're not either but let's do this. Deal?

TEARS SPILLED FROM MY EYES, DRIBBLED PAST MY NOSE, AND dripped off.

I showed him the screen again and his toothy smile warmed my heart. It would also cause a few heart attacks, if any wedding guests saw it.

I touched the collar and brought his hand to my mouth, kissed it. "This had better be a daytime wedding. Because you're coming."

"Interesting. And you're wearing this, or something similar that says you're mine."

"You're worried Finn might claim me?" I licked my lips. "He might taste good."

"Careful." Yagar growled.

"Say, whatever did you stick in my butt?"

He reached over me and brought something from the other side of the bench, showed it to me.

"No! My pink dildo?"

"Mine now. I took it from your bedroom."

"Why?" I asked, scrunching up my nose as I thought of possible reasons.

"As a souvenir," he informed me. "That is what humans do, to remind themselves of good times. I am humaning."

"Yes, you are," I agreed solemnly. "And you're getting really good at it."

"Thank you." He grinned, showing off the full wealth of his jagged teeth. "I hope to be even better, with you to help me."

CHAPTER 19

Yagar

PAST MY OUTSTRETCHED LEGS AND THE BLANKET WE SAT ON, the small fire burned against the night sky. Poppy lay between my legs. Her hair arrangement from the wedding had unraveled, and I amused myself extracting pins and combing her hair with my fingers. The fire was yards downslope and carefully bedded so it wouldn't spread. Unlike Poppy. I planned to spread her and not-so-carefully bed her soon.

We'd brought Bundy up here for a walk and he now lay next to Poppy, dreaming of whatever dogs liked. Bones, perhaps. Bones were good.

"Well, that was actually a lovely wedding." Poppy leaned her head into my chest. "I am so happy for Sian. Jeffrey is a bit of an entitled dick, but it looks like he really loves her. Finn was an ass, though."

"Expected," I murmured. There was more I could tell her. Even with my much-diminished daytime powers, I had been able to glean that Finn had hurt many people, not only those he saw as his rivals, but those he took to his bed. Like my brother, Grender, he took pleasure from pain. I suspected that Poppy had been right; Finn had indeed provided the drugs that had nearly killed Sian, and he had done so hoping for that outcome. I would not tell her this, however. Not today. This day had been happy.

"Oh! Mrs. Haversham gave me a note for you to read. Here." Poppy passed it back to me.

I unfolded it, read it out loud, "What have you forgotten?"

"How cryptic," Poppy remarked.

What had I forg—? Ah. Her advice at the hospital.

I remembered. But how could I give Poppy my heart? I wasn't even sure I had one.

Then the vows at the wedding came to me, full of symbolism.

"I have something to give you, Poppy. Turn around."

She swiveled on the blanket, gown bunching, and smiled at me curiously. "Yes?"

I put my hands to my chest where a heart should be. "I'm only a reformed babai who used to eat people and souls. I would like to marry you one day, if I can, but until that day, I wish to give you something that I hope will mean something to you."

Symbolism should carry great meaning, so I closed my eyes and imagined I was scooping out my heart, my fingers gathering the parts of me that loved Poppy and cared for her.

I scooped that symbolic heart out of my body, and I extended my hands, my head bowed. "This is my heart, Poppy. It says I will protect you and love you. I will be your keeper, as I hope you will be mine."

Her gasp made me smile. I opened my eyes.

Within my hands was a translucent red heart, it bobbed there, this impossible thing. Carefully, she placed her hands around it, and took it to her chest, cradling this heart that looked real, even though it could not be.

I closed my eyes tightly, opened them. Still there. Slowly, it faded and sank into her.

Then it was gone.

"I am not going to question this," she whispered. Poppy crawled back into my lap and hugged me. "Thank you."

"Maybe we need spectacles?"

"Shhh." She placed her finger across my mouth. *"Thank you for coming back to me and helping me to not to get so angry at things." She smiled and took a breath. <i>"Just thank you for everything. You have my heart too, you know?"*

"I do." I took her finger and folded her hands underneath mine. "One day, we will wed."

"Yes." Sighing, she wriggled deeper into my lap.

"If only we had a car to burn."

Poppy punched my leg. "Shhh!"

I laughed, but then and there I decided to turn the tide on the inequality. I would punish the bad men. The first would be Finn.

I would eat him, body and soul, before he did more damage.

"This has been a good day, Poppy."

"It has, my love. It has."

ABOUT CARI SILVERWOOD

I love to hear from my readers.

If you enjoyed Prey and Punishment, please consider leaving a review on <u>Amazon</u> or your favorite website.

Cari Silverwood is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling writer of kinky darkness or sometimes of dark kinkiness, depending on her moods and the amount of time she's spent staring into the night.

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RUINING RED BY VIVIAN MURDOCH

A Twisted Retelling of Little Red Riding Hood

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

To everyone who secretly (or not so secretly) wanted the wolf to eat Little Red Riding Hood.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Husdom

Thank you for being my werewolf and keeping me warm... Sorry it's usually your balls that take most of my frigid chill.

Awesome Alphas

Thank you for being on this awesome ride with me! You guys don't even ask questions. You just hold out your hands and demand my smutty goodness. Your feedback is invaluable, and I wouldn't be here without you all.

Thank you, Ashley, Bianca, and Rita!

TRIGGER WARNING

This book is intended for adult audiences and contains adult themes. The acts in this book are not meant to depict an actual dynamic and can be dangerous if done incorrectly. Please play responsibly. Author is not held responsible for readers' actions. KINKS, FETISHES, TRIGGERS:: INCLUDES BUT IS NOT LIMITED TO...

Assault (not by H), Some Blood and Gore (not the dark romance kind but the violent kind), Slightly Shifted Sex, Edging, Some Impact Play

Teagan

FROST NIPS AT MY SKIN, BITING AGAINST THE TENDER FLESH OF my face. Blinking against the light flurry swirling around me, I glance back down into the basket. With the tight covering, everything should be fine, but I don't want to take the chance of anything either freezing or somehow going to ruin.

Heart in my throat, I stare at the dark expanse of forest as it yawns before me, threatening to swallow me up. Shivering, I burrow deeper into my blood-red cloak and force one foot in front of the other. Whispers surround me, calling to me, but I ignore them.

The forest is full of evil and secrets. Stick to the path and heed not their alluring words. My grandmother's warnings echo through my mind as I seek out the way, barely seeing it through the undergrowth, and the snowfall threatening to erase it completely. But there it is; I just have to concentrate.

Glancing back up at the sky, I study the gray blanket stretching over the expanse. It turns the world a muted, milky white. However, as I squint, I can just barely make out the sun, watery behind the clouds as it struggles to break through. If I can just see the sun, I can find my way if the path disappears.

Heat flashes through my body, nearly driving me to my knees. It's not caused by the cloak to be sure. Could it be that I'm sick with whatever ails my grandmother? My fingers flutter to the opening of the thick fabric, pulling it closed despite the warmth that spreads through my limbs like wildfire.

The sensations swirling through me are altogether different than anything I've experienced before. My stomach clenches as an odd wetness coats my thighs. How can I be sweating this profusely?

I bring my fingers up to brush against my forehead and cheeks, expecting the skin to be damp. But it's not. Though warm, my face is perfectly dry. Dread settles low into my gut, forcing me to curl in on myself.

What sort of madness is this? To my knowledge, no one else in the village is ill, so why me? Pausing, I rest my hand against the nearest tree, propping myself up as I take in a deep lungful of cool air.

Betwixt my thighs, an odd ache throbs. However, this is not painful like a cramp or a wound. I have no words to describe the sensations pulsing through me, but I do know I crave relief. Snarling, I slam my palm against the rough bark, bringing my focus back to the task at hand.

The odd ache dies down; however, the heat does not. How I want to rid myself of this cloak, but to do so would leave me vulnerable to the sprites that lurk in the forest. Realization floods my system, forcing me to stand erect. That must be it. The forest is already weaving its magic around me, doing its best to deter me from my mission. And just like that, as if my thoughts alone can cut through the haze that surrounds me, I feel perfectly fine.

An eerie feeling threads through me as I restart my journey, venturing into the woods itself. Dead twigs snap under my feet. The crunch of snow vibrates through my ears. Every nerve stands on end, my body jumping with each new sound.

Just concentrate on grandmother, I whisper through my mind like a mantra. She is sick, and if reports are to be believed, on her deathbed. I must help her before she succumbs. Glancing down, I clutch the basket even tighter.

The healers worked tirelessly night and day to concoct these herbs and medicines for her. What type of granddaughter would I be if I allowed her to lapse because of my fear? Keeping my eyes straight ahead, I continue forward, one step in front of the other.

If I'm being honest, it's not her health that has me the most worried. Although we are kin and she has dedicated much of her time to my training, my grandmother has never shown me affection. Thus, the fact that she asked for me instead of one of her immediate children or the healers themselves gives me reason to believe she wishes to pass the mantle of matriarch to me. It's an honor I'm not ready for.

At eighteen, I should be exploring life, getting into scrapes, messing up. But now, there's a very real chance all of that will come to an end. Gnawing on my bottom lip, I slow my steps, taking my time as I mull my fate over.

It would be selfish for me to turn and run, leaving her with no one to help. And yet... I turn back, glancing down into the valley where fires gleam. Though I can't hear the merriment of those gathering for dinner, I see the twinkling of the dancing flames, my heart heavy.

We all have to grow up sometime. I just never expected it to be so soon. Shaking my head, I resume my journey, determined to actually grow up and face my fate. I should have known this would happen, should have prepared for it.

It seems as if the whispers surrounding my birth were true then. I always knew I was destined for something, but no one ever told me what. But now, everything seems to make sense. My head reels as everything narrows down into stark focus.

This is why they never allowed the boys to play with me. This is why the other girls granted me a large berth. All the pain and loneliness in my soul led me to this moment. It's why I was forced to stay inside and learn the way of the healers instead of playing with the others.

Granted, knowing now helps, but it doesn't erase the pain of the past. It's still with me, pricking my heart at every turn. The one good thing about becoming the matriarch is that I can change things, make a difference in the next girl forced to take over from me.

My soul lifts at that thought, allowing me to breathe. Besides, now that my fate is before me, they can no longer deny me the joy of interacting with others. Besides, it's not as if Grandmother stays to herself up here in the cabin. She comes down fairly often, less so as her health has been failing her.

Again, a surge of heat coils up within me, cutting off my thoughts. My feet falter, pitching me to the side. Keeping a tight hold on the basket, I slump over into the shelter of the trees. I know I'm supposed to stay on the path like a good girl, but no one can deny me refuge among the foliage. Not when everything heaves and sways, threatening my insides. Curling in on myself, I nestle into a space where the roots form a circle. It's a nice place to shut my eyes for a few moments.

Silent, I listen to the branches creak and groan as the wind howls through the leaves. I should be scared, terrified, and yet, there's a sort of kinship there. A storm brews as my mind whirls about, just as tempestuous.

It's a lullaby of sorts as I find a cadence, a rhythm to the noise. Deep in my cloak, the warmth is no longer stifling. Instead, it's an embrace, and soon, I find my eyelids are too heavy to keep open.

Odd dreams flit through my subconscious. Phantom fingers drift over my arms and face, but I cannot see them. Is it the spirit of the woods? Try as I might, my eyes stay shut. I move to lash out, to thrust the trickster aside, but find that I cannot move.

My limbs are heavy, wooden, and refuse to respond to even the simplest of commands. Dark eyes bore into me. I see them, clear as day in my head. But there's no face, no body... just eyes. They stir something within me, feelings I don't understand.

My stomach clenches as more of that infernal dampness gathers at the juncture of my thighs. I ache now, all over. It's no longer centered at my apex. Every joint screams at me as I attempt to move.

Whispers pull at me, zipping around my ears like a ferocious wind. They make no sense. They call to me, and yet, I find I do not understand the words. At least, my mind

doesn't. My body, however, responds, coming alive at the raspy sound.

With a start, my eyes fly open. Frantic, I glance about, noting the waning sun. I've been asleep far longer than I anticipated. Fear grips me as I look down at the basket in my hands.

A light layer of snow covers everything, including the medicine. With shaky fingers, I remove the top and look inside, my heart in my throat. With a sigh, I note that nothing is frozen. It must have been my body heat keeping everything safe.

Forcing myself back up, my legs wobble for a moment. I brace against the tree and freeze. I'm not alone. Though I cannot see anyone else, my hair stands on end as the sense of a piercing gaze follows me.

I've lingered far too long, and now, it's no longer safe. Pulling the basket closer to my chest, holding it against me as a talisman, I go back onto the path, breathing a sigh of relief as the way remains clear for me. In my fear, I worried it would disappear right from under my nose.

Striding forward, I make a mental note not to be distracted again. I can't afford any more missteps. The forest was kind to me once, but there's no guarantee it will be so forgiving next time.

As I follow the meandering trail, I still cannot shake the feeling of eyes following me. I long to cry out, to demand whoever or whatever it is to show themselves. But that's one rule of the forest I will never break.

Don't ask the trees questions, for you will not like their answer. The wise words I grew up with whirl through my mind. Redoubling my steps, I continue on, coming to a sharp bend. I take in a deep breath and follow it around, running into a solid wall of muscle. It's a miracle my grip on the basket never falters as I fall backward, landing square on my posterior.

Pain shoots through me, but I remain silent, refusing to give this stranger a foothold. As he leans forward, his eyes lock onto mine, stopping all movement. Those eyes. It's the eyes from my dream. What trickery is this?

A few seconds too late, I try to shuffle back, but his massive strides catch up to me in the blink of an eye. A whimper claws up my throat as his heavenly scent invades my nostrils, scrambling my thoughts. All I want to do is drink him in.

When he reaches for me, I'm helpless to resist. I allow him to help me stand and don't even put up a fight as his long arm snakes around my waist to steady me. My head brushes his chest, my nose slamming into his upper abs as he pulls me to him.

"Sorry," he murmurs, his voice vibrating through his core, sending shivers through me. "I never expected to collide with a lady such as you. That is, no one usually enters these woods, and so I thought I would be alone. Are you injured?" He pushes me away, holding me at arm's length, allowing me to take a breath.

It's still laced with his scent, making my body sway in the confines of his grasp. "I... I..." The world dips for a moment as my knees buckle from under me.

"Easy there," he commands, pulling me upright, holding me fast in his arms. His fingers smooth over my hair, sliding the hood off. Snow-white curls bounce down from where I'd stuffed them into the cloak, spilling about my shoulders. Terror seizes my lungs as he runs his fingers along my scalp.

Pulling back, I wrench out of his grasp and pull the hood back over. "You shouldn't take such liberties."

"I was merely searching for a wound, a bump on your head or worse." Concern laces his tone as his brows draw in.

Though his words sound truthful, I don't believe them. No one is supposed to look upon my hair save my mother. Touching it is out of the question. No one has ever said why it's forbidden, making the emotions coursing through me even more confusing. But, everyone from the village or nearby knows any sort of contact is impermissible.

That means he's a stranger. Fear swirls through my gut as I tighten the cloak tighter about my shoulders. There can be only one type of stranger in the forest, and I'm not foolish enough to fall for his silver tongue or handsome physique.

This sprite means to waylay me, to keep me from my mission. Squaring my shoulders, I attempt to move past him, but he blocks my way, crossing his arms to seem even more imposing. Looking up, I note the dark, stormy black and greys of his eyes, like choppy waves in a snowstorm.

I could get lost in those eyes. They're so cold, and yet, I feel a blazing warmth underneath. Shaking my head, I disrupt the spell he's weaving around me. I feel it like tendrils curling about my arms and legs, rooting me to the spot.

Soon, I'll be a part of the forest, a tree rooted in place by something as pathetic as flutterings in my stomach. Again, I try to push past, but he holds his arm out, anchoring it against a broad oak.

"I'll have your name, beautiful." His words slide over me like honey.

There's a compulsion there; I'm almost sure of it. Tossing my head back, I hunch down, using my diminutive size to duck under his arm. The smirk he gives me as I dance out of reach leaves me nearly breathless.

"If you were someone I was allowed to talk to, you would already know my name."

"Ahh, but can you not give a small courtesy to a passing stranger?" he teases, his smile widening.

"And that is why I shall not give it. I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

"And yet, we've been conversing for several moments now." He glances up into the darkening sky, squinting as a few flakes drop onto his face. "Seems to me you're still in good health."

There's something about his tone that flows over my skin like a caress. It coils through me, tightening my stomach. Again, that ache pulses between my thighs. Squeezing them together, I do my best to staunch the liquid gathering there, grateful my cloak hides all evidence.

However, the moment I shift, his head tilts down, his gaze narrowing. He stares right at me, his eyes going straight to the spot of my embarrassment. "I see. My very presence ails you, I presume?"

Relief floods my system as I nod. "Yes. That must be it. I have such an adverse reaction. Please allow me to leave so I can remain well."

He chuckles, the dark sound scraping across the synapses of my brain.

"Your name," he growls.

"Teagan," I cry out, unable to stop myself.

With a soft sob, I slam my hand across my lips, furious that I broke the rules. His eyes seem to glow at my reaction, no doubt a trick of the shifting clouds. Leaning down, he grabs my hood and slowly eases it back, revealing my hair once more.

"Good girl." Those two simple words said in that husky tone send flames licking up my body. "So much better than the name I gave you."

"What name was that?" I curse the words as they fall from my lips. Yet another rule broken.

With a smirk, he runs his fingers along the front of my cloak. "Little red hood." Pausing, he drifts up higher. "Your hair is so beautiful, like stars glinting on freshly fallen snow. Why hide it?"

I lick my lips, desperate to back away. But I can't. The promise in his touch, the unsaid words that twist my insides with need keep me there. I want to know why the rules exist... but more importantly why they force me to be so alone.

Couldn't I just...

"I…"

"Yes?" His lips hover so close to mine that I feel his very breath as it crosses my face.

A large crack rends the air as some distant branch falls to the earth, laden with too much snow. It snaps the spell, allowing clear thoughts to reign once more. Shaking off the remaining dredges, I take a step back.

"I have to go," I blurt out, forcing my body to move.

I half expect him to chase me, to drag me back to his side, but he stands still, ramrod as he watches me. "Run then, little red hood. Many blessings on your journey."

His voice rumbles through my mind as I hasten forward, aimless, barely keeping my feet on the path. Too close. That was far too close.

Conrí

I WATCH THE GIRL SCUTTLE AWAY, MY COCK THROBBING AS SHE leaves. That damned cloak reveals nothing of her figure, and yet, I find that it doesn't matter — I want to devour her anyway. Tipping my nose in the air, I scent the breeze as it flutters through the blood-red fabric, forcing her delectable smell deep into my lungs.

Could it really be her that smells so tantalizing? Again, I take in a whiff, my senses clouded by the myriad of aromas beating at me. I never did get a chance to see what she kept so concealed in that basket. It could be that's where that mouth-watering need to bite and devour is coming from.

It's big enough to contain all sorts of sweets and morsels. Growling under my breath, I slip into the woods, silent as I follow her unseen. It's not the basket. Food has never made my balls ache and my cock throb with needy insistence.

The girl is behind all of this. But why her? Crossing one foot over the other, I traverse through the underbrush, my steps confident and steady as I make my way closer. She never turns around, never suspects that I lurk close enough to touch her, and she never will.

I know these woods like the back of my hand. They're a part of me, an extension of my very being. Even now, as I close my eyes, I step, light as a feather, not so much as stirring the smallest of creatures.

Every now and then, she pauses her body ramrod as she looks around. For a moment, I think she might have heard me, but that's impossible. More than likely, the animalistic part of her brain knows a predator follows after, stalking her.

Teagan. Her name rolls about my brain, feeling comfortable bouncing about in my mind. So many other girls have made this journey, but their names are not memorable. But the name Teagan stands out like a beacon, a light cutting through the dark, solitary existence that is my life.

I long to howl out my pleasure at finding one such as she, but I dare not scare her any more than she is already. The wolf in me wants her on her knees, eyes wide as she takes in his ferocious form. However, the dichotomy is the man wanting her to come willingly into my arms.

It's a delicate dance, one that's taken me decades to perfect. I don't dare lose that balance over a girl that smells like freshly baked bread and decadent honey. The wind whips at her slight form, driving that maddening scent my way.

Could it be she's an elusive omega? The other half of my wolf's soul? For countless years I've searched and found nothing but empty promises and the devil's magic. Never have I come across the one that could truly take me. All of me.

Sure, they made grand promises, their cunts glinting with arousal as I fucked them senseless. However, the moment my knot swelled, stretching them tight, it was pure agony that racked their bodies and not cries of pleasure. As monstrous as I am, I couldn't harm them that way. The very idea disgusts me to my core.

Could Teagan be different? Already my other half prowls about, wishing to subdue her, to make her ours in every way possible, but that means nothing. He wanted those other girls too. Sacrifices set out by the matriarch for the offense of being an omega.

If only the matriarch knew how wrong she was. Shaking my head, I continue to watch the girl make her way through the snow-laden path. There are only a handful of reasons she would be making this trip; however, it's the basket of goodies that gives me pause.

It's no secret the matriarch's health has been waning, and so this could be a simple visit to shore her up. But then, the whispers of a sacrifice have been too loud to ignore. My gut clenches as worry floods my veins.

To think they'd condemn someone so sweet and innocent to death. Luckily, I control that in the palm of my clawed hand. Resting my back against a nearby tree, I allow her to continue her way unmolested.

Deep inside, the wolf stretches, preparing for the hunt. All the while, my brain screams at him, demanding he step down. I don't dare let him out this early. Not until the sacrifice is made apparent.

Fucking humans. So quick to destroy what they don't understand. Fury floods my veins, blurring my vision. They think by giving up these so-called demons, mistresses of lusts, that their lives would be easier, better, unencumbered by the deviance that simmers below the surface of every male there, regardless of age.

It's them that should be put to death for even wanting to touch a woman in that way, though granted, they manage to refrain. Besides, as I've discovered, eye and hair color does not an omega make. The lust those men feel, the need to fuck every hole, comes from something deep within and not merely pheromones put out into the air.

They are the blights, the pustulant sores, and the festering wounds that showcase the worst in humanity. Brothers, fathers, uncles, cousins, all of them will want her merely because of what her hair and eyes represent. They won't be able to control themselves, and so she must be put to death.

If she's making this trip, that means she's finally of age. Nothing will stop them now. No doubt that red hood of hers has been her only saving grace. Such pale blue eyes, though uncommon, are not unheard of, but no one can deny that hair, and both of them together can mean only one thing.

The fear vibrating through her when I removed her hood was palpable in the air, shamelessly stirring my arousal even more. Though I'm not of the same caliber as the monsters she lives with, I do so enjoy feeling terror give way to pure arousal.

She could reject that notion all day long, but her body wanted mine. There was no denying the shift in scent. The honeyed arousal turned deeper, darker, like caramel just moments before burning. Her pussy promised me a dessert I'd never forget.

Licking my lips, I tip my head up into the fat, lazy snowflakes drifting down. Hopefully, this will cool my ardor long enough that I can think rationally, but I doubt it. There's just something about her that's different from any other girl I've encountered on this path.

Each one had their quirks, but all were too eager to join me in the woods. They allowed my silver tongue to distract them. But not her. Not Teagan. Yes, my words moved her, but her resolve still won out. She's a conundrum wrapped up inside a nice red package.

There is an off chance that this is all a mere coincidence, though. But in my bones, I don't believe it for a second. If she is indeed tonight's sacrifice, which I'm fairly certain she is, then I'll be seeing her soon enough. Closing my eyes, I drag in one more deep breath laced with her scent.

Palming my erection through my pants, I rub myself, stifling a groan. Her face flashes before me, those pale blue eyes blinking up in awe as she takes my cock down her throat. Has she ever tasted a man before? Or will I be the first?

Just the very thought of stripping away every ounce of innocence from her as she begs so prettily from those pale lips has precum welling up at the tip. No, she's definitely not like all the rest.

None of the others drove me to distraction like she has. None of them have forced me to undo my pants in the middle of the goddamn woods and pleasure myself like a youth with no sense. And certainly, none of them have ever made my brain light up in pleasure at just the very thought of their names.

"Teagan," I groan softly, squeezing my erection.

Even rolling off my tongue it feels decadent, delightful, forbidden. I stroke myself, picturing her underneath me, her body quivering as I lap at her flesh. Will I take her as a wolf or as the human? That's the conundrum that races through my mind.

Omega or not, she wouldn't be able to handle me in wolf form. I know this, and yet, cum coats my cock at just the thought of ravaging her that way. Forcing the beast back, I picture her riding me wearing nothing but her red cape with the hood pulled back so that her silver hair could glint in the moonlight.

My balls clench as I picture my little red hood riding me, her pussy fluttering about my thick cock as I impale her, driving into her as she rises and falls against me. I'm sure she'd feel like absolute magic as she falls apart around me, her cunt gripping me, begging me for my sweet cum to fill her up.

Slamming my palm against the rough bark, I swallow that bite of pain as I grip myself hard, stroking my cock. Running my palm along the tip, I gather up my precum and use that to lubricate my movements, imagining her slick dripping down on me. If she already smells like a dessert, then I can imagine how her arousal would taste just as sweet.

The thought alone has me pulsing as lust swirls through my brain. A grunt rips from my throat, filling the woods with the sound as I buck my hips into the air. I'm sure my little sacrifice hears it. There's no way she couldn't have.

Would it turn her on even more? Make that delicious pussy of hers spasm? Poor little thing probably doesn't even know the pleasure her body can bring, and I can't wait to be her teacher. Though I detest the humans for sacrificing these girls, this is the first time I'm looking forward to it.

Her slight body stretched tight as flames light the way. Would they use rope on her this time? Or manacles? Either way, they're no match for my claws. I'll tear her down from there and take her to my home, showing her who and what I really am.

I don't give a damn if she doesn't want me. If her body proves to be that of an omega, I will chain her to me with my claiming mark. She will never be free, and if I play my hand correctly, she'll never want to be.

Just imagining my teeth sinking into her supple flesh makes my wolf howl with need. He paces in my mind, demanding I let him loose so he can hunt Teagan down and start the claiming process early. But there's a timeline that must be adhered to, a ritual to be followed.

The only way I can keep these girls safe is by allowing the herd mentality to believe I'm destroying them. If she does not appear for the sacrifice, they will always wonder what happened to her. They must see me take off with my prey, easing their hearts and minds that this 'evil' is truly vanquished.

This balance keeps them from killing the children when they're born or even later as they grow up. They rest easy in the knowledge that the god of this forest will take his due, allowing the men to jerk off in secret, but never touch the pristine sacrifice that is owed to me.

Unfortunately, it means pleasuring myself now to ease the burden put upon my wolf and me. Gritting my teeth, my motions become nearly erratic, frantic as I grip and twist, pulling pleasure out of me. With my other hand, I grip my growing knot, squeezing it, massaging it as it grows.

It's not the same as a lover's embrace, but it will have to do. A howl breaks forth, scattering the wildlife around me. No doubt it will add to the stories floating around in the village down below. But more importantly, I hope my little red hood hears it.

I hope it hastens her steps, taking her ever closer to the matriarch. The quicker she can be ensconced within those wooden doors, the sooner she will be mine. At this point, I no longer care if she's in fact an omega or not.

My wolf wants her.

I want her.

She will be mine.

The very thought sends cum surging up, splattering the leaves with thick, hot ropes. Groaning, I continue to milk my knot, squeezing every drop out into the snow. The frost melts away, eradicated by the heat.

Heaving, I stand there, watching my seed as it slides over the dead and dormant foliage, dripping onto the ground below. If only I were indeed a god and not just some cursed animal forced to roam about, masquerading as a man. If only I had the power needed to secure her by my side, sacrifices be damned.

But then, there is something to be said about granting my wolf a hunt. It's been nigh on eighteen years since I've allowed him that sort of free reign. My lips split into a feral grin as I pull my pants back up, stuffing my cock behind the confines of fabric and buttons.

Little Teagan is still out there waiting for me, and I must oblige her need. Prowling forward, I follow my nose, tracking her down until that dark, muted red flashes at me from between swaying limbs and pointed evergreen needles. Her fear is palpable, an acrid stench that has my cock swelling again. I will most certainly save her from the impending sacrifice, but who will save her from me?

Teagan

THE TREES DIP AND SWAY, CHURNING MY STOMACH WITH EACH swish of their snow-laden branches. The white flakes pick up both speed and volume, threatening to blind me as they strike at my eyes. Clutching my stomach, I brush them away, marveling at how I'm still so dreadfully hot.

It must be the cloak. It's the only explanation, and yet, I don't dare take it off. Instead, I draw it around me even closer, a ward to keep me safe. I drag the crisp air into my lungs, forcing myself to breathe in and out in an even cadence.

Though it's a struggle, my body finally calms down enough for my heart to stop thundering in my ears. That is, until that unnerving howl sounds through the trees once more, skittering up my spine like thousands of spiders crawling over me. The sound alone drives me to my knees, down into the snow.

I kneel there, unable to move or even think. Dampness seeps into my bones, but I barely feel it. The only thing I'm aware of is the throbbing between my thighs. Unable to take it anymore, I reach in between my legs, probing the area. Am I injured? My fingers slip across the seam of the dreadful part of me that I should never touch. But this time is different. I have to seek out the source of this discomfort and make it stop.

A whine lodges in my throat as slick wetness coats my fingers. I am injured then. My hand trembles as I pull it back, and I brace myself for the bright vermillion that's sure to coat my digits. But not a speck of red is visible.

A clear sheen coats my fingers and I marvel at what sort of witchcraft turns blood clear. At that moment, another howl rents the sky, reminding me that I'm not safe. Wolves are a bad omen, and this one sounds close.

If memory serves, they only appear during times of death and rebirth, and since I'm nowhere close to being born again, it can only signal my death. Again, my heart picks up speed, pounding so fast, so loud, that my limbs tingle.

Perhaps I'm closer to death than I originally thought. Forcing my gaze upward, I note the spiral of smoke off in the distance. If I can just make it to my grandmother's, then I'll live. I just know it.

She will keep me safe in her home until this threat has passed. *Move*, I scream in my mind. But my body does not respond. Gritting my teeth, I dig my fingers into the frigid ground, not caring about the pain spearing through me. It's the jolt I need to snap me out of whatever it is tethering me to the spot.

Grunting, I haul myself up to my feet and force one step in front of the other. Pain lances through my heart with each inch of ground I gain. Something doesn't want me to make it. Something wants me to die alone in the woods. Unbidden, my mind goes back to the stranger. I was doing well until him. Granted, I still felt as if I was on fire, but I could move of my own free will. Talking to him must have linked us together in some unholy way. This must be why I was commanded never to speak to anyone in the forest.

Soft sobs vibrate in my chest as I claw at the trees lining the path. I use them to hold me up, to push off of as I hobble my way over to the next. Searing pain slices through my midsection, forcing me to cry out.

Catching my breath, I look around, terrified that the sprites of the woods are listening, waiting for me to stop just long enough to drag me deep into the bowels where I'll never be seen again. That image alone is what gets me moving, redoubling my efforts. The pain begins to dissipate, allowing me to breathe once more.

Perhaps I'm wrong and this is all a test? Though others before me have made this journey to see the matriarch, no one mentioned anything like this. But then, why would they? If you anticipate the test, you can figure out ways around it.

If I am indeed to be the next in line, I must show my strength. Relief floods my system, leaving me dizzy. Of course. That's all this is. Some arcane way of ensuring I'm fit to take over and lead the village.

Emboldened, I straighten my back and walk unencumbered. No longer do I need to seek out trees to assist me. The matriarch needs no such devices, and neither will I. It's simply a case of mind over matter.

Those pretty thoughts, however, do nothing to quell the vibrations quivering my insides. I wish I could make it stop, to feel normal again. Clutching my midsection, I readjust my grip on the basket and force my way forward.

With each step, the path grows eerily quiet. No longer does the howling ring out from the trees. Even the snow stops, clearing my vision to better see the house that awaits me. Cocking my ears toward the trees, I listen for any signs of life and find none.

No birds call out to each other. No rabbits or deer scamper about in search of food. It's only me.

Alone.

For the first time since this journey, tendrils of ice wrap around me, coiling over my limbs until shivers wrack my body. The only thing granting me peace is Grandmother's door. She's so close now. If I close my eyes and concentrate, I can smell the burning embers of her fireplace.

So close. So impossibly close, and yet, so far away. The distance yawns before me, lengthening with every breath. Once more, my body is aflame, causing me to twist and turn, clutching at my midsection as I hunch over.

I will not allow this trip to get the best of me. Even if I die trying, I will reach my destination. Pushing past the discomfort, I continue trudging forward, only stopping when the need to catch my breath is so intense that my lungs burn in protest.

Eventually, I make it. Collapsing against the door, I rest my forehead against the rough wood. My fingers trace the designs etched deep as I force my mind to calm. It's not until I'm breathing in a nice, even cadence that I open the door.

There, in her massive bed, resides my grandmother. At least, it's an elderly woman who resembles the person I've come to know as the matriarch. Granted, her skin is thin, stretched tight over protruding bones. There's a glimmer of the woman I once knew, but she's swallowed up in shallow cheeks and cracked lips. Tears threaten to prick my eyes as I walk over with the basket. How selfish of me to think about becoming the next matriarch when the woman is still alive and in obvious discomfort.

I fear I must break the silence somehow. I glance over her face, thinking of something, anything to say that won't come across as impertinent or rude.

"Well met, Grandma," I murmur, setting the basket by her side. "What large, lovely eyes you have."

She laughs, a rusty sound that creaks with age and neglect. "Ah, my dear granddaughter. Though old, they can still see you very well."

I glance at the side of her face where her curls rest. "And I suppose your ears are well?"

"Quite. Though aged, they still hear all."

With a smile, I pull a hunk of bread from the basket and take it over to the fireplace. "Forgive me, Grandma, but I fear the cold weather has made this bread nearly impossible to eat. Allow me to warm it up so it's easier for you to chew."

"Nonsense, child," she cackles. "These teeth may be old, but they can bite well enough. Come, show me what you brought."

The moment I come close, my insides twist. Something isn't right about any of this. Handing her the bread, I empty out the remaining contents, revealing some pastries, drink, and some odd glass bottles.

I set them out in neat, organized rows next to her on the nearby shelf. Without hesitation, I tug at her bedspread. "Forgive me, Grandma, but surely this cannot be comfortable."

Her eyes narrow as she watches me fuss about, straightening here, tucking there. But still, nothing seems to fix it. It's an itch that burrows under my skin that I cannot scratch. The matriarch sits there, not saying a word.

Pacing, I run my hands along my sides, doing my best to staunch the incessant need to fuss and fiddle. I'm so deep in my thoughts, that I'm unaware that others have entered the room until I collide with another warm body. My eyes fly up, locking with an older woman.

She's not nearly as old as the lady in the bed, but somehow, she looks more like what I remember the matriarch looking like. "G- Grandma?" My gaze flies between her and the woman in the bed.

"Thank you for your assistance. That is all."

With a shrug, the old woman grips at her face and tugs. Dumbstruck, I watch in horror as the skin slides away, revealing a girl from the village. Tanya, I believe. We never interacted much, but her golden hair, yellow as if kissed by the sun, always stirred feelings of jealousy in me.

Even now, as she clutches the ruffly nightcap, I watch, my stomach twisting as the flaxen curls bounce free. The gray hairs that cling to the fabric were fake as well. Is this another test?

Backing away, I lift up my hands as if that will protect me. "I don't understand."

My grandmother scowls down at me. "I do not expect you to." Nodding over her shoulder, I watch in horror as more people file into the space. Family and friends, most of them males, trod in behind her, their boots thudding against the wooden floor. The sound rings in my ears, setting my heart to pounding. The only explanation is they are here to bear witness to me elevating in rank to matriarch. To think anything less makes my blood freeze in my veins.

"Have you ever wondered why you wear that red hood?"

I finger the garment in question, thrown off by this line of inquiry. "Mother said it was a symbol, a mark to keep me safe."

"That is the polite answer, yes. But I fear it's far more sinister." Striding over, she grips the hood in her hand and tears it down, revealing my hair to everyone.

Gasps flood the room as the men take a step back and the few women present sneer. I don't understand the reaction, but it cuts me to my core. Even my mother looks upon me with such hatred, such disgust. Frantic, I try to pull it back up, thinking if I can just hide this abomination...

But no. The matriarch grips the cloak by the shoulders and rips it from my body. My hands flail out in a poor attempt to grab it, to pull it back around me so I'm covered. Before I can so much as move, she tosses it into the roaring fire.

Falling to my knees, I watch, helpless as the one thing that's kept me safe goes up into flames. Tears flow down my cheeks in earnest as I look about, my gaze drifting over the people gathering around. Not one of them helps me.

I clasp my fingers together, shuffling back until I slide against the wall. Nowhere to go. I'm trapped. Next to me, a door leading to the outside stands just out of reach. I long to crawl over to it, to flee back out into the elements, but something about the sympathetic smile crossing my grandmother's face gives me pause.

"Poor, little Teagan. So frightened. So confused."

I slump down against the wall, relaxing under the soothing cadence of her voice. A misunderstanding. That's all this is. I smile up at her, basking in the warmth I feel drifting off of her, but soon, it turns frigid as she frowns down at me.

"Harlot," she spits out. "Demon from the pits of the abyss."

"What? I—"

"Do not deny it," my mother chimes in, her finger pointed at my face. It shakes, but whether it's from fear or fury, I cannot tell. "Do you know how many years I prayed to the gods for a daughter? How many sacrifices I made, how many potions I choked down? Only to have them laugh at me the moment you came into the world."

My heart stops for a moment as the acidity of her words coats me. "But—"

"I cannot even bear to look at you."

"Easy, Mother," the matriarch croons, comforting her. My heart splits as she murmurs nonsensical words, smoothing her hands over her face and hair. "Sometimes the gods give us trials. She was yours. You passed the test, and soon, you'll be rewarded." The matriarch's hand drifts down to my mother's stomach. "I'm sure of it."

"Oh." My mother beams, sliding to her knees in supplication. "Oh thank you. Thank the gods."

I sit there, stunned as my mother pays no attention to the daughter she already has. Pain lances through my body,

twisting my insides until I hunch over, a cry slipping free from the confines of my lips. More of that maddening liquid gathers between my thighs, reminding me that I'm injured and at their mercy.

"Please," I whisper, my vision blurring as tears cloud my eyes.

I blink them away, but the scene in front of me doesn't change. Even now, the men step forward, their eyes darkening like demons. Terror rips at my insides as they continue to press on, only stopping when the matriarch steps forward, waving about a chalice filled with smoke.

"Do not allow her to tempt you. Do not succumb to the filth of her body. It will surely lead you down into the fiery pits."

"What—" My words are cut off by another flash of pain, so searing I double over, clutching at my insides.

"You see," the matriarch continues, "the demons that live inside her yearn to be free. They call to you, men of the village. They beg for you to lie with her, to take them into your bodies."

Turning to me, she shakes her head, a slight hint of sympathy flashing in her eyes. But I cannot be sure. It's gone so quickly that I haven't enough time to fully comprehend her shifting moods.

She hunches in front of me, her fingers swiping over my fevered brow. They're cool, like ice against my fevered skin. With a soft moan, I lean into them, taking what little relief I can.

"You see. The demons demand relief and will take it from anyone willing to give it." Pulling back, she smacks me hard against the face.

A loud ringing floods my ears as everything dips in front of me. Darkness encroaches, seducing me with soft whispers of relief. I long to give in, to slip into that murky, liminal space that hovers before me.

However, before I can fully succumb, a smattering of roars and growls fill the room. Blinking up, I watch in horror as the men, including my family, come closer, their teeth bared as if they're animals.

Unbidden, my mind conjures up the wolf's howl, setting my limbs to shaking. It was an omen after all. Pulling back, the matriarch once more ushers the men back, keeping them at bay with whatever foul scent is pouring out around her.

"You see, little vixen, I knew this day would come. The moment I helped deliver you and saw the shade of your eyes, the paleness of your hair, I knew you were a demon spawn sent to lead these men astray."

She pauses for a moment before coming back to me. "You see, every generation or so, there's one like you. An *other*. But I couldn't be sure. Not until your eighteenth birthday. And so, I had your mother cover you, keep you from the rest of the village, like an infection that had a chance of spreading. I was right. The way your body responds to these men proves who and what you are."

Her voice lowers as she showers me with a glare. "You are an omega, and as such, you must be sacrificed for the good of this village."

Panic beats at my chest as I process her words. "You can't ____"

"Oh, we will. But do not fret. Think of it as your way of ensuring another generation of peace and harmony for this land. Your death will usher in an era of tranquility for your fellow friends and family."

Teagan

TERROR CLAWS AT MY INSIDES LIKE WHITE-HOT POKERS dragging across the sensitive membrane. I'm not sure if I'm screaming out loud or if it's just in my ears ringing. Honestly, I can't seem to understand anything going on around me at the moment.

It's as if time no longer has any meaning. My grandmother's movements are slow. Each twitch of her muscles reverberates until I swear I can almost hear them breaking the space around each molecule.

Colors fade, leaving the room in shades of black, white and gray. Is this what dying feels like? Clutching at my midsection, I draw my legs up, making myself impossibly small.

The words surrounding me are garbled, nonsensical, just a cacophony of noises that fail to penetrate my brain. Though I cannot comprehend them, I feel the violence as they slash at my skin. Glancing down, I study my arms and legs, convinced gashes will appear to spray the room in the vermillion of my agony.

But nothing happens. It's as if I'm trapped in this bubble that forces me to feel everything, yet not suffer any physical effects. Closing my eyes, I grip my knees and lay my cheek down, rocking back and forth as her words repeat like an illfated mantra through my brain.

Unfortunately, everything now makes sense. It's why I was ostracized, why no one in the village, my mother included, seemed to care for me. Bitterness wells up from deep inside my gut, burning my throat with its vile acid.

And here I thought I was set aside for a far nobler reason. I deluded myself into thinking I was marked for greatness. Now I see it's the complete opposite. I'm a pariah, an undesirable. Yet, my mother made me live, and for what? To be the sacrifice for the village?

Instead of training to be the next matriarch, I am to die so that they may live in peace? Lifting my gaze, I force myself to look upon the people I loved most dearly. I allow myself to see the violence exuding from their very pores.

Since I still cannot understand the venomous words spewing from their lips, I can better focus on the physical attributes. I see it all — the clenched fists, the mottled faces, and worse of all, the abject fury blazing in their eyes. No longer am I some naive child thinking they only mean me good.

Their need to see me dead is all too apparent. Still, they creep closer, their hands clawing at me, desperate to tear me limb from limb. The only person standing between me and certain dismemberment is my grandmother, the great matriarch herself.

I'm not stupid enough to think she means well by her actions. No doubt she needs me very much alive for sacrifice.

Glancing about, I note the door behind them, but there's no way I can dart past and make my way to freedom.

That leaves the door off to the side. If I can reach it, I might have a chance. But then, where would I go? I only know of the village and the woods that separate us. Will I have to make my home there, where it's forbidden?

My lips twist into a snarl as I purpose within myself to break any damned rule I have to if it means salvation. Again, I slide my gaze over, keeping my face blank. They can't know the turn of my thoughts until it's far too late to stop it.

As soon as my plan is formulated, an odd peace surrounds me, a serenity that cloaks me in its warm embrace, driving away the chill threatening to turn my heart into a shard of ice. I long to stay in this space, to feel the love and peace that infuses me, shoring up my resolve. But it's a false hope, a dream that comes to you when death is nigh. I cannot allow myself to be dragged under by its siren call.

Adrenaline spikes through my arms and legs, forcing me to move. The moment I break free from the spell weaving around, whispering sweet promises in my ear, everything crashes in around me. Sounds, colors and sensations overwhelm me, nearly gluing me to the spot.

But I move. I have no choice. If I want to live to see another day, I must fight past my fears and just move. With a blast of motion, I leap from the floor, startling the crowd. I dart to the side and open the door, wincing at the blast of cold air.

The snow crashes down in earnest, coating me with wet, frigid flakes. I use the sting to further wake me up, to compel me into a faster sense of motion. From behind, I hear angry shouts, but I'm already on the run. Without my cloak, I'm subjected to the elements. Each snowflake slams into me like tiny spears jabbing at my skin. Wiping my eyes, I force myself to press on, despite the numbness tingling in my feet and hands.

If I can just make it to the woods, I'll be safe. No one will dare follow me there. I keep pushing, keep fighting, all the while, keeping my ear open for any predators that might snag me and drag me down to my eternal sleep.

When the first hand grabs me, I barely feel it. It's a scrape almost, a flutter of sensation that spurs me on even faster. But it's no use. Soon, other hands wrap around my arms, my waist, anywhere they can grab.

A pained cry slips from my lips, punctuating the night air. In truth, it sounds so similar to the wolf that howled earlier. Before I can even question what I'm doing, I tip my head up and howl again, this time, on purpose.

I pour out all my hurt, my yearning, my fear into that sound, allowing it to rip from my chest and release into the air. Perhaps some hidden part thinks that by summoning the wolf, I'll find myself free. It's madness, but somehow feels so right. If he kills me, ripping me to shreds, it will be a blessed relief.

As their hands claw at me, dragging me back to the cabin, I continue to howl until I'm hoarse. Even then, I still try, the sound raspy, weak, and choked with the tears streaming down my face.

But the wolf never shows.

I am alone.

Desperate.

Hurting from the inside out.

I gasp for air, but it's laced with ice crystals, burning my throat as it fills my lungs. Pain bursts from every joint as hands claw at me, nearly tearing off my dress. My vision narrows as I stare up at the waning sun, doing my best to separate my mind from what's happening by watching the myriad of colors painting the dull gray into brilliant shades of reds, pinks, and oranges.

How I long to be where the sun touches, to feel the warmth upon my skin. The raging inferno that beset me earlier seems to be long past, leaving me a frozen shell, a husk. Snow burns my face, as they grind my cheek further into the ground, but even now, the pain is lessening as darkness threatens to encroach.

Again, I find myself longing to drift upon the ether, to finally be rid of this pain that splits my heart. It's a relentless ache, one that does not dare dissipate from the deadening snow. However, the moment one of the hands rips at my sleeve, threatening to bare an intimate portion of my body to the elements, something within me snaps.

With a roar that sounds more akin to a harsh croak than anything beastly, I lash out, pushing and shoving, wriggling my body about so their hands cannot find purchase. For several moments, I seem to be winning. The men back off, allowing me to turn over and crawl away.

On shaky limbs, I force my body to slither through the snow, like some injured wild animal. As I try to get up, I find my legs don't want to move. They're leaden beneath me, compelling me to go back to crawling — this at least seemed to be manageable.

One arm in front of the other, I pull my body, propelling it forward inch by inch. Pain zaps through me, as bits of rocks, roots, and other debris from the ground embed in my skin. I long to cry out, to scream, but find I have no more voice. I wasted it all with my damned futile howling.

A few more drags of my torso across the jagged rocks is all I can manage before collapsing again. And that's when I realize they're merely toying with me. Though I manage to get several feet before they give chase, their walking catches back up with me in a few easy strides.

Tears no longer prick my eyes as they lay hands on me. There are none left. All I can do now is face my fate with dignity. Lowering my head back to the ground, I heave as my lungs clamber for air.

Footsteps crunch through the snow, loud, ominous, and no doubt signaling my doom. I long to turn away, to not face my end, but I find I cannot move. I lay there, helpless, closing my eyes. Pain explodes against my skull, but only for a moment. Blessed darkness creeps in soon after.

I'M NOT DEAD.

At least, that's the thought that slithers through my brain amidst the pounding in my skull. Pain explodes through my body as consciousness brings awareness to every ache and scrape. If I were dead, it wouldn't hurt so much.

Despite their twisted views about my person, I've done nothing wrong, and so I shouldn't be cast down into a pit of torment. Right? Why should a particular combination of hair and eye color condemn me to eternal suffering? And yet, as I take inventory of my wounds, part of me wishes I was actually dead, then I'd know my suffering had a purpose, a chance at penance. This is just senseless violence and agony.

Groaning, I pry my eyes open, nausea bubbling in my stomach as everything swims into view. Thankfully, it only takes a moment or two for everything to right itself, quelling the bile rising in my throat. Wetness slides down my face, and based on the coppery scent, I know it's blood. My blood.

Heat licks at my body like flames, but thankfully there are none close enough to me to actually cause me harm. I have no clue how they plan to sacrifice me, but fire would most certainly be an agonizing way to go. Forcing my head to turn in spite of the splitting headache threatening the contents of my near-empty stomach, I watch as the men of the village gather around.

I don't recognize them anymore. No longer are they the nice, peaceable men who helped each other out, greeting everyone else with smiles and waves. Now, their faces are twisted, their eyes glowing in the firelight.

Demons, one and all.

My insides seize as I watch them prowl around me. Helpless, I try to run but find my arms stuck to a pole, tied too tightly for me to escape from. Until now, I didn't notice my predicament. I was far too concerned with determining if I was indeed alive or not.

Snow covers my bare feet, but I don't feel it. In fact, I don't feel much of anything except for a pounding head, insatiable heat, and an ache throbbing between my thighs. Moaning, I shift about, desperate to find relief. "See?" The matriarch cries out, her voice rising above the howling wind. "See how she tempts you with her body, her scent? Pray the demon comes quickly to take her away before you succumb and lay hands on her in an unholy fashion."

Unholy? As if everything else they've done to me thus far has been right and just. Blinking, I watch as they step forward, their hands fumbling with the front of their pants. Younger men and older alike, skim their palms up and down, rubbing some unknown portion of their bodies.

Terror infuses my limbs as groans flit into the air. In the winking lights of the fires, I watch as they produce long rods from their clothes, the muscle, if that's what you can even call it, pulsing as they run their hands up and down.

What manner of witchcraft is this? They circle me, their eyes blazing with absolute hatred. Each set of eyes bore into me, recrimination exuding from every pore. But worse than that, a scent fills the air, a pungent, musky odor that causes me to both shrivel into myself with revulsion and throb, the ache becoming far more pronounced.

They shout out accusations, blaming me for their actions. Their words slam into me, hurled as if they were stones. All the while, their hands continue to move in some odd rhythm, their hips jerking and bucking as their groans turn to pained wails.

Despair lances through me as I stare at them, unsure of what to even do or say in the face of such utter hatred. Is this the way they intend to sacrifice me? Curling into myself as best as I can, I allow the loneliness to surround me, covering me with its painful cloak. Loud, mournful cries spill from my lips, the only thing that can even come close to soothing the pain radiating from every pore.

Conrí

MY EARS PRICK AT THE SOUND OF ANGUISHED HOWLS RINGING through the woods. None of the other sacrifices have ever made such a sound. It makes my blood run cold, speeding up my steps. What in the hell are they doing to the poor girl?

Shaking my head, I force the beast to remain at bay. I need to assess the situation with a calm, rational mind first. If I run in there, wolf fully in control, there's no telling what I might do. As I reach the edge, however, staring off into the opening, ice curls its frosty tendrils around my heart, squeezing it until I can no longer breathe.

There, held aloft by rough rope, is the girl I met in the woods today. Dragging in a lungful of air, I detect the spicy notes drifting off of her. She's nearing heat. For a moment, I can barely believe it. For once, the sacrifice is an actual omega.

At her mournful sobs, my cock juts up, rubbing against my pants. I shouldn't find her tears alluring. I shouldn't want to create more just to watch them stream down that pretty little face. But I want all that and more. The beast prowls inside my mind like the wild animal he is, caged with nowhere to go. He beats at my insides, howling, snarling, raging, desperate to taste Teagan's pussy, which, by the scent rolling off of her, is already wet with slick. Running my hands over the front of my shirt, I take my time as I peel it off of my body.

Frigid air licks at my bare skin, soothing the heat rising from me. Next, I remove my pants, standing there naked as I watch my poor little sacrifice squirming about against the rough-hewn pole they tied her to. Even now, she shivers, yet not nearly as much as someone facing the elements with only a thin dress to protect them.

The warmth from her heat is the only thing keeping her from shaking so hard her bones threaten to break. Soon, it will be my skin and fur keeping her protected. At the very thought of curling around her in wolf form, the beast claws at my insides, desperate to take our mate and protect her.

Mate. Omega. The words pound in my brain, scattering all logical thought for a moment. Once I take this delightful little morsel, there will be no more need for sacrifices. I will no longer have to roam the woods alone, desperate, staying in human form as I fuck whoever I can to scratch the need that hovers just under the surface.

I'll be able to finally knot someone, experiencing every facet of sex with a woman who can take me. All of me. It's enough to make my heart nearly skip a beat. Though not sentimental in any regard, there is a gratitude that rushes through me, softening my feelings toward her.

But then, the wind shifts, carrying her scent further into my nose. Everything blurs, driving me down onto all fours. For a moment, I lose control, allowing my arms and legs to shift. Snarls drip from my lips as fangs protrude, punching through my gums.

Prowling forward, I stop myself, struggling as I watch her writhing. No doubt, she's caught my scent as well. Even now, her nose tips into the air, the delicate muscles quivering, setting her body to trembling.

I long to go to her, to scoop her into my arms, but that's not how this game is played. Every generation, we go through this song and dance. They expect ferocity, terror, and devouring. Granted, never once have I given them the satisfaction of watching what I do with them once they're in my grasp.

Those perverted monsters would love nothing more than to see me rut the girls, their beautiful bodies gleaming in the moonlight. Teagan, however, is different. It will take all my wits to not drag her down into the snow and claim her then and there. But then, it would shatter the illusion.

What keeps the villagers happy, what prevents them from committing violence, is thinking that I'm going to kill the sacrifice. I have to allow them to think I'm dragging this poor girl to her end. Rutting her like the beast demands is counterintuitive.

Not that I plan on taking anyone else after tonight. Now that my soul knows she's the one, there is no longer a need to find new girls. Tonight marks the last night of my hunt.

Well... last night hunting a stranger. Once this little morsel bears my mark, there's no stopping the things I'll do to her. The wolf howls in agreement, the sound nearly slipping through my lips to alert the others of my presence. As if the feral sound calls to her very soul, Teagan looks over at me, her eyes glazed, unfocused. I know she cannot see me, but that gaze pierces me to the core. Her lips part, a cry drifting out onto the air.

It calls to me, demanding the wolf take his satisfaction. Closing my eyes, I allow him to take over. Transforming, in and of itself, is not painful. What hurts the most is knowing I'll eventually have to rein him back in.

Once out, the wolf never wants to be confined back to the prison of my mind. Glancing up, we both watch as the clouds part, revealing a full moon. It's by sheer luck and superstition that these villagers plan these sacrifices for when my wolf can come out and play.

When the moon's fullness is over, clarity is the ruler of us both. Granted, I can still shift, but it's not an ever-pressing need. Not like tonight. Though, with the delectable way Teagan smells, no moon, full or new, would keep my savage half at bay.

My thoughts drift on the ether, transforming along with my body. Soon, I'll no longer think as a man. The wolf will be in full control. Even now, I feel my words slipping, failing me as I keep my gaze trained upon my mate.

Grunts and snarls fill my mind, transplanting phrases and morphing them into something far more guttural. *Mine*. That one word echoes as I pad over, keeping close to the tree line.

I'm not ready for the villagers to see me. Not yet. The first few minutes of transformation are always disorienting. I'm at my weakest and cannot allow myself to be put in harm's way. Even though I doubt they'll attack me, every generation is different. And so, I pace about, watching, waiting, and calculating. No one seems to have any weapons on hand, and there's no way they can take me in wolf form. Shaking my body, I ruffle my fur, tipping my nose in the air once more.

As the wolf, her scent is even stronger to me. It calls to me, beckoning me to taste her, tease her, bite her. However, what's even stronger than the slick gathering at her thighs is the stench of fear.

It surrounds her, engulfing her body like a cloud. Out of all the other sacrifices I can remember, she's the most terrified. Fury races through my brain like fire, touching every nerve, setting them ablaze. Snarling, I hunch low to the ground, desperately trying to keep my tentative hold on the beast.

Her fear is what keeps me tethered instead of allowing the beast his full reign. She shouldn't be shaking in abject terror. Instead, she should be trembling from the passion I bestow on her.

I look closer at the crowd around her. Their words, once muffled by the snow and distance, slam into my brain as if they're screaming it. Every accusation cuts my little omega to the core, bringing fresh tears to her eyes.

In their mind, it's her fault they're out here, pants down around their hips as they slide their cocks across their palms. Not once do they take into consideration their own depravity as they verbally assault her. These men are not shifters, not Alphas like me.

Her scent shouldn't have nearly as strong an effect on them as it does on me. And yet, here I am, mentally caught between beast and man. Still, I can control myself, contain my urges. These humans have no excuse. Rage infuses my limbs causing me to shake. With each stroke of their cocks, Teagan becomes more agitated, more fearful. This isn't how I want her, not terrified. If there is to be a bite of apprehension wafting from her body, it will be because of me and the delicious things I plan to do to her.

Then and there, I plot how I'm going to take her. The beast loves the taste of her fear in the air, the bite it gives to her spicy scent. The others don't deserve her and will never have anything more than they've already taken by force.

Snarling, I hug the forest, keeping myself in the shadows. The wolf growls in my mind, our will in agreement. The desire for blood drips through my veins, until for a moment, that's all I can see.

A swath of red covers the scene, painting everything in a ghastly hue. Smiling inside myself, I continue to creep closer, keeping myself hidden until I'm standing behind the villagers. Smug satisfaction rolls off of the matriarch as she watches the affair, not at all content with putting a stop to their deviant actions.

As this girl's grandmother, she should be in tears at the idea of her kin being dragged through the woods and devoured. Granted, that's going to happen, but not in the way this mortal thinks. She stands there, proud, arms crossed as she allows the men to defile themselves, stroking their bodies at Teagan's discomfort.

The only saving grace is that none of them smell like they're related. If even one of them had her familial scent, I would have allowed the beast to run off his tether and cut them into ribbons. As it is, however, I'm still not convinced allowing them to live is the best course of action. Snarling, I hunch down behind the matriarch, biding my time. Someone is bound to notice me soon enough. It is a sacrifice, after all, and even as daft and muddle-headed as these humans seem to be, eventually, they'll wonder where their god is.

Minutes creep by like hours as I force the beast to stay still. His claws rake through my mind, slicing me open, weakening my resolve. For Teagan's sake, I must keep the beast in check. It's her that's allowing me this one thread of sanity.

Eventually, the men grow tired of their idle stroking and slide in closer, choosing now to run their hands over her body, *my* body, as they slide up and down with renewed vigor. The vitriolic words they spit land on her like physical blows.

Again, that gut-wrenching cry howls from her lips, ringing in my ears. It's enough. These humans have crossed a line they will never return from. Their blood will stain the snow, turning it crimson, but not tonight.

There are far more important things to see to right now. I need to take my mate away from these miscreants and chain her to my side. Closing my eyes, I commit every scent to memory, determined to seek them out after I'm finished claiming my precious omega.

With a roar, I pounce upon the matriarch, driving her down into the snow. Keeping my weight off of her, I rest a paw against her chest, pushing down only hard enough to keep her pinned. Saliva drips from my fangs, dripping down onto her face and neck as I lean in close.

Fear widens her eyes and clouds the air around her with a putrid scent of fear and piss. The men break away, their shouts and cries frantic as they huddle together, unsure of how to rescue this woman. Lifting my snout, I growl at them, allowing my claws to lengthen and dig into the matriarch's skin.

Though human, this woman is mystical enough that I can lock my mind with hers, communicating as the wolf. Fear twists her spine until she's squirming underneath. She understands the depth of my rage, even if she cannot put it into words.

"S- Step away from her," she cries out, voicing my orders to the men. "How dare you touch what does not belong to you!"

They hang their heads, shame, anger and hatred intermingling into a murmur of violence. Releasing the hag, I lope after them, snarling and snapping my teeth. Exhilaration races through my limbs as they dart from before me, racing off toward the path that will take them home.

At least this way, they'll have fear following them, keeping their thoughts occupied until I can come back and finish the job. It will be a delicious form of torture, one that will work on its own while I claim my mate. Even now, she trembles in her bonds at each and every roar, but it's not all fear that makes her body vibrate.

I smell the tendril of lust and need which wafts from her body. Each exhale is laced with desperation as she writhes about, her body knowing what her mind refuses to understand. She will though. Soon enough, she'll understand her fate and embrace it with open arms.

Pausing just outside of her periphery, I struggle within myself. The plan I have for her will only work if she thinks she has an opportunity to be free from me. If I approach her as the wolf, there's a chance she'll just give up, thinking her life is already over.

I picture her running from me, her body tearing through the woods as I give chase. Groaning, I force myself to shift back, knowing it won't last for long. The wolf wants her just as much as I do, and there is no stopping him from taking what he wants. With great reluctance, I pull my clothes back on and head over to my prey.

Teagan

SCREAMS CONTINUE TO PEPPER THE AIR LONG AFTER THE MEN race toward the woods. Straining against the ropes holding me aloft, I long to join them, to flee from whatever this new threat is. If it's powerful enough to send grown men crying into the forest, then it certainly bodes ill for me.

Grunting, I tug at my arms, yanking as hard as I can, but all that does is cause searing pain to shoot down into my shoulders. Tears wet my cheeks, hot and angry, a stark contrast to the cold wind whipping about my body. Again, I twist about, not content with just standing there as I meet my doom.

I turn my head, desperate to look behind me, to find whatever terror lurks in the night. It's nearly impossible. Between the thickness of the pole to which I am bound and the tightness of the rope holding me in place, I can only see to the sides or straight ahead.

Awareness prickles the back of my neck as I grind my back into the wood, making myself as small as possible. This isn't how things were supposed to go. I was supposed to be taking over as the new matriarch. Or, at the very least, nursing my sick grandmother back to health.

If I had even an inkling this was in store for me, I would have let her rot in this cabin. Biting down on my lower lip, I watch as the last of the men disappear into the tree line, their torches a faint twinkling in the night.

I am alone.

Slumping forward, defeat settles deep into my chest. What does it matter now? I'm fodder for some sacrifice, not fit for saving. I wish the 'god' would just get it over with. Waiting like this is agony — my senses attuned to every sound, the dread winding through my veins hard enough to nearly crush my bones.

Ears pricked, I listen to any hint of noise, analyzing and overanalyzing it. Off in the distance, birds flutter about, unable to settle in their nests. Animals scurry, seeking refuge. None of them sound large enough to cause me any harm. By all rights, it sounds like a typical winter night.

Only now, it's as if the world itself holds its breath, the pregnant pause swelling until it overtakes everything. My heart pounds in my chest as silence descends, smothering everything in its path. I don't dare speak or even breathe for fear of disrupting it.

Crunch.

The sound rings out into the night, causing me to freeze in place. Perhaps I'm just hearing things. My ears strain in the darkness, hoping I don't hear it again.

Crunch.

There, directly behind me. I hear it. Panic assails my body, and yet, I force myself to remain still. My heart slams in my chest, stuttering my breathing. Try as I might, I find I cannot draw enough air into my lungs.

Crunch.

Each inhale is shallow, quick, not nearly filling enough. My vision blurs as dizziness threatens to overtake me. What can possibly be out here in the darkness? The sound isn't loud enough to be a massive creature.

Crunch.

With each step, it comes closer. I am helpless, defenseless. My mouth drops open, a scream hovering at my lips, but nothing comes out. Not so much as a squeak disrupts the quiet around me.

Crunch.

I'm too young to die. I still have my life ahead of me. Looking up into the night sky, I watch as the clouds part, revealing a full moon. The beams shine down, as if throwing me into the light. Is this some sort of sign?

Crunch.

Closer now, so very close. Forcing myself to calm, I take in the first deep breath since hearing the ominous sound. The air is laced with decadence, a mouth-watering scent that has no right smelling so divine.

It stirs hunger in me, but not for food. A different sort of need takes over, and I twist in my bonds. Not to be free, but to seek out that scent, to find who or what is causing it. Whimpers claw at my throat, barely audible, yet still shattering the silence.

Crunch.

The sound stops, and I pull forward, desperate to be free of my bindings. Every few moments, I pause, listening for more sounds, more footsteps, but hear nothing. Again, the night is deathly silent, waiting for either of us to make the first move.

Hands skim up my arms, hot against my frigid skin. They ignite a fire in me, blazing so hot I fear I will melt. Again, my vision fuzzes around the edges, but this time, I don't feel as if I will slump forward in a faint. This feels altogether different.

Nimble fingers work at the ropes, the realization setting my mind spinning. This can't be the god I'm to be sacrificed to. Why would he let me go? Again, I twist and tug, desperate to help this unknown Samaritan out, to see who dares defy a god.

Once I'm free, I fall forward, pitching toward the snow. Those hands wrap around my waist, hauling me up, keeping me from faltering. Turning, my eyes lock onto a familiar gaze. Those gray depths seem darker now, more ferocious. But I cannot tell if it's a trick of the light or my imagination.

"You must hurry," he rasps out, concern lacing his tone. "There is a wolf nearby. He means to devour you."

My mind slowly clicks along, not understanding what it is he's conveying. A wolf? A haze of memory teases me, a howl. But was that really a wolf? Or was it me? Nothing makes sense as I stare into his fathomless eyes.

I want to lose myself in the promise I see there. It's as if I'm reflected in his gaze. Only, the woman I see staring back is wanton, free, and so deliriously happy. Shaking my head, I dispel the thought.

Lovely as it is, it isn't real. Nothing about that woman exists. Sliding my fingers along the front of his shirt, I soak in the warmth emanating from his chest. So warm, so safe, so... decadent. Better than that, he seems to be the source of the mouth-watering scent which makes my stomach clench in some unnamable need.

Unable to help myself, I lean in, running my nose along the buttons that keep his body contained. How I long to slide my fingers between the fabric and rip it apart, sending those buttons flying into the snow. In my mind, I picture myself lapping at his chest, tasting the hint of salt on his skin.

With a jolt, I yank back as I blink up at him. What manner of thoughts are these? I know nothing of men or their chests, much less what they taste like. Fingers trembling, I force my hands back to my side.

The stranger merely looks at me, his head tilted as if studying a curious thing. Under the scrutiny of his gaze, I find that odd dampness between my thighs returning. Though I take a step back, he steps with me, as if we are of one mind.

"You should run," he purrs, his voice washing over me like a soothing blanket.

Run? Why should I run? Here is where I long to be. My thoughts jumble, and I find I'm unable to keep a hold of any of them. With each hot breath that washes over my skin, they scatter, like chaff on the wind.

There's something about his eyes. They hold me there, glue me to the spot. I can't run, not when he looks at me this way. It's as if he sees me, truly sees me. Few in the village dared look upon me, and the gazes of those who did were full of scorn and contempt.

I understand now. It wasn't my potential rise in power that caused them all to treat me as if I were nothing. It's because I am the sacrifice, the scapegoat, the dirty thing that must be cast from their midst.

Only, the man standing before me doesn't hold hatred in his eyes. He holds no ill will that I can see. In fact, there's a warmth there, a longing that matches my own. It's as if he's been lonely as well, seeking comfort in an outcast like me.

Reaching up, I graze his cheek with my palm, my heart fluttering at the illicit contact. Never before have I been allowed to touch another that wasn't my family. Instead of running from me, he stands there, enduring my touch.

My breath catches in my throat as his eyes turn molten, like liquid steel. Some unnamed emotion weaves around us, binding us together in that moment. It's a spell I never wish to be free from.

Witchcraft. That's the only term I have for it. My gaze drifts down to his full lips, my own tingling with anticipation. How often have I seen the men and women interact, their lips touching in light affection? How often have I sighed and wished that I, too, could experience such rapture?

The stranger leans in, his lips a breath away from mine. Is this to be my first kiss? From a stranger in the woods? Before today, I would have cursed my stupidity at allowing myself to get so enmeshed with a sprite, a trickster of the forest. But now that I know the designs my family had against me, I no longer care for their words of wisdom.

"You have my name, Sprite," I whisper in the minute space between us. "I have yet to know yours."

Pulling back, he gives me a lopsided smirk. Pain lances through my body at this slight rejection, need clawing at my insides to close the gap. Is it wrong of me to ask, to know the name that belongs to the lips which threaten to pull me under?

He studies me for a moment, staying silent. "And what would you do with my name, oh goddess of the night?"

His words send a tremor through me, a thrill I never knew I could have. "I merely wish to know. Is it not proper to know a man's name before aligning my lips with his?"

This time, the look he gives me seems to be confusion mixed with mirth. "And what would you do for my name?" He raises up even higher, his shoulders widening with each step.

Somehow, he grows bigger, larger as he gets closer. But it's my imagination running away with me. It must be. Air catches in my throat, my breathing coming in rapid gasps. Still, he propels forward, his steps never faltering as he brings himself closer to me.

With each movement forward, I ease back, keeping distance between us. Though I long to kiss him, to find out what secrets lie between men and women, I find that I'm also frightened. Intensity rolls off of him in waves, reminding me he could very well lead me to my doom.

"I'm waiting, little red hood."

Sorrow slashes through me, causing my insides to cramp. "That name is no longer fitting." Bitterness laces my tone as I wrap my arms around my waist, finally aware of the icy wind as it tears at my flesh. "As you can see, I am without it."

All it takes is two long strides for him to catch back up with me. Again, he reaches out and touches my hair, his fingers smoothing over the curls in an almost reverent manner. "You are better without it."

"It kept me safe. Kept me—"

"A prisoner." Those two words, spoken so matter-of-fact, so full of conviction. "I ask again, my little red hood. What will you give me in exchange for my name?"

Never make deals with the creatures of the woods. They will always be the victor, leaving you in a sorry state. My mother's words burn through my mind. Why is he so insistent? Why make an exchange at all?

"I..." My words falter, fleeing my lips as if to be rid of me too, just like the villagers. "It is a mistake. I want nothing from you. Your name is your own." Turning, I move to leave, to run from this man that threatens to enslave me to him.

"As I said earlier, little red hood," he murmurs against my ear, the vibrations in his voice making my knees shake as my insides turn to jelly. "You should run. Unless you want to be eaten by a wolf."

"I see no wolves here. Only you." Again, I turn, locking my gaze with his.

"Does this mean you will not run?" A slight pout mars his lips, twisting them down. "I only mean to save you, to protect you from what could be. That is..." Pausing, he reaches out to graze my arm, his touch branding me like fire. "That is unless you want to be a sacrifice. Is that what you really want, my little red hood? To be splayed open, devoured, and consumed? Tell me, omega. Is that what you want?"

Omega? The word bounces around my mind, filling my insides with such elation. Though the word is foreign to me, somehow, it feels right. No other words, terms, or phrases ever made my soul sing. Even if it means my downfall, I must find out the true meaning, to somehow imbibe this word and make it my own.

I'm rooted to the spot as he prowls around me, his other words flitting through my head. *Devoured*, *consumed*. They should frighten me, fill me with dread, and yet, I find myself even more curious than before.

Besides, it's clear the village doesn't want me. Perhaps I can make an exchange with this god. But first, I must find a way to extricate myself from this man. He's the one person standing between me and blessed sleep.

Still though, I do long to find what it is about him that arrests me so. Why does my body burn the closer he is? And why does my soul long to merge with him, to become one? He promises eternity. Somehow, I know this. But at what cost?

His form starts to blur as my eyes feel wide, heavy even. It makes no sense. Nothing about my reactions make any sense. Looking out onto the snowy expanse, I find the glare almost intolerable. The moon gleams bright like a beacon, nearly blinding me.

Blinking doesn't help. The only time it stops is when I get my emotions under control. Only then, does it feel like everything goes back to being normal. It lends credence to the notion he's more than just a man. What other explanation is there?

Conrí

I WATCH THE OMEGA STAND THERE, HER MIND CHURNING SO hard, I can almost hear it. It makes me wonder what exactly it is she's contemplating. Already she's proven to be far stronger than I gave her credit for.

As the other men ran, they pissed themselves, clambering over each other in a desperate need to flee the wolf. Granted, Teagan has only seen me in my human form, and it makes me wonder if she'll be just as frightened as they are. Circling, I breathe in her scent, taking it deep into my lungs.

Mine, the beast snarls inside as he claws at me, desperate to be free. But I cannot let him loose. Not yet. Not until I know I have him fully under control. Unfortunately, the longer I'm in this omega's presence, the less I feel as if I can dictate what he will and won't do.

It's madness, a feral need that eats at me as I take in the innocent bat of her eyes, the rosy blush to her cheeks. Even now her body shudders before me, responding to me, and I haven't even touched her yet. In truth, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to feel her lips under mine, to feel them part as I invaded her mouth.

But I'm too close to losing myself, to losing control. Even now, my claws extend as the beast fights to be free. Will I have the strength to hold him back? Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pull her in close, drinking in the scent of her impending heat.

Poor little thing doesn't even realize how close she is to me actually stripping her bare and rutting her in the snow. Those large eyes, fathomless, pools of black as her irises disappear, blink up at me, as if I hold all the secrets to the universe.

As it pertains to my knowledge of her, she's almost entirely correct. Though I've never had an omega of my own, I know they're supposed to exist. The ancient texts speak of one made for a wolf such as I.

However, where she's wrong is in the fact I've never been able to put it into practice. In some ways, I'm just as lost as she is, following everything by instinct. There's still the possibility that my senses are lying to me, and she is, in fact, not my mate.

But something deep in my gut tells me I'm wrong. No other sacrifice has responded like this. No one else burns as hot as she does, despite the snow. She should be shivering, nearly mindless right now, her skin a pale gray from the chilled winds biting her.

Yet, as I study her body, I find her cheeks a bright pink, healthy even, as if the weather has no effect on her. I'm sure if I reach out and stroke her again, I will find it warm. Granted, not as hot as mine, seeing as the wolf keeps me immune to such inclement weather. Under my palm, I feel her ribs expanding as she takes in large gulps of air. It's not fear that quickens her breath, but arousal. It scents the air, perfuming the space between us until my head spins.

I should let her go, allowing her to run until I can get myself back under control. But I find I can no longer remove my hand from her person. The very idea sends shards of pain deep inside my soul, forcing my wolf to cry out. It's the proof I need that she's far more than some human girl.

For once, the imbeciles in the village got it right. How I wish she had looked like them, that her nearly white hair and startling blue eyes didn't give it away that she was different. Oh, if she could have walked amongst them unmolested, without fear or being ostracized.

How fitting would it be if the wolf's mate looked like every other ordinary girl. But then, I wouldn't have the pleasure of running my fingers through curls so pale they blend in with the very snow beneath our feet. I wouldn't be able to look into eyes so blue, so sparkly, they put the very sky to shame.

Though I would have been more than content with whatever my mate looked like, there's something erotic in knowing I'll be the only one to enjoy such a morsel. There would be no lookalike elsewhere, sighing as meaty, unknowledgeable hands pawed at them.

None of the men would look upon their women and think they know what my mate looks like. They'll only have their memories of this night to comfort them while their hands slide up and down their cocks, urgency tightening their bodies. And they can have those memories. For now, at least. This jewel is mine and mine alone. Inside my skull, the beast howls, furious that others have seen the beauty of her hair, her voluptuous curves as they strain against the thin dress. I should be the only one to see her this way, to note the tousled curls and the way her impending heat flushes her lips.

My stomach cramps with need as everything in me tightens. My cock strains against my pants, rubbing the stiff fabric with every movement. None of that is worse than the feeling of the wolf prowling about, demanding control.

Pulling away, I force myself to put some distance between us. It's the only way to stay sane, rational. I growl under my breath as I pace, no doubt looking every inch a madman. If it frightens Teagan, however, she makes no show of it.

"Are you not scared?" I rasp out. "Are you not worried the wolf will destroy you?"

"How can I be afraid when you are here with me?" Her voice is small yet full of conviction.

It does more to me than her scent alone. There's a trust there that guts me, nearly driving me to my knees. How I want to be that man for her, the knight who will see her safe from harm. But I'm not. I will never be.

From inside my mind, the wolf inches forward, taking control of my mental faculties. It's his words that spear the air, lust coating every syllable. "Oh, but you should be afraid. Out here, alone, with no one to save you? You would be at my mercy."

"Mercy sounds like a good thing, and yet, the way you say it, it sounds like a curse." Again, those voluminous eyes stare up at me, the innocence pouring from her body. Running my fingers along her cheeks, I pause to scrape my nail across her bottom lip. As if on instinct, her mouth parts, her warm breath grazing me. She's not panting, exactly, but it's close enough to make my cock jerk. Images of her kneeling before me, mouth open to accept my seed into her belly, flash before my eyes.

I long to push on her shoulders, forcing her down, but in truth, that's not what I really want. My body craves her like it demands my next breath. I want to slide myself deep into her body, making us one.

"Such an innocent little virgin, aren't you?" I groan against the top of her head as I haul her into my arms. "You have no idea what I could do to you, to this body of yours."

"N- No," she whimpers, her tiny fingers clutching at the front of my shirt. "Please. Teach me."

The world freezes for a moment as that pitiful, mournful request meets my ears. There's no way I could have heard her correctly. Pushing her away again, I prowl about, the wolf slipping in and out of command. To her credit, she finally seems to understand fear.

It spices the air, souring it a touch. Normally, I'd be repulsed by it, but the wolf wants to draw more from her. It wants her screaming beneath us, unsure if it's terror or pleasure that draws such sounds crawling from her lips.

"This is your last chance," I growl, my voice raspy, almost inhuman. "If you value your sanctity, your innocence. You. Will. Run."

For a moment, she freezes in place, and I question her sanity. But then, as if her brain and body finally catch up with each other, she explodes in a flurry of movement. Nearly falling in her haste, she catches herself and runs off, taking to the woods.

I can no longer hold back. With a roar, I rip the clothes from my body and fall to the ground, my body twisting as hands and feet turn into massive paws. I'm nearly fully transformed by the time I take off after her.

This time, the wolf is in complete control. He sniffs her out, following the trail, the scent of her fear and arousal. It calls to him, puffing out his chest as he listens for her hesitant footsteps. In this game, she will surely lose, because no one knows these woods like he does.

HUNGER.

Need.

Fury.

Desire.

I lope after the girl, the omega, my mate. Fangs itch as I snap my jaw, reveling in this night run. Mother Moon gazes down upon me, illuminating the scene, but I don't need her to find my mate. My large eyes narrow, picking up on the faint trails left behind by the heat of her body.

Humans cannot see. Their eyes are too dim. Too weak. I see all. I smell all. *Teagan*. The name rolls about in my skull, making saliva pool in my mouth. I want to taste her, to devour her, to eat her up until there's nothing left.

I want to claim her, to chain her to me for all eternity. Pausing, I sniff the air, taking in the bouquet of the night. Off to the side, animals scamper, triggering the reflex to take leave of my current prey and enjoy them for dinner. But I can't.

In my mind, the human remains. Though his commands are weaker than mine, they guide me, turning my attention back to the slip of a girl who dares to run from us. Hunching low, I blend with the forest, using leaves to hide me from her.

She stops, her panting breaths forcing her breasts to heave with each inhale. The dress is already in tatters, exposing bare skin to my ravenous gaze. How easy would it be to pounce, to leap in the air and descend upon her? But then, what fun would that be? We only started playing.

Tipping my head up in the air, I give a warning howl, a sharp yip to get her moving again. There, that scent that drives me wild. Fear. It permeates the woods, filling my lungs until red tints my vision.

Again, I take after her, keeping a sharp eye out for any predator, human or animal, that might threaten my prey. She is mine. I'm the only one who will enjoy the taste of her flesh as I lick every inch of her.

With each dart through the trees, I catch a hint of silver, just a flash, but it's enough to make my cock lengthen for a moment. The human part of me loves her hair. He wants to wind his fingers through it, holding her down in his grip.

I only care about the taste of her pussy. He can have her hair, her lips, and whatever else he wants as long as I get the first taste of her arousal. Even now, it teases me, calling me with her alluring scent.

Striding closer, I stop, noting how the leaves glisten in a particular spot. She must have hunched down, hiding away from me in this little alcove. Did she enjoy the leaves brushing up against her so intimately? Or did she even feel it through her clothes?

I bury my nose in the foliage, forcing myself to keep my tongue behind my fangs. I don't want this first taste to be marred with the greenery of herbs. No. I want it undiluted, straight from the source.

Lifting my head again, I seek her out. The little omega is getting smarter, faster, somehow managing to stay just out of reach. Clever little girl. All it does is force adrenaline through my veins.

There. That flash of silver. Loping after her, I keep my eyes trained on her body, guiding her to a clearing near the human's cabin. With loud snarls, I maneuver her, forcing her where I want. Seconds go by like hours as I direct and redirect her, keeping her away from briars and thorns.

Soon, she breaks through the trees and brush, standing right where I want her. Again, the snow falls, the fat flakes dancing around her as she lifts her hands up in offering. She's ethereal, a fairy, a sight to behold. And mine. All mine.

The human beats at my brain, demanding he take over, so he can fuck her without harm. But I don't allow it. I want the first taste, and I will have it. Snarling, I burst through the brush, landing inches away from her.

Terror explodes from her body, souring the air with its acrid stench. This is not good. I want that bite of fear, but not this. Never this. Ducking my head down, I do my best to show her I mean no actual harm.

A purr rumbles through my chest, breaking through the silence. It's like a hum that vibrates in the air, a sensation I've never experienced before. As if in a trance, she sways before me, her body melting under the onslaught of emotions I sense racing through her.

The moment she falls to her knees, her descent padded by the thick vines I know grow here, I spring into action. I stride over to her, keeping my movements small and unassuming. Tears glisten on her cheeks, and the human in me roars to make this right.

My fangs near her face as I lean in to comfort her, and in an instant, she jerks back, falling on her ass. I take advantage of the opportunity and straddle her, pinning her down with my bulk. Her fists feel feeble against me as she slams them into my shoulders and sides.

I feel nothing, hear nothing. All I can concentrate on is her heavenly scent. Nuzzling her cheek, I lap at the tears, tasting the salt. She hesitates, freezing in place, as if any one movement will cause me to rip into her.

Purring again, I watch as she lays there, boneless beneath me. Keeping my claws light, I tear at her dress, stripping it away from her body. Her eyes are wide now, black pools without even a hint of iris. The heat must be overtaking her.

If the stories are to be believed, she'll need to nest before I can take her. I just need one taste. Just one and I'll be satisfied. She can make a mountain of nests for all I care. Just one, fucking taste.

I nuzzle lower, using my teeth to pry the fabric off of her body until I reach the place I want to be. Wedging my head between her thighs, I force her to open. Soft, whines claw at her throat, forcing me to pause.

There's an unease there, one that tears at the human's heart. It's just virgin sensibilities, one that will be ripped from her soon enough. I chuff against the swollen lips of her pussy, making her squirm. Just one taste. It's all I need to be satisfied. For now.

Keeping my fangs in check, I extend my long tongue, lapping at her core. One lick. Just one slide of the tip through her sodden folds. Gods but her taste is divine. As her fingers flutter down, gripping my fur, I realize I'm lost.

With a mournful cry, the human fights inside of me, demanding to be free. He wants her just as much as I do. It's painful, agonizing as we battle it out, my snout hovering just above her pussy.

Eventually, we reach a truce, something we never thought possible. We shift again, but this time, we merge, allowing the best part of us to have access to her. My fangs fade away, leaving human teeth surrounding a wolven tongue.

Claws and paws recede, leaving human fingers, hands, and feet. The body is his, but the cock is mine. This time, when she looks upon us, she sees the face and body of a human, but coupled with the ferocity of the beast.

Teagan

THIS IS WRONG. THIS IS ALL WRONG. HOW COULD I ALLOW A monster to touch me so intimately? Keeping my eyes firmly closed, I force myself to confront what just happened. A wolf licked my most intimate parts, and yet, I somehow enjoyed it.

Even now, I feel his hot breath against my skin, pausing, waiting. For what, I don't know. Hazarding a glance, I find no beast between my legs, but instead, the man I spoke with earlier. How is that even possible?

Could it be that it was him the whole time, and I just imagined the wolf? My heart pounds hard within my chest, flooding my ears until that's all I can hear. Unable to look away, I watch the smirk as it crosses his face.

An impossibly large tongue snakes out from between his lips. I study his teeth, my mind still unsure of what I'm seeing or experiencing. They look human, normal even, but just a little too sharp. His tongue, however, is nothing like I've ever seen.

It's long and flat, huge, far larger than any human has a right to have. Nervousness sets my limbs to trembling, and I long to break the silence. "M- My, what a large tongue you have," I half-murmur, half-whisper, unsure if I even said it out loud.

With another grin, he pulls back just a touch. "All the better to taste you with, my dear." The voice that comes from him sounds human enough, but there's an edge to it, a darker desperation that wasn't there earlier.

The sound skitters across my skin, pebbling it. That heat from earlier races through my body, turning me molten underneath him. Again, his head lowers, but his lips never touch me. Instead, he keeps his face far enough for me to see his expression through my splayed thighs.

His tongue snakes out to lap at me, to slide over every inch of that forbidden part. Now, I understand why it was wrong for me to touch myself. The pleasure that courses through me is electric, pulsing until I can no longer think.

I thrash about as he holds my hips steady, his tongue probing my entrance. Somehow, he's able to thrust it into me, spearing me with shallow motions. It drives me mad and makes me crave things I don't even understand.

Beneath me, the snow melts away from the heat of our bodies, and yet, despite the chill from the blustery wind surrounding us, I feel nothing but blessed warmth. It's odd, in a way. I should be shivering, but I'm not... not from the elements, at least.

Moans drip from my lips, carried away on the wind, disappearing into the ether. Reaching between my thighs, I run my fingers through this stranger's hair, gripping it as he lashes his tongue against somewhere far different. It's certainly in between my thighs, but higher somehow. All I know is pure, unadulterated pleasure surges through me as I grip tightly, refusing to let go. "My, what sharp claws you have," he teases, coming up for a moment. His eyes twinkle as he gives me a wink. "I might have to restrain you, but then, I love the violence your fingers create."

Violence? Horrified, I bring my hands up to my face to check if blood mars them. However, they're blurry, rendering me unable to see anything but the shape and shade. No matter how hard I try to focus, I find I'm unable.

Thankfully, there doesn't appear to be any streaks of blood, but it only shuts down that aspect of my mind. Panic beats at me as I look about, my eyes wildly roaming over the expanse. Everything melds together until it's just one giant blob.

Easing out from between my thighs, he slides over my body, covering mine with his. With far more tenderness than I could have thought possible, he cradles my head in his hands.

"Shhhhh, little red hood," he croons, nuzzling my face.

In an instant, my mind reverts back, transposing the image of a fearsome wolf onto his face. I'm going crazy. That's the only explanation for anything. Tears once more coat my cheeks, only to be lapped away by this man who holds me captive.

"You're going into heat," he continues, his voice muddled as if far away. "It's a natural response. Let it happen. Let it consume you."

My insides seize as his words tumble about my brain like a siren's call. With each utterance, I feel myself slipping away, drifting off into the night sky. Was this his plan all along? To get me alone so he can devour me? Steal my soul? I push at his chest, my touch feeble, weak. Try as I might, I cannot fight him or this pull that draws me ever closer. His lips feel like heaven against my neck as he trails down my body in a fiery path.

"Relax, my little conquest," he whispers, his words sliding over my skin like the snow drifting down onto my eyelids. "Let this happen. Open yourself to me. Give me your all."

"I'm afraid," I manage to croak, refusing to open my eyes.

"Yes, I know. And that's what makes this all the more delectable. I feel your fear beating at you, flapping behind your breasts like an injured bird desperate to fly away. Your unease brings me such pleasure, such joy. Ahhh, but it makes me crave you all the more."

His words should be terrifying, and in some ways, they are. However, my body responds in a completely different way. Instead of me trying to flee, to escape this unnamed monster threatening to pull me under, I find I'm rubbing against him, desperate for his touch.

"That's it. That's my good little omega. Now, open your legs wide for me. I want to touch you, to feel you come apart on my fingers."

His words make no sense. All I can understand is the command to spread my legs, but do I dare? Curiosity and desire eat at me, flooding my brain with the need to obey him, to do his bidding. Besides, we've already crossed so many lines. What's one more?

He could have hurt me at any moment, but he didn't. Unlike the men in the village, he's shown great restraint in his handling of me. But more than that, my body wants this, craves the dark promise in his voice. The moment my legs twitch, he's there, pulling them apart even more, stretching me out until my joints ache in protest. Pained whimpers claw at my throat as I press against him, fear demanding I close them once more.

"This won't do," he growls, his fingers curling into my waist.

With an ease that comes with great strength, he lifts me into his arms, holding me tight against his chest. Where my heart flutters in a rapid cadence, his is strong, steady, and even. It lulls me, soothes me somehow.

Sighing, I rest against him, allowing my mind to drift while in this warm, safe cocoon created by his body. Exhaustion beats at me. Before I realize it, I'm fast asleep.

A PULLING SENSATION, AKIN TO AN IMMENSE STRETCH, WAKES me from my blissful sleep, sending tendrils of unease racing through my body. In my mind, I was adrift in a small boat, rocking peacefully on the lake near my village. The sun beat down upon me, warming every inch, even down to my very soul.

Now, I'm very much awake, and the heat that once was warm and comforting feels stifling. Before I can even open my eyes, memories assail me, sending shafts of adrenaline through my system. Am I still tied to that blasted pole?

Were all the moments of pleasure with the stranger with gray eyes a dream and this is my reality? Again, I feel a stretch as my legs wrench apart, nearly to the point of pain. The men's faces swim in my mind, sending untold terror through my limbs. And that's when I feel it, hear the purr surrounding my body like a covering, protecting me from both my memories and the potential threat forcing me open like this. Cracking an eye open, I release a breath, realizing I'm no longer outside tied to that damned pole.

But that means...

Forcing my head up, I watch as the stranger tugs on the rope around my ankle, securing it to some obscure point on the floor. He looks over at me, flashing his dazzling smile, the one that makes me want to forget everything and just drown in his gaze.

Again, I note his teeth, human, but somehow razor-sharp, lethal even. I should be terrified of this man, this... god, but I find myself wanting to sacrifice myself, to lose myself entirely if that means spending the rest of my life with him.

Until he touched me, I didn't realize how cold and empty my life was. Though his touch contains more than a hint of violence, I find I want to be at his mercy, especially if it means never being alone again.

Blinking, I glance about the place, noting what looks to be a cabin. Somehow, I thought a god would have something far more luxurious or even ostentatious. I'm grateful it's this small, cozy space. It makes him feel human somehow.

And that's when I realize I can see. Though still blurred around the edges, I seem to be getting used to whatever this affliction is. However, now that I'm no longer wracked with fear, it forces me to concentrate on everything else he's doing to me.

Each limb is bound, stretched out like the sacrifice I was forced to be. My chest heaves as he rises before me, his body glistening in the light of the fire. He's a man, to be sure, and yet, I've seen no human look quite like him.

He possesses two arms, two legs, a head, a neck, and a chest, and yet, the large thing that juts out from his hips is anything but natural. More than that, a thick bushy tail lashes out behind him and large furry ears rise out from his thick head of hair.

"What... Who...?"

Flashing his sharp grin, he bows. "My name is Conrí. I guess it's time you know who I am, so you know what name to cry out when I bestow my pleasure upon you."

"C- Conrí?" Such a normal-sounding name for someone so... beastly, so magnificent. "Are you going to hurt me?" Oh, but why does my body pulse from asking such a question?

I don't understand anything. Not at all. With a smile, he walks over to the side of the room, running his fingers along bits of leather. They're fashioned into implements of some sort, but nothing I've ever seen before.

"Yes, my little Teagan. I will hurt you. But don't worry, I'll make sure you enjoy every moment."

"Pain is never pleasurable," I stammer, hysteria lacing my tone.

"Oh? And you know this? You're certain I can't make you cry out, not knowing whether or not you want me to stop or continue?"

I cannot answer. None of the words fluttering through my mind are coherent enough to make sense. Instead, I open my mouth and find a moan flitting through the air. "Just as I thought," he chuckles, picking up a piece and bringing it over to me. "I'm going to start out easy on you, just to see what you can handle." I stare at the leather dangling from his fingertips. Several falls, too many to count, hang down, jiggling with each move of his hand. "And if you're a good girl, I might allow you to release before you start your heat."

Release? Heat? Those words make no sense to me, at least not in the way he's using them. However, I'm unable to process any further when he takes the leather and smacks me, right between my thighs.

My lips part with a gasp, but nothing else comes out. I would have settled for even a shriek or a disgruntled squeak. But no. I lie there, my insides quivering as my body demands more.

"Oh, you like that, don't you little omega?" He's there, quick as summer lightning, kneeling between my legs before I can even shake my head. "You weren't thinking about lying to me, were you?" His fingers touch me, stroking me, scattering my thoughts. "Because I know arousal. I can see it etched on your face, feel it in the tightening of your body, and gods, can I smell it dripping from your soaking pussy!"

This time, he takes the implement and strikes each breast, making the tender skin sting and throb, and still, I find it's not enough. My nipples jut into the air, tightening at his treatment. I burn, I ache, and I yearn, fighting at the bonds to free myself.

"Poor little omega," he sighs, dipping his head down, hovering over my aching nipple. Each hot breath against my skin makes me writhe in my bonds. "Do you want me to take this discomfort away, to give you relief?" I nod, unable to speak. My insides twist and coil as I lay there panting. Instead of responding, he slides the tip of his tongue around my nipple, making it ache even more. I whimper and all the bastard can do is laugh.

Switching to the other, he uses his inhumanly long tongue to tease me some more until I strain against the ropes in desperation. He drifts his hand down, skimming over my waist until he's between my legs. Each slide of his fingers brings him so close to that place that throbs and burns, and yet, he dances away, hovering just out of reach.

Cries of need rip from my throat as he teases me, torments me. Gods, but it feels so good and yet so horrible at the same time. My head whips back and forth as I jut my hips in the air, desperation choking me as I lift in a silent entreaty.

But he never obliges me. He continues to strike me with the leather, stirring a deeper longing inside than I ever knew possible. They always say the greatest sacrifice is what causes you the most suffering. In this case, I think they're right.

Conrí

I WATCH THE LITTLE OMEGA, MY COCK DRIPPING WITH PRECUM as she whimpers and moans. Her pussy floods with slick at each strike, making my balls clench and my shaft twitch and jerk with every hit. Before, I'd use similar implements on the girls, hoping the titillation would get them wet enough for me to seat myself fully into them, but it never worked.

With Teagan, however, she seems to crave this brutality, adores the ferocity of the wolf. Who the hell am I kidding? This time, it's not my baser half that's enjoying this; it's both of us.

We want to devour her, to consume her, but first, I want her to be delirious. I want her so mindless with need she can't wait for my cock to impale her. For some reason, I need her to be able to accept me, to take me, all of me. It beats at my brain, driving me forward.

I strike her harder, watching as the falls of the flogger leave stripes of red across the delicate skin of her breast. Oh, but she marks so prettily. I want to leave my mark in other areas. I want to bite at her skin, embedding my teeth in every inch.

But that's the wolf talking. Luckily, by sharing space, I can keep that particular need at bay. Yes, I'll bite her, but only once will I truly break the surface. Groaning, I grip my cock and squeeze, elation at the idea of finally sharing a bond making everything clench in stark need.

Though I aim to tease Teagan, to drive her to depths of madness, I find that I'm the one needing to succumb. I need to feel her body ripple around mine. I need to know for a fact that her body can handle my girth and length, and especially my knot.

Normally, I don't feel desperation in any form, but being so close to having everything I want, I'm terrified it will all slip away. Kneeling before my goddess, the woman I intend to make my mate, I drag my lips across her swollen pussy. I can almost feel her throb against me, her need just as great as my own.

The wolf chuffs against her skin, as I nuzzle her, sliding her slick across my face. I want to bathe in this scent, to smear it all over me until all I can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste, is her. Easing a finger inside, I marvel at just how tight she is.

Her greedy pussy clenches as a moan akin to a howl erupts from her lips. The scent of her arousal changes, deepening, soon, she'll be in the full thrall of her heat. Scrambling, I make quick work of her bonds, untying them with a preternatural speed that only my wolf can grant.

Once she's free, she looks around, her body shaking with need. She looks so forlorn sitting there, but for once, I wait for her to make the first move. I long to see if she does indeed need me as much as I need her. With tentative movements, she gets on her hands and knees and crawls to me, her ass swaying with each shuffle forward. A howl lodges in my throat as her tantalizing body, her magnificent curves tease me, taunt me. Once she's close enough, she sits back on her feet and studies me with an intense gaze.

"Tell me," she says, her voice cracking with emotion. "Are you to be done with me after tonight?"

I freeze, mulling over her words. "What type of question is that?"

"I— Well, I... Please. I can't take much more of this. Are you going to kill me or not? I feel I may soon expire from the pleasure you're giving me, but I need to know if this is it. Is this my end?"

"Oh, my precious little omega," I groan, leaning down to cradle her head in my hands. Twisting my hips to the side, I keep my cock next to her cheek as she kneels there, allowing the soft skin of her face to torment me. "This is the beginning of forever."

With a soft sigh, she rubs up against my shaft, her lips seeking the delicate skin. Gritting my teeth, I allow her to explore me. She drifts her fingers up and down, her brows knitted in confusion.

"Does it hurt?"

"Does what hurt, exactly."

She motions to my cock. "This. I've never seen anything like this before, but it looks painful. And with the sounds you make... I don't wish to hurt you."

I tip my head back and laugh, the throaty sound bouncing around the room. "I appreciate your concern, but all is as it should be." Taking her hand, I wrap it around my shaft, marveling at just how small she is in comparison.

Her fingers only make it halfway around, but the tentative touch burns me like a brand. My cock jerks in response to her innocence, drawing a surprised gasp from her lips. She tries to pull away, but I wrap my hand around hers, keeping her in place.

"This part of me is designed for pleasure." Pausing, I motion toward her splayed thighs. "Just like that part of you."

Wonder fills her eyes as she looks from my cock to her pussy. This education is maddening, driving shafts of need into my very soul. None of the other girls cared. None of them ever showed any concern for me. But this little omega is nothing like the rest of them.

Keeping my grip light, I urge her hand to move up and down. Soon, she brings the other one up, surrounding me completely. "That's it, my darling," I bite out, rocking my hips back and forth.

The effort to not ravage her makes my muscles burn with the effort it takes to hold back. Her lips are so close to my tip. I want nothing more than to slide in and feel the heat of her mouth around my tip.

"Open your mouth for me." Without question, she does as she's told, parting her lips just a touch. "You're going to have to open wider than that," I murmur, stroking the side of her face. "I want you to taste me, just as I tasted you."

Understanding lights her eyes as she stares at my tip. Precum pearls at my slit as my shaft pulses in her hands. Swallowing, I look up, unable to handle the flit of emotions that cross her face. After several tense moments, her tongue laps at my crown, taking the salty fluid into her mouth. With a loud groan, she leans forward, wrapping her lips around the thick head and sucking. The noises she makes are somewhere between a satisfied moan and frenzied need.

With a vigor I've never known before, she sucks on me, demanding more of my essence. Glancing up, she stares at me as I inch my way forward, filling her mouth with my cock. Now, her eyes are black, her pupils blown out. All it took was one taste from me to send her fully into heat.

Her movements are erratic as need twists her about. Wrapping her fingers around me as best as she can, she bobs her head, doing her best to take as much of me as she can. Though unpracticed, her attempts at pleasing me feel far better than any skilled actions ever could.

With a growl, I pull her away, needing to be in her pussy. "Listen to me, omega. I'm going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk right after this heat, but before I can do that, I need a soft place to rut you. Can you make that for me? Can you make our nest?"

My heart stutters as I ask this question. Based on the texts, this is a main test to see if this woman truly is an omega. Though she's acted as such with every other aspect, so did some of the other girls. I need to know if she's just easily aroused or my soul mate.

Frantic, she looks about, her gaze bouncing all over the space. Off in a corner, I stacked a pile of furs and blankets, perfect for nest-making. Without any preamble, she scrambles over, plucking and pulling, her nimble fingers twitching as she tosses them about.

There's no pattern, no rhyme or reason I can see, but Teagan knows. She fiddles and moves things, pushing and pulling until it looks just right to her. Whimpers flood the room as she smooths her hands over the furs, her body agitated.

Again, she looks about, her eyes wild, almost unseeing. Soon, she leaps up and sniffs about, her nose quivering as she searches the cabin. Over on the other side, she finds a hamper with worn clothes waiting to be washed. Bringing my shirt up to her nose, she sighs, relief making her nearly sag.

Racing back over she places the shirt in the nest and frowns. Without saying another word, she goes back and grabs the hamper, dragging it behind her. I want to laugh at her antics, to allow the hysterical mirth to bubble up as I watch her, but I don't dare distract her from her mission.

Another shirt here and some pants there, and soon, she looks up at me, beaming. Like a small child proud of an art piece, she waves her hands about, showing it off. This time, I can't help but chuckle.

Striding over, I hunch down, running my fingers across the fur. "Very lovely, my omega. Now, invite me in so that I may destroy it by fucking you into oblivion."

Though I didn't think it was possible, her eyes dilate even more as the scent of her arousal permeates the air. "Please," she whimpers, her fingers drifting down between her legs.

Snatching her hand away, I growl, my cock jerking as slick drips from her body from that sound. "No. This pussy is mine. I will be the one to touch it. But first, I must taste you again."

I pluck her from the nest, marveling at just how small she is. Compared to me, she's so tiny, so fragile, and yet, I feel the strength in her limbs. Climbing into the nest, I hold her aloft, easing her down until her knees straddle my face.

"You're going to ride me, omega, and I'm not going to stop eating you until I'm satisfied."

Her whimpers are muffled as her thighs clamp around my head. Even in her heat, there's a nervousness about her, an uncertainty. Wrapping my hands around her thighs, I hold her in place, licking her with an abandon that has the wolf howling in my head.

Or maybe it's out loud? I can no longer tell as her slick coats my face, drenching me with sweet nectar. I lap at her, forcing my tongue deep into her tiny opening. My pulse pounds so hard, my ears even throb. Will I even be able to fit?

Shoving that thought out of my mind, I grip my cock, stroking as my tongue grows, my wolf demanding her body. The large tongue stretches her out, forcing keening wails from her lips. Reaching between her thighs, she grips my hair, her hips undulating as she finds her pleasure.

My nose grinds into her clit, pushing her closer to that edge. I want her to come on my face, to flood my senses with her release. Gods but she's so close. I can feel the desperate quiver of her body, the hard jerk of her hips as she starts to lose control.

Letting go of my cock, I trail my fingers over her ass, gripping her delightful curves as I put my everything into pleasuring her. With a loud scream, she tenses, her body breaking apart above me as her orgasm rushes over her.

She bathes my face with her slick, and I lap it up, tormenting her, forcing yet another orgasm from her tiny body.

When I stretch her open, I want her so mindless with need that she can't help but come on my cock, over and over again.

Pulling her from my face, I turn, burying her in the nest. Her body heaves as she tries to breathe, her frame shaking as aftershocks run through her. I hover over her, my body blocking out the light from the fire, but I can still see every delectable curve.

I pry her legs apart, settling in between them. She can't even reach her legs all the way around me. So tiny and helpless... and all mine. Reaching between her thighs, I slide the pads of my fingers over her clit, the wolf roaring as she moans for me.

Going down further, I notch a finger at her entrance. Locking my eyes with her, I slide it in, inch by inch. She arches up, mewling as I invade her, claiming her with my thick digit.

Sliding in all the way, I pause, delighting in how her inner walls quiver around me. I pull out and inch back in, teaching her, stretching her, preparing her body for my cock. This time, when I slide out, I push back in with two.

It's a stretch, but soon, she relaxes, allowing me to move in and out with no resistance. Already, her body accepts me far more easily than the others. It's the final thing that lets me know I can take her without discomfort.

When I press there against her opening, she gasps, opening her legs even more. Gods, she wants this. She wants me to stretch her out, to give her the relief only an Alpha can. I can't wait any longer. I must have her.

CHAP

Conrí

TEAGAN IS DELIRIOUS, MINDLESS AS I BRING THE HEAD OF MY cock up to her entrance. She juts her hips in the air, trying to slide down on me. But I hold her back, needing to take this slow. Not just for her, but for me too.

I want to savor this, to enjoy this moment before the rut overtakes me. Even now, I feel it in the back of my mind like a shadow, just waiting for the moment it can break free and take over. Growling, I hold it at bay, gritting my teeth as I ease in.

Gods, but she's so fucking tight. I stare down between us as I force her open, stretching her with each inch I slide in. So far, she's taking every bit of me with no issue. Her only complaint is how slowly I'm going.

Grabbing her hips, I hold her still as I drive forward, inching my way in deeper with each shallow thrust. Her body ripples beneath me. I'm not even all the way in and she feels close to another release.

Sweat rolls down my back. My jaw aches from how hard I'm clenching. The human part wants to keep her safe, to ease into her tight little body until we know for sure she can take us. The wolf part, however, the part that needs to claim this omega before someone attempts to take her away, wants to slide in, owning her from the inside out.

Ludicrous as that is, the wolf no longer cares. In his mind, it's a certainty — claim her or allow her to be vulnerable to the men of the village. Not that they can actually do anything. None of them are true Alphas. None of them shift. None of them can form a bond.

This is why Teagan is destined for me. They tossed her away, treated her like dirt, a whore to be sacrificed to a 'god.' I will raise her back up, fashion her in my image. Though she won't shift, at least not if the texts are to be believed, she'll be like me in all other ways.

The thought of her living as long as I do, of combining her life with mine sends shudders tripping down my spine. The need to possess her overrides all else. Try as I might, I can no longer hold back.

Lifting my head with a howl, I drive the rest of the way in, grunting as she squeezes me tight. Black tinges my vision as I stay there, feeling her pulse around me. My balls tighten, tingling with my need to empty inside of her.

Again, her body explodes. Sobs tear from her lips as her release cascades over her, making her undulate beneath me. At this rate, I won't last long. Pistoning in and out, I slam into her, over and over, grunting, snarling, clawing at her back as I hold her against me.

My knot swells as she cries out, begging for more. The final test. The final obstacle before knowing she's truly mine. With one final thrust, I bottom out deep within her, clutching her body to me as my knot expands, filling her up. Squeezing my eyes shut, I wait for the shouts of anguish, the pleas for me to stop. But it's too late now. I lost control. I've never knotted inside a girl before.

But instead of terror, Teagan explodes in a flurry of movement. She rocks her hips back and forth, her pussy squeezing down on my knot as she releases again. Sobs of pleasure wrack her body, sending shudders of ecstasy down my spine.

Gods, but she's mine. All fucking mine.

MY EYES OPEN AS I FIND MYSELF DRIVING BACK INTO HER. IT doesn't matter if we are both asleep; the wolf is insatiable, unable to get enough of her delicious pussy. Her eyes are glazed, hazy as she blinks up at me. It's as if she's caught up in a dream. Hopefully, it's the same as mine.

I see our future together, stretching out before us. Rough, hot, passionate sex. Taking her down in the forest and rutting her amongst nature as other animals look on. I see her happy, her eyes bright, and her lips quick to quirk up into a smile.

There's been too much sorrow for her, and that's only what I can see from the outside. Witnessing the abject terror and anguish that rolled off of her while she was strung up, waiting to die, still eats at me.

Reaching between us, I strum her clit, desperate to impart pleasure to her, as if giving her a mind-numbing orgasm will somehow make up for the dredges of despair that still waft from her body when her mind is not occupied with happier things. Every bit of me wants her to revel in this union, to have no regrets in what we do together. With a soft snarl, I lean forward, lapping at the tears that still drip from her eyes. I cannot tell if they're happy or full of sorrow, but they eat at me. I've held off claiming her, but I can no longer deny the misery that churns under the surface of her pleasurable elation.

Though I don't believe it's me or our union that causes these tears to fall, I cannot help her when I don't know what's wrong. She's my mate. I should be able to take the weight of the world off of her shoulders. But how can I when I don't know what's going through that mind of hers?

She says nothing, only offers her body up to me freely. But even that's not her. It's the heat, her estrus that drives her. Indecision wars at me as she falls apart, her body arching up as another release flows through her.

Her cries of relief tear at my skin, demanding I stop thinking and join her in this bliss. Once more, the wolf slides forward, taking over. I allow him this moment, knowing he will do what needs to be done.

Pulling out, I turn her over, grabbing her hips so her ass bounces in front of me. Such a delectable body, one that I can't wait to mark with my teeth. With a smack, I strike one cheek and then the other, my cock bobbing up with each slap of my hand against her pliant skin.

My tip grazes her lower lips with each jerk, teasing her clit until she writhes in my grasp. She turns to look over her shoulder, desperation lining her features. Gripping the base, I ease into her, a howl of pleasure filling the room. She's even tighter from this angle, and her grip threatens to choke me.

Forcing myself deep inside, I fight against the clench of her muscles. Her pussy fairly glows in the light of the fires as I rock in and out. Slick gathers at her entrance, easing my way. The wolf is not satisfied with such a gentle coupling. He wants fast, hard, and ferocious.

I gather her into my arms, holding her tight as the wolf takes over my movements, pistoning in and out of her. Soft sobs reach my ears, but this time, I know they're not laced with sorrow. She likes how we take her. She craves the violence in our coupling.

Even now, her pussy flutters around my cock as her release threatens to overtake her. I long to join her, to empty myself into her. Balls drawing up tight, I slam deep inside, my tip brushing against her cervix.

That bite of pain is all it takes for her to explode around me, screaming my name. Just the way she says it, the bliss, the need, the craving all rolled into the two delicious syllables that make up my name, has my knot expanding.

This time, however, instead of letting it expand inside her, I taunt her with it, shoving it in and forcing it out as it grows larger still. I ride this high of hers, teasing her with bites of pain as she continues to come, her body shaking with each thrust. Eventually, my wolf is done with this.

He wants his mate. He wants his bond. And by the gods, he will have it.

Slamming into her one last time, my knot expands fully, pressing against that spot deep inside that makes her squirm with delight. While she's distracted with pleasure, I lap at her shoulder, nuzzling that juncture where it meets up with her neck.

I hold her still, ensuring she's safe before biting down. Hard. My vision wavers as her screams flood my brain. It hurts. I know it does, and yet, her pussy flutters around my cock as yet another orgasm rips through her. Bearing down, I continue to let my teeth sink deep into her skin until blood coats my face and tongue.

A feral growl stutters from my lips at that coppery taste, so decadent, so forbidden. As part wolf, I've never allowed myself to taste human blood. I never wanted to tip the scales so that I became fully an animal. However, as I taste Teagan, I realize I'm lost, but in a completely different way.

It's not her blood I crave; it's her soul, her very being. I want to be enmeshed with Teagan, to know her every thought, every need, and every desire. With my teeth fully embedded in her skin, I feel a shift between us.

Until this moment, I was secretly terrified that the texts were wrong, that omegas didn't really exist. I feared killing her, of ripping her apart in my lust. Tears dot my eyes as I slide my hands down her body, stroking her, comforting her as the haze of pleasure lifts to reveal the pain of my actions.

Threads, so thin they're akin to spiderwebs, connect us, tying our hearts and souls together. The effect is soft at first, light enough I almost don't feel what's happening. Honestly, it's the wolf that feels this change before I do.

After another moment or two, the strands strengthen, tightening, forcing our souls to knit together as one. The world shatters as we merge, becoming one where there once were two. As we freefall deeper into this new reality, I feel the pain of her bite as keenly as if it's happening to me.

A rough purr pours from my body as I seek to end the pain. Releasing her shoulder, I lap at the wound, using one of the untouched fabrics to staunch the bleeding. I curl around her, surrounding her with my warmth and soothing presence until she finally falls asleep in my arms. Cradling her close, I seek out the strands, needing to reassure myself they're still there. Fear lances through my heart until I feel a vibration in my very core — the bond. It hums with her pleasure, making my heart sing.

I close my eyes and bury my face in her hair, drawing her intoxicating scent into my lungs. Our hearts beat as one as sleep overtakes me. For the first time in my life, I'm sated, satisfied, and complete.

FRAGMENTED IMAGES INVADE MY DREAMS. MEMORIES FLASH before my eyes, but they are not my own. Panic assails me, beating at my chest, forcing adrenaline to pump through my veins. Snarling, I look about, seeking out the threat to my mate and me, but find nothing.

The village below lays bare before my eyes. I walk about, my eyes drifting to each door. Pausing, I hug a thick, red cape closer around my body. It doesn't matter that it's sweltering. It doesn't matter that the infernal heat threatens my knees to buckle. It's what I must do.

Pausing, I reach out my hands, seeing soft, delicate, pale fingers, small and feminine as opposed to my massive paws. What in the name of the gods is happening? A noise catches my attention, drawing my gaze over to a nearby house.

One of the males walks out, his gaze hot and full of lust. My heart pounds as he comes closer, his eyes intense. Hands grab me, dragging me away. Her harsh words and her cruel fingers tear at me, blaming me for his licentious thoughts.

But it's not my fault. It's not *her* fault. I understand now that I'm seeing her dreams, experiencing the lonely life

Teagan endured. Through the bond, I feel every hurt, every slight as if it's happening to me.

Sorrow lances through my heart as I experience what my mate endured. The wolf paces about in my mind, furious at their treatment. She deserved better, and with me, she will have better. No longer will she be surrounded by a shroud of loneliness and recrimination.

The village will pay for what they did to my mate. Not the children, because they didn't know any better. Not the women either, because they tried their best. Their thoughts were shaped, molded by the matriarch. She will be the only female to die.

The men, however, are not blameless. They stalked Teagan, preyed upon her, even without her knowing it. As I watch them through her eyes, I note the need that courses through their veins. I see things her innocent mind cannot comprehend.

More than that, I was there when they pleasured themselves to her misery and terror. I took their scents into my nose, memorized their faces. They will not live after my rut is broken. Poor, naive Teagan may not know just how abused she was, but I do, and it will not stand.

Holding her even tighter, I purr, allowing the soothing sound to drift through her body until she's languid in my arms. As she continues to sleep, I touch her, stroke her, bringing her pleasure.

I replace her dreams with images of us and what I plan to do to her. In her mind, I show her our potential future children with snow-white hair like her and crystalline gray eyes like mine. She whimpers in my arms as her pleasure swells until finally, she releases on a soft cry.

CHAPFER II

Teagan

COLD. It's the first thing that registers as I OPEN MY eyes. The nest surrounding me is empty, and the cabin itself is deathly quiet. The only thing I can hear is the harsh wind howling outside, much like the wolf that owns me.

Pain sparks through my shoulder as I move, sending memories flooding through me. I thought it was a dream, however, as I touch the bandaged area, I find it's all too real. Closing my eyes, I sit there for a moment, unsure of what to think or feel.

Though alone, I'm very much aware of another presence hovering in my mind. *Conrí*. He's like a silent sentinel, waiting, watching and protecting me. However, he feels distant somehow, distracted.

Rising from the nest, I look about the place, my legs shaking with each step. Muscles which, until this moment, had been unused, scream at me, demanding I rest. But I don't want to. Not anymore. Now that I know what life can be like, I don't want to sit around and do nothing. And so, I busy myself, gathering the bits and pieces of our nest and piling them in a corner to be washed later. Unfortunately, I still know nothing of this man or how he keeps his house. I want to be useful, but find that all I can do is just sit and wait for his return.

My stomach growls, sending me on the hunt for something to sustain myself. Perhaps he's out hunting and will bring back something substantial for me to eat. As it is, I content myself with a small stash of nuts and berries, reminding my stomach of the time I went several days without food because the village forgot I was in exile.

A loud, ferocious growl floods my brain, driving me to my knees. There's a fury there, a terrible anger that burns my insides, leaving me quaking. It's not rage at me. Somehow, I know this. I'm not sure how, but my heart knows.

Conrí. His name hovers on my lips, branding my mind as it worms its way through. *My mate, my soul, my forever*. It's righteous indignation that causes him to howl to the skies, that forces him to shift into a massive wolf.

Soon, images flash before my eyes, as if I'm seeing through someone else. Everything is hazy, as if I'm in a dream. Clutching my stomach, I'm helpless as I watch my mate stalking through the snow, heading to the cabin where the matriarch lives.

My mate is of one mind. I can hear the snarled refrain as it thrums through on an endless loop — kill. Heart stuttering, I war within myself, not sure what I should do.

Based on the feelings surging through the bond, he's doing this for me, for justice. I can't fault him, especially not when similar thoughts passed through my own mind not that long ago. But I know I cannot enact these desires. It's not in my nature to harm.

However, my mate shares no such sentiments. In fact, the more I mourn the loss of the people who meant me harm, the more his resolve hardens. He does what I cannot, what I dare not dream to do.

Stalking forward, I watch through his eyes as he circles the cabin, sniffing the air. No longer does my terror taint the area, but it doesn't matter. He shifts, turning into part-man and partbeast. Rising up, he pounds on the door, demanding entrance.

When the door opens, I watch, helpless as the matriarch stumbles back, her eyes wide with terror. It's as if I can smell the stench of horror and piss as she flees from Conrí. Though she disappears into the small space, he is quick to find her, stalking her down.

A large axe gleams in her hands, the wicked blade glinting in the light. She screams, rushing forward, weapon aloft. The remaining berries fall from my fingers as I watch, helpless, as she attacks him.

One swipe, and she misses. Two, and she misses again. Her old age betrays her, making her movements feeble and erratic. It takes no work for Conrí to subdue her, chucking the weapon away. Shifting back into the wolf, he revels in her fear, drinking it into him.

Thankfully, he doesn't make her suffer. It's a favor for me as I watch and not for her. I hear his thoughts slithering through my mind. I know his need to draw out her agony. But for me, he makes quick work of her throat, chomping down and ripping it out in one hard yank. Blood sprays everywhere, coating the room in a hazy red. Bloodlust clamps onto Conrí and refuses to let go. I can no longer tell if the vermillion tint is all from the body laying quivering at his paws or the need to exact revenge.

Entrenched in his mind, I watch as he lopes through the forest, my mind whirls about as leaves and branches go hurling past. Nausea bubbles up in my throat as everything spins, turning into a riot of color. Thankfully, he shuts off the connection, allowing me to slump forward.

The few bits I had to eat sit heavy in my stomach as I heave, clasping my chest and throat. Based on the feelings that flow through the bond, I know it has to be done. I know I need to bear witness, to see the destruction and retribution delivered by my mate. It's the only thing that will stop the nightmares that plague me.

And yet, I still find that I mourn for these people. They did nothing to endear me to them. Not once did they ever show even an ounce of kindness. But they're still my people, my family.

No, Conrí whispers in my mind. Family doesn't do this. Family doesn't act like this. And family sure as hell don't give up one of their own in a needless sacrifice. I will be your family. Together, we will find others like us. We will make a home together, knitted together with love.

Love. It's a beautiful word, one I've never heard said to me before. Though we met not that long ago, our souls knew each other. When he says he loves me, I believe it, because I can feel it.

It surges through the bond, filling me up, leaving me breathless and without any doubt of his feelings. Arousal drips through my veins, but this time, it's not about the carnal act that brought us together. This is borne of affection, gratitude, love and desire.

Even without the bond connecting us, I would have loved him. His actions show me how much he cares on top of the pretty words he whispers into my mind. No one else ever showed me anything other than hate and contempt.

This time, when he shares with me his vision, I greet it like a friend, a lover. Though I shudder with a hint of revulsion as blood flows around him, I accept these deaths as his gift to me. One by one, he hunts the men down from that night.

He sniffs them out, dragging them from their houses. Though their families are terrified, someday, they'll understand the depravity that brought them to this end. Someday, they'll know exactly what they wanted to do to me and why, in their eyes, I had to be killed.

With a loud roar, Conrí drags each lifeless body to the center of the village. Sobs echo through the crowd, the sound soft and distorted through my ears. After grabbing a robe to keep himself concealed in front of the children, he rises, transforming into both man and beast.

The others gasp, their eyes filling with terror. However, I feel nothing but love and pride. His loud voice cries out, telling them why their husbands and fathers lie dead in the streets. He admonishes them, ensuring any others like me are safe from harm, from living a loveless existence as I had.

It brings tears to my eyes to hear him speak with such conviction. All around him, the women and remaining men sink to their knees, their eyes wet with tears. Through the bond, I feel the hum of their despair. It does nothing to me. It's not even a hint of what I felt all these years. Soon, as he leaves to depart, he shuts down my ability to see. But honestly, what else is there? It is done.

Numbress pervades my limbs as I process everything. Though he did it for me, as justice, all I want is to be back in his arms. He's been gone far too long, and I so desperately need his touch to soothe me.

On bated breath, I wait for him to return. With each passing second, my body strains for him, fighting the agony of the distance between us. In my mind, he whispers his love for me, tells me he's hurrying back to my side, but it isn't soon enough.

Pacing, I run my fingers up and down my arms. Now that adrenaline is no longer coursing through my veins, I'm left with the pain of his absence as it throbs through the bond. It's sharp and unexpected, and I pray I never have to experience it again.

You won't, he barks into my mind, his voice full of conviction. Nothing and no one will ever separate us again.

The moment the door opens, I rush to greet him, our lips clashing in ferocious need. It doesn't matter that he's coated with blood. My warrior mate is just as beautiful as ever in my sight.

Lifting me in his arms, he walks me outside where snow still covers the ground — white, pristine, untouched save the foot and paw prints from earlier. He lays me down, spreading my hair out around me. Through his bond, I see me, how he sees me. I see the beauty and perfection that gets him hard.

My hair, no longer a blight to cover up, glimmers in the sun like precious jewels. His hands skim my body, and I hear him marvel over the softness of my skin, the fullness of my breasts, and the mouth-watering scent of my arousal. He touches me with such reverence it makes me ache.

But that's not what I want. I want our coming together to be wild, passionate, froth with that bite of pain. His lips widen into a feral smile as he leans back, allowing me to watch as he morphs into both man and beast.

This time, I'm not delirious with my heat. I'm able to enjoy the look of him as he keeps many features of a man and yet shows a hint of the beast that lurks within. His face, though human, holds that long tongue that makes me flutter inside.

Large ears grace his head, twitching at every sound around us. Solid abs give way to the length of him, hard and ready for me. With a soft moan, I spread my legs, begging him to slide into me, to make me forget, and force me to think only of him.

Silence reigns between us, only filled by soft grunts and loud moans. He invades me, stretching me out until I feel I'm about to burst. His body slides over mine, eased by the blood still coating his skin.

It does something to me, turns me wild somehow. With a howl, I score my nails down his back, reveling in his answering cry. We tussle, our movements frenetic as we fight with each other. He wins every time, pinning me with his massive girth slamming into my body.

Pleasured cries flood the forest, as we roll about, the snow no longer white or pristine. Blood smears across the land, cleansing us as we get even dirtier. Soon, he turns, bringing me on top of him.

My thighs scream as they stretch out on either side, reminding me just how sore I still am. But that bite of pain merely spurs me on. Grabbing my hips, he guides me, teaching me how to ride him.

With wild abandon, I throw my head back, moans dripping from my lips. He touches me, teases me with his rough hands, grabbing my breasts and pinching my nipples hard. My insides clench, drawing a stuttered groan from his lips.

Tensing and releasing, I continue to ride, finding that release I so desperately yearn for. As my hips undulate back and forth, Conrí's fingers shift, transforming into that of the beast. Paws and claws dig into the soft skin, giving me that sharp pain I so long for.

Though he still remains mostly human, I see and feel the wolf in the forefront. With rough tugs and caresses, he takes over, using me as he sees fit. He slams me down onto his thick cock, the size and length making me burn each time he bottoms out.

As his knot starts to swell, a different thought floods my mind. Though I'm not part wolf, the need to bite him in kind, to tie him to me just as I am to him, beats at me. Even now, I can taste the copper of his blood on my tongue, and it twists my insides.

Leaning forward, I groan as his knot stretches me as far as I can handle. His hot cum burns my insides, setting off an explosive orgasm. I grab some clean snow and use it to wipe down his chest, refusing to let anyone else mar this experience.

He cradles my head to him as he rocks back and forth, his girthy knot driving me to distraction. Nuzzling the area just above his heart, I bite down as hard as I can. Blood fills my mouth as his howl fills my ears. Between us, the bond hums, an almost auditory buzzing of pleasure. The strands tying us together turn molten, red-hot as we merge even further. The pain of my bite ricochets through me as his mind collides with mine. But he doesn't mind the pain; it reminds him he's still part human.

Holding me close, our souls combine, drawing soft, happy whimpers from my throat. I pull away, lapping at his wound as peace floods my heart. This is where I belong. This is what all my suffering has led me to. My soulmate, my other half, my wolf. Never again will I be alone with him by my side.

Teagan

SUN BEATS DOWN ON THE LUSH GRASSES BELOW, TURNING them a warm, golden green. With a happy sigh, I run my hand over my stomach, surprised that it's still flat. Though I'm not showing yet, I'm sure I have a life growing inside of me.

Even Conrí treats me with the utmost gentleness. That is, when he's not railing me from behind or taking me in some new, unconventional way. Even now, I feel him prowling through my mind, smug satisfaction dripping from every pore as he detects my arousal.

I cannot go even an hour without needing him, wanting him. As much as I want to blame it on my pregnancy, I know it's not. Since taking my virginity those several months before, I've been wanton, insatiable. It's how I find myself pregnant and so very happy.

Walking up behind me, Conrí wraps his arms around my waist and hugs me close. "I wouldn't have you any other way, my mate," he growls, nuzzling behind my ear. "Your drive matches my own, making us a perfect pairing indeed." His cock lengthens as he rubs up against me, giving credence to his words.

"What about dinner?" I keep my voice quiet so as to not alert the others of this intimate moment between us.

"They can wait."

Turning, I giggle, looking up into stormy eyes that never fail to make my pulse pound. "I would like to make a good impression."

With a long-suffering sigh, he lets me go and grabs the freshly prepared meat. "Then I have no choice. However, I will keep your thoughts consumed with me and the things I plan to do to you once it's done."

He walks away, his long strides taking him to the fires with ease. I stand back, forcing my mind to take a far more innocent turn. Before he can thwart me, a small child, her hair just as light as mine with blue eyes that rival the sky runs up to me, her tiny hands reaching out.

"Come! Mama says we must set the table." With a soft laugh, I allow her to lead me to the others.

Conrí watches, his eyes darkening with emotion as he imagines our child playing about, carefree. Though I'm not sure how he found this village, I'm grateful. Here, others like me are common. It's still unsettling at times to see snow-white hair and blue eyes dancing about with not a cloak in sight.

On the outskirts, wolves like Conrí prowl, keeping a watch over the women and children. Soon, they will join us for dinner, all of us one happy family. Tears dot my eyes as we sit down, my heart so full it feels as if it will burst.

Though I was content to live my life with Conrí, having a family, a village, fully erases the pain and longing I

experienced growing up. Here, my children will thrive. Here, I don't have to hide who I am or be ashamed.

Leaning over, my mate captures my lips with his, pushing his love and devotion through the bond. Around us, children groan and turn away, their antics drawing a laugh from us both.

"What do you think we should name her?" he murmurs against my lips.

"Oh, so convinced she's a girl?"

He splays his hand over my waist, his eyes twinkling. "I'm certain. Your scent shifted, and I know for a fact she's a girl."

My eyes water as I choke on the emotions running through me. "I like Hope."

With a nod, he gives me the tenderest smile I've ever seen. "Hope it is. Fitting for our little one starting out a new life."

Love vibrates through the bond, wrapping both my child and me in a blissful cocoon. With Conrí by my side and a new family surrounding us, my daughter will never want for anything. She will grow up loved, cherished, and nurtured. She will have the life I never had, and only found in the arms of my forever mate.

IF YOU ENJOYED THIS STORY, MAKE SURE TO SIGN UP FOR MY newsletter so you can receive updates on all things bookish! For those who devour my books and want even MORE, check out my <u>memberships</u> with all different levels and perks to satisfy your thirsty soul! And if you're *extra* knotty, join my <u>group</u>! I don't bite... hard.

The End

ABOUT VIVIAN MURDOCH

Vivian is a sassy romance writer that likes to brat just as much as she writes. As a fly-by-the-seat-of-her-pants author, she's usually working furiously into the night when her creative juices hit her the hardest. Her books like to take you to the dark side and force you to dip your toes in, but don't drown you. She loves writing alphaholes, anti-heroes, and heroes you just love to hate. She likes to try out everything she's putting her heroines through, so the phrase "for science" is used in her house a lot! When she's not writing, you can probably find her playing Animal Crossing or tormenting her cats and Husdom.

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The Duke's Unwilling Bride

A Tale of Two Dukes

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