



REJECTED & CLAIMED

Seduced

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CELIA KYLE

Seduced

Rejected & Claimed Book 2

Celia Kyle



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Description

REJECTED BY HER MATE and betrayed by her pack, Delilah doesn't need a mate, let alone two.

When Delilah's alpha tries to sell her to another pack, she runs rather than submit. No one will look for a shifter in the big city. But when she encounters a strange alpha at the freaking *grocery store*, she realizes she might not be as safe as she thought.

But alphas Graham and Jude are as relentless as they are sweet and soon Delilah's caught between them – right where she wants to be.

Graham and Jude are nothing like Delilah expected, and as she grows closer to them, she begins to wonder if this could be the start of something real. But her old pack is still out there, and one day she'll have to run. Again.

There's no real home for a lone wolf. If Delilah wants a real future, she'll need to trust Graham and Jude with her past. But

she's already been betrayed by her pack and her former mate... can she put her heart on the line again?



Chapter 1

Delilah

DELILAH STARED OUT OF her apartment window, her gaze stretching over the typical Midwest rooftops and across the shimmering waters of the lake beyond. It wouldn't be long before the sun dipped below the horizon, and after a quiet night at home and some sleep, she would be back at the bistro for an early shift tomorrow.

“So, we gonna talk about this?” the man behind her grumbled. She'd come home to find Clark—her mate—at her apartment.

And as usual, he wasn't there to welcome her home.

“Not now.” She remained calm as she always did when he was in this type of mood, which seemed to be always. She kept her eyes on the town below her. This was Deacon Claw pack territory, the only place she'd ever known, but that didn't mean she hadn't thought about what else was out there.

In here, there was just her and Clark, and the usual round of nightly fights that weighed her down and made her want to

tear her hair out.

“It’s not right, Delilah!” Clark had a growl in his voice as he chastised her for what must be the twentieth time since she’d gotten home only an hour ago.

“I’ve been on my feet all day. Please can we drop it? I just want to get into the tub and then we can talk about it later.” In truth she had no intention of discussing *any* of this with her mate, and that in itself told her something was deeply wrong.

She and Clark had been dating on and off since discovering they were mates, but it had never been smooth sailing. He was strong, handsome, and came from a family of alphas—everything wolf shifter females like her were supposed to crave when it came to bagging a mate.

In reality, Clark was in her business far too much, to the point of being controlling. While she wasn’t exactly the model of female feistiness, she did know her own mind. This seemed to bother him, the same as the rest of the men from his family.

She kicked off her shoes and padded toward the bathroom, her only thoughts being of soaking in some hot, welcoming water laced with salts and lavender oil. It really had been a busy day, and another argument wasn’t exactly what she had in mind when she got home.

“Jesus, you’re a waitress, not a fucking defense lawyer!” he yelled after her. “Handing people their burgers and fries surely isn’t exactly that taxing!”

Bile rose from her stomach and caught at the back of her throat, but she wouldn't let him win again. He was always testing her in this way, trying to make her feel as though she wasn't good enough for him, the mighty Clark Deacon, great-nephew of the alpha...

And an asshole!

She slammed the bathroom door shut behind her and then turned on the faucet to fill the tub. She pulled down the lid of the toilet and sat there as the hot water misted the room, her arms wrapped around herself as she wondered how she had gotten herself into this situation.

“Fine, I'll wait until you're finished, and then we'll go over it!” Clark shouted from the other side of the door. “Because no mate of mine is going to go running around out of town making a fool of me!”

A stray tear made its way down her cheek, and she swiped it away, glad he wasn't there to see it. “Whatever, Clark,” she answered, her voice flat.

If she was being honest with herself, she knew this relationship was no longer right for her—mates or not.

Once the tub was filled, she sprinkled in a more than generous amount of salts and added some of her favorite lavender oil. She doubted it would help her relax at this point, but it was worth a shot.

Sinking into the hot water after she'd undressed proved to be more helpful than she'd expected. There, in the scented water,

as the salts worked on the aching muscles of her calves and ankles, she began to see clearly. As if the water itself had washed away all of the doubts she carried about the next moves she was to make.

Okay, she wasn't some high-flying professional—as Clark had just reminded her—and she never intended to become one. She liked the idea of being in a partnership and having her needs taken care of as well as taking care of her mate's, but a part of her always craved a *little* independence.

Apparently, that was too much for Clark. Sure, she knew they would have some issues along the way. All males from alpha families could be a little controlling regarding their mates. She'd simply hoped that maybe it wouldn't be too much of a thing with Clark.

All she wanted was to keep a small job that she loved and have the ability to be financially independent. She'd always been that way, which was how she'd managed to build a nice little nest egg for herself, one she might need someday.

Maybe today was that day.

As she sat with her thoughts, she knew this was never going to work out. Even the smallest amount of independence was going to be a problem for him, and if that was the case, she was better getting out now.

The fact that this wasn't upsetting to her was another obvious sign she was on the wrong path with Clark. She'd grown tired of the constant arguing and his attempts at trying to control her. Delilah wasn't hedonistic or fiercely independent, but a

part of her was free-spirited. She knew being cut off from that would never go well for her.

If she continued her relationship with Clark, she couldn't imagine what her life would look like in a few years' time. Or maybe she could, and that was the problem. He was already following in his uncle's footsteps with his views on mates, and if anything, it was only going to get worse.

Delilah wasn't sure how long she'd been soaking, but it was long enough. She hadn't heard the apartment door slam and could still smell him on the other side of the door, the scent of anger seeping under the crack like poisonous fumes.

She rose and toweled herself dry before reaching for her gown. Then she opened the door and prepared to face her mate, another argument already hanging in the air like a specter waiting to reveal itself.

Clark sat on her sofa, his legs splayed wide and an expression on his face that looked the opposite of "let's kiss and make up." Still, she remained calm, knowing she wasn't going to back down any time soon.

"So, you wanna tell me what's going on?" he started, his eyebrows raised.

"All that is going on, Clark, is that I was given an opportunity to take some training out of town for a few nights. It's hardly groundbreaking stuff."

He glared across at her, his eyes narrowed. "And why would you want to do that?" He leaned forward, that glare deepening

further.

Delilah shook her head in frustration. “Same as anyone who wants to progress a little in their life. I know I’m only a waitress, Clark, but that doesn’t mean I can’t better myself if I’m given the opportunity. David says I have potential.”

“You don’t need to do any of that shit. You’re my mate. I bring in the money. There’s no need for you to go running around out of town getting up to all sorts.”

“All sorts!” she said, exasperated. “It’s a short catering and hospitality course, not some dancing gig on the Vegas Strip!”

“Yeah, well it’s just as good as,” he grumbled as he settled back against the sofa.

As if the penny hadn’t dropped before, it now did, and by the bucket load. She would never be able to do *anything* if she were mate-bonded to this guy. He would want a say in anything and everything about her life, and the arguments would always be a feature of their relationship.

“Well, I’ve made up my mind. You’re not my keeper, Clark. The other women in your family might be okay with being told what to do, but I’m not.” The look on his face almost scared her, and she wondered if she’d taken it too far, but...

She meant everything she said.

“Then maybe you’re not good enough for my family,” he spat.

“Maybe,” she shrugged. “That’s why I think we should call this a day. Let’s be honest. It just isn’t working.”

Clark stood, towering over her, and she held her breath as he stepped closer and closer, his eyes never leaving hers. “You do this, and that’s the end of it.” His voice was low and a growl rumbled in his throat.

“I know.” She nearly sighed with the relief those words brought. “We tried. Didn’t we?” She attempted to keep it as amicable as possible. It was clear a breakup wasn’t his intention as he stared her down.

“Nobody will want you now. You’re on your own,” he snarled. “You’re no mate of mine.”

Delilah swallowed hard, his face only inches from hers now. In his eyes she saw the anger and bitterness that had probably always been there, just covered over until it seeped out in ways that were cruel and unhealthy.

Clark took her chin in his hand. “We’re through.” When he let go, she felt as though she could breathe again. She expected the door to slam as he made his way through it, but instead, she just heard the small click of the latch.

Finally, she was *free*.



Chapter 2

Delilah

BY THE TIME THE sun peeked through her bedroom curtains, Delilah was already awake, having had the best night's sleep she'd managed in a long time. Surely it wasn't meant to feel this good the day after a breakup, which told her everything she needed to know. She'd done the right thing.

“Proud of you, Del,” she whispered to herself. For a moment, her thoughts skipped to Clark, but it wasn't like she'd exactly torn out his heart and then trodden on it in the street. He didn't love her. All he wanted was the token mate—one that would be meek and mild-mannered, never wanting anything for herself.

That wasn't her.

Delilah wasn't sure what the next stage of her life would involve, but she didn't need to know everything. She'd closed one door and would wait for another to open—this time making sure of its safety before stepping through.

She got up and made herself breakfast, washing a few eggs down with coffee before dressing and treading off to work. Now that she didn't have to worry about Clark, she decided she'd tell her boss the good news about taking the training course he mentioned.

She worried that maybe the pack would come down on him, but it was her idea to take this course. And besides, she and Clark weren't even formally mate-bonded when this was being discussed, so in theory, it's not like her boss needed to ask anyone's permission.

The thought made her sick—that just agreeing to take a course, or a job, would be such a big deal. That she would need permission from her mate beforehand. She couldn't stomach such a life. Simply the thought of it made her want to shift and run for the hills, never to return.

But she didn't need to worry about that now. This was a fresh start for her, a chance to get herself back on course, and the only person she needed to answer to—apart from the alpha—was herself.

When she got to La Luna, she clocked in and put on her apron, more eager than usual to start her shift. She was already realizing how much her relationship with Clark had dragged her down, like a weight on her shoulders that ate up all of her energy as it pushed on her. Now that she was free of that weight, she felt light as a feather.

She headed to the front of house, ready to start as usual with the tables—making sure everything was clean and in place

before she moved on to the cutlery and condiments.

The scents hit her like a freight train, all of that lightness disappearing as the front door opened and Clark walked in alongside the alpha, Jonah Deacon, and his beta, Ryan Gleiss. They looked her up and down as if tasting her, and she swore her skin crawled.

Something wasn't right.

She didn't look at Clark. He could say nothing to her that she was interested in, and she didn't even want to lay eyes on him. She could smell his disdain for her as it dripped from him. The muscles in her legs twitched, deciding themselves that it was time to take off and run, yet she couldn't. There'd be no point trying to get away from these three.

"Morning," Jonah's sharp canines were on display as he smiled in a sickly way.

"Good morning," she replied. "Can I help you? David's out back if that's who you're here to see." A sudden pang of fear and guilt shot through her. Were they here to speak to him about the catering course incident?

"Ah, it's okay, honey. We're not here for him," Jonah replied, slowly stepping toward her.

"Oh," her stomach churned so hard she knew they'd sense her unease.

"We need you to come with us," he added. "Nothing to worry about."

He must've known his words would have no impact on her senses and instincts. They were already screaming at her to get the hell out. There was no point in him trying to persuade her otherwise. Not that she would need any persuading anyway. She was powerless here. They all knew that.

"Okay." She nodded. "I'll just go and—"

"No need for any of that," Jonah interrupted her. "We're leaving now."

Delilah's head swirled with all of the terrible things they could do to her. Now she looked at Clark. Was this because of him? Was he seriously that malicious? She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

"No trying anything," Clark warned her, an ugly smile on his face.

She looked at him, her stomach turning with fear and disgust. The thought that she was planning on being with this asshole for the rest of her days sickened her. Yet just when she thought she'd dodged a bullet there, this happened—whatever this was.

"Where are we going?" she finally managed to ask as they led her through the door and out onto the street. She winced as the bright morning sunshine hit her eyes. She thought about how quickly things could change from one way of being to another in such a short span of time. When she woke up that morning, it seemed like she had the rest of her life ahead of her. Now, she didn't even know if she'd *have* a life by lunchtime.

Surely, they'd never do anything like kill her. *Right?*

So many possibilities raced through her mind, none of them good, as she was led to a car and told to get in the back, flanked on either side by Clark and Ryan. The driver's seat was already occupied by Stan, one of Jonah's guys, and Jonah rode up front with him.

It was only a short journey, and the twists and turns told her they were more than likely headed to the pack house—the place where Jonah held court, and where pack business was handled. Something was obviously going down, but at least she wasn't being driven out to the ass-end of nowhere to be killed.

Still, it wasn't looking good for her. The day these guys turned up at someone's place of work and demanded their attendance wasn't going to be a lucky one. Maybe they were just looking to scare her. Women were supposed to do as they were told in this pack, after all.

Stan pulled up outside the pack house, and once again she was led by them, this time inside the wolf's lair, it would seem. Clark took her arm, gripping it tightly as he took her to an empty room and almost slung her inside.

“Are you serious?” she hissed, her fear now spilling over into anger. They had no right to do this to her.

“Looks like it.” He had that smile on his face again.

She wished she could reach across and wipe it off with her claws, show him who he was really messing with, but that was

just wishful thinking. She glared at him. “This what happens to all the girls that break up with you?”

He pressed his lips together as his nostrils flared. She knew she’d probably gone too far, but she couldn’t stop herself. This was completely unacceptable. All she’d done was break up with him, and they weren’t even mate-bonded!

“You’ll find out,” he growled low, balling his hands into fists before leaving. She heard the lock turn in the door, and panic well and truly set in. This couldn’t be happening!

She paced the room, wondering what the hell was going on and how she was going to get out of this when she heard footsteps approaching.

The lock once again turned, and this time Jonah stepped into the room. “Everything okay in here?”

There was nothing she could say. Getting cute with Clark was one thing, but she would never dare go there with the alpha, and certainly not this one. Jonah had a reputation for being brutal and callous, which was why she was almost ready to collapse into a heap of fear right in front of him.

“So, I suppose you’re wondering why we’ve brought you here?” He crossed his arms over his chest as he stared her down. Delilah didn’t answer. She just needed to know, once and for all. “Well,” Jonah drawled. “Clark told us about your little... disagreement.”

That dick!

“Seems like you weren’t too fussed about being part of this family or even this pack. Which is great news for you, because from now on you won’t be. You know how we do things around here.”

Delilah’s mouth fell open. “I’m being banished?”

“As if we’d do something so cruel to you.” He sneered. “No, you’re being given to another pack alpha, as a peace offering.”

“You’re *selling* me?”

“There you go again, always with the negative.” Jonah clucked his tongue and shook his head. “You’re a gift, Delilah. This is going to help the pack in a big way. You should feel proud.”

She licked her lips, her mouth dry, but managed to croak out a single word. “Who?”

“Doesn’t matter, now does it? All you need to know is that’s the arrangement.” He strolled back to the door and then stopped before turning to her once more. “You know, it really is a great thing you’re doing. Thank you for your sacrifice.”

Delilah put her hands over her mouth as the alpha disappeared, the door closed, and the lock turned. She sank to the floor, the bitter taste of betrayal fresh in her mouth. She had no idea what she was going to do, and it didn’t look like she had any choice in the matter, anyway.

When she’d thought about a fresh start, this wasn’t exactly what she had in mind.



Chapter 3

Delilah

“SONS OF BITCHES,” DELILAH whispered to herself as the sun gradually set. She’d been locked up in this room for almost a whole day now, but she had no intention of staying there for much longer. She’d already escaped one cage. No way was she going to succumb to another.

She lay on the bed, wishing for the sun to go down. That’s when she’d make her escape. Luckily for her, the room she was in was on the ground floor. From what she could gather, it was a bedroom of sorts, probably used by members of the inner circle for reasons she couldn’t quite decipher. But that wasn’t unusual. Deacon Claw pack was highly secretive, and no one was going to question Jonah’s motives for *anything*.

The other thing they were unlikely to question was whether or not Delilah was going to stay put. No one would dare run from Jonah and his pack. That’s why she hadn’t been tied up and why the room she was situated in was on the ground floor.

Any other time Delilah would've thought she was crazy to even consider running, especially as she seemed to be serving some special kind of purpose. But just the thought of being sold, or whatever they were doing with her, made her feel dead inside.

She still hadn't quite come to terms with the fact this kind of arrangement was even a *thing*. God knew this pack wasn't exactly some kind of utopia when it came to equality of the sexes, but giving women to other alphas as a gift was beyond *medieval!*

Not only that, but the man who was her mate only twenty-four hours previously was willing to go along with the plan! They hadn't exactly ended things on good terms, but as break-ups went, that really was something.

She shook her head in disbelief and whispered to herself.

“Who the fuck are these people?”

It was like she didn't recognize anything anymore, from her pack to herself. She'd never act like this any other time. Now, it was a risk she was willing to take.

Looking back through the closet again, she decided the best way to go about disappearing would be to ditch her clothes and use some of the ones hanging up. They were ridiculously big, obviously made for a man twice her size, but they would do the job, being highly scented with another shifter's essence.

Reluctantly she waited, knowing that if she was going to do this—and she *was*—she needed to have some patience and leave only when the time was right. That was when the sun

had been down for several hours and the pack and the town were deep in the middle of sleep.

When the time came, she pressed her ear to the door, hearing nothing. Next, she looked out of the window, fairly happy that the streets beyond were still and she could slip through them without being detected.

Finally, she peeled off her clothes, including her underwear, leaving them in a heap on the floor. Then she pulled on whatever she thought would fit her the best from the closet. It needed to be something highly scented and not so big that it would impede her as she ran.

She settled on some jeans with a belt and a flannel shirt. Tucking everything so she could run freely, she topped it off by rubbing a sweater over any skin that wasn't clothed, starting at her hands and moving up to her neck and face before running it over her hair, too.

She gagged slightly at the scent and from being covered so fully in a stranger's essence. The last thing she wanted was to smell like this pack ever again. But at least it covered up her scent, which was the most important thing. Hell, she'd crawl through the sewers if that was the only way out of this town.

Carefully—slowly—she lifted the sash window and slipped out. It took all of her willpower not to shift and run, knowing full well that if she did her scent would return, and she'd be easily traced. For now, she'd have to remain in human form.

The streets were quiet and still as she slipped through them, bathed only in the orange glow of the streetlights. As much as

she just wanted to get going, she had to get back to her place to collect everything she was going to need to get away and *stay* away.

When she reached her apartment, she found the door already open and knew that Clark had been there before she even smelled him. She didn't look around, not wanting to see whatever he'd done. She was leaving now anyway, and this place would be a part of her past, just like *him*.

Just like the Deacon Claw pack.

She had to be quick. No way did she want to smell of this place and risk getting tracked by her ex-pack. She headed straight for the area that contained everything she needed. Hopefully he hadn't managed to find it, if he was even looking. He probably just wanted to come here and create some havoc before she left, one last chance to take control.

"Thank god." She breathed a huge sigh of relief when she saw the fan above the stove hadn't been disturbed. That thing had never worked and had been her hiding place of choice for her stash.

Pulling off the grid, she reached up and took out the plastic bags that contained her money and ID. As she did, she realized she never really trusted Clark. She wouldn't have this type of stash if she did. Perhaps she always knew it would come to something like this.

She looked at the money, saved from years of tips that she'd worked so hard for, and felt proud of what she was able to achieve with some hard work and a good attitude. Thank god

she'd listened to her instincts when it came to saving money and wanting to be financially independent.

Then she ran to her bedroom, collected a rucksack, and threw in the money along with some small basic items of clothing. She didn't need anything else. Just her money, her ID, and the courage to do this. Without even taking a glance around, she left.

She walked as quickly as she could, avoiding the major roads and routes as she made her way to the neighboring town—a larger one that had a busy bus terminal. By the time she got there, she was tired, and her feet ached, but it was worth everything. She was already on her way out.

She boarded her bus, feeling for the first time that she might actually be able to escape. As they pulled out of the station, her eyes were glued to the window, trying to catch any sight of her ex-pack members.

But she saw nothing. No Jonah, no Clarke. Just the usual sights and sounds that anyone would expect somewhere like this—people coming and going, suitcases, luggage. Nothing out of the ordinary.

She rested her head against the back of the seat, relief making its way through her tired and anxious body. It wasn't going to be a long trip. The plan was to get on and off across several stops and lines, throwing them off her scent so they wouldn't be able to track her.

Altogether, she had four changes to make and she was desperate not to fall asleep just in case she missed any of her

stops. Plus, she was too worried that by sleeping, she would be letting her guard down. She was a long way off from being able to relax. Yet.

Along the way she stopped off at a thrift store, buying several outfits that she could change into and then dump before moving on, just another way to throw them off her scent. Piece by piece she was leaving a trail of lies.

It was only midday when she boarded the next bus, tired but wired as she tried not to think about how Jonah and the others would have reacted when they discovered she was gone. If she thought about those things long enough, they might be her undoing.

The bus wasn't too full, and she stopped at two empty seats, hoping she'd be able to sit there alone for the duration of the journey. As tired as she was, no way was she going to sleep, and she didn't want to have to make small talk or even deal with someone sitting next to her right now.

After putting her bag in the overhead compartment, she settled into her seat, her eyes heavy from the complete lack of sleep and her mind on where she was going to end up. She knew the best place would be somewhere that would help cover her scent.

They would never let her just go. She was pretty sure of that. The only way forward was to pitch up in the hardest place to find her—somewhere with lots of scents, lots of people, and all that came with them.

A place teeming with scents, distractions, and a distinct lack of open green spaces wasn't the natural habitat of a shifter. But at this point, she had no choice. She was on her way to the next state over.

It was city life for her from now on.



Chapter 4

Delilah

IT HAD TAKEN SOME time, but after looking around the city, Delilah had found a hotel with vacancies within her budget. Being overwhelmed, she had taken an entire day to just sleep. The television had streaming options, so she binge-watched and ate pizza.

The break was exactly what she needed. These past few days, she had feared for her life, severed ties with an abusive lover, and gone on the run. A “me day” seemed merited.

But today, Delilah felt remorseful. She couldn't afford to take an entire day to rest, but she had. She had built up plenty of savings, but it was easy to burn through what wasn't being replenished.

Today, she vowed to find something more permanent in town. She couldn't afford to stay in hotels forever with no income. What's more, the room was nice, but it was a little too cozy for her.

She dried her hair after spending much of the morning in the jacuzzi. The room came with a hair dryer, kitchenette, couch, and coffee table, packed tightly together. She admired the wall art—an impressionist painting of a mountain meadow, which reminded her of a Van Gogh she had seen—before stepping out.

The complimentary breakfast was satisfying but made her miss home. Here, the eggs were fake or hard-boiled, the cereal was a little stale, and the bacon and sausage were dry and burned. She remembered the feasts back home they would make for the pack and felt resentful at all that had been snatched from her.

The transition from the calm lobby, with hints of smooth jazz filling the room, to the city streets, was pronounced. With her enhanced senses, Delilah was suddenly overtaken by the auditory assault.

Outside, car horns honked angrily, echoing through the streets and hotel parking lot. Valets took cars from guests and moved them into the parking garage. Fortunately, Delilah didn't have far to walk.

Witnessing the barely moving traffic and furious drivers, Delilah was thankful to be a pedestrian. She strode down the street, proudly looking to the sky. Doubting herself would do her no good. She needed to walk with confidence, taking her day in stride.

“*Ay, caramba!*” a man shouted out his car window at Delilah. She pulled her jacket tight and kept walking, avoiding eye

contact with the driver as he blurred past. It had been a middle-aged man, seemingly there just to ogle people.

Skyscrapers dominated the scenery. It wasn't just tall buildings of glass windows and rectangular steel but ornate towers of every conceivable shape and subdued color. They all stood apart, but still blended harmoniously into one giant mosaic of a skyline. Delilah loved the variety of businesses and architecture that dominated the cityscape.

From a newsstand, Delilah grabbed several copies of the day's competing newspapers. Her goal, rather than going business to business, was to find classified sections in newspapers.

Moving through all of the businesses in the city one by one was impractical, especially considering all the remote and work-at-home jobs.

One had several niche job listings, but most were sketchy or specialized. *The Fast Times* had a meager classified section that mostly featured fast food and receptionist jobs, something to consider. *The Boudoir* included a much more comprehensive classified section, but it was too much to glaze over.

"Can I help you?" the man running the booth asked.

"Oh, sorry!" Delilah said. "Just looking."

"You wanna look, you gotta buy," he replied.

He reminded Delilah of Cheech Marin with black hair that barely ran around his head, a wide nose, an approachable face,

and a stained white tee. Delilah handed him ten dollars for all three and a pack of gum.

“If you’re looking for jobs,” he told her, unsolicited. “I find it’s best to talk to the owner. You’ll find a lot more jobs open up to you that way.”

“Thanks,” Delilah offered a kind grin. It made her uncomfortable that he had been scrutinizing her the whole time, but she tried to be gracious.

She curled up on a nearby bench, watching pigeons flutter by and eat bread crumbs left on the pavement. Lying down on her back, she flipped open the newspapers, looking a little closer. She found several medical trials, and she briefly considered that might be a last-ditch desperate option before realizing her anatomy wasn’t even compatible with many drugs.

She noticed an elderly couple on a far-off bench, throwing the bread crumbs she had just seen for the birds and commenting on their eccentricities. They laughed at how one of the birds waddled around and did a dance whenever he found a crumb. They seemed so happy together.

Her hair blew into her face with the force of a coming gale, and she brushed it out of her eyes. The bench was metal and uncomfortable but she loved people watching. The electric tram stopped a few feet away, and Delilah watched passengers disembark.

Coming off the tram, a group of cosplayers huddled together against the strong wind, holding their props tightly.

“If they only knew, ” she muttered to herself, looking at the cosplayer dressed in a large wolf suit.

Delilah’s mind ran wild with all of the colors around her. She thought back to the captivity she had recently experienced and shuddered. She knew she should be more worried, a lone shifter roaming the city, but she was just happy to be *free*.

Freedom was taking time to enjoy your surroundings. It meant not being owned by a man who would just as easily sell you off. It meant owning your time and getting to decide when to use it and when to waste it.

She was free to binge-watch TV all day as long as she could find a job to support herself. She was free to order in a pizza and stay home. Not tonight, though. Today she was getting groceries like a responsible adult. She rolled up the newspapers and stuck them in her travel bag, smiling at the elderly couple.

The Lakeside Marketplace had a grocery store, several eateries, and an outside dining area to serve them. Several women in wide-brimmed hats sat together arguing politics.

When she walked in the sliding door, she grabbed a cart and began moving through the store. Over the loudspeaker, peaceful and reflective indie music played, calming Delilah’s anxiety.

She loved to shop, even just for groceries. Partly, she loved the colors and how clear and organized everything was. Partly, she just loved being around people.

What she didn't like about shopping was having to fight herself on what to purchase. Everything she threw in her cart was a critical-thinking decision and required financial analysis. Apples were technically cheaper in a bundle, but was she going to eat them in time?

Her purchases were extremely limited because she didn't have an oven or a full-size freezer. She was going to be limited to one TV dinner, some canned goods, and sandwiches.

As she fought herself over her shopping decisions, her cart intersected with something very broad and sturdy. At first, she thought it was another cart, but then realized that the soft thud had been clothing not metal.

"I'm so sorry!" she spun, apologizing profusely.

There she saw a tall man with red hair who looked fit and well-built. She couldn't help admiring the physique before her, his tightly cultivated musculature covered with form-fitting clothes. As he turned around, Delilah was lost in his hazel-golden eyes and ginger beard.

"No problem at all," the man rumbled.

Delilah laughed nervously. "Sorry. It's not like you're easy to miss." He raised a ginger eyebrow in response, and Delilah realized that she had probably let her thoughts slip. "I mean... never mind. Sorry again." She strode off, cringing.

It took all her strength not to turn and catch a last look at him, but something caught her nose. Was it peppers? There were

peppers nearby, but this smelled more like ground black pepper. Or was it something else?

Delilah instantly recognized that the scent must have been coming from his cologne before a feeling of panic set in. The familiar scent wasn't fruit or cologne, it was the scent of a pack alpha. That man was a fellow shifter.

Her mind ran through all sorts of improbable scenarios as her feet moved her abruptly through the store.

"I didn't catch your name!" he called out after her before some other realization took hold. She turned and watched as it dawned on him too that she was a shifter, and he gave chase.

She knew nothing about shifters in the city. Had this just been some coincidence, or was he here for her? Had he been sent to bring her back home to be sold off?

As he gained on her, she pushed a nearby shopping cart into his path, smiling in satisfaction as his cart crashed into the obstacle. She wasn't happy that she'd done it, just momentarily relieved. The alpha looked on in frustration as Delilah got away before taking a second to sidestep his cart and pursue.

"Ma'am, you gotta pay for those!" a cashier called after her as Delilah ran out the door with her shopping cart.

She'd been so focused on escaping she'd lost all sense of everything else. She stopped abruptly and left the shopping cart, mouthing an apology and accepting she would have to pick up groceries later. Or maybe she'd order online and have

them delivered. With an alpha shifter on the loose, that seemed like the best option.

Delilah rounded a corner, taking a moment to catch her breath. She had lost him. Whoever he was, she had shaken his pursuit. He was gorgeous, though. For an instant, she'd almost let her guard down. It was a pity she'd have to do whatever she could to avoid him if she wanted to live independently here.

It was good to be free.



Chapter 5

Jude

“I SHOULD JUST BUY everything,” Jude muttered.

He sorted through piping extensions, not sure what he actually needed. There were elbows, tees, reducers, unions, couplings, crosses, caps, swage nipples, plugs, bushings... he had no idea what any of it meant. But he had been sent to the hardware store with the task of getting plumbing supplies.

He wasn't even certain whether the PVC pipes they used were one and a half inches or two inches. It wasn't as though they couldn't afford all of it. He just hated buying something he'd never use.

Jude hated hardware stores. He hated the synthetic oil and metal smells. He hated all the barren concrete, paint, and linoleum tiles. Plus, all the silver-colored fittings and tools made him uncomfortable since—like most shifters—Jude was allergic to silver. Just the color was enough to make him nervous.

His phone rang, causing him to nearly drop the pipe connector he held. He fumbled, catching the plastic tube between his wrists. The plastic left a brief imprint on his palms. Setting it all in his cart, he picked up the call.

“Go for Jude,” he rumbled. His voice was warm and deep, reflecting his bulky physique.

“Can you just answer the phone normally?” Graham sighed.

“I’m tired of all the ‘hi’ and ‘hellos.’” Jude shrugged even if Graham couldn’t see the motion. “If you’re going to ring my phone twenty-four-seven, let me change it up.”

“Whatever.” Graham laughed. “What are you doing?”

Jude picked up a pipe cutter, wondering if he needed it too. It looked flimsy, but he supposed it probably worked. He was pretty sure they had extra PVC back home, so maybe they could use it for another plumbing project later.

“I’m at the hardware store,” he reminded Graham. “Like you asked.”

“How quickly can you get out of there?”

Jude looked at his cart, shoveling connectors and tools impulsively into it. It was so much more than he needed, but he wanted to cover all bases. “I’m on my way out now,” Jude assured him. “Why?” The phone went silent, and Jude questioned whether he’d lost connection. “Hello?”

“So...” Graham drawled. “You know how dangerous it is in the city right now for shifters. Right?”

“Yeah...” Jude wasn’t sure where Graham was going with this. He piled everything onto the scanner, using everything he’d learned from his years in retail to speed through the process. It was challenging with his phone pressed to his ear, but Jude was remarkably coordinated.

“Well, there’s this woman I’ve never seen before in my life. She’s a shifter, and she’s pretty freaked.”

“Wait what?” Jude exclaimed, startling a human woman at the self-checkout across from him.

Jude froze and then immediately realized he needed to be speeding up, not slowing down.

“I was just out grocery shopping, and she bumped into me with her cart,” Graham told him.

“Oh, you poor baby.” Jude wasn’t meaning to be condescending. They liked to joke with each other.

“Then she made a break for it. Pushed a bunch of carts into me to slow me down. It was like something from a movie.”

Jude wasn’t sure which movies Graham referred to. He’d never seen anything so mundane as a grocery store chase in the movies he’d watched. He loaded his bags into his cart and then left in a hurry, flashing his receipt to security on the way out.

“You might have scared her off.” Jude could smell the plastic on his hands, and it drove him crazy.

“I did what I could in the moment, man,” Graham assured him. “You’d have done the same.”

Graham didn't usually like how candid Jude was with him, and he made that clear often. He could tell in Graham's voice that he wished Jude would dial it back a bit. After all, Graham was the alpha, and Jude was only his beta—second-in-command.

“What's this girl look like? You said she ran out of the grocery store?”

“Yeah,” Graham answered. “I watched her run out, and I'm pretty sure she wasn't driving. So, she's going to be on foot. She's fast.”

Graham took a second and then spoke as if loading her appearance from memory. “She had long blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. She was pretty tall, maybe five-nine. She was wearing a pink cardigan.”

“Can I meet up with you somewhere?” Jude wondered. “Or should we split up and look?”

“I'm still at the grocery store,” Graham informed him. “Not that she's likely to be anywhere near now. All I can say,” Graham continued, accompanied by the sounds of a loud rattling cart. “Check crowds. If we can find her at all, she'll be hiding in plain sight.”

“Got it.” Jude nodded. “I'm just gonna keep you on speaker, so you might keep the cart noises to a minimum.” A pause. Jude realized the ridiculousness of this request, and decided if it came to it, he'd just mute Graham instead.

The description was just vague enough to not be useful. So many blonde women in pink shirts were walking along the pavement. This felt like an impossible task, and finding anybody in the city was like finding a needle in a haystack. Still, he could somewhat follow his nose, and maybe he'd find her that way.

He was about to give up and began heading back to the pack sector of the city. That's when he saw her, golden hair and the brightest, deepest blue eyes he'd ever seen. She waited at the traffic lights, a folded newspaper sticking out of the periwinkle travel bag on her arm.

"I'm gonna put you on mute," Jude announced.

"Wait, what?"

"I found her. She looks really jittery."

"Be careful. She's probably going to dash as soon as she finds out what you are."

Jude pressed the microphone button on his phone, cutting off the scraping, rolling noises of the shopping cart. He was thankful for the long traffic lights at this intersection and approached from the side, careful not to catch her off guard. He wanted to make sure he was well within her peripheral vision.

She looked up at his face as he stoically looked ahead and then looked down at his bags. To not intimidate her, which would be fairly difficult because of how imposing he looked, he was going to be passive and let her come to him.

“Jesus,” she murmured. “Got pipes?”

Jude moved all his bags to one hand, despite the searing, cutting pain, and pressed his palm to his face, trying to convey mock frustration. “Crap!” he teased back. “No. I forgot to get them. Stupid, *stupid*.”

The woman laughed.

“Haven’t seen you around,” Jude tried breaking the ice. “You new?”

“Town full of six million people, and you know every one of them?” She grinned. “That’s an impressive skill. How do you manage that?”

This was his chance. She didn’t suspect anything. If he was going to build rapport with her, he was going to have to be honest and establish common ground. “Well, you’re a little different than most. Aren’t you?” Jude hoped to drive the point across subtly while they were in public with humans all around.

He watched as realization crossed her face. She sniffed the air and her eyes widened. He hoped for a brief moment that his pleasant demeanor would convince her not to run.

“Oh come on!” she cried. “Not you too!” She bolted across the street before Jude could react. Her speed was ungodly. Jude was fast, but he wasn’t *that* fast.

“Well, okay,” Jude muttered under his breath. “That went well.” He watched her disappear out of sight, heading east, and

then he took the phone out of his pocket. Pressing it to his ear, he unmuted Graham.

“I lost her,” Jude told his alpha.

“I heard. You didn’t even try to pursue her on foot. Did you?”

Jude considered how to answer. He didn’t want to disappoint Graham, but he was acting out of desperation, not strategy.

This was so uncharacteristic for him, usually able to manipulate people and situations to his every advantage.

“She was terrified, and I didn’t see it working out. If I caught her, then what? I grab her by the arm and force her to come along with me?”

“I guess that’s fair.” Graham still carried a critical, disappointed tone.

Jude moved toward the pack sector, swapping bags between hands to try to minimize the strain. It might have been annoying, carrying these bags so far, but it was a million times better than getting stuck in traffic.

All around him, a soundtrack of traffic played. Long, deep horns pushed down out of frustration... short, quick horns meant to send a message or a nudge. This was something he hated about living in the city. To a shifter, whose senses were enhanced and needed to be controlled and focused, these noises were overwhelming. It was like having a flashlight shining in your eyes when hungover.

“If we’re going to protect this girl from the city, we have to reconsider our approach. Don’t you think?” Jude asked.

“I don’t know.” Graham sighed. “I kind of wonder what the hell happened to make her so afraid. We’re supposed to be kin.”

“No idea.” Jude shrugged. “But she shouldn’t be walking the streets alone with no pack to speak of.” Jude thought for a second. “Wait. What if she’s just visiting?”

“No,” Graham said with finality. “She’s not.”

“How do you know?” Jude wondered what his alpha knew that he didn’t. “She had a travel bag.”

Graham paused, clearly trying to figure out how to phrase it.

“Call it a gut feeling,” Graham finally admitted. “This girl is special. We have to keep looking.”



Chapter 6

Delilah

DELILAH RAN UNTIL SHE was sure she'd shaken both of the shifters. Why were there so many of them? Delilah was beginning to think maybe this city had its own pack. She crept into a small cafe, looking in all directions before sidling inside. Sniffing the air, she could scent no nearby shifters. Whenever she met somebody new from now on, she was going to smell them *first*.

Maybe she should have given the shifters a chance and really gotten to know them, but she couldn't help associating shifters with her confinement and near enslavement such a short time ago. Suppose they knew her pack, or the pack she was being sold to, and tried to return her to be captured and sold off?

"Can I get you a seat?" came a friendly voice.

Delilah looked uneasily out the front window, making sure she wasn't being followed. A waitress with braided brown hair, a lean physique, and a pair of emerald slippers approached her at the front of the restaurant. At first, Delilah wanted to tell her

no thanks, but all that running and the late time of day had made her very hungry. And it wasn't as though she couldn't afford a meal.

Delilah smiled at the waitress and nodded politely. The woman sat her down at a booth, getting her a menu.

“Do you know what you want to drink?” she asked. “Or do you need a minute?”

Delilah told her that she needed a second to think. The woman told her to take her time and vanished behind the swinging cafe door. At this time of day, Delilah was the only one in there. Looking around the space reminded her of what felt like another life, even though she hadn't been gone long.

She admired the fifties diner aesthetic. Keeping white tiles polished like this took a lot of work, but looking down, she could see the sun bouncing off the floor, giving her a small glimpse of her own reflection. She loved the red dining booths and bar stools that had kept the integrity of their leather upholstery.

“Have you thought of what you'd like to drink?”

Delilah had gotten so taken with the cafe she had lost track of time. “Erm... What do you recommend?”

The waitress sized her up, looking from her falsely chipper demeanor to the sweat on her brow. Delilah felt truly seen, but being held up to such scrutiny was also a little uncomfortable.

“You're not from around here, are you?” the waitress asked.

Delilah laughed nervously. “You caught me.”

“I could tell,” the waitress nodded. “Most folks in this city have a way about them. You can tell by the way they carry themselves.”

“What do you mean?” Delilah didn’t want to seem like an outsider. If she was going to make a living here, no matter how temporary, she needed to blend in.

“Well... life is so fast-paced, people tend to know where they’re going, for one,” the waitress said. “They don’t usually stumble in off the street for no reason without knowing what they’re looking for.”

Delilah listened. This woman had a knack for sizing people up. She was so good at noticing little details. If Delilah had sensed anything on her, she might have suspected she was a shifter.

“You look like you’re running away from something, quite literally,” the waitress added. “So let me ask, what brings you to the city?”

“Just visiting.” Delilah smiled.

“And yet you’re carrying multiple newspapers with you, as if you’re on a job hunt,” the waitress observed.

Crap. Had Delilah forgotten to zip up her bag? She was surprised everything hadn’t blown away. “What do you recommend to drink?” Delilah asked, trying to steer the subject.

“I like Coke,” the waitress said, stone-faced. “Are you looking for a job? Because we really can’t seem to keep people.”

Delilah became lost in thought, looking out the window at passersby. Her stomach gurgled. Mere minutes ago, Delilah had run into not one but two shifters, and they were all within blocks of this place. If she became a permanent fixture in a nearby business, there was a much greater chance she'd be discovered by what she was running away from.

But she did need to find stability and normalcy to reclaim her sanity and independence. If she fled like some kind of fugitive every time she met another shifter, how was she ever going to be happy again?

“Or... maybe I've scared you away,” the waitress frowned.

“I'm sorry for assuming.”

“I'll take it,” Delilah announced with finality.

“You'll take it?” the waitress raised a single brow. “You will have to apply for the job like everybody else...”

“Right, sorry,” Delilah shook her head. “I mean, I'd love to work here.”

“Then let me make another assumption,” the waitress added.

“You've waitressed before. Haven't you?”

Delilah nodded. “How did you know?”

“Your travel bag is from a restaurant,” the waitress said simply. “Also, nobody's that interested in floor tiles.”

“How do you keep the floors so clean?” Delilah asked.

“Everything in here is immaculate.”

“Trade secret,” the waitress said. “If you get the job, maybe I’ll tell you.”

“I’d like that very much.” Delilah mustered as much enthusiasm as she could.

“Then let me get you an application.” Without asking, the waitress also poured her a Coke, saying it was on the house. Delilah could sense that she might have pitied her, and though it bothered her a bit, she was still grateful for the charity. The waitress came back to the table and sat beside Delilah, putting the application in front of her.

“So, first off...” The waitress pointed at the application. “You can put me as a reference. I’m Miranda Mae.” She continued to give Delilah her details, including address and phone number.

“What do I put for ‘relationship’?” Delilah asked.

Miranda smiled. “Just write ‘friend,’ or ‘coworker.’”

“Got it.” Delilah scrawled in Miranda’s information.

She looked at the job experience section and hesitated. She didn’t want people to know she worked at La Luna. That was traceable back to her pack. Yet she was walking around with branded merchandise from her old job as if wearing her biography on her sleeve.

“What’s wrong?” Miranda asked.

“So... I know it’s really my only job experience, but I kind of don’t want people knowing where I’m from.”

“Curious,” Miranda said. “Can I ask why?”

Delilah shook her head.

“Well... all I can say is, first of all, ditch the bag,” Miranda said. “And it’s not as if your job application is public information.”

“Understood.”

Delilah scribbled down her prior job history before going back up to the top of the page. “Also, I’m kind of staying at a hotel right now,” Delilah said. “Is that going to be an issue?”

Miranda hesitated. “I can explain it to my boss. We’ll need somewhere to route your paperwork through... Can you get a PO Box or something?”

Delilah nodded. She had no idea how to set that up, but she could stop by the post office later and figure it out.

“For now, you can just leave that section blank and add a note.”

Delilah handed her job application to Miranda. She loved the smell of her perfume and thought to ask her where she got it.

“You like eggs?” Miranda asked. “Are you a breakfast kind of girl?”

“I love eggs,” Delilah said with a bit too much excitement slipping in.

Miranda chuckled. “How do you like ’em?”

“Fried or soft-boiled.”

“And do you like sausage or bacon?” Miranda kept taking her order.

After jotting everything down, Miranda went to the kitchen. She didn't come back until she had brought a massive dinner plate full of eggs, sausage, waffles, and grits. Delilah wondered if she had cooked it herself... if they were really that short-staffed.

Miranda sat down next to her as she ate. Even though it was approaching the dinner hour, she remained the only customer in the cafe.

As she ate, Miranda questioned her more in-depth on her life. Delilah knew she needed to be as vague as possible. She mentioned that she had an abusive ex back home, that she'd been working as a waitress for years, and that she was just frugal enough to have a good nest egg in her back pocket.

The entire time, Miranda listened closely, nodding where appropriate, and expressing genuine sympathy. She seemed very invested in Delilah's story and was a great listener.

When it came time to pay the bill, Miranda insisted that the whole meal had been on the house, but Delilah refused. She wanted to pay for it. It was important to her feelings of self-sufficiency. Plus, she didn't want to start something that could become a friendship feeling indebted or like she was taking advantage of Miranda's charity.

As she paid the bill, Delilah left Miranda her phone number. Miranda said they should get together sometime, so she could

show her around town, and Delilah expressed how much she'd like that.

Delilah didn't want to get her hopes up, but this job felt perfect. She'd made the first genuine connection with anybody since arriving, and she felt confident she could trust Miranda. She seemed like she wore her heart on her sleeve, like what you saw was what you got with her. Authentic people like that weren't common even back home.

Sure, the pay probably wouldn't be great, and she'd be within walking range of the two shifters she'd encountered. But she had a feeling that wasn't going to come up again. Perhaps it was misguided optimism, but this felt like a genuine reboot, an opportunity to start fresh and wipe the slate clean.

Delilah headed for her hotel, still afraid of running into either of the two shifters on her way home. Thankfully, that didn't happen, and as the night wore on and her stomach emptied itself, she ordered another pizza.



Chapter 7

Graham

GRAHAM AND JUDE CONTINUED to search the city for the lone female shifter but to no avail. After daily street watches and exhaustive searches into nearly every nearby business, they still found no signs of her.

Soon, Graham began to fear the worst. Aspects of this city weren't kind to shifters, and if her past hadn't caught up with her, perhaps the city had. The ability of certain individuals to shapeshift, mainly into wolves, was a closely guarded secret, but some among the population knew the truth and wished them ill.

Meanwhile, Jude continued to insist that she was probably fine, and maybe she was just visiting the city and belonged to another pack. But Graham knew the look of a shifter displaced from their society, and his every instinct told him to protect the girl, wherever she was.

Graham was a brilliant strategist, but he had an even better intuition. In his life so far, his gut had never led him astray. To

hopefully broaden their search, he had called a pack meeting.

As much as they wanted to conceal themselves and the existence of shifters from the public, the pack sector was an array of neon lights, bonsai trees, and townhomes. The Fang District of the city aimed to be fully self-sufficient, bringing in income through pack-owned businesses and avoiding as much outside intervention as possible.

The Grimmaw pack's goal was to hide in plain sight. Whenever anybody produced outlandish claims that werewolves lived in the Fang District, their pack-run newspaper *The Fast Times* discredited the claims, making it clear that the existence of "werewolves" was motivated by the name of the district and people's active imaginations.

Over generations, they had worked to mix modernity with nature. A few skyscrapers dominated the district, but they also had a secluded, sizable park. Trees and foliage jutted out of the sides of the skyscrapers, integrated into their design through cultivation and careful metal crafting.

The Fang District was meant as a paradise for shifters, protecting them from the cultural narratives and rival packs that endangered them.

Graham and Jude met at the teahouse, sitting outside on the patio while watching the alternating neon lights. They waited patiently. Even here, in the middle of the city, they could see the first stars in the sky appearing among violet swirling clouds.

Samson, Dakota, and Sarah approached the patio table, with Sarah carrying a briefcase and a portfolio. Jude was an excellent backup, his presence intimidating to those he first met. However, Samson and Dakota were even more imposing.

Samson looked more Hulk than human, with red hair that stretched down below his waist and a burly, unkempt beard. Dakota looked like a biker and had tattoos and piercings to match. His wife Sarah was the total opposite, being both soft-spoken and professional.

“I know why my wife’s here,” Dakota’s nostrils flared in a way that his nose piercing shook like a bull’s. “But why you gotta bring the muscle down, too?”

Sarah lightly brushed his shoulder, encouraging him to calm down.

“A shifter is out and about,” Graham paused and took a moment to let it sink in before adding, “And we wondered if you’d seen her.”

“There’s a lotta shifters around,” Dakota noted. “You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“This one is a blonde girl, and she *doesn’t* have a pack.”

Stunned silence crept into the discussion until Samson broke the quiet. “You mean some poor girl’s just out there in the city? Completely defenseless and without a family?”

“Yup.”

“That’s a threat to our way of life,” Dakota announced. “We have to find her. What if she turns in the middle of the city and

we have another sighting to debunk?”

“We’ve thought of that,” Graham said. “There are a lot of risks to this—for her, for our way of life, for what we’re building here...”

“But mostly, we just want to keep her safe,” Jude added.

Graham nodded. Sarah mostly kept her head down, flipping through her portfolio, though she did look up occasionally, concern evident in her features.

“So how did you figure all this out?” Dakota asked. “Did you just bump into some girl, get her life story, and then scare her off?”

“Pretty much.” Graham sighed.

“There’s still a lot we don’t know,” Jude broke in. “For starters, we didn’t get much information out of her before she ran away.”

“But you did confirm she doesn’t have a pack?” Dakota asked.

“Well, no,” Jude hedged.

“We were able to put it together from context,” Graham interjected.

Dakota looked from Jude to Graham quizzically while Samson played with his hands.

“So, which is it?” Dakota asked. “Do you know if she has a pack or not?”

Graham and Jude looked at each other, contesting their stances with their facial expressions. “I got the impression she didn’t

have a pack,” Graham said finally. “We’re not one-hundred percent, but if there’s even a chance that she’s out there alone, we have to find her.”

Graham and Jude both offered their side of the story, explaining what had happened and how they had run into the girl. They explained that the only thing they had to go off of was her looks and that she was a shifter. They had not gotten a name.

“She had a travel bag,” Jude said. “I can’t remember what it said on it, but it was blue and it had some kind of logo on it.”

“That’s not a lot to go on,” Samson said.

“I know,” Graham huffed. “We also have a range of locations where she could be, based on where we ran into her.”

“If she didn’t hightail it and leave town,” Dakota countered.

“It’d be pretty stupid to stay in the same place if she was scared enough to run away.”

“We just hope you’ll keep an eye out,” Graham pressed them.

“If you’re in the area, maybe see if you see her, maybe ask around.”

“That is our job,” Samson said firmly.

“Will that be all?” Dakota asked, already motioning to leave the table.

“That is all,” Graham said finally.

Dakota stood up, leaning over to kiss Sarah on the cheek. He looked like he could literally crush her if he fell over. “See ya

at home, honey,” Dakota said and then hobbled away.

Sarah coughed, clearing her throat a bit. She opened the portfolio and took out two stapled informative copies, giving one to Graham and one to Jude. In the top left corner of the front page were the words “Fang Tech” with a logo of a fang going through a rectangle with rounded corners. The cover bore the words “Seasonal Report” and was otherwise a blank white sheet.

Jude and Graham flipped through the pages knowingly. It was all a series of charts, graphs, spreadsheets, and qualitative reports.

“Of note,” Sarah’s voice was quiet and mouselike. “Our engagement through sales apps has gone up fifteen percent this month, we think due in large part to increased spending during the summer.”

Graham and Jude nodded.

“We have numerous reports of loading glitches on mobile, especially when people load in from a new tab. For that, we may need to work on the backend code... see if what we’re deploying is compatible with newer mobile models.”

“I’m working on that this week with the team,” Jude assured her. “Get Kristi in PR and social media to address reviews and complaints, if she hasn’t already.”

“Understood,” Sarah said, before adding, “right now, we’ve diversified quite a bit. We offer mobile devices, online purchase apps, mobile games, and even hardware. We’re

spread very thin as a result, especially with Kim and Aldor retiring.”

“So, we need to ring it in,” Graham said. “Maybe we move a few people in hardware and games over to mobile and apps?”

“With it being the summer season, I can’t recommend moving people off of games,” Sarah disagreed. “We’ve got August launches for Caramel Crunch and the new Seekers of Evenlore, and the teams are still working hard on last-minute bug fixing.”

“How is our marketing for those new games?” Jude asked.

“We’ve got a high click-through rate. We’re over budget, but it should pay off in microtransactions and cosmetics later.”

Graham and Jude nodded.

“Profits are up,” Sarah announced. “It’s normal that we see a profit spike through quarter two, but our revenue is up fourteen percent from last year.”

Sarah, Graham, and Jude continued to discuss business, moving from tech to property values and direct sales. The tea shop was losing money, but they were eating the cost well. The thrift shop was turning a small profit, and restaurants in the Fang District were also thriving due in part to new menu offerings.

She showed them engagement and retention rates for their apps, games, and sites before moving on to product design pitches. Jude was confident enough in Evenlore that he encouraged development of a sequel to start soon after bug

fixing was over, even proposing development on PC and console.

Graham's mind wandered. He loved going over numbers and was proud of what they had built together. The Fang District and Fang Tech were an energizing part of the city's economy, and they were more than self-sufficient.

But he wondered if the girl was safe. He wondered what kind of life she led, and how she spent her time. Something about bumping into her like that felt predestined, like he was meant to find and protect her. He shook his head, and Jude and Sarah both looked at him, stopping midsentence.

"You okay?" Jude asked. "You haven't said much about these pitches. Sarah worked really hard to organize them for us."

"I'm sorry," Graham pinched the bridge of his nose. "My mind's in another place." He looked at Sarah. "I mean no disrespect."

"I understand," Sarah said. "I've said most of what I needed to, and it's all in your packet anyway." Sarah left the table, taking her briefcase and portfolio with her.

"What's on your mind?" Jude asked, as soon as Sarah was well out of earshot.

"I'm just really worried about the girl," Graham admitted.

"And I don't even know why."

"Don't worry, man," Jude said. "We'll find her. I know we will."



Chapter 8

Delilah

A WEEK HAD PASSED and Delilah wasn't quite so scared anymore.

Yesterday, she had her interview at the Bean Me Up Cafe. It had gone well, except that she had been asked about the holes in her application. She had to explain her current living situation and lack of a suitable address.

She'd given a lot of awkward answers in that interview, but Delilah still thought she had saved the interview with her charm, experience, and confidence.

Today, she had planned to search for backup jobs in case this job didn't work out. She was at the newspaper stand buying today's papers and having a friendly conversation with the clerk, when she received a call.

"Delilah Belfin?"

She had trouble placing the voice. It was a male voice, a bit harmonic and not too deep. It was difficult to hear with all the

noise from the streets, so she pressed her ear closer to the phone.

“Speaking.”

“It’s Greg from Bean Me Up. We spoke yesterday.”

“Oh! Hi, Greg!”

She walked into a nearby Dollar Store, not to buy anything but to hear the phone better. Her heart was racing. The store bell chimed as she walked in.

“I noticed on your application you said you could work as soon as possible,” Greg said. “Would you be able to make it here in about thirty minutes? We had a call-in and could really use your help.”

“I got the job,” Delilah said, phrasing it not as a question but a disbelieving statement.

“You did!” Greg laughed. “Congratulations!”

Delilah pumped her arm in excitement and spun around on her heel.

“You probably won’t see much of me. But Miranda speaks quite highly of you! You’ll be working with her today, and on most of your shifts I’d wager. You can make it in today, right?”

Delilah stood smiling for several seconds before she realized she hadn’t given him an answer.

“Absolutely.” Delilah failed to mask her enthusiasm. “I’ll be right there!”

“Good to hear it! Welcome aboard, and we’re glad to have you!”

Leaving the Dollar Store, Delilah rushed to the diner, making it just a minute too late. Considering she’d only just been told she had the job and called in, Miranda was completely understanding.

Before her first shift, they offered her a waitress uniform identical to Miranda’s—a pure white outfit with a green apron, green collar, and green buttons.

She panicked when, after carrying somebody’s food to their table, the customer insulted her for messing up their order. She had made the mistake of offering them white toast rather than wheat, and the customer distracted her about it at the wrong moment. The tray tipped, and she spilled coffee all over herself, effectively ruining her first day.

“Bit rusty, aren’t you?” Miranda asked, as Delilah tried in vain to blot out the stain with a napkin. “Don’t worry. I can show you a trick for getting that out.”

She told her to take vinegar, laundry detergent, and water to spot clean it before washing. At the end of her shift, her feet were sore and her energy was depleted. Returning to work was going to take some getting used to.

She bought vinegar on her way home and then applied the mixture as instructed before washing her outfit in the hotel washing machine. Delilah was relieved when it worked.

She collapsed in bed that evening, before getting the best sleep she'd had in weeks. As her eyelids became heavy, and sitcom laughter played from the hotel television, she thought of how cramped she felt in this small hotel room.

That night, she dreamt that she was running through the city streets on all fours, shifted into wolf form. The full moon shone down on her from above, bouncing off the windows and striking the pavement.

Only nobody cared that she was a wolf. She wasn't afraid of endangering herself, or exposing herself to the wrong people. She was just free to run. As she ran, she was joined by so many more wolves, with eyes and fur of every conceivable color. She felt truly at peace, roaming with her kin.

She woke up in a cold sweat, her alarm blaring. It had felt so surreal.

In a few more days, the full moon would hang high in the sky, and Delilah would transform, becoming her wolf. She had heard that some packs on the West Coast could stifle their wolves and resist transforming but at great cost. Unfortunately for Delilah, that was not an option for her.

Over the next few days, the dreams were going to continue. It was how her mind signaled the change. As it was, she could either drive out to the country, risk being caught by animal control, or worse, if she was seen transforming, cause a national incident.

On her third shift at the cafe, a harsh downpour fell over the city. Delilah could take a bus and risk being late to work, or

she could take an umbrella. She opted for walking.

She struggled to dodge the splashing rainwater of passing cars. Stretches of pavement near bus stops narrowed significantly, forcing her to cling to the walls, umbrella in hand, if she wanted to stay dry.

But by the time she had arrived in front of the diner, she was still mostly dry. She felt an enormous sense of relief, proud of herself for not ruining her third shift. She turned to approach the door, and a honking, speeding Corvette threw water all over her, soaking her uniform.

Delilah wanted to scream at the driver, who had sped along the one street in the city that wasn't swarming in traffic. Instead, she took a deep breath, collected herself, and walked into the cafe, forcing the most believable smile she could manage.

"I'm soaking wet, Miranda!" Delilah called out, noting the absence of customers. "I'm gonna need to grab an apron from the back!"

She fought to find an apron that actually fit her, settling on one that was about two sizes too large. She clocked in, making her way back to the front, when a feeling of panic set in. As she stepped out from the sliding diner door, Delilah caught Miranda's eyes. She stared right at her, smiling patiently.

To Miranda's left, also smiling at Delilah, was the same tall red-haired alpha she had met at the grocery store and the same muscular beta who'd approached her at the streetlight. She began to run, but Miranda was too quick. How was Miranda so quick?

“What are you doing?” Delilah screamed as Miranda blocked the front door. “Let me out!”

“I’m sorry, Delilah,” Miranda frowned with her apology. “You know I can’t do that.”

“I don’t want to hurt you! Just get out of the way!”

“Delilah, stop and think for a second.”

“No!”

“These men are here to help you!”

In desperation, Delilah flung herself at Miranda, trying to escape. She knew the impact could harm Miranda, as fast and strong as Delilah was, but she had to try to get out.

But Miranda caught Delilah, using her own weight to throw her aside. Delilah crashed to the floor, barely missing a diner table and scraping herself on the tile. “I’m sorry, Delilah,” Miranda continued blocking the door but showed sincere remorse. “I’m so sorry.”

“What *are* you?” Delilah cried from her vantage point on the floor.

“The full moon’s going to be here very soon, and I know you don’t have a plan,” Miranda urged. “Please just hear them out. You can’t be running around in the city by yourself.”

The rational part of Delilah’s brain knew Miranda was right, but the emotional part of her, which still remembered being locked away and sold, resisted ferociously.

The entire time, the alpha and beta at the table just watched. Delilah swore she saw sympathy or pity in their eyes, but she couldn't trust anything anymore. She had thought many of the men back home were good men too, but they were master manipulators.

"No, Delilah," Miranda said as Delilah pushed herself up off the tile. "Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Delilah stood, frozen in place, surveying the situation. She had no viable escape path. She couldn't make it to the back because the alpha and beta would just block her exit. And Miranda was obstructing the most obvious way out.

"Delilah." Miranda ducked her head to try to meet her distant expression. "I know you don't trust them. But can you trust me?"

Nobody seemed to understand that it wasn't just a switch Delilah could switch off.

"Honey..." Miranda crouched nearby. "I'm not going to leave your side. These men just want to have a few words with you, but I'm not going anywhere. Okay?"

"You promise?" Delilah asked, a sob breaking free. "You can't leave. You just can't."

It was like something in Delilah's mind had reverted to an almost infantile state. Too shaken by the visuals that came crashing back to her on repeat, she could barely think... could barely act. She just remembered being confined and locked

away against her will, being manhandled and coerced, told she was a commodity. Her mind spun out of control.

“I promise,” Miranda assured her. “It’s a slow business day anyway. I can call Greg and ask for permission to shut down early. I’m going to move out of the way of the door now, Delilah,” Miranda said. “You’re trusting me to stay with you through everything. And I’m trusting you not to run. Do we have a deal?”

Delilah nodded slowly.

“Do you need me to walk with you?” Miranda asked.

Delilah nodded again. Miranda walked over to her, allowing her to lean on her shoulder, and then gradually led her to a table across the tile floor.

The two shifters sat patiently before her as Miranda led her to a seat, and Delilah crumpled into the chair. She could feel her senses returning, but stray memories still filled her mind, flashing uncontrollably. For her own benefit, she was going to try and trust again. The rational part of her—the part that needed to survive—knew she couldn’t keep living like this.

“We’ve been looking for you for quite a while,” the red-haired shifter spoke first. “Fancy a chat?”



Chapter 9

Jude

JUDE WATCHED IN A mixture of horror and pity as the girl, whose name was Delilah, was talked down and brought before them. A part of Jude would have rather left her alone, given how much trauma was clearly resurfacing due to their presence.

He hated seeing the girl's fears take control of her. He would have rather met the charismatic and witty girl he briefly encountered at the stoplight before she ran than this scared defense mechanism she employed.

They were now forcing her to confront her fears against her wishes. The only way to talk to her was to trap her. He could see her work through every possible escape scenario until she finally gave up.

"We've been looking for you for quite a while," Graham, sitting on Jude's right, said to the girl now seated before them. "Fancy a chat?"

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Delilah murmured with heat.

Jude could see resentment on her face.

“You absolutely do,” Graham said. Jude looked at him in panic. Was he going to let her run away after everything they’d done to find her? “But if you want to survive the full moon and be among your kind, we can help you,” Graham continued.

Delilah thought for a minute and then looked up at Miranda. She was wiping down the countertop and watching the door. Outside, the rain had turned to hail and pelted off the roof of the diner. White balls bounced off the ground.

“Please just hear us out,” Jude tried. “We don’t want to hurt you or force you to do anything you don’t want to do, but we’re also concerned for your safety.”

Graham nodded.

“You keep saying that.” Delilah sighed. “But you haven’t told me anything. So start talking, or I’m leaving.”

Jude could see a stark difference between the kind girl on the street and this fiercely independent, survival-minded creature.

“This might not be easy to hear,” Graham said, “but we have a pack in the city.”

“I kind of figured,” Delilah nodded. “Good that you’re confirming that, though.”

“I’m Graham, Grimmaw pack alpha, and this is Jude, my beta, as you’ve probably already worked out. Full moon’s happening tonight,” Graham said. “Miranda just said you don’t have a plan. Is that true?”

Delilah hesitated for at least a minute, hyper-fixating on the details of the diner before nodding. Jude knew they were going to have to be patient with her if they wanted to get anywhere.

“That’s pretty dangerous,” Graham pointed out.

“I don’t really have a choice.” From the look in her eye, she didn’t seem to think she did.

“Why not?” Jude asked. “Why do you hate shifters so much?”

She took another moment to think, this time lightly drumming on the table. “I don’t,” she admitted. “After all, I’m a shifter. I just can’t really trust other shifters again after what I’ve been through.”

“Can you explain?” Graham raised his eyebrows.

Jude instantly knew this was a bad move. Delilah stood up to leave. “It’s okay,” Jude interjected. “You don’t have to talk about it. We get that you’ve been through a lot.”

Delilah looked down at Jude with what seemed to be gratitude before sitting back down.

“Maybe we should cut to the chase?” Jude pleaded to Graham.

“Right.” Graham folded his arms across his chest. “Anyway, our pack has a massive park where our wolves can just run freely, if they want. Have you heard of Fang Park?”

“Of course,” Delilah nodded. “I want to go there, but every time I do, it’s always locked up.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Graham assured her.

Jude looked up as Miranda was now on her phone. The conversation seemed to be going unpleasantly as she looked to the table and spoke in hushed voices. He wasn’t sure what they were going to do if customers started walking in.

It would have been a lot of effort, given that thunder and lightning had now joined the rainy weather soundtrack. But if somebody was really desperate, they could have just barged in.

“Fang Park, and the whole of the Fang District, is a safe haven for the Grimmaw pack,” Graham continued.

Delilah’s eyes widened in revelation. At this point, Jude wasn’t sure if this epiphany brought fear or relief to her.

Nobody spoke as the pitter-patter of rain and the crashing of thunder overtook their conversation, however briefly. Jude and Graham waited for a spoken reaction from Delilah, but it never came.

“You’re welcome to join us on the full moon and see the park if you like,” Graham continued finally.

“Would I have to join your pack?” Delilah asked.

Jude looked to Graham, who fought with himself for a second. Delilah was clearly searching for a no, but as protective as Graham was, Jude wasn’t sure he’d give her that.

“No...” Graham said, surprising Jude. Delilah nodded, forcing a smile. “If you just want to come with us to the park and check it out, that’s fine.”

Jude could see Delilah’s mind ticking away. She looked to be considering the offer.

“But if you want to join us and run under the full moon,” Graham continued, “it might be in your best interest. I don’t know if you know this, but it can be kind of dangerous for a shifter here.”

“Or anywhere really,” Jude added. This felt obvious to Jude, but some went their whole lives not knowing the risks. Also, in rare cases, newly turned shifters had no idea of the world and had been brought into it involuntarily.

“Well, yeah,” Delilah smiled ruefully. “That’s kind of day one stuff.”

Jude and Graham nodded. Miranda walked over to the table. The diner clock ticked seconds at a time, still resonating in the room even against the sounds of pouring rain.

“Bad news,” Miranda said. “Greg said we need to stay open. Rain’s expected to let up soon.”

“That’s fine,” Graham replied. “I think we were about done here anyway.”

Jude panicked. They still hadn’t gotten a solid answer out of Delilah, and Graham was just going to let the conversation die?

“Okay,” Delilah said, “I’ll meet you and see the park.” Jude felt a weight lift from his shoulders. “On one condition.”

Graham and Jude looked at Delilah expectantly. Miranda pretended to not be invested in the conversation, as she began walking back to the front counter. Just then, an elderly gentleman carrying a black umbrella and sporting a gray hat walked into the cafe.

“I want to know what her deal is,” Delilah said loudly enough for Miranda to hear.

Miranda stopped cold in her tracks. She was halfway between the table and the customer. Maybe Delilah would be forgiving and understand that the job came first.

Improvising quickly, Miranda moved close to the table and put a washrag down on an adjacent table to wipe it down. Jude noticed that the washrag she used wasn’t clean, and that she’d probably need to legitimately clean it later.

“We’ll be right with you, sir!” Miranda called out.

As she wiped, Miranda mumbled, “Take her to the back. I give you permission to tell her.”

She put the rag down, moved behind the counter to wash her hands and then greeted the customer at the door, guiding him to his seat. Jude and Graham looked knowingly at Delilah.

Graham stood up and began heading to the back followed by Jude. He wasn’t sure if Delilah was going to follow them but was glad when she did.

Jude realized, as he penetrated the barrier to the break room, that neither of them were technically supposed to be there. A small round table rested in the middle of the room, and the black and white diner tiles had shifted to wooden paneling, which looked much less well-maintained. Several cabinets covered the wall, leading to a black, old-looking fridge.

He also realized that Delilah was surprisingly okay with this change in circumstances. Despite moments ago not wanting to be out of Miranda's eyesight, she now privately shared a room with the two of them. It was a sign of trust, no matter how small, and that was a step forward.

"This might not be too easy to hear, and I'd like you to be calm if possible," Graham said as they sat down around the table. "But Miranda's a shifter, too."

Jude could see the feeling of betrayal in Delilah's eyes.

"How?" Delilah asked, not hiding the outrage in her voice. "I smelled her! There's no way she's a shifter!"

Jude hushed Delilah, gesturing beyond the diner door. It was easy to lose yourself in the moment, but they didn't need civilians overhearing them.

"She's got a way of hiding her scent... I'm sure she'll tell you later," Graham said.

Delilah looked furious. "I trusted her!" she screamed in a hushed whisper.

"Look at it from her perspective," Jude said, trying to help however he could. "She knows you're a shifter, and she cares

about you. She could tell you were scared out of your mind, freaked out beyond understanding when you showed up at the diner. Would it be kind of her to jeopardize your safety for the sake of honesty?"

Delilah looked at the notes on the fridge absentmindedly. Several discussed the importance of labeling and dating your food then there were some passive-aggressive comments written underneath them.

"I mean, I guess not..." Delilah finally admitted.

"Exactly," Jude said.

"If we go to the park, will Miranda be there too?" Delilah asked. "I'd kind of like to hear her side of the story."

"Miranda will be there," Graham said. "She's in the Grimmaw pack, too."

Delilah bit her bottom lip. "Okay."

"Okay?" Graham asked.

"Okay. I'll go with you," Delilah said. "As long as Miranda's coming, I'll tag along."

She went back to the front of the diner, saying nothing further but giving the two of them a nod of acknowledgment. As soon as she was out of earshot, Graham whispered, "Well, that went much better than expected."

Jude nodded. Now, they would just need to see if she showed.



Chapter 10

Delilah

THE HAIL HAD DIED down, but thankfully not until toward the end of Delilah's shift. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy interacting with customers, as personal interaction was the best part of being a waitress for her, even if some customers were intolerably rude. However, with so much on her mind, trying to act like she wasn't bothered around Miranda was proving to be a difficult task.

"What'd you tell them?" Miranda had asked her earlier that day.

"I said I'd check out the park if you came, too."

"Did they tell you—"

At that point in the conversation, Delilah pretended she had urgent work to attend to and over-polished the counter. She hoped Miranda couldn't tell that she was dodging the issue, but Miranda had proven remarkably insightful. So instead, the dread of confronting her weighed on Delilah.

What could she really say, in public? There was no practical way to talk about it as long as they had customers without both causing a scene and exposing what they were to the world.

At the end of their shift, Delilah walked with leaden feet to Miranda's car. The impulse to run away was still present. She didn't know why, but she couldn't keep what had happened with her pack from affecting her decisions.

Miranda drove a bright yellow VW Bug with immaculately upholstered leather seats. Delilah had noticed that Bean Me Up's well-maintained condition mirrored Miranda's own habits, as evidenced by the neatness of her car's interior. In the cafe, Miranda had even attempted to teach Delilah a 'lifehack' for cleaning tiles using baking soda, hydrogen peroxide, and dish soap. However, to Delilah, it seemed like way too much effort for a negligible result.

"Are we going to talk about why you've been acting so weird around me?" Miranda asked as Delilah looked out the window, her head on the glass. "I mean, I know why. I'd just love my friend Delilah back on planet Earth."

"How did you hide it from me?" Delilah turned to her friend, looking her coldly in the eyes.

"Is that really the first question you want to ask me?"

Delilah nodded.

Miranda took a deep breath, flipping her turn indicator left and turning at Madison and Hook. Even within the confines of Miranda's Bug, people on the street still stared, either at the

bright yellow passing car or the two attractive women inside. It made Delilah self-conscious because she worried they could see what she really was.

They came to a sudden traffic jam involving a large string of pedestrians crossing ahead.

“It’s not really advertised because of course it isn’t. But there are ways of masking your scent,” Miranda honked as a car ahead came to an immediate stop for no reason.

Delilah drew back into her own thoughts. She had heard of masking scents by using another shifter’s clothes—she’d done that herself when escaping her pack. But she’d never heard of eliminating it altogether.

“What do you mean?”

“The Grimmaw pack makes a special scented cologne and perfume,” Miranda said. “Of course, it looks innocuous enough, but it’s very expensive, and one of the main ingredients, saffron, is hard to track down. I think that’s the main thing that makes it work? But just rubbing saffron on yourself wouldn’t completely mask your scent. It also uses a plant called bloodflower, which I’m told is also quite rare. To regular folk, it just seems like a premium cologne and perfume, but to us shifters, it can be a lifesaver.”

Hundreds of schoolchildren crossed at the intersection of Lincoln and Hook, and Miranda and Delilah sat in silence.

“Why did you lie to me?” Delilah couldn’t mask the pain in her voice.

Miranda turned to Delilah and looked at her sympathetically in spite of the pedestrian line now ending. Several horns honked behind her in response.

“Sweetie, I never wanted to lie to you,” Miranda said, lightly brushing Delilah’s cheek and finding a tear running down. “I knew you were running from something, and I wanted to keep you safe. That’s all it is.”

Miranda put the car back into motion, acknowledging the rude insistence behind her. The remaining car ride was mostly silent.

They were coming up on a huge spread of neon lights to their front left, all advertising Fang Tech products and different shops, accompanied by holographic billboards. Miranda stopped across the street from an empty, narrow alley, going to great lengths to avoid parallel parking.

Delilah started to open her door, but Miranda interrupted.

“Before we go...” Miranda paused, seeming to collect her thoughts. “I feel terrible about what I did to you. You know I never intended to *force* you to confront your fears like that.”

Delilah played with her hands in her lap, trying to cheer herself up.

“But I was the only one who could help you,” Miranda added.

“My options were either to let you roam the streets and risk losing you or to traumatize you. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to live with myself, but I’m going to protect you from now on, no matter what.”

Delilah fell still. She wasn't sure if she could ever completely forgive Miranda, but she didn't want to torture her either. So, for now, for Miranda, she would try to act happy, and hopefully her happiness would become real.

“For now, try to follow me!” Miranda called out as she opened the car door. “It's easy to get lost here!”

They stepped out of the car and onto the busy street. Cars were blaring by, and the wait to cross was interminable, but they made it and Miranda headed into the shallow alley, Delilah following close by.

“What's funny is for all that time we spent stuck in traffic, we probably could have just walked,” Miranda announced absentmindedly.

Delilah thought Miranda might have been screwing with her, leading her into an empty alley like this. She looked at her for some hint that this was an elaborate practical joke.

Miranda moved her hand up to a rusted electrical box that looked like it was from the fifties. Delilah wasn't sure what Miranda was doing until she pushed a well-concealed button on the side of it and it opened up, revealing a modern number pad.

“I can never quite remember this,” Miranda said, pulling out her phone. “Oh, you're standing a bit obvious to cars, Delilah. Can you move over a bit?”

Delilah obliged.

Miranda punched a long complex sequence of numbers into the number pad, emphasizing that the long code was to prevent people from stumbling in. Just then, an innocuous panel in the wall slid open. Delilah would have never noticed it. There was no visible seam.

“You can access our shops from the street, but not the park,” Miranda said. “This is a protective measure... an extra layer of safety just in case. Graham developed it when he realized you couldn’t just have an open-air shifter haven in the middle of the city and not take precautions.”

Delilah followed Miranda down a dark layer of stairs leading to a bar. As Delilah made her way through, the patrons all stared at her, recognizing she didn’t belong. Walking past table after table of shifters was incredibly bothersome to Delilah, even if she was glad to see her kin from so many walks of life.

“Don’t mind them.” Miranda waved at a few shifters. “This is neutral territory. If anybody attacks anybody here, they’re thrown out and shamed for life.”

“Good to know.” Delilah tried to avoid eye contact with everybody as much as possible.

“Shifters from all walks come here, but it’s mostly home to the Grimmaw and Sable packs,” Miranda told her as they exited the building, coming to a large open plaza.

Curiously, the businesses all appeared to be access points to rear, not front, entrances.

“What is there to do here?” Delilah asked, marveling at all the businesses. She saw a boutique, several restaurants, a teahouse, a large skyscraper, a thrift store, and a marketplace.

“Pretty much what you see!” Miranda said. “I think the only things you can’t see from here are the gardens and the park. The garden is just down the hill, if you follow the path down, and you’ll find the park at the edge of the path, too.”

“People don’t ask questions about any of this?” Delilah wondered as they came to a teahouse. The alpha and beta were sitting there at one of the tables, and Delilah told herself not to be nervous.

“We just tell them it’s employees only,” the alpha said. “Most people leave it at that. And if a passing airplane flies overhead and sees what we keep here, it’s no big deal. It’s not like we transform in the middle of the square.”

“I’m not sure if you were properly introduced yesterday,” Miranda said, gesturing toward the two of them. “This is Graham. He’s alpha of the Grimmaw pack. He and Jude, the beta, run Fang Tech together.”

There was a stark difference between the two of them Delilah hadn’t noticed. Whereas Graham was a tall, fair-skinned ginger-haired man with a chiseled jaw and a swimmer’s physique, Jude looked more like an enforcer. The flecks of gold in Jude’s green eyes stood out against his rich, umber skin, and Graham’s eyes shone with gold, and hazel. In the right light, and under the right context, the two of them were really quite handsome.

“Glad you decided to come,” Graham focused on her.

“Miranda talks about you a lot.”

“We were hoping you might join us for the run,” Jude added.

Delilah looked at Miranda. The wind picked up, blowing into a set of wind chimes hanging from the teahouse patio.

“I mean, I’m game if you are,” Delilah told her.

Miranda channeled a sudden burst of enthusiasm. “Thank god you said that!” Miranda exclaimed. “These days, I don’t have anybody to run with anymore.”

“Nobody can keep up with her.” Graham smiled ruefully.

Miranda winked at him. “If you’re up for it, Delilah, we’ll meet up with them later?”

Relief rushed through Delilah. She still felt best with Miranda.

“That sounds great.”



Chapter 11

Delilah

DELILAH WAS BEGINNING TO love sunsets in the city. The way the orange, pink, red, and yellow beams of sunlight bounced off layers of towering metal only amplified their beauty. Unlike at home, where they seemed lost beneath layers of trees. Here, the clouds also seemed more plentiful or more densely packed, which created a canvas teeming with different colors.

Perhaps she had never truly taken the time to enjoy sunsets, being so fearful of the moon that followed them. Each passing moon had been a countdown to her inevitable transformation. That unease seemed so far away now, and she heaved a sigh of deep relief.

Delilah and Miranda had spent some time shopping. From the plaza, which was a sanctuary for many shifters, the Fang District had seemed relatively small. But entering each of the shops through the back entrances had revealed how large this area truly was.

They had agreed to take a full day to shop later on after Miranda had generously purchased a bottle of Honey Rose, the perfume that concealed shifter scents from people and other shifters.

“I’m buying it for you, and I’m not taking no for an answer,” Miranda had told her, looking at several glass bottles of the pink substance on a shelf display. “You’re going to use it, and it’s going to keep you safe.”

“I keep telling you. I don’t need your money,” Delilah had told her, trying to whisper. “I can afford the perfume on my own. Let me buy it for myself.”

“Didn’t you just tell me you were living in some cramped hotel room? No.” She shook her head. “I’m getting this for you. You’re going to start saving up for an apartment.”

It had been a very hefty price tag, costing hundreds of dollars for a small bottle. In spite of Miranda’s insistence, Delilah kept telling her that she would pay her back. Eventually, Miranda stopped acknowledging her protests.

The stores had been run exclusively by shifters, some even lone wolves whose packs had left them behind. In spite of this, the customers in almost every shop had been non-shifters, or very carefully veiled shifters wearing Honey Rose, and none of them seemed to pay any notice to the “employees only” exits Miranda and Delilah left and entered the shops through.

Extending outward on a path leading down from the plaza were trees as far as the eyes could see, which Delilah knew to be Fang Park. Compared even to the sizable plaza of the Fang

District, Fang Park was immense and could have easily swallowed up the other sector six or seven times over.

After meeting back up with Jude and Graham, Delilah and Miranda approached the park together, moving from the main Fang District path downward to a brick-paved slope. As they reached the park gate, Graham immediately pulled out his phone and then opened an innocuous-looking app. It looked very bare bones, and even as she watched, Delilah had no idea what the app did.

“I’ll send you this too later if you join the Grimmaw pack,” Graham said, putting his phone away after tapping on a blue circle. “All it does is work the locks of the gate to Fang Park remotely. That way, I’m always able to open and close the park if a shifter wants to go for a run.”

“If anybody ever wandered into the park while a shifter was out running, it would be very bad,” Jude added. “I’m sure you get it.”

Delilah nodded.

“Oh, Dakota!” Jude waved toward a very gruff, angry-looking shifter, accompanied by another bulky shifter and a small woman. At first, Delilah was very concerned, as the shifter he waved to was covered from head-to-toe in piercings and tattoos.

“Sup,” the shifter acknowledged with no clear emotion.

“This is Dakota,” Jude said redundantly as the trio approached.

“And this is Samson.” Jude pointed to the other extremely

muscular shifter, whose red hair stretched even below his waist. Delilah noticed that his hair was even longer than hers.

“They’re the pack’s enforcers,” Graham added. “They’re often patrolling the park, making sure nobody’s in here who isn’t supposed to be. They act as our security, our muscle, and in the rare cases where we need them to, our intimidators.”

“And I’m Sarah,” the small woman wearing glasses announced sheepishly.

“I wasn’t going to forget.” Graham smiled. “This is Sarah. She’s a big part of why any of this even worked.”

Delilah interjected. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve known Sarah for a very long time,” Graham said.

“Too long,” Dakota said, slightly uncomfortably.

“Back in the day, she helped us get Fang Tech off the ground,” Graham ignored the shifter’s interruption. “She knows a lot about a lot of things and helped us form our teams. She acts as head of marketing, head of sales, and a head of communication for just about every shop in Fang District and every sector of Fang Tech.”

“That’s pretty impressive!” Delilah grinned.

Dakota wandered away, seeming to be in a mood.

“Don’t mind him,” Sarah said as she waved toward Dakota.

“He tends to act up around the time of the full moon.”

Sarah pursued him and Samson followed, just tagging along with the pair.

“Dakota gets a bit jealous of Graham’s relationship with her,” Jude said. “Sometimes, I think he wishes he was as close as those two used to be.”

Delilah had never seen Graham without much to say, but he tucked his hands into his pockets and nodded.

A dirt path ran through nearly the entire stretch of the park. On the way, statues commemorated historical figures, and Jude noted that many had secretly been old shifters. She also noticed a stream running through the park, several ponds, bird feeders, and abstract art pieces. The path was lit on all sides by street lamps, and as they approached, Delilah saw many birds playing near park benches before flying away at the sight of them.

Eventually, they came to a clearing filled with men and women. A few stood beside the reflective water surface of the pond, casting their lures. They stopped in front of a tall, lanky brown-haired man, who Delilah immediately recognized as a shifter, and a man whose black beard was quite pronounced, but who lacked any hair atop his head.

“Any bites?” Graham asked the lanky gentleman.

“Not today,” the tall man said. “Caught a couple small ones but not much.”

“This is Tive Daly,” Graham introduced the man. “And this is Delilah, our guest for the evening.”

Tive made a gesture like he wanted to reach out and shake her hand, were it not for the fishing pole he was currently using.

“Nice to meetcha,” Tive said. “This is Lunar Matthis, my beta.”

Delilah glanced at the balding, burly bearded man in the outdoor chair with confusion as he took a swig of beer. “These are the alpha and beta of the Sable pack,” Graham clarified. “Back in the day, they sought protection in the Fang District, and they’re partly responsible for bringing so many together here.”

“And that beer is strictly nonalcoholic. Right?” Graham asked Lunar, who shrugged. “Because you know the danger of drinking before a full moon.”

“Relax.” Lunar chuckled. “I know my liquor. I’d never get intoxicated before a run.”

Tive gazed at Graham apologetically, and Graham sighed and walked away. “He knows that if anything happens, they might be expelled from the district,” Graham said.

“He’s a free spirit,” Jude added.

“A really *stupid* free spirit,” Graham said.

Stars had become visible in the darkening evening sky, which impressed Delilah. She didn’t think you could see stars in the inner city. The moon had not yet risen.

Delilah was also taken aback by how well Graham and Jude seemed to interact with the other pack members and even the lone wolves. Back at the Deacon Claw pack, there was a clear pecking order. The alpha had no equal and treated anybody else as lesser.

They all approached a park shelter, where they undressed in preparation for the full moon. While the women all undressed in front of each other, Delilah was offered a stall to undress privately if she so chose. Having reluctantly come here, she agreed.

The changing room had a window, high on the wall opposite the door, which nobody could see through, and it allowed the faintest bit of evening light into the room.

At first, Delilah worried that this stall could even contain her wolf form. But as she hunched down, and instinctively, her body transformed, she realized it offered just enough clearance. One by one, in quite a civilized manner, the wolves exited the shelter and darted off into the night.

Delilah found Miranda's wolf, her fur covered in braid-like structures with pink and green eyes, running alongside Graham and Jude. She could tell it was them by their scents.

Jude's wolf was a dark onyx creature with a beige patch of fur on his underbelly, his brown-black eyes nearly identical to those Delilah was used to seeing. He was a large wolf, but not nearly as large as Graham.

Graham's massive form was covered in russet hair, except at the tips of his tail and paws, where it seemed to fade into white. His eyes were magnificently golden, but still had hints of green and aqua.

They didn't seem to be actively pursuing much of anything, Delilah noted. And as Miranda dashed ahead and Delilah

followed, chasing her, Graham and Jude seemed content to watch from a distance.

Miranda would occasionally slow down just enough that Delilah felt like she could reach out and touch her before Miranda rushed ahead again. She proved that her energy reserves were nearly limitless... that Miranda could probably run forever if she needed.

Delilah had made it her goal to catch up to Miranda, but to no avail. Every time she reached out to her, being just a hair away, Miranda dashed out of reach. Beneath her wolf form, Delilah could feel herself chuckling.

It was the best full moon Delilah had ever experienced. Despite being a stranger, she felt welcome here. She felt like an *equal*.



Chapter 12

Graham

NIGHTS UNDER THE FULL moon in Fang Park felt like home, more so than any other time of the year. In this form, running on all fours, paws out, Graham felt true to himself. He believed that in his wolf form, he was at his most pure, and most honest, and he believed the same applied to everybody else.

Graham and Jude lingered in the dust, watching Miranda and Delilah chase each other through the park. They both studied her movements. Graham always learned the most about a shifter through the behavior of their wolf because it was harder to lie when you couldn't speak, harder to conceal your nature.

Miranda was as fast as ever. It had always been a mystery to Graham how she could exert so much energy yet never show any signs of exhaustion. She didn't pant, never slowed down, and never yielded.

Graham could see how Miranda enjoyed teasing Delilah, watching as Delilah pushed herself to keep up with Miranda,

but always at the precipice, Miranda sped up. However, they didn't see frustration in Delilah's actions. They couldn't sense any conceit or melancholy, even as they watched Delilah realize in time that Miranda was uncatchable.

Instead, Delilah pursued her ambitiously and expediently, always slowing down to try and reach out to touch Miranda, and always speeding up just as Miranda sped away.

It spoke to Delilah's competitiveness but also to her tenacity, patience, gregariousness, and cooperation. These were all wonderful traits in a new recruit. Other undesired traits—aggression, wrath, jealousy, and impulsiveness—were nowhere to be seen.

Graham and Jude continued to watch from afar, enjoying the scenery. They reveled in the smells of passing rose bushes and herbs. They glimpsed their own reflections in the moonlit waters of rushing streams and calm pond water.

They watched the forms of distant shifters, silhouetted against the scenery and bathed in moonlight, unburdening themselves from their human lives as they reveled in their truer, more honest forms. Occasional fights broke out among the other shifters. This was inevitable, as they romped about the woods, rolling through the distant scenery. But thankfully, there was never any urgent need for intervention.

It was only dangerous to be a shifter when you were lying in your daily life—when your human face was nothing but a mask. This spoke to integrity, to each pack member's true

intentions ultimately benefiting the sanctity of the district and the good of the collective.

That's why, for many members, the full moon ultimately served as a test of each member's character, showing any holes in their integrity and whether they secretly harbored dangerous intentions. It worked two ways as well because no shifter wanted to be caught on the city streets under a full moon.

Delilah was remarkable, though. As he watched her playfully rolling under the moonlight, her yellow and gray coat reflecting the light of the moon, Graham was struck by her gracefulness.

As Jude looked on beside him, Graham wondered if he saw the same positive traits in her. If he could see how beautifully she moved, how kindly she conducted herself. He wondered if he could also see how great of an asset she would be to the pack or whether he saw something different.

Graham had to admit to himself that from the moment he saw Delilah, he had been struck by something. At first, he told himself it had been idle concern for his safety or fear of the danger a rogue shifter running about might pose to the secrecy of the pack and to shifters as a whole. It was in everybody's best interest to ensure no shifters wandered the streets alone, lest they be caught transforming on a full moon.

He had been singularly consumed in finding her, wanting so desperately to reel her in and bring her home. He could see the loneliness and fear in her eyes—a trauma so deep he could

hardly bear to understand. At night, finding her was all he thought about. He had even forgotten to eat some evenings.

He still caught himself wondering what had troubled her so much. She had run from them both in such a hurry, not for who they were but *what* they were. Surely, being abandoned by one's pack could be traumatic, but there was something deeper that Graham longed to understand—a pain more intense than being abandoned, more poignant than being ostracized, ridiculed, or shamed.

And that might have been what enticed him. Maybe it was the mystery—the fact that even in spite of her strong integrity, she guarded her pain and kept it hidden from everybody around her in whatever way she could. It was a selflessness unlike anything he'd ever known.

Maybe he wanted to fix that, to show Delilah a haven from her fears. Even from just their brief interactions, Graham could tell she didn't deserve to shoulder that pain, at least not alone.

Graham realized he'd lost Jude somewhere in the presence of his thoughts and rushed to find him. He had cut himself a good way off from the rest of the pack.

Through forests and over benches, Graham dashed, trying to catch Jude. Then at long last, he found a shadow, set apart only by the tan patch of fur on its underbelly, darker otherwise even than the night. Playfully, he tackled Jude to the ground.

But Jude hadn't expected him, and for a brief moment, the scene shifted to one of competitive aggression as Jude tried to defend himself from the unseen assailant. Jude tore into

Graham's shoulder in self-defense, and Graham jumped back, recoiling.

"Ouch, dude," Graham said, now back to his human form.

The shift to wolf form was forceful and natural with the full moon, but shifting into and out of the form throughout the night was easily attainable with a little self-control.

Jude's wolf form leered at Graham for a moment before his eyes adjusted and he saw his friend—his leader—clutching his shoulder. "Crap! I'm sorry," Jude's almost human form cried out. "Why'd you jump out at me like that?"

Graham sighed at his own stupidity. Sometimes he had a mischievous streak and liked to play pranks on his friends and colleagues, though never to their detriment.

But Jude had not always been part of the Grimmaw pack. Before Tive took over, Jude had been the Sable pack's alpha. They had come here to escape.

It had happened in the night, as Jude described it. One evening, the Sable pack was asleep, in a rural area a couple of states out, when a rival pack, who had sought territorial expansion, attacked their camp. The pack was twice their size and a lot crueler.

Many of Jude's family and friends were slaughtered that night while he hid. He barely managed to escape, and found very few of his remaining pack members, who had only managed to conceal themselves through similar cowardice.

It was a moment of great shame for Jude—one he never let himself forget—and it was why, when coming here, he ultimately stepped down as alpha. The remaining members of the Sable pack didn't think less of him for it, but the images of that night, and the choices he made, were seared into his brain.

Even here, Jude was terrified of being attacked and having his pack dismantled. He wore his trauma on his shoulder.

Remembering all this, Graham was mortified. "I don't know how to begin to apologize, man. I'm so sorry."

Jude sat down on a nearby bench, the wind harshly blowing the pond behind him. "I guess it's okay." Jude sighed. "Why'd you wander off?"

Graham gingerly approached the bench and then found a seat beside Jude. They both looked out at the night sky, the moon mere inches from fading.

"I got a little lost in thought..." Graham trailed off. He watched the silhouettes of his friends rushing through the cultivated forests around him.

Neither said anything, just observing the passage of time.

"Delilah's pretty incredible, isn't she?" Graham finally spoke.

Jude looked him in the eye. "I would hope so, given that she's been your obsession for the last week."

"But it's all for the good of the pack, and all that," Graham waved his beta off. "We can't have a rogue shifter..."

“Running through the streets of the city on a full moon,” Jude interjected. “I know. That’s been all you’ve been saying lately.”

Graham shifted his mouth, trying to scratch his nose without actually touching it. “So if it wasn’t a big deal to you too, why’d you go along with it?”

“It *was* a big deal. You were right,” Jude said. “We can’t have a shifter running alone through the streets. There are too many dangers.” A silence took hold of the scene for a moment. “I just don’t think you were honest with yourself about *why* you wanted to find her.”

“Oh yeah?” Graham quirked a brow. “Why was I trying to find her?”

“You were smitten,” Jude grinned. “Everybody with eyes could see it. From the moment you ran into her, you were hooked.”

“And what do you think?” Graham spoke up again after another awkward silence.

“I agree.” Jude nodded. “She’s very interesting. And I’d like to get to know her better.”

“As friends?”

Jude nodded.

“As more than friends?” Graham pressed.

Jude looked to the distant horizon. “All I know is that she’s carrying some pretty deep trauma, maybe more than she can

handle. And as somebody who's been through that, I want to help her through it. When you look at her," Jude continued, "I think you see some enchanting, perfect, mysterious figure, like a fairy or a spirit of the woods. That's not what I see. I see somebody trying their best to keep going, taking life one day at a time."

As they sat alone on the bench together, quietly observing the sunrise, they came to the conclusion they should pursue Delilah.

Together.



Chapter 13

Jude

AS EVERYBODY CLEARED OUT the night of the full moon, Jude and Graham had managed to confront Delilah with a request. They had asked her to help them set up for the pack dinner, which was supposed to take place the following evening. Given how detached she had been up to that point, and that Miranda was nowhere to be seen, they expected a firm no.

They were surprised when she agreed. Jude almost wondered if maybe she had begun to overcome her past, and their aggressive strategy the day before had worked in their favor despite the potential risks. He had not been proud of the way they confronted Delilah, forcing her to talk with them, and he knew Miranda felt even worse about.

Delilah was impressively strong, even for a shifter. To prepare for the dinner, she, several of the pack members, and even some other lone wolves had been tasked with moving tables

down to the main plaza, where the market stalls normally stood.

By all appearances, she was contributing about half of the effort. One pack member, Kieron Dotson, probably wouldn't have even attended on time had he not been part of the coordination effort. He would lift one table, take an hour-long break to look down at his phone, and then return to the task at hand. Meanwhile, Delilah toiled away, dripping sweat and barely catching a breath between exertions.

Graham moved from the loft up above, where the food was stored, to carry down heavy platters to the table below. During the setup, Jude carefully observed the coordinated effort.

Jude's contribution was that he had cooked most of the meal. He had prepared the prime rib, scalloped potatoes, stuffed mushrooms, and ravioli. He'd found and purchased the cheeses, reached out to local distilleries for the wine and beer, and even worked with some locals in town who had made the Italian meatballs, eggplant, and beef pho. Of course, he needed an intermediary to do a lot of it.

None of this would have been possible without their food coordinator, Gerund Wynn. As Jude looked down on the area below, Gerund asked how he was able to get away with it.

"They're down there slaving away, and you're, what, watching?"

Gerund was a heavysset shifter with an eyepatch, who wore a gun holster everywhere he went. He didn't like staying in the district, and had his own pack somewhere outside the city.

A shifter's biggest motivator was scarcity. Jude knew it well. It had been the reason why, twelve years ago, his pack had nearly been taken off the face of the Earth.

As soon as they had a reliable source of food, they found that growing the Grimmaw pack and the Fang District came easily. Shifters went where the food was.

Something like ten years ago, Gerund had become their means of obtaining food, and every month on the day preceding the full moon, he came in with a generous shipment for their feast. He also brought in their monthly food supply. It was up to Jude to research meals and mingle with local businesses.

"I cooked all this food," Jude said. "If you don't understand the effort that took, I guess you don't know food as well as you think."

Gerund chuckled and disappeared down the fire escape. Jude would see him again in another month, and the battered wolf would probably try to rile him up again.

"Guess Delilah's not going to get to meet the food guy?" Graham commented as he lifted a soup kettle out of the fridge. Jude shook his head. "Well, she's not missing much."

Once all the food had been brought down the pair of them made their way down to the tables.

"I thought it was just *two packs* and some lone wolves down here?" Delilah gestured toward the several dozen people who had gathered at six long tables. Many filed in through the

tavern at the back, but some entered through back shop entrances or apartment spaces overlooking the area.

“Well, a lot of people were displaced by the expansion of the city.” Graham took a seat at the table beside her. “We said ‘some lone wolves.’ Maybe we should have clarified. Most shifters here are unaffiliated, and just welcome neutral territory.”

“It’s a brutal world out there,” Jude added, trying his best to convey sympathy. She missed the hint.

“Have you spoken with many of the people here?” Graham asked. “That should give you some idea of how the Fang District came to be.”

Graham climbed atop the table, currently barren of food, plates, or silverware. He had always been one for flamboyant displays.

“Please welcome Delilah Belfin to this, our hundred and twenty-fifth monthly pack dinner celebration!” Graham announced. “Tell her all your stories, so that she might know the histories of the Sable pack, Grimmaw pack, and the Fang District!”

Graham paused to allow a ripple of applause to run through the crowd.

“This month, we celebrate the seventh wedding anniversary of our own Sarah and Dakota Baysong!” Graham continued. Jude looked at Dakota, afraid of the kind of reaction he might have.

“I keep telling him to shut the hell up.” Dakota scoffed. Sarah had her small arms wrapped around him, teeth showing in a beaming grin.

Jude watched from afar as Delilah pieced together the history of the Fang District. He tried not to be too obvious about it, but was also kind of surprised that nobody noticed his eavesdropping as he stood at the potluck table.

From Gray Ellis, whose grandfather had started *The Fast Times*, she learned that shifters had lived in the city long before either the Sable pack or the Grimmaw pack had arrived. She learned that sixty years ago, Gray’s grandfather Wilson Ellis had started the newspaper to protect shifters within the community from a growing paranoia in the city.

From Sarah, and an apologetic Dakota, who was sorry for last night’s interaction, she had learned that in the early days, the Fang District was just a few members of the Grimmaw pack huddled together in an apartment. She learned that Sarah had to learn a lot of skills fast to help Graham, whose first success was a cloud-based compression algorithm.

From Tive, she learned that when the Sable pack joined the district, Jude had offered his own coding skills, and that they had all started the community garden together.

From Rachel Wilson, the short, mousy brunette who ran the teahouse, Delilah learned that what had grown the district were the independent ambitions of every member that joined the pack. The Fang District had been in an impoverished area,

and they had all contributed to develop the properties and make the park more welcoming to shifters.

And from Sire Slat, a property owner in the area, she had learned that Graham's own resolve and ingenuity had brought investors, including Sire, who had funded the growth of Fang Tech and the Fang District. He also offered that should she need an apartment, he would offer her an excellent deal. Delilah jotted down his number and stuck it in her purse before also entering it into her phone.

Jude was amazed by her gregariousness as she easily confronted so many strangers to piece together the winding story of their origin. Should she ever join the pack, she could be a wonderful asset to their networking efforts. Tive never told her what the Sable pack had gone through to get here, but maybe that was a story she would ask Jude for someday.

After confronting as many people in the community as she could and introducing herself to every shifter there, she finally sat down for dinner. She still clung tightly to Miranda, but Jude could tell she felt much more at ease.

After she had taken a prolonged bite of the prime rib, savoring it in her mouth and showering it with compliments, Jude finally asked what he and Graham wanted to know more than anything else.

"So now that you've heard the stories of everybody here," Jude said quietly, "what's your story, Delilah?"

Delilah swallowed another morsel of the delectable beef. Jude thought she was going to speak, but then she took another bite

of scalloped potatoes and washed it down with a few sips of wine.

“I lived in a pack about a state over,” Delilah said, thinking while chewing. “I was going out with this guy, who seemed nice at first, but got kind of a big head and turned into a jerk.”

Jude listened closely, not touching a bit of his food. The loudest sentences were usually never spoken.

“Anyway, I got a waitressing job so I wouldn’t be so controlled by him.” Delilah sighed. “Then one day, he got to be way too much, and I hit the road, found this place, and here I am.”

Jude mulled over her story. Of course, he knew that people didn’t usually volunteer the most traumatic stories of their lives over a friendly group dinner, but he had still hoped for more.

“And that’s all that happened?” Graham also seemed to notice that a few details seemed left out.

“Yep!” Delilah said cheerily, now enjoying a ravioli.

Miranda gazed at her sympathetically. Jude and Graham just stared at each other, before realizing they were being rude, and the last thing they wanted to do was to make Delilah feel uncomfortable.

“Well,” Graham said, “we’re so glad you could join us!”

Jude nodded, also smiling. He wondered what could have possibly scared Delilah so much that she still couldn’t talk openly about it. He knew she would never truly find healing

and move forward until she was ready to admit that it had happened.

Miranda shrugged, taking a swig of beer.

The night carried on well, and Jude could tell that Delilah had enjoyed herself, which was what mattered.

Still, a deeper part of him longed to know more and to help her heal. He committed himself to never press her for anything she wasn't comfortable sharing, and to always listen to everything she wanted to say. Healing took time, after all.



Chapter 14

Delilah

DELILAH HAD NOT SEEN either Jude or Graham in the past week. It wasn't because she didn't want to see them. Quite the contrary. She had simply been too busy since coming home from the pack dinner.

Immediately, upon arriving home, Delilah had taken out her phone and dialed Sire Slat's number.

"It was wonderful talking to you tonight, Mr. Slat!" Delilah said, trying to lay on the charm. "You said you might be able to set me up with a deal?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, darling," Sire had said. "But yes. As a friend of Mr. Grimmaw's, I would be happy to offer you a generous deal."

Though initially flabbergasted at how much Delilah was able to put down as she had been saving for quite a while, Mr. Slat offered her a wonderful apartment with plenty of space, with just a five-hundred-dollar security deposit and half a month's

rent. The biggest hurdle to her getting an apartment, the application and character references, were taken care of by Slat, who only needed a social security number to do the background check.

The move had been taxing, and Delilah was so grateful for Miranda's help. Miranda had offered her car for relocating her possessions and was even willing to shop for furniture with her.

Delilah looked at her empty living room—furnished only by a small desk, a cream couch that Miranda had personally selected for her, and a new television. She had no tables yet, no chairs, and the bedroom was empty, except for a single queen size bed.

She was glad to have all this empty space to frolic in, but it had the opposite problem to the cramped hotel room. Rather than feeling cluttered and stuffy, it felt un-lived-in and unwelcoming. Fixing that would be a multi-step process.

She looked down at her phone, filled with text conversations between her, Graham, and Jude. She chuckled at Graham's banter and Jude's social awkwardness.

Delilah wanted nothing more than to go down to the Fang District, the pack territory where she had been royally welcomed just seven days ago. Miranda had been an immense help, but she'd had to go to work and now Delilah was alone in this apartment with nothing but her own thoughts.

Maybe she should have some of the pack up here for dinner sometime? She scrolled through social media, contemplating

different ways to enhance her space and leave her short stint of solitude, when the phone vibrated in her hands.

“Mind if we make this a group call?” Graham’s rich, familiar voice echoed out of the receiver.

“Not at all,” Delilah said cheerfully.

Immediately, Jude’s voice joined their conversation. “Hey, doll,” Jude said. “How’s your day gone?”

Lately, Jude had taken to calling her “doll.” She was a bit put off by it at first, but she’d grown to like it as she had him. The confusing thing was she felt the same for the alpha, too.

“Oh, it’s been fine, you know,” Delilah answered, absentmindedly. “Just a lot of moving stuff.”

“Yeah?” Jude asked. “And how’s the move going?”

“I can show you some pictures, if you like,” Delilah offered. “It’s still pretty empty.”

She snapped a few pictures, first of the empty living room. Then she moved on to the kitchen, which had a microwave, fridge, and knife set. Besides that, she snapped a picture of the laundry area, which had been furnished by the apartment complex.

There was a long hall next to the living room which led into two adjacent bedrooms, both of which were empty, save for her bed. The bathroom had been furnished with a few ocean-themed items, a seahorse night light, a set of ocean-themed towels, a beach-themed toilet seat cover, and a blue rug with bath pearls for decoration.

When she was done, she sent the pictures to both of them via the special messaging app Fang Tech had developed. It was a bit clunky still, but she was glad to support the company.

“Dang,” Graham said. “It’s a great space, but it looks like you could use some furniture.”

“I’ve got Miranda helping me with that, actually,” Delilah let them know.

“Well, if you need a couple more pairs of hands, I’m sure either of us would be glad to help you.” Graham offered and Jude agreed.

“Thank you!” Delilah said. “But you still haven’t told me about either of your days. What’s the big secret?”

At first, Jude and Graham seemed to think she might not be interested. But after some insistence, they both launched into the details of their days.

Graham was dealing with some struggles in some of his tech teams because a couple of senior programmers had left. He explained they had been going through some restructuring, moving people between teams to meet release schedules, and it had left a few of his employees unhappy.

He wasn’t sure if they were going to hit their game and product deadlines. Jude reassured him that they would, and that he needn’t worry. But Graham explained that he still didn’t know how they were going to release the new Evenlore game on time.

Delilah couldn't absorb every detail, and she didn't understand all of it. She hadn't come from the same technical background they had, but what was sexy to her was the passion Graham had for his job... the way he was so able to effortlessly juggle deadlines and employee tasks, stepping in wherever he was needed. She also loved the sound of his voice, the way words fell so cleanly off of his tongue, and hung in her ear. Every word left her wanting more.

Jude's day had gone quite a bit differently. Rather than dealing with deadlines and gaming, he worked one-on-one with several employees and managed the backend development of Fang Tech's websites and apps.

Kieron Dotson was one of their best backend coders, but he wasn't punctual or reliable. He and Sienna Lin, a coding prodigy who contributed something to nearly every coding team, had motivated each other through a sometimes-toxic rivalry, undermining and even berating each other's code. Jude had recognized that their rivalry was ultimately beneficial, but it also dragged down other members of the team, who were distracted by their constant fighting.

Jude had also focused one of his teams on improving some of the clunkiness in their code. Something was slowing down the server significantly which resulted in bad performance for multiple apps and websites.

The difficulty was that none of their code had been well-organized or annotated. Going back over old code to find what wasn't working had been quite tedious, and everybody on that

team had started to protest that they were better off contributing to new projects.

On the other hand, Jude was impressed by some of the ideas research and development had come up with and was excited to get new teams on them. When Graham asked him for specifics, he just said he'd have to "wait and see when they pitch them to you."

What Delilah loved about Jude was how relatable he was when he expressed everything. He didn't use too much technical jargon, and when she had a question, he slowed down and explained it better for her. He was much more approachable and warmer than she was used to.

"Well," Delilah said. "Sounds like you've both been a lot busier than I have. I can tell you about my back pain from moving the couch but not much else."

"Bah," Jude disagreed. "It's your day off. Nobody expects you to work."

"And moving is a whole lot anyway," Graham said. "Big changes are coming your way. Any plans for later tonight, now that you're settling in?" Graham added. "I was wondering if the two of you wanted to come over to my place...?"

"Well... you won't believe this, but in the couple of weeks since some brute scared me out of the grocery store, I haven't been back," Delilah deadpanned. Jude chuckled while Graham said nothing. "So, I was thinking maybe I'd go back and get some food for my fridge."

Graham's silence sent a sudden chill through her. She imagined him reacting like Clark would have, furious at her messing around. She genuinely didn't mean to upset him, and had only been kidding.

As her mind went through worst-case scenarios of how badly she had messed up the rapport, Graham finally spoke up.

"Well, maybe the two of us can accompany you. We'll scare that 'brute' away."

Flooded with relief, Delilah's heart fluttered. It was only a trip to the grocery store, but how could she possibly turn that offer down? Unlike Clark, Graham really knew how to turn on the charm.

Delilah smiled. "I might just have to take you two up on that."

"I have to finish up a couple of things here," Graham said.

"But we can swing by and pick you up in, oh, twenty minutes? How's that sound, Jude?"

"I have no objections," Jude added. "Twenty minutes from now sounds great."

After they'd all hung up, Delilah stood still in her silent apartment, trying to understand why she felt so giddy. It was only a trip to the grocery store, after all. And they partly owed her this for scaring her away from it in the first place.

She approached the bathroom mirror and scrutinized her appearance, realizing that sweatpants and a T-shirt wouldn't work for the occasion. It dawned on her that mere weeks ago,

she couldn't bear to be in the same room with another shifter. It was funny how life worked out like that sometimes.

They had opened her eyes to a new world, showing her hospitality, affection, attention, and generosity — things she never knew she needed.

Yet, the approach had its flaws. Delilah still bore mental scars from the incident where Miranda had trapped her in the restaurant, forcing a confrontation. Over the past eight days, Miranda's constant apologies had led Delilah to gently insist she stop mentioning it.

But there was more to this. Was she smitten with Jude and Graham? Why was she so excited about this?

She loved how well they treated her, and how they seemed interested in everything she had to say. She loved how passionate they were about their jobs and how much they cared for everybody in their pack.

And they weren't bad-looking either.



Chapter 15

Delilah

STILL FEELING HIGH FROM the afternoon she'd had with Graham and Jude the previous day, Delilah walked to work with a smile on her face. They took her to the grocery store and back without pushing her for more, just a comfortable presence at her side.

It was so unlike anything she'd had before, and she was finding herself feeling better and better about her decision. Leaving her home and Deacon Claw pack had been such a huge risk and a major upheaval, but she was glad she trusted her instincts and got the hell out. The alternative, of course, was being sold to another pack, so running had really been her only option.

She'd made a friend in Miranda, had a job, and had found a home. The city was less stressful than small-town living, if different. Not only that, she'd found a pack to run with. But most of all there was Graham and Jude—an alpha and beta who made her realize what shifter men really should be like.

Her phone rang, and she reached into her purse, her stomach fluttering in the hope it was one of them. She looked before she picked up, seeing neither of their names on the screen, just a number that she recognized without a contact name attached.

It can't be.

She'd changed her number when she left her old phone at La Luna the day she escaped. How did he get her new one? For a second, she hesitated, her heart in her mouth, but if he had her number it wouldn't be long before he knew where she was. It was best to be prepared, and that meant knowing what was going on in his head.

"Clark?" she answered, trying not to sound too timid in her answer.

"There she is," came the voice down the line. It sent a shiver down her spine, as if a spider had just crawled the length of it.

"Missed me?"

"What do you want, Clark?" she replied, stopping in her tracks. Just hearing his voice again was enough to drain her of all the positive energy she'd manifested recently. But that was Clark for you. Negativity came with the territory.

"Well, I thought that would be obvious. After all, you left pretty quickly, and when you were needed as well."

"Nothing is obvious when it comes to you—except for the fact you're an asshole who'll do his best to ruin people's lives," she spat.

“A bit of distance made you brave, huh? Thing is, it’s time for you to return now. You’ve made your point, had your little run. Get back to this pack, or else.”

Nausea hit her. She knew they wouldn’t let her leave without some kind of repercussion, but the time she’d spent in the city and the distance between her old pack and this place had given her a false sense of security.

“Sorry, but there’s not a chance in hell I’m coming back to Deacon Claw pack. Leaving was one of the best things I ever did.” She meant every word. Breaking up with Clark ranked as one of the best decisions she’d ever made. Leaving that shitty excuse for a pack came as a very close second.

He growled and she could just picture his face, those eyes of his hard and cruel. “Then you leave us no choice. We’ll have to come get you.”

Panic ripped through her, and she quickly hung up, turning off her cell and throwing it back in her bag. For a second, she wondered about whether she should just discard it there and then, but if he had her number already, he’d do it with another cell, he was well connected in that way.

Her mind raced. Was it worth staying and putting herself in danger of being found by him, or should she just take off again, run, and never stop? All of this, when she was finally started to think she could settle somewhere with shifters she liked and respected.

When she walked through the door of the cafe, she almost broke into sobs. Just the thought of having to leave was too

much. “Keep it together, Del,” she whispered under her breath.

“What’s that?” Miranda said absently as she busied herself at the counter.

“Oh, just cursing myself for forgetting something,” she said, swallowing down the fear and sadness that threatened to take her over. “Morning, by the way.”

“Good morning,” said Miranda, stopping what she was doing to look at her. “You sure you’re okay?”

Delilah painted on her best smile. “Course, just didn’t get much sleep, that’s all.” She was starting to feel guilty—that was two lies within the space of a few moments. Still, she wouldn’t let that prick get to her anymore.

“Well, grab yourself a coffee before you start. Weather’s good, which means we’ll probably be busy today.”

“Sure will,” she replied. “Coffee it is. You want one?”

“No, I’m good. You go ahead, though.”

Delilah did as Miranda said. In truth, she could have done with something a little stronger than a coffee, even though it was early. Just something about the way Clark had spoken to her made her nervous and on edge.

Despite that, she was determined not to let him pollute any more of her time, he’d done enough of that. She threw herself into her work, glad of the distraction and hoping she’d never hear from him again, however unlikely that was.

Just as Miranda had predicted, the good weather had brought in the customers, and she didn't have much chance to think of anything apart from tending to them. But that didn't mean it all went away. A few dropped glasses and some mixed-up orders as well as her edginess all must have communicated that something was wrong.

Delilah rested one foot against the wall out back as she sipped on some iced tea on her break a few hours into her shift. She heard the door open, and Miranda appeared in the small yard. "So, you gonna tell me what's going on?"

"Sorry about the glasses," Delilah replied.

"Oh, please, I'm not talking about the glasses. I mean with you! Something's not right, you seem really on edge."

"Like I said, no sleep," Delilah lied again. "There's nothing else, really. I'll get an early night tonight and be right as rain tomorrow."

"I've just never seen you like this." Miranda obviously wasn't buying her pathetic excuse, but she couldn't bring herself to discuss what had happened that morning, for many reasons—one of them being that just speaking it out loud would make it more real. For now, Clark and his threats were just some words down the end of a cell phone, and that's how she liked to think of them.

She drank up her iced tea and got back to work, noticing how Miranda watched her as she went about her tasks. She could tell something was wrong, but clearly didn't know what to do about it. Delilah felt bad for lying and for not telling her what

was really going on, but for now, she just wanted to leave it be.

She was coming to the end of a busy shift when she smelled something familiar that was like a tonic for her soul. Inwardly she took a huge sigh of relief when Graham and Jude both walked in.

“Hey,” she said, approaching them as they took a seat in a small booth.

“Hey, yourself,” said Graham. “We haven’t heard from you, and your phone was switched off.”

“Oh, yeah, dead battery,” she lied. Again. How many times was that today?

“See, told you she was okay.” Jude chuckled. “You are okay, aren’t you? It’s just we called Miranda because we were worried, and she said you’ve been out of sorts all day today.”

Delilah looked over to Miranda who simply shrugged. It was useless thinking she could keep anything from these guys now. They’d smell it a mile off. Plus, she knew Miranda was only acting out of concern, and this was the alpha and beta after all.

“It’s just... I mean...” Delilah was all over the place, but she didn’t want to lose it, not here at her place of work.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Jude spoke softly and patted a nearby chair.

“Look, sit down for a minute.”

She did as he said, taking a seat next to Graham, already feeling the comfort and protection of having him close. She

finally felt like she could breathe and let down some of her guard, which she'd tried to keep up all day.

The relief was palpable, her body starting to relax for the first time since hearing Clark's voice that morning.

Opposite her, Jude was the picture of comfort and concern.

"So, what's bothering you?"

"There is something, but I just don't want to get into it here. Can we talk privately somewhere maybe?" They both looked at each other, as if registering her need.

"Course we can. How about you finish up here and then we take you out somewhere for dinner? Whatever's happened, we can figure this out," Graham assured her.

"What do you say? Can we take you out on a date—hopefully get your mind off whatever it is that's getting to you?" Jude was quick to agree.

She smiled, thinking about how great these guys were, so different to the men at Deacon Claw pack. Just being close to them like this made her feel safe, secure, and valued. The day had taken its toll, and she was tired and still feeling the effects of the fear Clark had instilled in her.

But seeing Graham and Jude had already helped to ease that tension and worry, even though she knew she still had a huge problem on her hands. "That would be great. I'd love to."

"No problem, nothing we can't sort out." Graham sounded so confident, and she hoped with everything she had it was true.



Chapter 16

Delilah

DELILAH, JUDE, AND GRAHAM spent some time deliberating where to go. They knew it should be somewhere private, so Delilah wouldn't be so afraid of anybody overhearing. At first, Delilah thought they might go to her apartment, but she didn't have much to eat, and Jude and Graham were both very hungry.

Ultimately, they settled on going to Jude's home. Graham complimented Jude's cooking abilities, and the taste of Jude's prime rib from the pack dinner still lingered in Delilah's mind. Jude humbly downplayed his culinary skills, but was glad to have guests nonetheless.

"Oh my god," Delilah marveled at how well-kept the place was. She ran her finger across a countertop and felt no trace of dust.

"Don't mind Jude," Graham said nonchalantly. "He's a bit of a neat freak."

“I have a lot of spare time, apparently,” Jude said simply, as he approached the kitchen.

She felt embarrassed of her own home, which though still empty was in shambles by comparison. She didn't mind having stray paperwork or a little clutter, but she knew that if she ever invited Jude over, she'd have to step up her game.

“What are you all hungry for?” Jude opened the refrigerator.

He groaned when he was met with nonchalance, as Graham sat down around the dining table, patting the chair beside him to encourage Delilah to sit down.

“Okay,” Jude spoke from the kitchen. “I have lobster ravioli and polenta. How's that sound?”

“Delicious,” Graham said simply.

“It's frozen, so you might have to deal with that. I can't make fresh pasta on such short notice...”

“I'm sure whatever you fix will be great.” Graham attempted to stop him from putting himself down anymore.

Jude nodded and then grabbed a pot from out of a cupboard to begin boiling some water.

Delilah couldn't help but admire Graham's physique as he stretched, now turning the news on at low volume. He took such great care of his body. Through the fabric of his form-fitting dress shirt, Delilah could make out every detail of his trim abdomen.

“So...” Graham began, thankfully not noticing how thoroughly her eyes wandered over his body. “We’re all here now. What did you want to tell us?”

“Should we wait until Jude gets done in the kitchen?” Delilah asked.

“I can hear you just fine,” Jude assured her. “Out with it, doll.”

“Okay. Well... you know how I came from another pack?” Delilah hesitated. “And how my ex was kind of an asshole?”

“You might have mentioned it,” Graham’s sarcasm outweighed any hint of indifference.

“Okay. So, he just called me and said if I don’t turn myself in, he’s gonna come get me,” Delilah admitted.

Graham turned the television off. “Seriously? And you’re just mentioning this now?”

“I didn’t want to upset Miranda.” Delilah squirmed. “And besides that, we were really busy. Who knows who could overhear?”

“That seems a bit paranoid,” Jude spoke up from the kitchen, now dropping the frozen pasta into the pot.

“If you went through what I went through, you’d be paranoid too,” Delilah answered, feeling jittery.

“Okay, okay,” Graham tried to ease the tension. “You’re safe here. You know that. Right?”

“We’re not going to let anything bad happen to you while you’re on pack territory,” Jude added.

“I know that,” Delilah agreed, half-convincing herself. “It’s just... it was so scary hearing his voice again for the first time.”

“This guy really messed you up,” Graham growled.

Jude shot him a knowing look but remained quiet.

“What can we do to help?” Graham was quick to offer assistance.

“I’m terrified to even use my phone,” Delilah admitted. “I don’t know if he’s going to call or text me. Even if I block him, he’d still find a way. And I don’t even know if he’s tracking my phone.”

Jude shook his head, now mixing the polenta.

“He’d have to be pretty well-connected to do that,” Graham said. “I guess it’s possible but not likely.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Delilah asked.

Jude and Graham thought for a second. “Hey, Graham?” Jude said, still preparing the food. “I’ve got a few prototypes of the Fang Five in my bedroom, in the end table. It’s no good for testing anymore.”

“Gotcha,” Graham stood from the table.

Delilah followed him nervously as he entered a small, immaculate room, empty except for a bed, a lamp, and a few tables. He bent down to open the drawer, and Delilah admired the view, his firm and muscular legs complementing his hard ass.

He produced a phone that looked almost identical to his own and walked back into the hall, grinning slyly as he passed Delilah.

“All we have to do is get rid of the testing firmware and we can make this usable for you.” Graham made it sound so simple. “Give me your current phone as well and I’ll transfer everything over for you.”

She could hear the pot boiling in the kitchen and watched Jude multitasking, Graham mouthing to himself as he tapped the screen.

The phone rebooted.

“Done?” Delilah asked.

“Not by a mile,” Graham said. “Hold on just a minute, sweetheart. I’ll tell you when it’s ready.”

While Graham maneuvered through a series of screens and reboots, Delilah did her best to engage him in small talk. She couldn’t find much to talk to him about while he was distracted by the device, but she did find it funny how he kept mouthing nonsensical tech jargon while he worked.

Eventually, the phone rebooted with a satisfying startup noise. At nearly the same time, Jude emerged, carrying table settings followed by plates full of delicious-looking lobster ravioli covered in vodka sauce.

“Dinner is served,” Jude announced, as he sat at the table. At the same time, Graham handed her the phone, complete with all the old information from her other cell already preloaded.

“I did you the courtesy of already blocking the last incoming number from your old phone, just to be safe,” Graham told her.

“Thank you!” Delilah smiled, gratefully fiddling with it in her hands.

Jude got out several candles and lit them at the table. If he hadn’t been so skilled at reading the mood, she might have called it presumptuous. They smelled like vanilla and honeydew, two of Delilah’s favorite scents. She wondered how they knew.

She had a hard time believing that the ravioli was frozen. If Jude hadn’t told her, she wouldn’t have believed it. He explained, somewhat humbly, that he had altered the ravioli somewhat with some extra spices. He had also served it with some fresh steamed broccoli, which he had mixed in.

For the first time all day, Delilah felt truly at ease. Not once during the entire meal did Clark cross her mind. She knew he had no real way of tracking her now since Graham had basically scrapped the old phone for parts.

As Delilah ate, she couldn’t help watching Jude’s mouth. He had a very graceful, clean way of eating, and as she watched his lips curl around his fork, she imagined his mouth engulfing hers. She looked to Graham, who smiled almost knowingly, before she looked down at her plate.

The way Graham stared at her, his eyes never leaving her face even as she looked away, she could feel him peering into her

soul. She could see him undressing her with his eyes, and the weirdest part was, she really didn't mind it.

At the end of dinner, Jude took all their dishes, immediately rinsed them, and then cleaned up the kitchen before joining Graham and Delilah on the couch. She wasn't sure what to say to him, so she just kept playing with her phone.

But as Jude sat down, Graham finally broke the silence. "So, Jude and I were talking the other day, and I think he has a thing for you."

"Oh?" Delilah could feel her face going red as she kept scrolling through social media. Her heart fluttered uncontrollably, and she could feel her body heating.

"Yeah," Graham continued, probing in an obtuse way. "What do you think of that?"

"Pretty interesting," Delilah answered, unable to conceal her smile. She felt elated, but she knew what she had promised herself. She was never going to go out with either of them and risk hurting the other. They had become a huge part of her life.

Graham moved in, reaching for her phone before setting it on the coffee table. He looked her directly in the eyes, and she was unable to look away.

"Jude thinks I'm into you, too. And he's not wrong," Graham continued. "So, we wanted to ask you something."

Delilah looked between the two of them, nervously waiting for somebody to say something.

“We thought since we both like you, and we think you like both of us,” Jude paused for a moment, giving Delilah the chance to speak. She was too shaken to say anything.

“Maybe we could all go out together,” Graham finished. “God knows we’d do anything for you.”

Delilah was unable to keep the smile from her face. She felt completely giddy. As she smiled brightly, looking at both of them, Graham took the initiative, moving to embrace her cheek with his hand. She stared into his eyes, looking at the deep flecks of blue, green, and gold before he pressed his lips to hers, and she melted in his arms.

Life froze. She could see galaxies forming as she closed her eyes, and every nerve in her body vibrated. She couldn’t see what could possibly come next, but she almost didn’t care. His rough lips brushing against hers were intoxicating, and she could feel them overpowering her.

That was, until Graham moved back to the couch and nodded at Jude. Jude approached her, weaving his hands lightly through her bright hair before he kissed her neck and then moved his mouth gradually to her lips, holding her gently.

Where Graham’s kiss felt like being dominated, Jude’s felt like a dance. He moved against her lips, and then she moved against his, tongues cradling each other in succession. As she broke the kiss, Graham moved in, and the two of them both caressed her.



Chapter 17

Graham

GRAHAM WASN'T USED TO sharing, but when it came to Delilah it seemed like the most natural thing in the world. All he wanted to do was please her, in any and every possible way. He just had to listen to that drive, feeling like he'd burst if he didn't.

“Sweetheart, you know this is all down to you, yeah?” he asked, his hand buried in her blonde tresses. “If you're not ready for this, we can stop.”

“No, don't stop,” she breathed, her chest heaving as she struggled to contain her arousal. But he didn't want her to contain it. He wanted her to open it up to him and his beta. They'd make sure she was well looked after.

“Music to my ears,” murmured Jude, always the sweet talker. But Graham knew she didn't need to be talked around. She was ready and willing to give herself up to them. He could smell her desire. Everything about her said she was ready.

“I’ve never done—” she said.

“Shh,” Graham hushed her. “You’re in safe hands. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she said through deep, panting breaths.

“Do you trust us?” he continued.

“Yes... Yes, I do.”

“Good girl. That’s all we need to know. That’s all that matters, okay?”

She opened her eyes, searching his, and in them he saw her willingness to submit to him, to the both of them. She just needed to know they could be trusted with her. “Okay. I trust you, both of you. And I want this.”

“Now that’s music to my ears, too, sweetheart.” He smiled as he leaned in to her. She moaned into his mouth, the sensation and the fact that she was so turned on making him desperate to hear more.

“How about we take this to the bedroom,” Jude offered.

“What do you say, sweetheart?” Graham murmured. “Would you like that?” She stared up at him, her eyes soft, and said nothing, just gave a gentle nod. A small growl left his throat knowing she was theirs for the night, and he’d never felt so excited about being with a woman, even if it did include his beta.

He stood, aware of the pressing need to get rid of his pants that his hardness strained against.

“Come on,” he said, trying to dial down the alpha slightly so as not to intimidate her. It was more difficult than he thought it would be because deep down he’d never felt so much like one in his entire life.

It was like she brought out every alpha instinct in him—his veins almost buzzing with the sensations. Delilah reached out, and he took her hand in his, pulling her sharply to her feet and making her gasp. He held her tightly against him.

Jude stood, unbuttoning his shirt as he went about locking up for the night. He dimmed the lights completely, the only glow now coming from the flickering of the candlelight.

“You know, I’ve changed my mind,” Graham murmured. The look in her eyes seemed to be of disappointment, but she had nothing to worry about at all. Picking her up he carried her over to the thick-pile rug in front of the fireplace. “I think here is just perfect,” he said, placing her down in front of him.

“Now let’s get you out of these clothes.”

Slowly, he peeled her clothes from her, her scent becoming stronger the more naked and more aroused she became.

“Step out,” he ordered as her panties dropped to the floor.

Delilah did as she was told, her breath hitching when he trailed his hand across her lower belly.

Jude had settled on the floor, watching with a smile as she stood above him, his view of her a rear one as he rested against a chair. He was shirtless by now but still kept his jeans on, as if knowing that his alpha was calling the shots here.

Graham pulled off his shirt to join them both in their state of undress but kept his pants on, just like his beta, despite how hard he was. Tonight was about pleasuring her.

“Lie down,” he said, gesturing toward Jude on the floor. Jude opened his legs, his feet flat on the floor, and beckoned her down between them.

She settled against his chest, and he kissed the side of her face, moaning when he massaged her breasts and then pulled her nipples through his fingers. Graham couldn't control the growl any longer, the scent of her arousal now so strong it was like a delicious torture.

He dropped to his knees, taking her leg in his hand and placing soft kisses along the inside of it. She arched her back when he moved back down, his grip on her ankle firm as he trailed his tongue along the length of the sole of her foot before taking her toes, one by one, into his mouth.

“Oh god!” she cried as he flicked his tongue across them, sucking and teasing each of them with his lips.

“You like that, huh?” he said with satisfaction, placing her leg back down and repeating the motions with the other. He trailed his tongue across each nook and cranny of her foot and then her ankle, noticing how she reacted at each point and taking a mental note.

She whimpered when he flicked his tongue over the back of her knee. He was seeking out her most sensitive erogenous spots, determined to find them all and drive her wild, just like she was doing to him.

Between that and the attention from Jude, he knew she was so ready for what he was going to do next. Slowly, he moved closer to the apex of her thighs, her back quaking as she waited for his mouth on her pussy.

Her scent was driving him insane—sweet and floral—and he couldn't wait to taste her. But he also wanted to feel her, see how wet she was for him, and know what her most sensitive skin felt like on his fingers.

Slowly, he ran his fingers up the inside of her thigh, noticing the heat that was emanating from her. He glanced up at his beta, who looked on eagerly as if needing to know what she felt and tasted like and not able to wait to see her come.

“You're so wet,” Graham whispered against her skin as he gently slid three fingers up over her drenched sex. Her breath hitched, and she almost stopped breathing when he reached her sensitive spot, circling the engorged nub with his index finger.

It was more than he could take now, and he buried his head between her legs, spreading them widely so that he had the best access to her. She glistened below him, sweet and wet, crying out when his mouth finally met her flesh.

Writhing beneath him, he had to hold her legs to stop her from moving. Jude did the same, holding her firmly, teasing her nipples, and kissing the side of her face. For a moment she went quiet as he took her chin, twisting her face to his and kissing her deeply.

Nothing but the sounds of groans and lips lapping at skin filled the room, and Graham almost felt high with the scents that surrounded him. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said between mouthfuls of her, his face drenched with his sweat and her juices.

He looked up to see her neck exposed, Jude tipping her head back to trail kisses and hot licks across it. Her hair hung over him, and she was completely exposed to both of them, reveling in the pleasure they were giving her.

In that moment, Graham knew this was the right choice—everything about it felt so natural, so instinctive, like the three of them were made to be together. Nothing about this felt wrong or unnatural in any way.

Graham swallowed as he looked up at her, her golden hair like a halo, her toned body lit occasionally by the flickering flames. He was in awe at the trust she placed in them both by surrendering herself so completely.

Then he dipped his head once more between her legs, running a soft, flat tongue over her clit and needing to hear her scream, to taste her as she climaxed at his mouth. “Oh, Graham... Jude!” she panted, one hand in his hair, the other, reaching up to clasp the side of Jude’s head.

Graham could taste her pending orgasm, hear the thrum of her heart, her heated blood pumping furiously. A part of him wanted to tear off his pants, and take her right there, thrust into her so hard and deep until she was screaming his name.

Another time, he told himself. Because there would be another time, and he would get to do that, make no mistake. But for now, he and Jude needed to make sure she was satisfied in a way she'd never been before.

He rolled over her clit with his tongue, knowing she was almost there, her legs shaking, her body desperate for some release. Suddenly, a taste so sweet entered his system as her stomach began to convulse, her cries cutting into the night air as he gave it to her.

His lips were against her as she came at his mouth, screaming their names. He placed two of her fingers inside, wanting to feel her as she did, her flesh hot and quivering. He hooked them upward, stroking her and bringing her back to the brink, extending her pleasure for his pleasure. *Their* pleasure.

“That’s it,” he said, kissing her stomach as she lay completely spent, wrapped up in him and Jude. “Like I said, you can trust us.”



Chapter 18

Delilah

DELILAH THOUGHT BACK ON the past day, her mind full of euphoria and conflict. She could still feel the sensation of being embraced by Jude and kissed by Graham. She couldn't believe what had happened, finally... that she had been seen by somebody wholly for who she was and not for what she offered or looked like.

No, not just valued by somebody—she was valued by two men, who were capable of caring for her simultaneously, noncompetitively, and selflessly. She was cared for by two men, who she could feel in her gut, would lay down their lives for her and never betray her.

Her mind couldn't stop playing back the previous night. She remembered the smells of the vanilla candles as Graham and Jude embraced her in tandem. She remembered the sensations of the two men rubbing against her, caressing her skin.

But with her recollections of the previous night, which never stopped, she also remembered her reason for meeting with

Graham and Jude in the first place. She remembered *his* voice—the true reason she had run away and come to the city.

He was her captor and her lover. He was everything she hated, and everything she had once loved. She remembered his threats and the bile he spat. She remembered her imprisonment. And then she felt cold and hollow, and she wanted to crawl back into the corner she had worked so hard to escape from.

She wanted to be strong and fight for herself as well as for Miranda, Jude, and Graham. But a part of her was still buried deep, a part which remembered life before this place. It threatened to unravel everything.

She couldn't let that part of her win.

So even as she wanted to savor the sensations of the night before and let them envelop her, she needed to keep moving. It was her day off, and she wasn't going to spend it longing for a perfect moment on the edges of her memory, even as she fought back the trauma in the nooks of her mind.

She picked up the phone and called Miranda.

“Hello?” She heard the ambient noises of the cafe, of pouring coffee and idle conversations among strangers.

“Hey, Miranda,” Delilah said. “When you get off, do you want to hang out?”

“You haven't been letting me in. Are you finally ready to talk? What happened yesterday.”

“You get off in about an hour?” Delilah asked. It had been a late night, not that she was complaining. She had fallen asleep in the small hours of the morning.

“That seems about right,” Miranda answered. “Why don’t I meet you outside the teahouse, and we can have that girl’s day we always talked about?”

Miranda hung up. Delilah had a hard time finding the right clothes for the occasion, her head still spinning. She eventually settled on a light-yellow sundress with a brown straw hat.

She sat outside the teahouse waiting for Miranda, watching birds flutter by as the wind chimes spun with the gentle breeze. She appreciated that even as her life was changing rapidly on so many fronts, nature moved at the same pace as it always did. She took time to enjoy the tranquility, and then turned to watching other shifters move into and out of shops, each absorbed by their own victories and fretting over their own worries.

“So, where to first?” came Miranda’s familiar voice from somewhere behind her.

She spun around and saw her friend in an adorable pair of brown overalls hanging loosely over a yellow tee. It was definitely a youthful look, but Miranda had a way of making every style work.

Delilah shrugged. “I thought you were gonna show me around.”

“Well, if I want to get you to talk, the spa’s probably the best idea,” Miranda said.

The small but luxurious spa was just off the Fang District, tucked away in a corner near the main drag. They stayed in the sauna for twenty minutes before heading to get manicures and pedicures. She felt a perfect combination of vulnerability and serenity as she finally began to truly feel relaxed with her friend..

“So, what the hell was up with you yesterday?” Miranda asked bluntly.

“Oh. My ex called,” Delilah said.

That problem felt miles away. Miranda looked shocked at this revelation. “No way!” she cried. “What did he want?”

“To come here and abduct me.”

Miranda stared back at her wide-eyed, trying to figure out if she was serious. Delilah chuckled at Miranda’s bewilderment, even though in another world, without this afternoon and last night, she would probably be weeping.

“Abduct you?”

“Yep.” Delilah laughed to ease the tension.

“Is that like a figure of speech?” Miranda raised her eyebrows.

“No, he... actually saw me as his property.” Delilah sighed.

“As soon as we broke up, I was simply a disposable commodity for his pack.”

Miranda worded her sympathies carefully. Delilah could see her walking on eggshells. “Well, you know... at least it’s no major loss. He sounds like a huge asshole.”

Delilah nodded. “I’m glad I didn’t end up with him and all, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt.”

Miranda offered a consoling nod.

“He locked me up before I ran away,” Delilah continued. “He was actually going to sell me to another pack.”

At this point, the pedicurist had to remind Miranda to remain still. She nearly leapt to her feet, unable to contain herself.

“Like as a slave or something?” She was practically screaming. “Delilah, you’ve got to tell Jude and Graham! I can only do so much for you.”

“Oh, they know,” Delilah said before adding more at the puzzled expression on Miranda’s face. “Not about the being sold as a peace offering part. They *cannot* know that.”

“Why the hell not?” Miranda asked. “If you’re not going to tell them, I am. I can’t—”

“No.” A sense of severity finally returned to Delilah, the urgency of her secret finally grounding her. “Listen. You can’t tell them. That’s my story to tell.”

Miranda considered her words carefully. “Listen, if your pack comes back to get you, and they kidnap you? There’s not anything I can do.”

“Miranda, relax!” Delilah urged her. She took her phone out of her purse and held it up. “Graham and Jude already wiped my

phone and got me a new one. They've got no way of tracing me."

Upon seeing the look of persistent concern and gloom on Miranda's face, Delilah added, "I'm going to tell them the rest of it. You just have to give me a bit, let me find the right time."

Miranda gave her a sideways glance. "You're awfully calm about this."

"Well, you know, I've got you here now," Delilah said, partly hoping she would catch on.

"No..." Miranda added. "There's something else you're not telling me."

Delilah grinned, blushing in spite of herself.

"What happened last night?" Miranda asked. "Did you... did they *kiss* you?" Delilah shook her head, still grinning widely. "Holy crap!" Miranda shouted. "You—with *them*? And you're hanging out with me instead of being back at their apartment?"

"You know how they are," Delilah said. "They've got a business to run. And I've got too much on my mind to hang out at either of their apartments."

"I guess I get that?" Miranda finally added. "Still. I'm honored."

"Honored?" Delilah asked.

"Yeah. Even with all this going on, of all the people you could be spending your day with, you chose me."

Delilah flashed a grin in return. She felt safe around Graham and Jude, but being around Miranda felt so natural. She felt somehow like she'd known her forever. She enjoyed the peace of the moment, but she knew it was fleeting. As she tried to hold on to it and treasure it, she could feel it slipping through her fingers, like grains of sand in a toppled hourglass.

Delilah could feel Miranda dragging the day on, but she didn't mind. They returned to the Fang District, spending time in almost every shop they hadn't already visited earlier. Delilah got a better look at the boutique but had the most fun at the thrift shop. She loved looking at pieces of nostalgia from her childhood and marveling at the technology she was a bit too young to remember.

As she cycled through old clothing pieces on the rack, Miranda explained how she had stumbled into the city too, setting to escape her overbearing family and carve out her own legacy. She hadn't really intended to become a waitress, but she had found she enjoyed it. And for now, that was enough.

Miranda's last big idea came as a bit of a surprise. Delilah got into her car without any idea where they were going. When they started seeing trees and open fields she realized they had reached the countryside. Delilah was extremely confused and couldn't hide her puzzlement.

"Don't worry," Miranda said, looking away from the road. There were almost no cars out here, and the sun was starting to set. "I know the perfect way for you to let out some of your aggression."

They arrived at a large log cabin, standing alone and surrounded on all sides by trees and meadow. Outside were a few trucks, but otherwise, it seemed pretty desolate.

“Follow me,” Miranda said, smiling as she opened the car door.

Delilah was starting to feel uneasy. She trusted Miranda, but she wasn't sure why she'd taken her so far out from the city. Above her and to the right, she made out the sign of a business, which was too faded to read.

As she stepped inside, Delilah was immediately greeted with the reason for their visit. A small family and a few guys all stood in their own booths, wielding axes that they threw at wooden walls.

“Ever been axe throwing?” Miranda asked. “It's a great way to unleash your aggression.”

Miranda paid for thirty minutes for each of them. At first, Delilah was afraid of the axes, but after a trainer came around at Miranda's behest to give her some pointers, Delilah learned the correct way to throw.

Soon, she was tossing axes with abandon, and with each throw and think of the axe hitting the target she felt her stresses unburden.

It was a truly great way to vent her frustrations.



Chapter 19

Jude

IT HAD BEEN A magical night, but Jude and Graham were both grateful when Delilah didn't object to their abrupt exits that morning. They had told her they both had busy days at the office, and as far as she knew, that was completely true.

Everybody at Fang Tech had been instructed to play dumb if she showed up and to act as if they were in, working a full day. Jude hated lying to Delilah about it, but she would appreciate it later.

“Miranda didn't even have to push,” Graham said, scoffing lightly as he helped blow up balloons. “Delilah called her after she woke up anyway.”

Jude was relieved. There were a lot of variables to this and so many ways it could go wrong. And it seemed like, for once, everything was working out.

But they had to give her the best birthday they could. She'd had plenty of stressors this year. This was their opportunity to

ensure her new year started off on a better foot. It was their chance to shield her from her past.

They had set up Delilah's birthday party in the Fang District's plaza, and they had gotten everybody from both packs to participate. Dozens of shifters sat at wooden tables, some still blowing up balloons despite Graham's insistence that they had enough. Yellow, blue, and white balloons filled the tavern, coasting lightly across the floor, bouncing over tables, and colliding with the bar's brick ceiling.

They had brightened up the place as much as they could, but the tavern was still mostly lit by firelight from lanterns, candles, and one large roaring fireplace.

"She should be here any minute," Graham said to everybody in the room. "Get ready!"

Everybody watched the stairwell, waiting for the sound of the entryway opening. It was unnaturally tense for such a joyous occasion. Jude just hoped they could make her feel safe and get her mind off of what had happened only the day before.

The entryway opened, and as coordinated, Jude saw a billowing sundress descending the stairwell, with Miranda tailing behind as rehearsed.

With a loud shriek, a rogue party horn filled the silence. Jude could see the irritation on Graham's face. He hated party horns and had tried to confiscate them all.

"Surprise!" they all yelled.

Delilah's jaw dropped as she looked across the room, not saying anything. She found an empty chair, looking out across the room. At first, Jude was terrified that she hated the party as Miranda hovered behind her expectantly.

"My god." Delilah scanned the room, her gaze landing on every person as tears welled in her eyes.

Panicking, Jude advanced toward her, Graham following not far behind. Everybody in the room watched Delilah while Jude, Graham, and Miranda all found seats around her.

"I don't know what to say," Delilah whispered.

"Are you okay?" Jude caught himself asking.

Delilah's lips curled upward into a smile, but it was a gradual change. "I'm so happy." She looked down at the place setting on the table in front of her.

"She likes it!" Graham hollered to the crowd.

Delilah forced herself up, and voice cracking, she loudly announced to the room, "Thank you all so much!"

The room applauded. Jude could see Delilah looking at the extravagant display of wrapped gifts on the farthest table, near one of the tavern's side rooms. Later, she'd get a better look at the cake.

Jude was looking forward to that. He had worked hard to prepare it.

"I'm sorry," Delilah said quietly, as the room advanced into its own series of unrelated discussions. "I guess I'm still a bit

shaken up from yesterday.”

“That’s okay!” Graham said enthusiastically. “I get it.”

Delilah meekly smiled. “Did the three of you prepare all of this?” Delilah asked, now looking distantly at the gathered crowd.

“Well, obviously, everybody pitched in,” Graham assured her. “But Jude prepared tonight’s dinner, and I was in charge of the decorations.”

She looked up at the banner, bearing the words “Happy Birthday Delilah!” in gold lettering, and then she took in all the balloons that filled the room. She couldn’t stop smiling.

“They’re lovely,” Delilah murmured, tears clouding her eyes. “In all my years at the other pack, nobody ever threw me a party like this.” She corrected herself. “Nobody ever threw me a party, at all.”

“That’s pretty sad.” Jude grimaced sympathetically.

“How did you know?” Delilah asked. “I didn’t think I ever even told anybody.”

“You told me, silly,” Miranda said. “During your shifts at the cafe.”

“I did? I don’t remember doing that...”

“I could have just cheated and looked at your application, but I kind of subtly snuck it in.” Miranda fiddled with one of her braids. “I was able to figure it out when you told me your star

sign, and that you were born on the third Friday of the month. I tried to draw it out so you wouldn't get suspicious."

"And we just looked at your social media profile," Graham confessed.

Miranda stared at him, looking betrayed.

"Yeah," Jude admitted. "We knew before you told us. Sorry."

As the night wore on, Delilah's mood lightened. Jude got the impression that maybe the surprise had startled her more than she let on. But thankfully, she became more receptive through the evening.

At first, Graham got out a game of Twister, and he, Delilah, Miranda, and Jude all played together. Jude hadn't realized how flexible Miranda was, and she ultimately won the game. He suspected that Delilah had thrown the game, though.

Then, they all sat together and played Truth or Dare. It had been Graham's idea because Delilah had mentioned having fond memories of high school party games, but the truths were all relatively inconsequential, and the dares were pretty tame. Jude could see the frustration on Graham's face, having expected something more taboo.

The utter realization of how terrible the game had gone crossed Graham's face. The most exciting thing to happen had been Dakota admitting to being terrible with finances while Sarah nodded along in agreement. Jude couldn't help laughing at Graham's irritation. In response, Graham playfully punched him in the ribs, causing Jude to guffaw while trying to catch

his breath. Delilah had seemed bored by the game but was delighted by the spectacle, giggling uncontrollably.

In the gift exchange, Delilah received a useful organizer and journal, small but necessary things for her kitchen and the rest of her apartment, as well as several more fragrances, a new tablet from Graham, a large set of cooking utensils and spices from Jude, and a year of gym membership from Dakota and Sarah. She was incredibly grateful for everything and seemed to be scrolling through social media, taking note of everybody's birthdays in response. She seemed to be using her new phone even more than her old one.

Dinner was a pot roast Jude had prepared with sides of baked potatoes and macaroni. It was simple enough, but it was Delilah's favorite meal. Then it was time to cut the cake, and Jude couldn't have been happier at Delilah's reaction. She seemed genuinely delighted and amazed by it.

"Holy wow!" she exclaimed. "Did you seriously make this?"

Jude nodded, cutting her off the first slice. For the cake, Jude had prepared a copy of the Bean Me Up diner's menu cover, even custom ordering edible toppers. He had ordered the cake in vanilla with blue and yellow buttercream frosting, which he had found out was her favorite through an intensive trawl through her social media profiles.

Then while some of the shifters stayed back and watched John Hughes movies on the tavern television, Jude, Graham, Delilah, and Miranda, along with several other shifters, all went to Fang Park. The full moon wasn't for several weeks

still, having just passed, but Graham had wanted a mini gathering at the park regardless.

For about an hour, they traversed the paths around the park in human form as Jude caught Delilah gazing longingly across the pond's surface, and Miranda seemed bothered by something. Graham tried asking her what was wrong, but she pretended everything was fine, despite being noticeably more silent than usual.

When Graham was certain that nobody else had wandered in, having walked a good deal of the park on foot, he remotely locked the gates.

Everybody nodded. Jude could sense some renewed apprehension in Delilah at the mention, but they all found a park shelter and stripped off their clothing before running back into the park, dashing under the diminished light of the moon.

Jude and Graham both stayed close again, trailing Miranda and Delilah. Jude wondered if she felt liberated. Graham had moved the location of the party from the diner to the Fang District at the last minute on a hunch, hoping that it might ease Delilah's mind. He hoped that none of the thoughts that had plagued her entered her shifted mind. He hoped that for those couple of hours, she felt pure joy.

He knew he couldn't protect her from the real world forever, and that as much as he tried to defend her, it was up to her to fight her past. He hoped that in here, her ghosts would never bother her directly, that the battles she waged would remain purely psychological.

When they regained their human form, and Delilah bade Miranda goodbye under the light of the stars, Jude and Graham stayed behind. “Did you enjoy your party?” Graham asked her. They had found a couple benches to lie upon, and Delilah curled up on top of Graham, gazing up at the night sky. Jude sat, his back pressed up against the bench, as Delilah caressed his face.

“That was amazing,” she said blissfully. She seemed sorry that she had to return home, but she had work to get back to tomorrow. She gave Jude and Graham both a passionate parting kiss.

Jude hoped Delilah got to a place where she could truly call the city home. He hoped that all of her days there were as peaceful as this one.



Chapter 20

Graham

GRAHAM LEFT THE OFFICE energized. Deciding to walk home, he pulled up Jude's number and called him, tapping his fingers against his leg impatiently. It rang twice.

"Jude Sable, Techy Things."

"Please tell me that's not how you answer the phone with clients."

Jude snorted. "Of course not. Just you."

"Can I ask why?"

"No. Why did you call?" Jude always knew how to ruffle Graham's feathers. It was usually only mildly annoying, but when he had such important news to deliver, it was excruciating.

Reminding himself that some things were more important than communicating his frustration, Graham took a deep breath.

"We landed it! We got the contract!"

"Which one?"

Graham was losing his patience. “What do you *mean*, which one? *The* one! Wriston Investments—we got it!” Satisfied to finally hear a whoop on the other end, he imagined Jude fist-pumping and smiled.

“Where are you now? Let’s celebrate!”

“Maybe later. I’m headed home to wrap up some stuff. I got a cryptic call from another alpha and it might take a while to sort out. Plus, I’ve still got to call Delilah with the news.”

“Sounds like you’ve got your hands full. I can call Delilah,” Jude offered.

Graham sighed with relief. “Would you? Just loop me in on the plans.”

“Sure! I’ll let you go. And hey!”

“What’s up?”

“Congratulations!”

Graham’s grin stretched across his face. “You too, man!” He hung up the phone as he reached the front door. After stepping inside, he opened his voicemail to play the message he’d received from the alpha who had contacted him earlier that day. His heart sank as soon as he heard the voice. “Alpha Grimmaw, this is Jonah Deacon. I need to speak with you at your earliest convenience. It’s about our plans.”

Graham laid his keys and jacket on the kitchen counter and sighed, rubbing his face with his hands. “Full moon. Why is it always on a full moon?” he muttered under his breath.

His mind raced with a million details from the contract he and Jude had landed with Wriston Investments. The firm was the largest in the region and arguably the most successful. It had taken the two of them months of work to establish contacts with the board of the firm and schmooze each of its members individually.

In the end, their work had paid off. No one had thought they'd be able to convince such a large corporation to let them handle all of their technological needs, but they had done it! Now they had to prove they hadn't bitten off more than they could chew.

On top of that, Graham had the full moon run and dinner to plan. He had delegated most of the preparatory responsibilities to other members of the pack, but he took a special pride in being fully present as the alpha. He had guests to make welcome.

Any and all of those things would have plenty to occupy his attention, but then there was the call from Jonah Deacon. Graham put a kettle on to boil and made a production of preparing a cup of tea. How he wished he could pretend the call had never come in and simply go celebrate with his friends.

The image of Delilah's version of friendship came to mind and his face grew warm. He made his way to his home office, but instead of switching on the computer to attend to administrative tasks or calling Jonah back, he swiveled his chair to the window.

Lifting the shades, he sat back in his chair as far as it would recline and looked out over the gardens. A couple of the members of his pack were out tending to the plants and harvesting what they would need for dinner. It was soothing—pastoral, even—and it warmed Graham’s heart.

He knew he couldn’t put off the phone call any longer. Taking a deep breath, he tried to get himself into a positive mood before dialing Alpha Deacon’s number. He disliked few things quite as much as speaking with him.

Jonah Deacon was exactly the kind of alpha that Graham aspired not to be. Controlling, deceptive, and self-important, he ruled his pack with an iron fist, holding them to a strict hierarchical structure and ensuring every member knew their place.

At times Graham regretted ever having made a deal with that guy. To be sure, there were definite advantages to the plan. Grimmaw pack would gain an alpha female, something they had never yet had. Still, engaging in business with Deacon almost made him feel dirty.

Finally finding the peace of mind necessary to retain his composure on the phone with someone he considered a cretin, Graham dialed the number. After a few rings, he allowed himself to hope that he was engaged in a game of phone tag and would have ample excuse to procrastinate the interaction further.

Much to his chagrin, Deacon picked up on the last ring. “Grimmaw,” he said perfunctorily.

“Deacon! I was surprised to receive your call. You said it was about the deal. You aren’t going to disappoint me. Are you?”
He kept his voice upbeat to veil his threat.

“I am.” *Well, damn.* Apparently, veiled threats didn’t work on someone like Jonah. “The deal is off.”

Graham waited for further information that wasn’t forthcoming. “That’s it?”

“What more do you want, an apology?”

This guy is such a piece of work, Graham thought for the umpteenth time. “Nooo.” He drew the word out, attempting to keep his voice even and give himself time to calm down.

“Something... of an explanation might be nice, however.”

“Like what? We had an arrangement and now we don’t. End of story. You might tell me what you plan to do now.”

Nothing ever prepared Graham for how infuriating it was to talk to that moron. He couldn’t understand how he had led a pack for as many years as he had. Then he remembered he led it through fear tactics.

“Deacon, I would love to understand where you’re coming from so I can reach a conclusion about how best to move forward.” His best diplomatic efforts fell on deaf ears.

“You only want to understand our motives so you can sniff out our weaknesses. That’s not going to happen.”

That conversation was more frustrating than any he could ever have imagined with Jude or even the most belligerent business contact. Business leaders could get hostile when they felt that

someone who didn't understand their passions was trying to edge them out of their corner of the market. Jude, on the other hand, would intentionally push his buttons because he thought it was fun to see Graham's collected exterior crack.

Even attempting to calm territorial pack leaders was usually easier than dealing with Jonah. He had accomplished many successful liaisons with his ally packs in the past but never one this important to him.

For a moment, he allowed himself to wonder what would happen if he couldn't get through to Deacon. He didn't often allow himself to consider failure as a possibility, but there may not be a choice in this matter.

"I don't know how to communicate to you that I'm not trying to attack you, Jonah. I truly wanted this deal to go through and I'm disappointed that it's not, but I was under the impression you needed it as well."

"Then you were mistaken. We were attempting to do a kindness for a smaller pack that was at a disadvantage, but there's been a change of heart."

Graham gritted his teeth. He didn't like being referred to as disadvantaged, especially by someone he barely knew. Who the hell did Deacon think he was dealing with? "Okay, but why the change of heart?"

Jonah was giving him nothing. "There was just a change of heart! That's all I can tell you!" he repeated, his tone escalating.

“Okay, I understand there was a change of heart, but whose?” Graham allowed him to lead the conversation in circles for a minute or two more, hoping to glean any iota of information about who Deacon had been planning to give to the Grimmaw pack, and who didn’t want her to go—and why. He got nowhere.

Inevitably, the insults grated on Graham’s nerves to the point that he could take it no longer. The tedium of crafting inane responses just to pump for more information became too much and he exploded.

“Alpha Deacon!” he exclaimed. “I won’t allow you to insult me further. You’ve proven yourself to be a complete waste of time and energy. Goodbye.” He hung up.

Almost simultaneously, he heard his front door slam. Rubbing his forehead to ease his blooming migraine, he stepped quickly down the stairs, taking note of the basket in the kitchen with a sinking heart.

He hoped Delilah hadn’t heard that conversation. Generally speaking, he didn’t mind it when people discovered his flaws because he had made his peace with them. Something about Delilah, though, made him want to present his best side at all times.

If she had heard the contents of his argument with Jonah, she would not have seen his best side. Allowing a rival alpha to verbally drag him on the stupidest of wild goose chases was not what he wanted her to see when they should be celebrating the company’s victory.

He opened the door to find a dumbstruck Jude standing on the stoop. “Was that Delilah?” he demanded. Jude confirmed it with a nod and Graham could feel his headache getting worse.

Why does everything always happen on a full moon?



Chapter 21

Delilah

DELILAH BREATHED DEEPLY, RELEASING the stress of the day before opening the door. She held a basket of baked goods on one arm that had been hard-won and the taxi ride over had been less than pleasant.

She had heard from Jude, that Graham and Jude had won a major client for the company, someone they had put a lot of time and effort into locking down. Wanting to do something nice for the men, she had called an order into a bakery for a special treat.

What she hadn't known at the time was that the particular bakery she had chosen for its proximity to the cafe was also a business rival. The baker who answered the phone recognized the number and had decided to take matters into his own hands.

When she arrived at the bakery to pick up her treat basket, nothing had been what she ordered. Raisins instead of chocolate chips, names misspelled—it was a royal mess! She

was just glad she had looked at everything closely before walking out the door.

The baker had argued with her when she demanded a refund until she threatened to leave a scathing review, at which point she got her money back and took her business elsewhere.

Unfortunately, by the time she had her order filled at a different shop, she was frazzled, and it was too late to walk to pack territory and make it by the time she had planned.

Baked goods finally in hand, Delilah had quickly hailed a cab, and called Jude to ask him to meet her at Graham's place.

While she'd been speaking to Jude, the cab driver had misunderstood her directions and somehow got lost in the relatively short amount of time it should have taken him to drive to her destination.

After getting the driver back on track and haggling over the cab fare, Delilah was hot and frazzled, looking forward to a relaxing afternoon with Graham and Jude. The air was close and it smelled like rain. Maybe they could make some tea and curl up with her basket of cakes and pastries to watch the storm for a while.

Knowing the door would be open, she entered without announcing herself. She had planned to get the treats set up in the kitchen before anyone noticed her presence hoping to have it ready before Jude arrived.

No one seemed to be in the house at the moment. *Good*, she thought as she wandered from room to room. The place

smelled heavily of Graham, but that was to be expected in his own house. She didn't detect Jude's presence at all.

Stepping back into the kitchen to lay out everything, she set the basket on the countertop and paused. She distinctly heard men's voices through the hallway, Graham's and one she couldn't place.

For a reason she couldn't name, she was suddenly on high alert. She couldn't smell the presence of a second male shifter, or even a human man, so Graham must be using the speakerphone. That in and of itself wasn't a problem, but the other voice had a ring to it that made her blood run cold.

Delilah left the kitchen and followed the voice through the house and up the stairs. Graham had never kept anything from her before, had never told her there was anywhere in his home that she was unwelcome, but she suddenly felt herself a trespasser.

She edged down the hallway as quietly as possible, knowing that Graham was one of the best hunters she had ever met and that he would surely hear or smell her long before she approached.

When nothing happened, she listened to the voices again. The voice that wasn't Graham's bothered her until she felt as if ants were crawling under her skin. She wanted to claw at herself until they popped out, but no amount of scratching could satisfy the itch in her brain.

Inching her way toward Graham's office, she noticed for the first time how perturbed the voices were. Maybe that was why

the wolf with the keenest senses she'd ever seen had missed her presence in his home.

Peeking in through the partially open office door, she saw Graham's slim form standing next to his desk. He was, indeed, on the phone. The handset was in its cradle and the speakerphone was on, which explained the volume and clarity of the second voice.

Graham's posture spoke of his tension. He was standing, but he had both hands on his desk as he leaned his weight into his upper body. His head hung over the phone and his eyes were closed.

"Okay, I understand that there was a change of heart, but whose?" Graham was saying.

"I don't see how that's relevant," the voice replied. Those words, the formality, the hedging, the tone, the timbre—they were all so familiar, but they seemed so out of place that she couldn't put her finger on who they belonged to.

Graham released a sigh of frustration, drawing himself to his full height and rubbing his face with both hands. He tapped his foot as if using his full concentration to rein in his emotions before they got the better of him.

"It's relevant..." he began slowly. "Because I like to be thorough. Was the change of heart yours or that of the female in question?"

Female in question? It sounded like much more than a business deal. Graham was usually able to handle himself

better in a business deal.

“Look, the point is that the deal is off. I don’t like to have my motives questioned, and I don’t like to be accused of withholding information.” The combative and evasive quality of the voice had Delilah so on edge she could feel the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

Graham pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “No one is accusing you of anything, Jonah,” he ground out between his teeth. “I simply want to know what happened, and I don’t understand why that’s such a bad thing. We had a deal and you can’t just call it off.”

Delilah’s scalp prickled as her blood turned to ice. Her throat began to close, and her breathing grew shallow and labored. The tips of her ears felt hot as her vision swam. Jonah. She knew exactly where she had heard that voice before, as well as why it was so difficult to place.

That voice had no business there. In fact, she had been beginning to think she would never have to hear it again as long as she lived. Why should it crop up there, right then, exactly when she was letting her guard down and finding a new way of life—one she actually enjoyed with people she actually cared about?

Jonah Deacon was the last person someone like Graham Grimmaw should be talking to, but there he was doing exactly what he wasn’t supposed to with a voice that Delilah was never supposed to hear again. *How could this happen?*

Before she could decipher what deal Graham could possibly have made with a cretin such as Jonah, it came over the phone loud and clear. “You’ll do what you have to do, Grimmaw,” Jonah leered. “We both know you’re not the kind of man who would have honored the terms of the peace offering, anyway.”

What the hell? It was her. It was him. She was the female in question, he was the alpha they had been about to sell her to. Everything fell into place like the click of a revolver being held to her temple.

The intensity of emotion that ran through her following her revelation was the bullet. It crashed through her, tearing at her mind and heart in ways she had never thought possible. This was worse than anything Clark could ever have done to her, even if she had stayed with him.

Before she could hear any more words, before that cursed phone could spew forth any more vomitous lies, she turned and ran. She thought she heard Graham call after her, but she didn’t care. She had to leave that horrible place before it wreaked further havoc on her psyche.

“Delilah?” Jude caught her wrists as she hurtled into his chest rounding a corner. He chuckled at their mishap and then looked into her eyes. “Delilah. What’s wrong?” he asked urgently.

She looked up into his dark, dark eyes and realized that if she could get lost in them, the truth could, too. What if he was mixed up in all of it? What if he knew the whole thing? Would he tell her? Would he try to hide it?

Deciding she didn't want to swallow any more lies—or truths, for that matter—Delilah broke free of his grasp and ran through the kitchen, down the hallway, and out the door onto the bustling avenue.

The passing crowds that had been a mere inconvenience only minutes before became positively hostile to Delilah's harried mental state. She couldn't think what to do or where to go. Her path became blocked by places she couldn't go and things she didn't want to do.

Well, I sure as hell can't stay here.

That thought finally broke the roots holding her feet to the sidewalk. She turned right, then left, then left again, and after that she lost track. She lost all thought and care of where she was or where she was going.

When she came to herself again, she had walked full circle back to Graham's place. Realizing that the only place she wanted to be was with the people who had the potential to hurt her the most, and knowing that she couldn't handle hearing why, Delilah ran away.



Chapter 22

Jude

JUDE PEERED INTO GRAHAM'S home, sensing Delilah and Graham somewhere in the vicinity but not hearing any dialogue. On the counter in the kitchen, he saw a basket of baked goods, covered in Delilah's scent. She'd been carrying the basket around for some time. He was so grateful to have her in his life. She had always been so generous despite having so little.

"A cookie won't hurt," Jude said, grinning to himself as he grabbed a chocolate chip from the basket. This wasn't the first time Delilah had brought baked goods by the house, so he understood the gesture.

Then something else caught his attention, and it made the hairs on his neck pluck upward. It felt so familiar—so urgent—but he couldn't place this feeling.

He trudged up the stairwell to Graham's home office, eager to discuss launch plans for their new cooking app. The past few

weeks had been quite uneventful, but he was glad to spend time with Delilah and Graham in peace.

As he rounded the corner, just before reaching Graham's office, he got a better impression of what he had sensed in the kitchen. Fear? Panic? It was a little bit of everything. The air had filled suddenly with a swath of emotions so negative it was burdensome. He could feel the stress chemicals filling out the house, and his immediate reaction was to run.

But before he could better process these secondhand emotions, a familiar mass collided with him. The collision barely affected him physically, but as he got a glimpse of Delilah's emotional state, he was overwhelmed. He instinctively reached out, grabbing her wrists.

Her breathing was rapid, her pupils dilated, and her forehead covered in sweat. It reminded him of seeing her back at the cafe when they had first formally met.

"Delilah?" Jude attempted to meet her gaze, her eyes darting frantically around the room. He could already feel himself losing her, but he still had to try and engage her. "Delilah? What's wrong?"

Her eyes finally met his, and for a moment, he thought maybe he had connected with her. Then her eyes clouded over, and her expression became blank. She had completely shut down at this point.

In an instant, he could feel her body going limp. She slipped between his fingers, and before he could process what was

happening, she had darted down the stairwell and was slamming the door downstairs.

Jude's legs moved before his brain. He almost hurtled down the stairs as he lost his footing but caught himself on the banister. He flung the front door open, staring out over the bustling streets.

He tried to get a sense of direction from the overwhelming emotions he had experienced—tried to make sense of the converging crowds on the pavement—but it was hopeless. He collapsed on the stoop, feeling utterly helpless.

Upon seeing Graham standing above him, he could almost feel his senses returning. He was still overtaken by Delilah's emotions. They *screamed* at him. They were so strong, in fact, that they had become his own emotions.

“Was that Delilah?” Graham leaned down, putting his hand on Jude's shoulder. Jude nodded, still trying to gather his senses. “Well, what are you doing sitting here? We've gotta find her!” Graham attempted to urge Jude to his feet.

“You didn't see her, man,” Jude said. “She's spooked. It's like the first day we met her.” Jude could see the cogs in Graham's mind working. “What the hell did you say to her?”

Graham took a defensive stance, firmly planting his feet. “I didn't say anything at all. I was just making a phone call.”

“Deacon Claw?” Jude asked. There were few things Graham had complained and fretted over more than talking to Jonah Deacon. It had weighed heavily on his mind.

“How did you know?”

“For the past few weeks, it’s been all you talk about. Did you finally figure it out?”

“We can talk about it later,” Graham said urgently, surveying the city street. “But, no. I didn’t.”

“That’s probably fine,” Jude said. He watched Graham desperately scrutinizing the faces walking on the pavement. “You’re not going to find her that way. She’s long gone.”

“She’s fast,” Graham agreed. He glanced down and analyzed Jude’s appearance. “Jesus, you’re a mess.”

“And you aren’t? Why, exactly?”

“Pick yourself up, man,” Graham said, extending a hand.

Jude took it and stood up, lifting himself from his feet. He could still feel the unpleasant vibrations coursing through her body, nearly knocking him backward. “We’re going to find her, and we’re gonna bring her home.”

Jude nodded. His senses eventually returned to him, and they motivated him to move aimlessly, pacing about the pavement while Graham spoke to himself.

“Where do we know she might be?” Graham asked rhetorically. “We should probably try her apartment first and then maybe the cafe?”

“Good thoughts,” Jude said. His purpose was probably to be more of a wall to bounce ideas off of than anything, but it didn’t hurt to interject. “Maybe the park?”

“If she were really trying to get away from us, would she actually go to a place we frequent so often?”

“Could be she doesn’t really want to get away from us. Maybe she just needs space,” Jude said. It sounded ludicrous to him, given what he had experienced just minutes ago, but it was what his gut told him.

“The way she slammed that door and ran away? The way you’re looking?”

By now, Graham knew him well enough to know he was a sponge for negative emotions. It made him great with empathy but not so great in tough situations.

Jude just shrugged before adding, “We could save ourselves a trip to the cafe if we just texted Miranda.”

Graham nodded, getting out his phone as he started walking.

“Where are you going?” Jude asked. “I thought we were headed to her apartment?”

On the way, Jude jabbed at Graham for living so far away from the pack sector. He even proposed that they should maybe just take the car. But it was rush hour. If they left now, there was no way they were going to catch up to her.

As they walked, Jude noticed so many things that didn’t seem right. The newsstand had been left completely unattended.

Around the nearby benches, where pigeons normally gathered to eat their helping of breadcrumbs, there were neither birds nor elderly couples.

They arrived at her apartment, grateful to have been given a set of keys, to find nothing. She hadn't hung her jacket or uniform up—there were no signs that she'd been here at all. Graham received a concerned text from Miranda, saying that she hadn't seen or heard from Delilah since she left work, but that she would let them know if she heard anything.

“Well, I'm about out of ideas,” Graham said, pausing to put his hand on his lower lip.

“Seriously?”

“I mean, I guess we could double back and check all the shops,” Graham added, not noting Jude's incredulity. “We could start with the grocery store, but I almost think she'd avoid places she'd run into—”

“Or she's not trying to avoid us at all,” Jude said. “She's not thinking rationally, and she knows that. Right now, she's running on pure adrenaline.”

“Okay,” Graham added, still unsure what Jude meant.

“So I keep telling you, where's the one place Delilah's likely to run when she's feeling totally lost and just wants to hide?”

“I thought we eliminated the park,” Graham said.

“You did. I still think it's the only possible place she'd be.”

Graham analyzed Jude again. Graham was great at understanding diplomacy, but when it came to the finer sentiments, he was lost in their nuances. He was too good at removing himself from the stakes and emotions and cutting straight to the point.

“Okay,” Graham said. “We’ll try it your way. But compromise? We’ll take my car.”

“That’s going to take way too long, you know?” Jude said.

“We’re already here.”

“I get that,” Graham replied. “But suppose we get to the park and she’s not there? Suppose we need to scour the streets?”

Jude hesitantly agreed. He was mentally exhausted at this point, and it was starting to physically tire him out. So they followed the long path back, returning to Graham’s house to collect his vehicle.

They were quiet on the way there. Jude could feel, in snippets, Graham’s anxiety, as a little of it slipped through his normally cool demeanor. “We’re gonna find her,” Jude said.

But by the time they were riding in the car, Jude had started to worry that they’d lost her entirely. What if she’d gone back to her apartment, grabbed her stuff, and simply left town? What if his instincts weren’t correct?

Traffic was nightmarish, but Jude was still glad they hadn’t taken the car initially. He watched the passing scenery, remembering the time they’d spent with Delilah at each of the businesses.

As they passed Mario’s, he remembered the initial call he’d received from an insistent Graham. He remembered tailing her to the stoplight, and for an instant, he was filled with hope. If he could run into her then, with so many odds stacked against them, surely they’d be able to find her now.

As he steeled himself with confidence, the world looked a little less bleak. He was certain they were going to find her, and failing that, that she'd find her way home.

Looking at Graham was like looking at a cracked mirror. He could see Graham's own mind filling with doubt. Jude even thought he might have sensed a little guilt in him—for what, he wasn't sure.

When they finally pulled up to the Fang District, and the park's outward-facing entrance, Jude could feel a familiar sensation clouding over him. "She's here."



Chapter 23

Delilah

DELILAH COULD FEEL THE jolt in her knees as the soles of her sneakers hit the pavement. Walking on the park path that would lead her into the forest, she considered her next move even as she tried not to think about the events that had led her there. How could they do this to her?

Graham was such a traitor! He had been trying to buy her off her old pack this whole time! How could she be so stupid?

She hoped Jude wasn't in on the deal, but she hadn't been able to anticipate Graham's involvement, so who knew how low they were willing to stoop? It was possible that they both knew everything—even that she had been the trade that they wanted to make.

I bet they're both back at Graham's laughing about the whole thing right now! What the hell do I do?

The path disappeared into the trees and wound its way through the ever-thickening forest. Delilah walked faster and faster

until she found a path that had never been finished. It just ended at the edge of a clearing.

She walked to the middle of the grassy oasis and spun in a circle, trying to decide which direction to go. *There is nowhere to go*, she repeated to herself. *I can't start over again.*

She chose an open trail with hard-packed soil that looked as though it hadn't been taken in a while. Her stride became harder, more insistent, and then broke into a run. Accelerating through the pines and hardwoods, she didn't care that her feet were hitting the ground too firmly, that her paws would leave tracks.

Fur bristled across her back and neck as her coat grew thick and long. The colors of the forest grew darker and more vivid as her eyes changed color, her retinas more receptive to the light that scattered from the low-hanging clouds.

Nothing had gone right today. First, there was the mix-up at the bakery and then the stupid taxi driver fiasco, and then, when she had tried to leave Graham's house, her only choice to get to the forest was public transportation.

Normally, the bus didn't bother her. She liked to lose herself in crowds and feel that she might be anyone taking a stroll, or going shopping, or headed to visit relatives. She enjoyed the feeling of blending in.

Today, however, the bus ride had gone on interminably. The conversations she would usually tune out were tinny and irritating. The sights and smells were too numerous and grated

on her nerves. She felt nauseated, dehydrated, and confused by the time she finally made it to the park.

Among the trees, the dirt scraping under her claws, the wind in her ruff, the ferns brushing against her legs, she ran until she forgot all about the hardships of the day. She ran until she could barely remember the name Grimmaw, until Graham and Jude almost didn't exist. Almost.

Panting, she came to rest at the base of an old oak tree. The wet, cloying air tore at her lungs. Maybe she could ask the tree how it had stayed in one place so long with everything that wanted to eat it, build a home out of it, or simply get it out of the way.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she curled up between the roopy sinews of the tree's roots. Feeling hidden and safe, Delilah felt that she could ask herself the question she had been running from—*Why does this hurt so badly?*

Why should she care if men proved themselves to be what she had known they were all along? It was a disappointment, to be sure, but why should it pierce her to the core like it did? If she had expected all alphas to be like Clark, why did it shock her to find out that Graham and Jude fit the pattern?

I was falling for them. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but the truth was as real and solid as the cool, rough bark at her back. Her tears fell. What would she do now?

A low bark drew her attention and she opened her eyes to see the reason she should have cared if she had left prints. Graham

and Jude stood before her in wolf form. If they had sought her out as humans, she may have had a chance at running.

Still worth a shot. She bolted, tail straight behind her for balance, body close to the ground so she could get the most distance out of her perfectly timed leaps. She could neither see nor smell any sign that they had been able to follow her. She must have caught them off guard.

Good. Now they can see what it's like for a change. Just as her confidence that she had been able to outrun them had reached its peak, she screeched to a halt to avoid a head-on collision with Jude's giant, jet-black form.

Crashing through the underbrush, Delilah changed direction, only to be stopped short by Graham. Lithe and quick, he had hemmed in her only other escape route. She twisted out of reach to double back the way she'd come.

She didn't want to talk. She wanted to run. The only problem was that there were two of them and they were experts at cornering their prey. They met her every stride, closing in on her from a distance so she knew she had nowhere left to go.

Desperately turning this way and that, searching for a way out and knowing she had none, she finally gave up. It seemed they had won their peace offering whether she liked it or not. She sank to her human knees and hung her head.

"Fine!" she screamed in frustration. "You can have me! Happy now?"

Graham and Jude approached her carefully with confused looks on their now human faces. “What... are you talking about?” Jude asked.

“The peace offering! It’s me! But you knew that.” Jude’s face transformed into a perfect mask of bewilderment as Graham looked back and forth between him and Delilah, stunned.

Examining both of their reactions, it was clear to her that they had not, in fact, known that she was the object of their trade with Deacon Claw.

Jude was the first to find his voice. “Wait, so you’re from Deacon Claw? I thought you were just a rejected mate.”

Delilah shook her head, tears and hair flying. “No, you don’t get it. I *was* a rejected mate. But I was going to stay with the pack.” She looked between them frantically, pleading with them to understand. “A breakup wasn’t enough for me to leave my family. When it became clear that things weren’t working out with Clark, I was happy to stick around and make a life. But they... he...”

A sudden, grim set had hardened Graham’s jaw, but when he spoke, his voice was gentle. “Tell us. Tell us what happened. It’s okay.”

She turned on him unexpectedly. “*Nothing is okay!*” she screamed. “You were going to *buy* me from my own family! You were purchasing a mate from a rival pack as a treaty! How sick is that?”

Graham’s hazel eyes took on a stormy hue and his tense jaw set even more firmly. He stepped toward her as if for

confrontation, but Jude placed a hand on his arm. Something he saw in Jude's face must have restrained his temper because he held back.

"It's easy to misunderstand why someone would do something kind for you if all you've ever experienced from those closest to you is betrayal and heartache," Jude said.

"What? *Kind*? How could you possibly think you were doing something *kind*?" Delilah shot back.

Jude stepped between Graham and Delilah, holding out his hands in a conciliatory stance. "Whoa, whoa, let's not get ahead of ourselves here. We're just fighting in the dark. Delilah, calm down and tell us what happened. Please."

Delilah took a deep breath, remembering that Jude may not be a part of this at all and the least she could do was give him the benefit of the doubt. "Okay. So, my relationship with Clark hit the rocks and we both knew it, so we split. I was fine to stay and let Clark choose whoever he wanted, no hard feelings, but then I got a not-so-optional summons to see the alpha."

Graham's face had gotten hard again, almost as if he knew where she was going with this. Delilah continued. "They told me I was their next shot at a peace offering with a rival pack, that they were basically selling me to be some alpha's mate, and they locked me in a room to wait for my 'big day.'" She rolled her eyes. "Like I would just go willingly, no questions asked."

Graham nodded, his jaw working. "That sounds about right," he said. Just as Delilah's temper flared, he added, "Deacon

Claw is notorious for that sort of thing.”

Deacon Claw?

“Wait, so they lied?” Delilah was incredulous, but almost immediately wondered why she should be. It was totally in keeping with their past actions.

Jude nodded. “Yeah, we do stuff like this all the time—offer to take in rejected members of other packs, I mean. It’s how Miranda came in six or seven years ago. Hell, that’s kind of how I got here.”

“But there was never a rivalry or a weird marriage contract or any of that,” Graham asserted. “I knew the female we were taking in had been the mate of Jonah’s heir, and that was about it. Because of Deacon Claw’s reputation and what they do to their females, I didn’t need to know anything else. Nobody deserves that.”

“Oh.” Delilah scuffed her foot in the mud, feeling suddenly tired and ashamed. “I’m... I’m sorry I... jumped to conclusions.” She looked at the ground and sighed. “It’s just...”

Jude wrapped her in a sudden embrace. “You don’t have to explain anything. Like I said, it’s easy to assume the worst when the worst is all you’ve ever gotten.” Delilah melted into his arms, feeling the anger and tension drain from her body.

She had never felt this warm and safe before.



Chapter 24

Jude

RELIEF FLOODED JUDE'S SYSTEM and he welcomed it with open arms. The last thing he wanted was to lose her now. Just when he thought he'd found the woman he could imagine himself with, she had discovered the agreement with her old pack.

It was almost as if fate was playing some very cruel game with them. But he wasn't ready to give up on it yet. It had delivered her to them after all. Now she was looking at them both like she might actually believe they weren't the bad guys she assumed they were.

He couldn't blame her, not after what she'd been through with the Deacon Claw pack. Those guys really were the biggest bunch of assholes, especially when it came to women. He was just glad they'd managed to salvage this situation. And from the way she was looking at them, that was definitely the case.

"So, I was hoping maybe we could stick around here for a bit longer," she said as she took in both of their forms. Her lips

parted slightly as she lightly brushed her top one with her tongue.

Jude took in a deep inhale, already smelling her intentions. She wanted them—both of them—and no way was she going to take no for an answer. “I think that could be arranged,” he said, stepping closer to her. The scent of arousal that belonged to the three of them was now pungent.

“Definitely,” replied Graham, his voice low and deep.

“Good,” she said, trailing her hand up Graham’s arm, her other meeting Jude’s chest, “because I had such a good time the last time we were all together like this.”

“I think that goes for all of us,” Jude said, his blood starting to heat at the thought of being close to her naked again. She rewarded him with a kiss, her lips still chilled from the run, that familiar sweetness caressing him once more.

Delilah turned, her attention now on Graham as he leaned down to her, taking her chin and claiming her mouth. Her moans made Jude’s stomach clench in anticipation, her scent becoming stronger as her arousal grew.

He felt her pull away, her eyes remaining on the alpha’s as she walked a few feet forward and then laid herself down on the mossy forest floor, as if offering herself up. Within seconds Graham was there, settling himself beside her. Jude looked on as they kissed before joining them.

Beneath him the ground was soft, and the air dripped with the scents of the forest and arousal. It was an intoxicating mix, a

beautiful one that made him feel completely at home. He took her hand in his, sucking on her fingers before making his way up to her shoulder and neck. She gave it to him gladly, still enjoying Graham's mouth on hers as they both lavished her with the attention she wanted and deserved.

The alpha's scent was strong, and Jude knew it wouldn't be long until Graham took her, claiming her first as she became theirs. The thought thrilled him. Since the first time he'd seen and heard her come, as he held her close to him in his arms, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it.

Finally, she turned to him, her eyes soft as she sought out his mouth. Jude gladly gave it to her, noticing how much she needed this and knowing that whatever was going on between them was definitely working its magic.

He slid a hand down her toned stomach, desperate to feel what Graham had the chance to do the last time, moaning as he came upon her wetness. He dragged his fingers through, savoring how much she wanted this, before landing upon her clit with his forefinger.

"Yes," she breathed as he worked her, with Graham's hand meeting his between her legs. Jude moved further down, sliding one and then two fingers inside her, feeling how hot and wet she was for them.

"Oh god," she said, beginning to writhe between them. Opposite him, Graham moved, his mouth now working on her nipple. Jude smiled and then did the same, knowing how she'd

be driven insane by sensation as they worked her most sensitive areas.

Her hips started to buck, her panting growing louder and faster as they worked on her. Her clit, her entrance, her nipples, they left nothing in their determination to bring her to ecstasy.

“This what you wanted, sweetheart?” Graham asked, his voice dark and low.

“Yes, god, yes,” she moaned. “Graham, oh—”

“Good, because this is what we’d do for you always if you were ours,” he replied.

Jude wanted to reply with a “hell yes,” but was too immersed in what he was doing. The scents were so overpowering, bringing him so close to his wolf yet still more human than ever when it came to the feelings emerging within him.

“Any moment now you’ll be feeling so good again, just like before. And then once that’s done, I’m going to do it again, but with my cock,” Graham growled.

Between those words—that promise—and their fingers and mouths, she stood no chance. She arched her back, her walls beginning to quiver and convulse as Jude penetrated her with his fingers, Graham still on her clit.

Jude teased her nipple with his lips, just slightly using his teeth for extra effect as she called out their names, her legs spread wide as she enjoyed every second of the ecstasy they gave her. The scent of her climax washed over him again, a perfume so sweet and rare, like it was made just for them.

“Yes!” she cried, her head pressed into the ground. Her muscles throughout her body trembled and twitched as her orgasm worked its way through her, and he felt every one of those beautiful movements as they happened, feeling her heat, smelling her sweetness.

“Told you,” said Graham, a dark smile on his face as he kissed her.

“You did,” she replied, returning the smile and kissing him back. “You guys are amazing.”

Jude felt a rush of something as her words hit him. “You’re the amazing one,” he said, meaning every word.

“I also told you something else,” said Graham, who was now leaning over her. Jude moved away slightly, sensing this was the moment. He backed up slightly to give his alpha the room he needed as he climbed between Delilah’s legs.

Jude swallowed hard, unable to tear his eyes away as Graham slid into her. He felt no jealousy, just the sense this was meant to be and the arousal that came with knowing how much Delilah was enjoying it.

He growled when Graham pulled out of her, reaching out and flipping her over gently onto her knees. Delilah looked up at him, and he knew what he should do, positioning himself on his knees in front of her.

Taking his throbbing cock in his hand, he fed it to her carefully, a deep, satisfied moan leaving him as she took him into her mouth. “Ah, that’s it, doll,” he said, helping her by

thrusting gently into her mouth as Graham moved in and out of her from behind.

He reached down, swiping away damp, blond tendrils and looking at her beautiful body as the three of them pleased each other. Caressing her head, he told her how amazing, how beautiful she was, her moans reverberating along his length.

“You feel so good,” growled Graham. He didn’t doubt that for a moment, and if her mouth was anything to go by, when he got between her legs, he knew he was in for the ultimate treat.

The forest seemed silent, like it was made just for the three of them that night, no one else, not even the creatures that had always inhabited it. They moved together, in perfect synchronicity, the scents pervading the air, their bodies as one.

Delilah devoured him hungrily, sucking at him and swirling her tongue along his head. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to be taken by the sensation, the air on his naked skin soothing and cooling.

“Oh god, Delilah,” he whispered, finding it hard to keep control as he felt himself on the edge of bliss. It was stronger than he’d ever felt before, as their scents mingled, their upcoming orgasms evident to him. *What the hell!*

Every fiber of his being felt alive, tingling, screaming for the relief that would come when they all tipped over into ecstasy together. Nothing could have ever prepared him for how strong it would be, but he could sense it, there was no doubt about that.

“Oh, fuck!” Graham cried. “This is wild!” It was like he could read his mind, or maybe at that point they were really all one. Beneath them Delilah was becoming frantic with it all, pushing back onto Graham, desperate for release.

Jude pulled back, allowing her the space to do what she needed to make sure she was fulfilled. She looked up at him, her face full of desire and desperation before nodding and opening her mouth to receive him again.

Graham let out an almighty growl, pumping frantically before pinning himself at her waist. Delilah moaned against Jude’s cock, sucking hard as she joined Graham, no cries this time, just the tight hold she had on him with her lips.

For a second he thought he should pull away, but it was obvious she didn’t want him to, her lips gripping him as they both came together, his legs almost giving in with the sheer strength of sensation that ripped through him.

“Ah, Delilah!” he cried as he spilled into her mouth, his hand resting gently on the side of her head. Stars appeared behind his closed lids, and his body felt as if it was about to explode into pieces, scattering across the forest and through the universe to become one with it all.

How is this even possible? he thought, breathlessly. *That I have someone like Delilah.*



Chapter 25

Delilah

PUSHING HER CART DOWN the aisle, Delilah became lost in thought. She had woken feeling nostalgic that morning and, while out running errands, had found herself at the very same grocery store where she had first met Graham.

She allowed herself to relax into a state of flow as she shopped, listening to the wheels on the cart glide smoothly across the tiles, checking items off her list, and listening to the low bustle of people shopping and the white noise of the refrigerators.

Turning down a particular aisle, she remembered the feeling of ramming her grocery cart into Graham's solid form and smiled. How embarrassed she had been, and how surprised to discover a shifter in a city! She chuckled as she recalled how she had left a cart full of merchandise at the front of the store in her haste to flee. There had been no limit to her frustration that day.

Thinking of how things had changed since then, she sighed, overwhelmed with details and possibilities. It was impossible to have known at the time that she ran from the person who would improve her life so thoroughly. She could only be grateful that Graham hadn't taken it personally. Or Jude, for that matter.

Delilah blushed as she thought of the two of them together. Running her hands over their skin, being caressed and cared for by two of the strongest men she had ever known. The very thought was so tantalizing that heat rose in her cheeks.

I had better stop thinking about this before I start sweating right here in the produce aisle, she told herself, but it was easier said than done. She redirected her attention to the other good things that had come from her relationship with Graham and Jude, namely the benefits of being accepted by the Grimmaw pack.

She felt she could never fully express her gratitude for the way everyone in the pack had accommodated her. They had been kind and generous, befriending her and helping her with whatever she needed whenever she asked.

Wistfully, she thought of one day being invited to join as a member. She hoped that day would come sooner than later. They had been a family to her when she had sorely needed one and she planned to spend the rest of her life working to make sure they knew how wonderful and whole she felt every time she was with them.

Reaching for a head of lettuce, her train of thought stopped abruptly and her hand froze in midair. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end as if she had just stuck her fingers in an electrical socket. Something was most certainly wrong.

Delilah's nose tingled. Her nostrils flared as she took short, nearly imperceptible breaths, testing each molecule of air for scent. Detecting nothing out of the ordinary, she turned her head this way and that, listening for anything out of place.

Nothing.

She tried to tell herself she was crazy, tried to think that perhaps she was coming down with something that made her paranoid or had eaten something that disagreed with her, but everything in her senses was telling her that something was off. She had always been told to trust her senses.

Unable to put her finger on what was bothering her, she quickly selected the last couple of items on her list. Normally frugal, she didn't bother to look at the brand, quality, or unit price of anything she picked up, preferring a speedy getaway to the loss of a few cents here or there.

Leaving the store, she paused and tried to place the feeling that had come over her. She closed her eyes and attempted to picture the feeling, adding elements in her mind's eye until she had formed a snapshot.

The only picture that would come to mind in its entirety was of a deer standing in a clearing surrounded by trees. She had encountered the phenomenon many times on the hunt and seeing it usually excited her. The smell of the grass, the

anticipation of a good meal, and the more immediate thrill of the chase were all things she fully enjoyed.

As she thought of the deer now, however, a sinister tone washed over her from head to foot, and she thought of the moment it would catch the scent of someone in the pack or hear a twig snap because someone on the hunt had gotten careless. Without fail, the deer would lift its head, prick its ears, and try to run away.

Delilah tried to conjure any familiar emotions that she usually associated with a moment such as that. Frustration, urgency, and hunger would not have been out of place, but something was still niggling at the back of her mind that she couldn't shake. It was akin to fear but with more awareness behind her eyes.

Suddenly she knew why she had never felt like this before and why she was having such a difficult time picturing a situation in which she might feel this way. The fear and awareness weren't emotions with which she was familiar. She had known fear, of course, but it had always been directed toward a clear threat.

This time, however, the fear was directed toward something or someone she could not see or hear or smell. It was a fear that she was only accustomed to observing from a distance. It was what her prey felt when she watched it, hunted it, and stalked it to kill it for meat.

A shudder ran down her spine. She had always suspected it was unpleasant to be hunted, but she had never had the

unfortunate opportunity to experience it firsthand. She hated it. She continued to feel openly pursued the whole trip home, though she didn't know by whom or how someone could be watching her as she rode the bus. All she knew was that the ceiling of the vehicle felt like a translucent membrane with a million eyes on the other side. It was silly, she had to admit—there was no evidence that she was correct about being stalked. But she couldn't escape her intense desire to hide somewhere no one could find her.

Hiding would have to wait, however. Hearing a *thunk* in the bedroom, Delilah was overcome both with a jolt of panic and a sensation of relief that she could sink her teeth into something tangible. Part of her hoped that the last part was literal.

Lowering the groceries to the floor and extending the claws of her dominant hand, she edged her way toward the bedroom, sniffing the air with anticipation. Whoever it was, she could fight this—no sitting around waiting for the villain to show himself.

Something in the air halted her. The scent she was picking up was familiar, and all violent intentions left her. Letting her enthusiasm for the kill out on a puff of air, Delilah rolled her eyes and pushed the door open.

“Hi, Miranda.”

“Ouch!” Miranda stood up and turned too fast, dropping a boot on her foot and smacking her head on the doorway to the closet. Evidently, she had been nosing around for a while. Half of Delilah's things were strewn on the bed.

“What are you doing? I gave you my key for emergencies.”
Delilah couldn’t keep the edge of annoyance out of her voice. She had been so ready to neutralize a threat that it was difficult to come down from the anger and anticipation of serving justice to her imaginary pursuer.

Miranda waved her off, adding to Delilah’s irrational and barely suppressed urge to lash out at her friend. “Oh, everybody knows that ‘emergency’ is relative. Besides, I needed to find you a pair of shoes to go with this!” She presented a floor-length, strappy, sparkling blue dress with layers of chiffon curling down the skirt.

The wave of aggression Delilah had been riding receded, and she found her energy at low tide. “*Where* did you get that?”

Miranda looked confused. “Don’t you like it? I picked it up from Oswald’s. Such a terrible name for a designer of such fabulous dresses!”

“Of course, I love it, but I can’t possibly afford something like that!”

“Honey, please. It’s a gift, and not from me, either. A little birdie told me you had a hot date tonight and, seeing as how you’re new in town and probably haven’t been on one of these in a while...” Miranda shrugged. “Let’s just say I put a bug in a few ears.” She waved the dress back and forth in front of Delilah. “I can always take it back if you don’t want it.”

Delilah couldn’t help herself. She laughed and took the gown from Miranda, stroking the material and testing its weight.

“It’s so soft and light! How did you know my size?”

Miranda patted her pocket. “I probably should have told you that I interpret the term ‘emergency’ *very* loosely.” She turned back to the closet. “Now, go take a bath while I find some shoes. And we’ll have to do something with your hair. You can’t go looking all wind-blown!”

Something in Miranda’s suggestion made Delilah hurry to the bathroom, which she found decked with candles as a hot bath bubbled in the tub. “Don’t get all pruny!” She heard wafting from the bedroom. “Get to smelling less like a wolf and get out!”

Delilah snorted. “You’re not the boss of me,” she murmured under her breath. Undressing and easing herself into the mass of bubbles, she leaned back and felt her muscles relax. She could already feel the day getting better.

Fifteen minutes later, she sat in a robe in front of her mirror as Miranda did her hair and makeup. “So where am I going?” she asked tentatively.

Miranda mimed pulling a zipper across her lips. “I’m not undoing all the work I did while you were out, sweetie. You’re on your own.”

Delilah smacked her forehead. “The groceries!”

“I took care of those while you were in the bath.” Clucking over her nails, Miranda added, “And I didn’t get you out of it a moment too soon.”

Just as they were zipping up the dress and adding the finishing pins to Delilah’s hair, the doorbell rang. “That’ll be them!”

She patted Delilah on the shoulder. “Have fun! And try not to mess up your hair too much.” Delilah swatted at her, but Miranda dodged and winked. “Don’t keep ’em waiting!”

The door opened to reveal two of the finest gentlemen shifter eyes ever beheld. They cut an excellent figure in matching black suits and ties, Graham holding a bouquet of lilies and Jude a fistful of long-stemmed roses.

Both of their faces lit up appreciatively when they saw her.

“This way, my lady.” Graham held an arm out for her to take.

“Your chariot awaits,” Jude added, offering his arm in turn and directing her toward the limousine.

This is going to be fun.



Chapter 26

Delilah

“WHERE ARE WE GOING? I’m *dying* to know!” Delilah could barely contain her excitement as her dates helped her into the car. Graham gave the driver instructions while Jude popped a bottle of champagne and poured three glasses.

“You can’t wait twenty more minutes?” Jude asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I can’t wait *one* more minute!” Delilah insisted.

Jude leaned over, brushing a stray wisp of hair from her neck in a gesture that made Delilah shiver. He held his mouth so close to the rim of her ear that she could feel his breath, sending another wave of chills down her spine.

“Too bad,” Jude whispered, and it took a moment for Delilah to recover from sensation enough to be offended.

Graham laughed as she slapped Jude on the knee. “I really want to know! Tell me!” she pleaded. They both shook their

heads as Graham removed a bowl of ripe strawberries from a minifridge in the corner.

“Just drink some champagne and fill that succulent mouth with some almost-equally-succulent berries.” Before she could protest, he held one to her lips until she bit, sucking on the juice that gushed from it. She sipped from her fluted glass and enjoyed the sweet tingling that bubbled up into her nose.

“Mmmm, I wish I’d had some of this at bath time!” she enthused.

“We can make that happen.” Jude’s voice was full of innuendo as he slipped one of her straps from her shoulder and brushed a kiss onto the bare skin.

Heat spread from her belly up to Delilah’s cheeks and down to her thighs. Graham laid a hand on her knee and the pressure through the soft fabric was almost too much. She laid her head against the seat and moaned.

“We may want to slow down.” Graham chuckled. “No point getting her revved up this early.”

“That and we’re here,” Jude said.

Delilah looked out the window and gasped. She had never seen anything so magical in her life. Graham exited the car and held his hand out to her, helping her from the vehicle.

The limousine had stopped at a park. Oaks, elms, and firs stood in clusters around which a brick footpath wound. Fairy lights hung in the trees, illuminating the copses and the people walking under them.

A sign at the park's entrance said "Rembrandt Gala" in cursive script, and a queue of people in formal attire had formed in front of it. In the distance, Delilah heard violin music. "What is this place?"

"Its daytime alter ego is just your average park," Jude explained. "But at the moment, it's all decked out for a black-tie music and arts festival."

Graham led them to the front of the line, where a man in a tuxedo was checking invitations against a list. To Delilah's awe, he waved them through with barely a glance. "Who does one have to bribe to get *that* to happen?" she asked.

"The Arts Committee," Jude answered without missing a beat.

Graham blushed. "The company makes sizable donations to the artistic fund every year because *we* believe it benefits the community. Keeps art in schools, that kind of thing."

"Plus, we get membership to events where we get to dress fancy and walk in parks," Jude added. Graham rolled his eyes. "What? I *love* dressing fancy to walk in parks." Delilah laughed.

The men escorted her down the pathway. Each grove of trees housed a painting set upon an easel with an informational plaque next to it. Beside each painting was a musician in black playing with an orchestra.

Confused, Delilah leaned toward Graham and whispered, "I hear an orchestra, but I don't *see* an orchestra."

Graham pointed to tiny speakers hidden among the foliage. “Each player has a set of mics that are run by Bluetooth to a sound box. It combines the effect of all the instruments and pipes it through the speakers so you see one instrumentalist at a time, but hear all of them playing the same piece. I believe this one is a Locatelli concerto, in case you’re interested.”

Delilah raised her eyebrows, but before she could express her amazement, Jude piped in, amused. “Don’t be too impressed. We designed the sound system and Graham picked out the music himself.”

Delilah smiled and threaded her arm through Jude’s. “I’m not sure that’s a reason not to be impressed.” She brushed a kiss on each of their cheeks. “You two are fabulous.”

They led her through the exhibit, stopping to enjoy each painting and musician along the way. Wait staff with silver trays appeared from time to time with champagne, fruit, and hors d’oeuvres. When they reached the end, a screen was set up, on which the image of each musician was projected so viewers could see the whole orchestra.

“Another creation of yours, I presume.” Graham blushed again as Jude nodded. Delilah wouldn’t have suspected a man of Graham’s confidence and abilities to be so humble, and it endeared her toward him even more. On the other hand, Jude’s matter-of-fact assertions about their work could hardly be viewed as arrogant.

Looking at each of them in turn, her heart felt full. She knew she could never choose between them—neither could ever be

more important to her than the other—and that made these moments and the opportunity to enjoy them with both men all the more special.

As they reached the end of the path, she saw the car waiting to pick them up. “Surely the evening isn’t over!” she objected.

“Of course not!” Graham assured her. “We wouldn’t send the lady home on an empty stomach, now, would we?”

When the car stopped this time, it was in a far less natural location. Delilah stood in front of a high-rise building in the middle of downtown. Graham and Jude led her through the building to a hidden express elevator that took them to the top floor.

Getting off the elevator, Delilah was stunned at the view from the walls of glass enclosing a restaurant. Terraces wrapped around the structure and sconces lent the golden atmosphere a warm glow. “What’s wrong?” Jude asked.

Delilah shook her head. “Nothing! Nothing at all. I’m just... why would you do this for me?”

Graham and Jude exchanged self-satisfied glances. “We just want to spoil our girl,” Graham said. “We don’t want to dwell on the past but on our future together.”

Delilah blinked back tears and held tightly to each man’s hand, squeezing them and pulling them close to her. They led her to a table by the window, and servers brought out mouth-watering dishes that had clearly been prepared in advance.

Throughout the meal, each man took his turn pointing out new foods to try and encouraging her to take another glass of wine or have dessert. She felt overwhelmed by the attention at first, but soon fell into the rhythm of the meal.

With each successive bite, the contact lingered longer and grew bolder. Graham laid his hand on the small of her back, urging her to take a bite of his steak. Jude traced his finger up her thigh, holding a forkful of his amandine potatoes to her lips.

When dinner was over, they led her to the terrace to dance to the soft chamber music. She didn't know how it would work at first, but Jude left to get cocktails while Graham took the first dance.

Allowing Graham to guide her across the dance floor, Delilah took in his heady aroma of tropical citrus and vanilla. She let him pull her close so she could breathe him in and brush his neck with her nose.

Graham released a low, throaty growl, turned his head, and took her ear gently between his teeth, tugging until she lifted her head. Catching her mouth in a soft kiss, he deepened it and slid his tongue between her parted lips. She had to break the kiss to come up for air.

As they held each other and felt every movement through the thinness of their clothing, Graham bowed his head near her cheek and whispered, "I love you."

Delilah's heart swelled in her chest. She had never felt such a rush of emotion. Just as she finished returning the sentiment,

however, Jude asked to cut in and swept her into his arms.

Almost angry that he had spoiled a moment, Delilah opened her mouth to say something when Jude twirled her around and hugged her into himself. Her curves fit against him perfectly, and she leaned her head back against his shoulder, closing her eyes and enjoying the spicy floral notes of his scent.

He smoothed his open hand across her belly, stopping just shy of her breast and tightening his grip until she thought he might lift her from the floor. Rubbing her temple with his forehead, he dipped his mouth to her ear and whispered his own, “I love you.”

Heart so full she was surprised it didn't burst, she confessed her own feelings before her two shifters led her to a group of chairs next to the balcony railing to refresh themselves. As they looked out on the city, they huddled on either side of Delilah to warm her from the cool night wind that whipped around the top of the building unimpeded.

“Delilah, we're so glad you came here and we met you,” Graham began. “Life has been so different since that day, and we wouldn't have it any other way. You've brought wonderful changes to us and the pack, and everyone agrees that they'd like you to join.”

For a moment, Delilah couldn't take a breath. This was what she had been daydreaming about only this afternoon. It was as if they had read her mind.

“Don't answer right away,” Jude cautioned. “Take some time to think about it. It's a big step.”

Delilah nodded. “Yes, of course. You’re right. I’ll think about it.” Looking out over the city with two powerful shifters standing beside her, she wondered if she could ever feel safer, more cared for, or more at home.



Chapter 27

Delilah

DELILAH WAS IN A whirl, completely caught up in everything that had happened during the evening. From the amazing spectacle Graham and Jude put on for her to the words they'd whispered under the moonlit sky.

As she sat in between them on the limo ride back, their energies pulsated, everything rushing to the fore. They loved her. They wanted her to be part of the pack. And they wanted her in every way, more than anything.

There was no doubt about it; she felt the same. Tonight, they'd told her how much life had changed for them since she arrived in the city, but they had no idea just how much things had changed for her too.

Here she was able to be herself, not some kind of trophy mate who answered to the pack males. They loved her for who she was, and in turn she loved them for it. She never realized just how imprisoned she was in the Deacon Claw pack.

Now she was free, in her mind, in her body. She never thought she could love two men at once, be with them intimately together, but they'd changed all of that. They'd changed her.

Delilah glanced from side to side, smiling as she found herself sandwiched between them both again. Nothing felt better, it had fast become the place she wanted to be. Just the three of them.

“What?” asked Jude smiling.

She smiled back. “Oh, nothing, just thinking about how lucky I am,” she said, one hand easing slowly up and down his thigh while she did the same to Graham with the other. They'd driven her crazy all night, and the way she wanted them in that moment was almost overwhelming.

“Kiss me,” she said, turning to Graham. She heard the small growl emanate from his throat as he leaned in and placed his lips to hers. Then she reached around to Jude, pulling gently but firmly at his cheek, directing him to her neck.

When his lips landed there, she moaned. She'd never get used to having two mouths working on her. Two mouths, two pairs of hands. Two... “Oh, you guys,” she breathed as Graham trailed kisses down her face and the other side of her neck.

She sat back and let them devour her, just as hungry for them. “My place,” she said, daring to feel how hard they were for her. “I want you both back at my place.”

“Whatever you say, sweetheart,” murmured Graham against her hot skin.

“Sounds perfect,” agreed Jude.

It wasn't usually what they did. Her place was small and so much less impressive than either of theirs. But that didn't matter, especially now. She wanted them on her territory, marking it with their scents. In the air, on her sheets.

Everywhere.

The rest of the drive was a beautiful torture, but eventually they arrived, the three of them almost flying out of the car and through her front door. Delilah wasted no time and walked straight to the bedroom, knowing that they'd follow.

“Undress for me,” she said. They both raised an eyebrow, Jude smiling while Graham fixed his eyes on her, never looking away for a second. She watched as they parted with their clothes, each layer that came off making her more and more desperate for them.

Finally, when they stood there erect and straining to get to her, she too shed her dress and then her underwear. Graham made to lunge for her, but she held up a hand. “My place, my rules,” she said, smirking. “Just for tonight, Mr. Alpha, if that's okay?”

She heard him swallow hard, a wry smile pulling at the corner of his lips. “Just for tonight,” he rasped.

“Good boys,” she said, almost teasing them. Yet she meant it. Tonight, she wanted to be in control. To be the one who called the shots and to enjoy their bodies as much as they all enjoyed hers.

Stepping closer to them, her heart thudded even harder in her chest as she took her place between them, one hand to each side so they didn't instantly try to descend on her. As much as she loved that, she wanted to have a chance to explore them both.

It was almost hard to breathe. How in the hell did she get so damn lucky! Two of the most beautiful, strong and lean bodies. Her breathing became harder as she walked around them, trailing her hands across strong glutes, toned abdomens, hard biceps and pectorals.

She pressed herself against their bodies, rubbing her skin against theirs, their lengths against her stomach and her ass until she couldn't take it any longer. "You're so beautiful," she panted, reaching down for both of them as they gasped.

Feeling her way up and down them, she looked into two pairs of eyes, both so full of longing and desire, before dropping to her knees. First, she took Graham into her mouth, tasting her alpha as he moaned her name.

She swirled her tongue around his head, dragging small grunts from him as she pleased him, and then turned to Jude, her hand now slowly fisting Graham's cock. Jude groaned her name, his hand gently teasing her hair as she sucked at him.

She continued from one to the other, unable to get enough of them, her mouth so hungry for them it was almost uncontrollable. For once, they let her take control, do what she wanted without interfering.

Looking up at them both, she was undone by love and desire, never having imagined that she could be this free. It was the most natural thing in the world to be with them like this. It was meant to be.

“You’re amazing,” Jude said, his voice soft and so full of authenticity. She looked up into his eyes that radiated such longing. Right then, all she wanted was to make him feel as wonderful as he had made her feel so many times before.

She took him in her mouth fully, feeling him hit the back of her throat, his moans getting deeper as she sucked and worked her way along him. She felt so connected to him, despite Graham being at her side, watching.

His moans spurred her on, eager to draw out as much pleasure in him as she could, knowing he was relishing every second of her attention. She was his and he was hers. They belonged to each other now.

“I’m going to—”

“Do it,” she whispered, cupping his balls and pushing him back onto the bed.

“Oh, fuck!” he said as she pumped him with her hand. She growled when he called her name as hot jets of cum burst from him, her mouth now on his as she slowed down, milking him of everything he had left until she was satisfied that he was satisfied.

“My Jude,” she said, kissing him. He looked back and took her face in his hand, swallowing hard as he settled down from his

climax.

“Always,” he said.

“All of us,” she replied, now reaching for Graham who was on the bed, his hand softly stroking his length. “My alpha and my beta.” It sounded so good, but not even a tiny percentage compared to how it felt.

She pushed Graham back, urging him to lie down. He smiled, understanding what she needed him to do, reaching up to her as she crawled on top of him, straddling him and then sinking down onto his cock.

Slowly, she rocked on top of him, her eyes locked on his as he filled her. Beside them, Jude looked on before stroking her back. “Oh god,” she moaned. Was there anything better than having her alpha inside her? She doubted it.

He grabbed her hips as she rode him, each penetration pulling at her walls. Jude kissed her neck as she writhed, his hand occasionally brushing softly over her nipple and bringing her closer and closer to release. She tipped her head back, giving him access to whatever he wanted. She was theirs completely and nothing would change that now.

“Both of you,” she breathed. “I want you both so much.”

“We know,” growled Graham. But it didn’t sound arrogant. He was the alpha and was bound to smell how much she needed them. It wasn’t something you could keep to yourself as a shifter, the signs were always there, hanging in the air, waiting to be sensed.

Steadying herself with one hand on his hard chest, she drew him in and out of her, his hips now matching her in their rhythm as he attempted to get as deep as he could inside her. She allowed him to, gratefully, wanting nothing more than to be completely owned by him, filled to the brim until there was no space left between them.

Her stomach clenched and she knew it was coming. “Yes, that’s it,” said Graham, obviously hungry to see her spill over into ecstasy on top of him. “Sweetheart, you are a fucking goddess.”

He reached over so his thumb grazed her clit, pressing softly against it until she was completely undone. Jude did the same with her nipple, her body now exploding with sensation as she cried out, her screams bouncing off her bedroom walls.

They were joined by those of Graham, low and deep as he spilled into her, the veins in his neck now bulging with the force of this climax, his eyes almost feral as he watched her. Both of them shared a moment of sheer bliss until there was nothing left to give.

She leaned back against Jude, who kissed her damp cheek, Graham still inside her as her walls quivered and throbbed. He pulled himself up with his strong core and kissed her forehead.

There she sat, wrapped up in them, never feeling happier or more satisfied in her life.



Chapter 28

Delilah

“YOU SKANK!” MIRANDA SHOUTED, covering her mouth when she attracted the attention of a few customers. She had come in to get some coffee at the end of Delilah’s shift and wanted the juicy details of her date.

Delilah blushed. “Do you want to hear about this or not?”

“Sorry, sorry. Yes, I want to hear about it, sorry. Tell me *everything*. I’ll be good.” The impish grin and the sparkle in her eyes told Delilah otherwise, but she continued.

“They took me to the Rembrandt Gala and then LeFae’s. Have you ever been?” When Miranda shook her head, Delilah described the evening in great detail, leaving nothing out as she’d been prompted.

When the story was finished, Miranda gave a long, dramatic sigh, fluttering her eyelashes and dropping her chin into her hands on the countertop. “Oh, Delilah! You’re *sooo* lucky!”

Unaccustomed as Delilah was to sharing the personal details of her life, it was good to tell a friend about her relationship. Anyway, Miranda was right. She felt like the most fortunate girl in the world.

Taking off her apron and bidding the staff goodbye, she pushed her way out the front door and walked heavily down the sidewalk toward the pack's block. It had been a long day, but she wanted to see Graham and Jude if she could before going back to her apartment for some rest.

A couple of blocks down the street, though, the hair on the back of her neck stood on end the way it had in the grocery store just a few days before. *Not again*, she complained to herself. She felt like she was walking down the street completely naked, all eyes on her.

Taking out her cell phone, she dialed Graham and then Jude, then a couple of other pack members with no answer from any of them. A few of them not answering was normal, but not all of them, not at this time of day.

Walking a little faster, she mentally attempted to shake the feeling off, but it only intensified. It spread through her chest and settled on her shoulders like someone had dropped hot rocks down her shirt. Before she knew it, she was running down the street.

The wind whipped her hair into her eyes and sweat streamed down her back. She focused her thoughts on making it to the pack block before whatever it was caught up with her.

She didn't stop to think about whether anything was actually there. It was enough that it felt like there was. She knew her pack would take her seriously. *Her pack*. Technically, that wasn't accurate. She didn't have a pack yet. She was still a lone wolf. More and more, though, she knew what her answer to Graham and Jude would be.

She had never felt so at home in the pack she was born into, and it would be sheer madness not to join the shifters she had come to care for so deeply. The simple knowledge that she had a place to go when she was scared, people who would take her at her word that something strange was going on, slowed her heart rate and calmed her thoughts.

Delilah settled into a more intentional pace, hurrying the rest of the way to Graham's house. Letting herself in, she called for him several times with no answer. That in itself wasn't something to worry about, but coupled with her call attempts, she began to get alarmed.

Running to Jude's house, she found it the same—dark and empty with a somewhat sinister feeling. She rushed from room to room, knowing the house was empty and unaware of what she was checking for. *I've got to remember to tell Graham and Jude never to throw me a surprise party*, she thought. *This is creepy*.

Deciding to check the pack house, she ran to it with more hope that someone would be around. Surely, they would all be talking and laughing, sitting at the table with their phones off

or something, and all would be well. They'd get a kick out of how panicked she had been.

She found no one at the pack house. The situation had officially escalated to worrisome. She even found signs of a hasty exit—doors half open, tasks half-finished, papers strewn here and there like people had literally dropped what they were doing and left.

As she wandered around, she searched her thoughts for ideas. No one had prepared her for this eventuality, and she didn't know where to check next for someone who could tell her what the hell was going on. Just as she considered giving up and crying, the clock in the back room struck six, drawing her attention to the windows overlooking the courtyard.

Her wish to find somebody had been granted in spades. A crowd had gathered among the shrubbery in something of a messy circle, their backs to the windows. Instantly forgetting her alarm that everyone had bugged out without her, she strained to see over their heads to discover what had captured everyone's interest.

No dice. She ran up the stairs to the second story and then the third until she could see straight to the middle of the circle. The first face she made out was Jonah's and her heart slammed in her chest. He was in wolf form, teeth bared and snarling.

Jonah's beta was also present in wolf form, but that didn't scare her nearly as much as seeing Clark's distinctive lope through the crowd. For all the world, they looked like they

were stalking somebody. They circled like vultures, growling at somebody on the other side.

Delilah hoped beyond hope that she wouldn't catch a glimpse of russet fur even as she did. She squinted, trying to find Jude in the shadows, and her heart sank as she saw him exactly where she had expected him to be, backing up Graham with their enforcers.

She also saw two other wolves she didn't recognize from her perch at the third-floor window, but she didn't need to know who they were to know that she had engendered this uncomfortable situation. Graham and Jude had to know this was her fault, but to their credit, they hadn't sent anyone to get her.

Maybe they had actually been serious when they said they didn't care about her past. Serious or not, however, they couldn't have been prepared for her past to follow her here and cause such problems for the Grimmaw pack.

Still, they hadn't sent for her, and she had to consider the idea that her presence might cause more problems than it would solve. She could leave now, bow out gracefully, and disappear. They would have plausible deniability, and Jonah wouldn't be able to do anything when they couldn't produce her.

Delilah shook her head, disgusted at herself for even thinking like that. She was tired of running from her problems. She had found a home and a pack she loved, and it was high time she fought for what she wanted.

Exiting the house through the rear door, she found Miranda at the edge of the crowd and nudged her. She turned and gasped. “Oh, good, you’re here! It’s just getting intense!”

“What’s happening?” Delilah whispered.

“Well, the two big ones say someone here belongs to them, but Graham and Jude say they don’t have anyone here.

Apparently, they lost a female they were planning on trading as a peace offering to those other two over there. They said they were Silver Tail or Silver Creek or something.”

“Silver Paw,” Delilah asserted grimly. Now that she saw them up close, she recognized the two members of Deacon Claw’s allies, Alpha Travers and Beta Edward.

Miranda looked at her with wide eyes. “You know them? Wait, are they talking about *you*?” She bounced up and down with excitement. “You didn’t tell me you were a *fugitive*,” she breathed.

Delilah chuckled and shook her head. She should have known no one in the conglomerate city pack would care about the rules of loyalty the forest packs required. Even as she smiled with relief that her friend was still hers, she looked up to find Jonah pointing her out to the crowd.

“There she is! There’s the runaway!” he shouted. That feeling of everyone watching her returned, only this time it was certainly real. Heads turned and eyes widened in her direction as Delilah’s cheeks reddened.

Finally allowing herself to get angry, Delilah decided to handle things a little more confrontationally this time. She blew her hair out of her face in frustration. “Yeah, it’s me. What of it?”

Jonah and Clark looked a little taken aback and she thought she saw Graham hide a smirk and Jude cover a spurt of laughter with a cough.

“What of it? You’re a peace offering. You’re coming with us, or else.”

“Or else what?” she challenged. “What more could you possibly do to me? You already want to sell me into slavery!”

Jonah’s eyes flashed. “You of all people understand the time-honored tradition of cross-mating between allied packs! You have the opportunity to be the tie that binds us together.”

Delilah snorted. “To-may-to, to-mah-to. I’m *not* coming back with you.”

Jonah set his mouth grimly. “You don’t have a choice. Come with us, or face the destruction of your... *friends* here.”

Graham spoke up. “Why is that necessary? Consider your peace offering given. You offered her to us and here she is. I don’t understand the problem.”

She loved Graham’s efforts at diplomacy, but Delilah knew that Jonah would always have at least one more trick up his furry sleeve. “The problem, Mr. Grimmaw, is that I called off our deal when I agreed to send her to the Silver Paw pack,

instead. If you choose to harbor this fugitive, we will hold you guilty of kidnapping.”

Darkness clouded Graham’s eyes, and a shiver went down Delilah’s spine. She had never seen Graham get angry before. Evidently, unlike Jonah, she believed it to be because he had a long fuse, not because he lacked the ability to retaliate. She was suddenly afraid for Jonah and Clark.

“Then I guess we’re guilty of kidnapping, and you’ll do what you feel you have to.” Shock crossed Jonah’s face at Graham’s words. He had obviously anticipated that his intimidation tactics would be successful and he would leave with Delilah and Graham’s blessing.

“This is stupid,” Travers interjected. “You’re protecting someone who isn’t even yours. Delilah is a lone wolf who didn’t hold up her end of the bargain. I’m not leaving without her and that’s final.”

Watching the storm clouds gather on Graham’s face, Delilah knew Travers had no idea what he was getting himself into.



Chapter 29

Graham

GRAHAM SCRAMBLED OUT THE front door, not bothering to pick up after himself. He had been in the middle of important pack affairs, but it would all have to wait. He could do it later. No rage would be spared today. He'd use every ounce of it, if needed.

He'd received a text from Samson that shifters from another pack had entered the Fang District, and it didn't take much to deduce who it might be. It was one thing to be bothered by the Deacon Claw pack. But when they showed up in his neighborhood, pursuing someone he had sworn to protect—someone he *loved*—they deserved no more patience.

As Graham strutted down the sidewalks, walking forward to the Fang District, meeting up with Jude on the way, he swore to himself that if it came to it, he was going to offer no pleasantries. There was a time to be civil, to make compromises. This wasn't that time.

He vowed to use all of his frustration at being so carelessly interrupted and redirect it toward the impending confrontation. He wasn't just protecting a pack but trying to run a multimillion-dollar business.

Graham had left his suit jacket at home. He was dressed down to the bare minimum, just a dress shirt and a pair of gray slacks. He put his cuff links into his pocket and rolled up his sleeves. He looked up at the series of towers that greeted him in the distance, familiar yet foreboding, and nodded at Jude as they entered the district through the shop entrances. They had no idea what awaited them on the other side.

He was relieved to see that Deacon Claw hadn't caused an incident. In the teahouse, the civilians were casually going about their lives, unaware of what was transpiring behind them.

As the two of them casually slipped out the back, behind the wooden doors, through the back room, and past the sliding glass doors, they were greeted by three wolves, weaving through a crowd of people while sniffing and growling.

At first, Graham felt terror. Grimmaw pack, as well as Sable and everybody he was responsible for tending to, was casually standing among a tense adversary, poised to escalate a conflict.

But on closer inspection, not only did the three wolves—two he recognized from Deacon Claw and one he didn't recognize—not seem to care about the gathering audience, both within their reach and watching from up above, they seemed ambivalent to Jude and Graham.

They were going to shift, but first, they approached Miranda. “Thank god you’re here,” Miranda said. “I told these jackasses to leave because I got all sorts of bad vibes, but they’re not listening. No idea what they’re here for.”

“They haven’t tried to escalate anything. Have they?” Graham asked. He tried to hide the tenseness in his voice but probably failed.

“No,” Miranda replied. “Near as I can tell, they’re looking for somebody. They ignore everybody who tries to engage with them.”

“So, the biggest threat they’re causing is just making a scene?” Jude asked.

He had a point. By creating a spectacle, they were interfering with pack business, stifling productivity. The civilians on the outside had no idea what was transpiring here, but that didn’t mean they weren’t jeopardizing the safety and work of all the business owners as well as all shifter-related commerce.

Part of Graham thought that the best thing he could do was to return a sense of normalcy and motivate everybody to return to their daily lives. But then, if the rival pack shifters did escalate anything—and Deacon Claw hated nothing more than being ignored—he would be jeopardizing the safety of everybody here.

So instead, he transformed, with no regard for his clothes. The fabric tore from his body and ripped with every bulge of muscle and bone as his hands moved to the ground, becoming paws. In his peripheral vision, he could see Jude taking the

hint and casually discarding his T-shirt and jeans as the great onyx form of his wolf took hold.

As the strange wolves yipped and ran around the courtyard, Graham could see them subtly acknowledge him and Jude, in spite of their feigned indifference. In his slacks, now ripped apart, Graham could hear his phone ringing and worried that it might be Delilah. He knew that changing form to answer it would be a very different idea. She needed to stay as far away from this as possible.

On the other hand, he wasn't sure if the Deacon Claw pack would ever wear down and leave. He held his ground, watching the entrances to every building and carefully monitoring the pack members spread about the crowd. Some had lost interest and gone about their lives by this point, but the interfering wolves were nothing if not tenacious. He could see now that they had even brought backup, and that the three of them hadn't come alone.

Some thirty minutes later, Graham could see a familiar blonde streak in the windows overlooking the courtyard, darting back down the stairwell. His heart skipped a beat.

No, he thought. She can't be here.

He had no idea how Deacon Claw pack had found out that she was living there, but nobody had said anything to directly confirm that she was even here. She could still escape. It didn't matter that nobody had any claim to her since the deal had fallen through. If her old pack was here, she wouldn't be safe anymore.

Uncaring of nudity, Graham shifted and called out. “Deacon Claw pack!” Graham roared out. “You’ll find nothing of interest to you here. Leave me and mine alone!”

“Finally talking to us, are you, Grimmaw?”

Jonah approached, followed by Clark, as the third wolf watched on in fascination.

“The silence was all yours, Deacon,” Graham snarled.

“It’s a nice try, but we can smell her,” Clark said.

“Smell who?” Graham asked. “You mean the girl you were going to *trade* us? Even if she’d made it to us, which she hasn’t, she was still promised to us.”

“You know that isn’t how that works,” Jonah growled in response. “As we told you, the deal was altered. The female will go to Silver Paw, not Grimmaw.”

“And as he told you,” Jude interjected, now human, as well.

“You don’t just get to take back a deal you agreed to whenever it suits you.”

“I don’t see why you care,” Clark interrupted. “As I recall, you were appalled by the deal when we brought it to your doorstep.”

Jonah’s eyes peered into the crowd suddenly, and he let out a frightening chortle. “There she is!” he cried. “There’s the runaway!”

Graham could see all of the eyes in the crowd fixating suddenly on Delilah’s form. He was frightened for her. Why

had she stayed in spite of all of the danger and trauma it posed her?

Delilah stood coldly and seemed a little taller than usual.

“Yeah, it’s me. What of it?”

Graham grinned proudly. He would defend her in a heartbeat if anything escalated, but he was just glad to see her fighting.

Not for her safety—he wanted to keep her far away from this, and he felt a fear greater than anything he’d ever experienced—but for everything she’d gone through.

“What of it?” Jonah barked. “You’re a peace offering. You’re coming with us, or else.”

In spite of the potential dangers, Delilah held her ground.

Jonah defended the pack’s practices, claiming that trafficking her would be done in the name of tradition and for the good of the pack. He was an older wolf, a slave to tradition, but Graham still couldn’t understand how Clark would approve of this deal... couldn’t comprehend how awful he was.

Then Jonah threatened his pack’s safety if she didn’t come back with them, and that was the final straw. “Why is that necessary?” Graham asked. “Consider your peace offering given. You gave her to us and here she is. I don’t understand the problem.”

He tried to sound cooler than he really was inside. All of his rage threatened to spill out at any given moment, and he was operating out of desperation now. He had let Delilah fight, but he wasn’t going to jeopardize the Fang District’s safety.

“The problem, Mr. Grimmaw, is that I called off our deal when I agreed to send her to the Silver Paw pack instead. If you choose to harbor this fugitive, we will hold you guilty of kidnapping.”

“Then I guess we’re guilty of kidnapping, and you’ll do what you feel you have to.”

Rage fueled Graham’s words now. He was done playing nice. He could no longer prevent an escalation.

This time, Travers spoke up. “This is stupid. You’re protecting someone who isn’t even yours. Delilah is a lone wolf who didn’t hold up her end of the bargain. I’m not leaving without her, and that’s final.”

“Well, we’re not giving her up, and I don’t think she’s going with you,” Graham challenged. “So, you can leave and deal with it, or you can waste everybody’s time a little longer. Up to you.”

Travers spat. “You dare disrespect me?”

“If I might interject,” Jonah said. “I believe what we have here are terms for a duel. Is that not correct?”

Jude chuckled. “Maybe in old-timey, uncivilized interpretations of shifter law, but—”

“You’re correct,” Graham said. “Winner takes Delilah? Assuming she’d even go with you, of course.”

Jude stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“We might have buried those laws,” Graham breathed, “but their strictest interpretation is still just cause for the end of the Grimmaw pack.”

“There’s no way I’m letting you.”

“There’s not anything you can do to stop me, Jude,” Graham said, looking at the four wolves in front of him, Travers carefully watching the discussion. “If anything happens, I need you to do me a favor.”

He looked to Delilah, determined to stand her ground but afraid for him regardless.

“What’s that?” Jude asked, already half knowing the answer.

“If anything bad happens here, I need you to take Delilah and evacuate the packs,” Graham said. “Maybe they consider her property, but she’s not ours to hand over.”

Jude nodded reluctantly, as Graham moved to Delilah, giving her one final kiss.



Chapter 30

Delilah

DELILAH LOOKED ON IN panic. It wasn't fair. She had stood up to fight, and she was finally ready to confront the specters that had been looming over her for so many months.

As the packs dispersed from the courtyard, spectators eager to witness the fight were pushed back to its perimeters, creating a wide, open space for the impending duel.

"I wouldn't do that," Miranda said, holding Delilah back as she moved to approach the starting fight.

"This is my fight, Miranda!" Delilah said, through an enraged half-whisper, half-yell. "I should be responsible for fixing this, not Jude and Graham!"

Jude had taken leadership now and was carefully monitoring the area while Graham and Travers circled around the plaza square, a fountain pouring close by, and the steady rhythm of the clock above ticking with every passing second. He fit the

role well and maintained a professional calm in contrast to the internal turmoil Delilah knew he felt.

“Look around,” Miranda said. “They’re not fighting because they have to protect you. They’re fighting because they *want* to protect you.”

She caught the quizzical expression on Delilah’s face, before adding, “It’s a screwed-up system. But right now, they’re the only ones who can stand up for you because the laws weren’t designed for you.”

Miranda looked back out over the plaza. “And besides that, with everything you’ve had to deal with mentally, I think you’ve already fought enough.”

“I can’t just sit back and watch them maul each other,” Delilah cried.

“Honey, I know it’s hard, but right now, the best way you can help Graham and Jude is by doing nothing at all.”

Miranda immediately realized her words hadn’t been comforting. “Just try to support them the best you can,” Miranda continued. “If Deacon Claw weren’t so stuck in misguided tradition, maybe you could appeal to them with logic and diplomacy. But they only honor the old ways.”

For a moment, she thought surely Miranda was mistaken. There must have been some way she could help, some manner in which she could jump in and offer moral support to Graham.

But looking around, Delilah realized how little she could do. If she stepped in at all, she would only be justifying the engagement of the entire Deacon Claw pack. The bloodshed would be horrific.

Graham cast a knowing glance at her as he and Travers continued to pace around the fountain, and Graham just barely dodged Travers's forward lunge. She could sense that he knew what she was thinking, and his gaze comforted and reassured her.

As Travers tried to leap backward, Graham ripped into him, snapping at his neck. Travers pried himself free, moving back and continuing their dance.

The plaza had gone quiet. It was like watching a sporting event, only real lives were on the line. Jude tried to fixate on the two in conflict, but over and over he tore his eyes away and back to her.

That's when she noticed Clark staring at her in wolf form with Edward coldly standing beside him. His eyes were unwavering. Would Clark attack her if given the opportunity? Did the laws he clung to really mean that little to him?

Delilah caught Jude's eye and dragged her front paw backward, digging into the ground in an attempt to signal vigilance. He nodded back and they returned their gazes to the fight.

"They're both being very careful," Miranda said. "This could go on for a while."

“Do you think he’s trying to wear him down?” Delilah asked.

“Who? Travers or Graham?”

“Either.”

“Hard to say at this point.”

Travers leapt recklessly forward again, attempting to sink his fangs into Graham’s haunches, but Graham parried this time, biting into his front paw.

“I think if Travers keeps attacking like that, Graham has already won this,” Miranda said.

Delilah wondered if Miranda was just being optimistic, or if she was really watching this from the same lens Delilah was. To Delilah, it looked like Travers was attempting to unnerve Graham, to put him off balance and force him into making costly mistakes.

She wondered if Graham and Jude had to fight for Miranda when she was in this situation, if this was the second time she’d experienced this. Once upon a time, after all, Miranda had been the focus of a pack exchange, promised to another pack with her own independence stripped away.

Granted, she hadn’t been their mate, but there was still so much Delilah didn’t know about Miranda. And she had no idea how Miranda could keep so calm when Delilah felt like she was falling apart.

She watched as Graham, in a moment of overconfidence, took the initiative to attack this time. At this, Travers took the

opportunity to throw Graham off balance, casting him to the ground.

“Oh my god,” Miranda said under her breath as Travers took a huge chunk out of Graham’s stomach.

Shifters healed quickly in wolf form, so it was hard to estimate the real damage, but the wound was brutal. Graham managed to throw Travers off of him, putting strength into his back paws, but Delilah swore she could see a bit of a limp.

They returned to their positions, closely monitoring each other as they circled. She could see their eyes darting over each other, looking for weaknesses. They were doing more than just attacking each other blindly. Every move was a calculated risk, a game not just of brute strength, but of strategy.

She wondered what Travers’s weakness was. He seemed desperate to return home, and his actions seemed to speak to his desire to end this. She thought of what might happen if Graham lost, and briefly imagined herself having to care for the Silver Paw pack before vomiting in her mouth a little.

That isn't going to happen, she reassured herself.

Graham had become noticeably more careful. She could see his movements faltering on his right side a bit, but he had started leading with his left paw to protect himself.

With every forward lunge, Travers found himself systematically broken down. When he charged forward, Graham evaded and bit back. At a certain point, Delilah realized they were almost evenly matched again.

“Say... beta.”

Delilah heard a familiar voice from her right side in the distance. It crept along her spine like ice as she looked to see Jonah now approaching Jude.

“You’ve sided with the violating pack in this matter,” Jonah said. “Technically, I believe I’m supposed to bring you to heel.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jude snarled. “I’ve got a pack to watch. My duties as beta trump any ego trip you might be having.”

Jonah looked down at the ground, feigning disappointment.

“Well, that’s a shame,” he said. “I suppose that means the current duel is forfeit, and we’re free to engage your pack with hostility.”

“You *snake!*” Jude cried.

Delilah could see a twisted smile creep up along Jonah’s mouth. *Just ignore him*, Delilah’s mind screamed. *There’s no reason to fight him now! Don’t be stupid!*

“Can I count on your participation?” Jonah asked.

“I’m going to end your little pack, once and for all!” Jude said, with an animosity Delilah had never before heard from him.

“You want to bury yourself with the old ways? Fine. We’ll bury you with the old ways.”

“Fantastic,” Jonah said, in a singsongy voice before nodding at Travers.

Was this a strategic play? Was the whole point of this really just to unsettle the duel between Graham and Travers?

Delilah could hardly watch as now Jude was drawn into the conflict. She could see Samson, Sarah, and Dakota now approaching from the teahouse, left to watch the pack by default as its enforcers.

“This is getting ridiculous!” Miranda hissed. “That can’t be legal by pack laws!”

“Still think we can’t do anything?” Delilah asked.

Miranda glanced back at her. “No, Delilah,” she said. “You need to sit back. You cannot interfere.”

“So you keep saying,” Delilah replied.

“Look. I’ve been exactly where you are, like I keep telling you, and I’m not going to let my friend throw her life away, endangering the pack in the process.” Delilah scoffed, but Miranda continued, “I know how scary this is. But—”

“You don’t, though,” Delilah said. “You’ve never watched a man you love endanger his own life for the sake of laws that don’t care about you. Picture that, twice over, and you might know what I’m going through!”

Miranda grew quiet, returning to watching the scene unfolding before her eyes. “If you go in, I’m going to stop you,” Miranda muttered.

Delilah felt a small pang of guilt as she had made Miranda—her biggest advocate and best friend—angry. In a world where

everything worked out, and Jude and Graham both triumphed, maybe Miranda would forgive her.

She wondered how she had arrived at this point. What had she ever seen in Clark, the distant figure whose stare had never left her and who was now eyeing her as prey? He had been possessive, domineering, and self-involved. This was not a man, not even a wolf. This was a monster.

Her eyes returned to the conflict playing out in front of her. As neither Jude nor Jonah had moved, she could see Graham looking sideways at the new combatants, looking irritated. She couldn't tell if he was more upset at Jonah for challenging him or Jude for agreeing to the terms of the battle.

"I'm sorry, Miranda," Delilah said.

"It's okay, Del. You know it is," Miranda replied. "I keep trying to understand what you're going through, but I've got no idea."

"You're the only one who understands," Delilah said, smiling grimly.

Miranda nodded and then returned to watching the fights. It had seemed so long since the fight between Graham and Travers had started, and Delilah and Miranda were both sitting ducks.

She was wrong before. This was nothing like a sporting event. This was a brutal spectacle that would result in lost lives, no matter who won.



Chapter 31

Jude

HAD JUDE BEEN STUPID for accepting the terms of this duel? Jude looked from Graham, whose face expressed obvious disapproval, to Jonah, whose face was contorted into something far more sinister than he'd ever seen.

Jude wasn't fighting the collected, albeit stubborn, cruel, and outdated figure he'd seen Graham speaking with on numerous occasions. This was a demon of a man. To think that such brazen cruelty—such entitled selfishness and callous disregard—had been lurking just beneath the surface this entire time?

Jude was bewildered.

He looked back at Delilah, and this cemented the wrongness of his decision. Not only was the cruel, sneering juvenile she had broken up with staring back at her, she was staring at him, in betrayal, helplessness, and disbelief.

Jude had abandoned his pride for the sake of an ego fight, or as Jonah might call it, an “honor round.”

“I want you to know that I’m not going to miss any opportunity to tear you to shreds,” Jonah said, no expression entering his voice. “And I want you to give me your all. It’s no fun for me when they don’t fight back.”

Jude sneered.

“You just let me know when you’re ready, sport,” Jonah said. “My claws haven’t tasted flesh in years. I long for your blood.”

“Fine. Count of three.” Jude was not going to humor this delusional old man. He knew when he took on this fight that Jonah was a weakened challenger, and maybe that made him dishonorable. But it had been Jonah’s insistence that they fight in the first place.

“Three.”

Jude reared back as Jonah uttered the word, preparing to best defend himself. Jude had trained in many fighting styles unique to wolves, but he had learned the best from Graham.

“Two.”

Jonah was licking his lips now, staring wildly at Jude’s face. Jude felt vulnerable suddenly, like he was wholly outclassed. What power was this man hiding?

“One.”

Jonah leaped at Jude, unleashing a flurry of claw strokes, driving his claws against his face and into every part of Jude’s body that he could reach. After seeing Travers fight, Jude had

been prepared for something more subdued and watchful. Calculated. Not this ferocious assault.

Jude felt like Jonah's punching bag, or perhaps more aptly, scratching post. He mustered all his strength into backing away, as he could taste blood reaching his lips and could tell Jonah had gouged into his eye.

"You really don't hold back, do you, old man?" Jude wanted to civilize the fight, but Jonah wasn't talking. In a wild bout, he drove his claw into Jude's lip, drawing more blood and tearing it.

Jude needed to think fast. Jonah was going to rip him apart if he didn't fight back. What did Jonah have that Jude didn't? What could possibly weaken him?

Arriving at a swift conclusion, Jude plunged his claws into Jonah's paw, pressing forward. If he could slow Jonah down, force him not to attack so quickly or so recklessly, perhaps Jude could take a second to strategize better.

"You bastard," Jonah cried, as his paw now left a trail of blood on the brick pavement.

Taking the opportunity, Jude leapt forward again, this time getting Jonah's eye with his claw. He didn't want to inflict serious damage just yet, but he needed to dull the relentless onslaught.

"An eye for an eye," Jude snarled, before trying to go for another paw.

Jonah tore a huge gash into Jude's side and wouldn't let go. He could feel himself, almost ready to pass out from the pain, before taking all his energy and using it to drive himself away from the claws.

He was in excruciating pain. But Jude had achieved his goal. He was able to slow Jonah's assault and put the time toward gathering his own strength and balance.

He took a quick sideways glance back toward the pack. Good. Samson, Sarah, and Dakota had taken charge and were holding the pack back.

Clark hadn't moved in what felt like hours. It was unsettling. He still watched Delilah with the same predatory expression as though daring her to move forward. He was egging her on in his own way, motivating her to interrupt the assault.

As Jude took a moment to shake his head, signaling to Delilah that it wasn't worth an interruption—that her moving forward would have ramifications beyond her understanding—he felt another claw tear into his ear and was met with the crazed, wide-eyed smile of his opponent.

"I don't want you getting lazy on me," Jonah said, chuckling. "My nephew's not going to try anything. He knows we've got this in the bag."

"I wouldn't be so fucking sure," Jude hissed, leaping backward. He could feel Jonah gash into his side as he moved away, clawing deeper into the unbearable wound he had just caused.

Even more disturbing, Jonah was motivating unsettlingly reckless behavior in Travers. The previously cool and observant Travers had become bloodthirsty and was ripping into Graham's side.

Jude closed his eyes for a second, trying to return to a calmer state.

"Taking a nap on the job?" Jonah snarled.

As Jonah charged forward, Jude moved slightly to the side, his eyes still closed, and then ripped upward, tearing into Jonah's underbelly. He could feel himself clawing inward, as though he were trying to escape from the innards of some beast larger and more ferocious even than himself.

Jonah countered, throwing his weight sideways to escape from the piercing claws.

"Impressive," Jonah hissed. "But you're gonna pay for that."

In an onslaught of his remaining concentrated strength, Jonah swiped furiously at Jude's leg, digging repeatedly into muscle and clawing sinew. Jude could feel the blood spilling over, could feel himself weakened as he limped away.

He could see how much this enraged Graham, who now took the opportunity to bite into Travers's chest. "I'm sorry," he could hear Graham whisper.

Travers bit back, attempting to dig into Graham's ear. But Graham pinned him back to the ground as he dug in further.

There was no grace to any of this. Jude knew that Graham had come to the grim realization that he would have to take his

opponent's life. It had to be done. Jude could see the remorse in Graham's contorted features, his fur matted in blood.

"That's a wonderful idea," Jonah said gleefully, from out of Jude's right ear. "*Bon appetit!*"

Jude was tackled suddenly to the ground, and he could feel Jonah trying to bite into him, his muzzle reaching for Jude's chest. With all his strength, Jude held him back, but to no avail. In a flash, Jonah snapped into Jude's chest, tearing into his flesh with his teeth.

His eyesight faded in and out as pain started to overwhelm his senses. If he let Jonah get any further, Jonah would surely end his life, and with it, Delilah's freedom.

He didn't want Delilah to fear for her own safety. He didn't want her to feel like a refugee any longer. "No!" Jude screamed, using his hind leg to throw Jonah off balance.

He desperately clung to life, feeling his strength wane. In the distance, he could hear Delilah's panicked yelps, her eyes brimming with tears. Jude realized he needed to embody a different side of himself. Fully grasping the ruthlessness of his opponent, who would not hesitate to kill, he tapped into a similar ferocity. The kind, reserved Jude receded, replaced by an unleashed, primal ferocity.

"Sorry, buddy," Jude said to his imagined better half. "We're going back a bit."

He could see Jonah and Graham attempting to understand his words, as he leaped forward. With calculated animosity, he

drove his jaws into Jonah's neck, twisted, and snapped.

With his dying breath, Jonah wheezed, "Well done, beta. I knew you were just like me." He let out a final rasp, a final sputter of blood leaking from his lips before the life faded from his eyes.

What had he done? He stared down at the pavement, his eyes unblinking and heart pumping uncontrollably. He expected to see everybody's terrified stares when he looked up. He expected them to reject him as a savage.

He had taken a life, and he had done so casually. It broke everything he stood for. Why had he ever agreed to this fight?

Jude tried to still his heartbeat. He was losing blood at a rapid rate, and it would do no good if he died here. The match would be a stalemate. He and Jonah, both dying in vain.

He looked down at his opponent's lonely body, and as he closed his eyes, he felt pity for Jonah, left there to die alone.

Jude sighed. He remembered that night, the last night of the Sable pack, when he had barely survived the assault from the attacking pack. The night on which he had watched his friends and family die. He remembered what he had done—and what he had blocked out.

Reopening his eyes, he realized that he never had to be that man anymore. He had hidden his cruelty well, and now, he would bury it with Jonah.

Jude looked to Graham. His alpha stood over his own vanquished opponent, and was staring back at Jude. He

expected the look to be full of deep revulsion at what he had unleashed, what he had become. But what he was met with instead was a deep sorrowful look of understanding. Turning to Delilah, he could only see relief in her eyes.

“Come bury your dead, Deacon!” Graham had shouted it, but it wasn’t intended to be callous. Jude almost thought he heard Graham fighting back tears as he said it.

There was no glory in this. Today, they would celebrate this occasion, celebrate Delilah’s freedom. But she had been victimized by a cruel, uncaring law, twisted by a sick man hellbent on devaluing and objectifying her.

And as happy as Jude was to finally be with Delilah—for her to finally feel safe—he just felt sad that men like this would still bend the old laws. He felt sad that women like Delilah had to go through any of this at all.



Chapter 32

Delilah

“IT’S OVER,” MIRANDA SAID, breathing a sigh of deep relief.

Delilah didn’t believe it. So much tension still lingered in the air. From the looks on Graham’s and Jude’s faces, it hadn’t seemed like a victory to them at all. They looked like they had come back from war.

She felt deep sympathy for them. She wanted to be there by their side, comforting them.

“Come bury your dead, Deacon!” Graham cried out, a sorrow shaking from his feet through his body.

She caught something out of the corner of her eye, a rush of fur, moving too quickly for her to react. As she turned her head, Clark charged at her in a moment of desperation. Had he planned this all along?

But before she could react, Miranda moved left and forward, intercepting his path and pinning him to the ground. “You’re a

fucking snake, you know that?” Miranda spat. “Your own uncle just died, and you’re still more concerned about your ego than giving him an honorable burial?”

Jude and Graham approached, looking equally disgusted.

“Sorry we weren’t fast enough,” Graham said, with an air of forced playfulness. He tried to lighten the mood, but something about the tone of his voice failed to convey the normalcy he tried to project.

“No worries,” Miranda said. “I’m just happy to defend my friend. You both got all the action.”

“You might think this is over,” Clark spat. “But me and my pack will be back. I can think of a few other packs that might want this beauty.” To Delilah’s utter disdain, he looked up at her and gave her a wretched smile.

“You lost me when we broke up, Clark,” Delilah said. “Why can’t you get that through your thick skull?”

Clark began muttering incoherently and angrily before Graham interjected.

“Even by your own code, Deacon, you lost,” Graham said.

“By your code, Delilah belongs to us now.”

“And our first action, as owners?” Jude added, expecting Graham to finish the sentiment. He didn’t disappoint.

“We’re freeing her,” Graham said. “She belongs to nobody except herself. She was never property to begin with.”

Clark chuckled. “You naive idiots. You’ve got no idea how the world works.”

“Oh?” Delilah approached him, looking down at him on the ground in satisfaction. She got as close to his face as she could, content that she would never be scared of him again. She scrutinized all of the features she used to love, but now barely recognized. “Please enlighten us then.”

Clark stared at her, his mouth clearly moving faster than his brain. “Nobody understands pack loyalty anymore,” Clark said. “Nobody understands honor. You say nobody’s property, and that we’re all owned by ourselves and not the pack? Watch as we all crumble, our packs fall apart, and divided, we become easy pickings for the civilized society too afraid of us to live in peace.”

“That’s a fun idea,” Graham said, looking down at him in pity and disgust. “Here’s another idea. Either pick yourself up and bury your dead, or join them. Never come back here again as long as you live, and tell Silver Paw and the rest of your pack they’re banned too.”

Clark looked between the four of them, unsure of what to do, before picking himself up off the ground and slowly standing. He clearly expected another confrontation. When he received none, he stared at Delilah.

“I hope it was worth it,” he spat.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Delilah said, not even making eye contact.

“It was.”

Edward had already begun cleaning up the bodies, readying them for transport. She couldn't help but feel pity for him. As beta, he hadn't asked for this. He was just being loyal to the cause of his pack. She doubted he'd ever get those images out of his mind.

Clark approached him and joined the cleanup effort along with the rest of the Silver Paw and Deacon Claw packs that had accompanied them. Delilah could see the two of them bonding, and it bothered her more than she'd like to admit.

But Clark was finally little more than a stranger to her, and she considered that a huge victory. She felt nothing for him other than embarrassment, and although her trauma lingered, he was no longer the source of it. The fact that she could begin healing in earnest meant so much to her.

"Are you okay?" Miranda asked, trying to forge a connection. "I'm really sorry."

"I'm fine," Delilah smiled. And for the first time in a long time, she meant it. "And I completely understand. I would have done the same thing, in your position."

Miranda nodded, smiling sheepishly.

"We'll talk more later," Delilah said, looking at Graham and Jude, but speaking to Miranda. "I'd like a private word, if that's okay?"

When Miranda had cleared out, and everybody was out of earshot, Delilah addressed Graham and Jude, who were both in terrible shape. They both probably needed medicine, and

Delilah realized that was one area where their pack was severely lacking. After everything was done with, she'd probably be responsible for getting them to the hospital, which she was fine with.

"So I'd like to wait to say this," Delilah said, acknowledging Graham and Jude.

"Wait to say what?" Graham asked.

Jude didn't seem to be quite himself, but his ears perked up regardless.

"We probably need to patch you guys up," Delilah said. "And it's not even the full moon yet, won't be for a while."

"Are you gonna get on with it?" Graham asked playfully. "We get it. You're good at keeping us in suspense."

"Tradition dictates I'd say this on a full moon," Delilah said, smiling at Graham's continued annoyance, "but fuck tradition. If you'll have me, I'd love to join the Grimmaw pack."

Graham and Jude could hardly contain their enthusiasm. "Are you serious?" Jude asked, nearly falling over in stitches from his erratic and excited movements.

"You know if you're doing it to access the Fang District, you don't need to worry, right?" Graham added. "We're happy to have you here, Grimmaw or not."

"This is my first choice, as a free woman," Delilah said, chuckling. "There's nothing I'd rather do than pitch in to help this pack. You gave me a new life, and I can never stop

thanking you. And I'm so sorry for what you had to do to defend me," Delilah added.

"We'd do it again if we had to. Right?" Graham asked, now looking down at Jude. Jude nodded, smiling timidly.

"Oh my god!" Miranda shouted. "We're going to be pack sisters?"

Delilah looked over her shoulder, uncertain of when Miranda had joined them, and cocked her head to the side. She had never even heard her approach. There were some things about Miranda that Delilah would never understand.

"You know you can't keep secrets from me, Del," Miranda said, smiling. "I'll always be watching."

"Creepy," Jude said.

"Please," Miranda contested. "After pinning her ex-boyfriend to the ground for her, I'm allowed to creep."

Following the events of that day, Graham and Jude decided some form of celebration would be necessary, but the occasion was marked with somberness. They were relieved that there had been no deaths on their end, but it had all felt so unnecessary. And in Jude's words, "It never felt right to celebrate a death."

They settled on having a pack dinner and an evening run. Delilah could still see the blood on the brick tiles of the plaza; it would take time to clean up.

The pack dinner was hastily thrown together with leftover ingredients from their last dinner. The last thing Graham or

Jude wanted to worry about was food preparation, but it was still entirely delicious. Delilah wasn't even sure how Jude had stored steak for a week so it was still so delicious, but it was as fresh as the night she'd first tasted it.

Even though Graham and Jude were asked to recount the details of the fight numerous times, and they embellished the details every time, Delilah could see their underlying sadness. The things they didn't explain and the parts they left out were what they kept close to their hearts, the things that would haunt them still.

Grimmaw pack had sent a message, not just to Silver Paw and Deacon Claw, but to all other packs that the Fang District was a safe haven. Anybody who challenged that again would be met with the might of the Grimmaw pack.

“We have an announcement to make, and I'm sure you've all heard,” Graham said, standing atop one of the tables and speaking to the modest gathered crowd. “Normally we save these announcements for the night of the full moon, but Delilah's had enough tradition for one night.”

That comment was met with lighthearted, albeit slightly uneasy laughter from the packs.

“We've asked Delilah to join the Grimmaw pack, and she's accepted!”

She heard a pride in his voice that he couldn't betray. Jude smiled widely at her, and the audience cheered much louder this time as Delilah blushed.

The entire time she had been in the city, it had never quite felt like home. Something always seemed unfinished, lingering on the horizon, waiting for her attention. It had kept her from making permanent decisions as she was always afraid of having to uproot herself again.

But she realized that was gone now. She felt truly free to make her own life here, away from the prying eyes of her unsettled past.

She decided to join in the applause. It felt weird, clapping for herself, but she was clapping just as much for the sacrifices and love of the people around her. She was proud to be a Grimmaw.

At the dinner's conclusion, with the stars shining brightly down upon them, Graham and Jude both picked her up in their arms and carried her to the park. She could feel herself melting in their grasp as they both planted a kiss, first on her cheeks, and then passionately on her lips.

And with that, she remembered what they had all been fighting for—this moment of brief, untampered bliss, a herald of all the joy to come.



Chapter 33

Delilah

A SUDDEN SURGE OF worry shot through Delilah as Jude and Graham walked into the cafe. It was only midday and wasn't like them, so her first thought was that something was wrong. "What is it?"

"What's what?" asked Graham, walking toward her and planting a kiss on her cheek. That act alone, plus the fact she could smell nothing other than their gorgeous scents told her she was worrying about nothing.

"Nothing, I just thought something must be wrong. What are you guys both doing here?" She took a breath. "Sorry, I'll start again. What I meant was I thought you'd be at work."

"Well, usually we are," said Jude, beaming. "But it's a year today since you landed on our doorstep, so we thought we'd mark the occasion."

"Oh," she said, surprised that they would even remember such a thing. She hadn't. If anything, she wanted to forget

everything about what happened before she came here. She was happy now, happier than she'd ever been and felt safe and secure with her alpha and beta, despite the reason she ended up in their territory in the first place.

But that wasn't in her control. That was firmly in the hands of fate, and sometimes it worked in very strange ways, it would seem. Now she had a home, a job, and a pack. But most of all she had them—Graham and Jude, two men who would do anything for her and always made sure she was safe and happy.

“So, we're coming to take you out,” said Jude. “Don't worry, it's all been cleared.”

Delilah looked over to Miranda, who smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Oh, well I don't know if I should. I mean—”

“We're going,” said Graham, that look of determination on his face only an alpha could have. It always stirred something in the pit of her stomach, and this time was no different. “It's all been arranged, so nothing to worry about.”

“Okay then,” she replied, taking off her apron and heading to the counter where she folded it and placed it in the drawer.

“Have a lovely day,” called Miranda as was on her way to serve a customer. “Don't worry about anything. It's all sorted.”

“Thank you,” Delilah said, before heading back to her guys. They were dressed casually but were still hot as hell. She often found herself wondering how she got so lucky. Just one of these guys was a hell of a find, but two!

“So, where are we going?” she asked, as they led her out to the car. “I mean I’m not exactly dressed for anything, really.” She looked down at her jeans, wondering if she should go home and change.

“No need to worry about that,” said Jude. “Besides, you always look a million bucks.” She smiled and pecked him on the cheek.

“Kiss-ass,” said Graham.

“Oh, don’t worry, Mr. Alpha, there’s plenty for you, too,” she said, kissing him as well. Jude laughed, and she tried not to. They were always teasing him for being the tough guy even though underneath he was sensitive and caring.

They drove out to the edge of the city, to somewhere she hadn’t been before. The buildings became lower and then started to disappear, replaced only by fields. That’s when she realized they were approaching an airfield.

“Wait, where are we going?” she asked, wondering what the hell was going on as they pulled up.

“Only for a quick trip,” Graham said. “Come on, let’s go. The chopper’s waiting for us.”

“The chopper!” she shot back, incredulously. “I’ve never been in a helicopter!”

“Good, another first we can share,” Jude said, taking her hand and squeezing. “Come on. You’re gonna love it.”

They climbed into the aircraft, Graham making sure she was properly strapped in and safe before the pilot launched them

into the air. “So, we’re gonna be going out west,” Graham said through the earpiece. There’s some forest out there that’s hard to get to by car or foot. We know how much you miss the outdoors, being in the city.”

She swallowed down her emotion, truly touched by how thoughtful this way. As they got underway, she watched as the buildings became fewer and the trees started to take over, with nothing but green stretching for miles. It took her by surprise just how expansive it was, and her feet itched to be on the ground.

“There’s a landing spot just over that ridge,” said the pilot after a while. “I’ll land there and be back for you in three hours. No one’s out here, not even hunters, so you can run freely.”

And that’s what they did—ran, breathed in the clean air, smelled the scents of nothing but the earth with no trace of humans or the city. Delilah had never felt so free in all her life. It was like a dream come true—one that they made happen for her.

After stretching their legs and running wild across the wilderness, they shifted back to their human forms and returned to the bags that the guys had brought with them. Inside were the makings of a picnic fit for royalty, complete with an exquisite bottle of ice-cold vintage champagne, suitable for a queen and two princes.

“Oh my god, you didn’t need to do all of this for me,” said Delilah, overwhelmed with how well they treated her.

“Yes, we did,” said Jude. “To show you what you mean to us.”

“We’d do anything for you,” said Graham in an uncharacteristic show of softness. “Which is why we want to ask you if you’d marry us, enter a mate-bond—the three of us, forever.”

The three of them, forever. It made her heart sing. “Of course I will! Yes! Yes, Yes, Yes!”

She felt so high she could have flown home without the aid of the helicopter. The flight and the car ride back were bathed in a warm and comfortable silence, each of them lost in feelings of happiness.

“It’s been the best day of my life,” Delilah finally said when they got back to Graham’s place.

“Good,” he said, pulling her close and kissing her passionately. “And it’s not even over yet.” He picked her up and carried her to the bedroom, Jude following behind. “Thank you for saying yes, for being ours forever,” he said as he placed her down on the bed.

“Thank you for asking me to,” she replied as they undressed and showered her body with kisses. She’d never get enough of what they did to her, worshiping every inch of her skin as if she were a goddess.

They were so focused on her that it was sometimes difficult to get her hands on them, but she was getting better at it, knowing what she wanted and when. Tonight she wanted them both, wanted to be filled by each of them—her mates to be.

“I love you both so much,” she breathed. “You mean everything to me.”

They growled softly, their kisses becoming hotter and more frantic as she told them how she felt about them, how safe she now felt, how adored. The words spilled from her with ease, as if their new bond had drawn them out, feelings waiting to be set free for the longest time.

“Delilah,” Graham said as he propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at her with such love in his eyes. “You deserve everything we can offer you and more, sweetheart.”

Sensation gripped her as Jude slipped down between her legs, whispering sweet nothings against the sensitive flesh of the inside of her thigh. She cried out when he landed on her sex, his tongue gliding through her folds—hot, wet, and delicious.

Graham watched as Jude pleased her, his eyes on hers, his free hand massaging her breasts and teasing her nipples through his fingers. “You’re so beautiful,” he said as she moved closer and closer to orgasm. “I’ll never get tired of seeing you come.”

“Oh god!” she cried. Jude sucked gently on her clit, teasing out her pleasure until she was bucking her hips and screaming his name. She looked up at Graham as she did, his face becoming simultaneously feral with desire and full of love.

She waited for a few moments for the pulsing to stop before sitting up. “Come on, I want both of you,” she said. “I want you both so much.”

“Anything you want, doll,” said Jude, getting up to his feet, his length hard and dripping. Graham moved down to the edge of the bed, his legs over the edge as she straddled him, desperate for him to be inside her.

“Yes,” he hissed as she slid down onto him.

Jude joined them at the end of the bed pressing his erection at her backside and teasing her until she couldn't take any more. She wanted to be filled by her alpha and beta, completely taken by them.

He eased into her slowly, everything now stretched and so completely full. Gently they found their rhythm, the three of them working as one, joined together so fully it was as if they were one and the same.

She rocked back and forth on Graham's cock, watching him as he looked up at her, completely captured by the moment. Her alpha underneath her, her beta behind her, everything she needed and more. She belonged to them.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” he murmured.

“And you,” she said, reaching back to Jude.

“And you,” he replied.

Together they brought each other to bliss and back, just like it was going to be from now on. Just the three of them—forever.



Thanks SO much for reading “Seduced”! It would be totally awesomesauce if you’d leave a review for this book at your preferred retailer as reviews are an easy and FREE way to support your favorite authors. (And I’m totes your fave, right? I knew it!) -bootyshake-

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Excerpt

Abigail's mouth was so dry it hurt.

She forced her lips apart before she even opened her eyes, and the sensation of air slipping between her teeth was a torturous relief. Then she allowed her eyes to open and, when she didn't recognize the ceiling, turned to her side.

She was in a large bed. It had to be king-sized at least, and the sheets were a soft gray. She inhaled the twisted scents of leather, wood, spice, and musk.

Well, you're definitely not in your own bed, she thought.

She tried to sit up but quickly realized that was out of the question. Memories took shape as she lay back down.

Memories of a healer. Memories of the presence of an alpha.

When she looked down at herself, the cast on her arm showed that she had not been hallucinating.

Suddenly, pain—sharp, breathtaking pain—spiked and spiraled up her arm. The pain held her in a chokehold almost immediately, and it kicked the breath out of her, pinning her to the mattress. Any hope that Abigail might have had to sit up was negated in that moment. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she lay there and stared up at the ceiling.

Where the hell am I? And when is this pain going to stop?

Abigail thought this, and the words repeated over and over in her head.

Where was she? Whose bed was she in? And when would the pain stop?

Waves of panic and anxiety crashed into her then as she remembered the two older people who had found her in the car.

Yes, that's right, she thought hazily. You were in too much pain to drive. You pulled over to the side of the road.

Two people found her, two wolf shifters. They took her back to their pack. Abigail sat upright then, ignoring the pain that made her gasp as she realized she was in a different pack's territory.

More memories flooded into her mind, overwhelming her and forcing her back down. Memories of the attack by Christian. Memories of Christian telling her that Luke didn't want her.

This time when she cried, it wasn't silent. Abigail turned onto her side and sobbed as she remembered Christian's words. She hadn't been crying long when a man walked in. Somehow, Abigail remembered him clearly despite the haze that had settled over her other memories.

He was the alpha of the pack territory she was in.

A very handsome alpha.

And then, despite her tears, her cheeks started burning as she remembered what she had said.

I called him handsome! I don't even know the man!

Maybe the alpha knew what was going through her mind right then because he smiled gently at her.

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About the Author

Ex-dance teacher, former accountant and erstwhile collectible doll salesperson, New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Celia Kyle writes urban fantasy, science fiction (as Erin Tate), and paranormal romances.

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