



Freeing Her Cheetah

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Saylor Spade is a cheetah on the run.

Saylor has never had a home. Her mother was her world until she was viciously taken from her, and now she is lost. She's been running from a man who is determined to bond with her even though he isn't her mate. When his pack gets too close, she has to use everything she has learned from years of hiding to disappear again.

She had an escape plan, knowing she couldn't stay in one place long. But things out of her control derailed her progress, and she found herself deep in the woods, unsure how to proceed until her mate appeared through the trees.

Elijah is a cheetah shifter. He left a thriving horse ranch, following his neighbor and best friend to a town filled with misfit shifters and vampires. He considers Laken, a dragon shifter, the only family he has left and would do anything to protect him, even live in a place with vampires, a species he despises. Elijah doesn't talk about his past, which still haunts him. He doesn't want a mate until he finds a tempting cheetah in his woods.

Will Saylor finally have a home and never have to run again? Can she not only free the cheetah within herself but also Elijah's?

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Chapter One

Saylor

The fingertips of fear slowly pad up my neck.

I pause a second as I hold the pot of coffee over the customer's cup before filling it up. I keep my smile in place, nodding my head as they thank me. I move on, never looking over my shoulder to where I know they are sitting.

They tried to mask their sick scent with cologne, as if that would hide them; I know their smell. There is a reason they haven't caught me yet.

I laugh at the sweet older man who cracks a joke. He comes every day and sits in the same booth. He orders a bowl of oatmeal and coffee, no matter the time of day. He lectures me on a healthy diet every time. His wife died years ago, and now he sits here for hours, enjoying the noise of the diner.

I check my other full table, filling cups, still smiling, as if there isn't a predator at my back.

I take an order and move towards the kitchen, picking up stray napkins and silverware. Ever so slowly, the kitchen comes closer. I walk through the swinging doors, hoping they don't know my routine. I usually never go into the back to give the orders.

Today will be different.

“Sally, we have a live one,” I yell.

Sally knows the code word.

“Damn, girl. You don’t have to yell. Be patient.” Sally grabs the pen and paper she always keeps in her apron; turning her back on the open window that shows the tables in the diner, she starts writing. “Get some water. Have a seat for a minute, and I’ll get the next order to you as quickly as possible,” she shouts.

“Are they here?” she writes.

“Yes.”

“It was nice knowing you. You know the plan. You have very little time.” She nudges the paper back to me.

“I don’t want them to hurt you,” I write, worried for her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll burn the note. I’m a rabbit. Everyone knows we are crazy fuckers.” She looks at me with determination and sadness. “Get safe.”

I watch her burn the note on the stove and know I have run out of time.

I walk softly but quickly to the bathroom near the back door. I strip down to my skin, shoving my clothes behind the toilet. I reach up to the top shelf and bring down the sealed bag of new clothes. With shaking hands, I use alcohol wipes to rub down my skin everywhere I can reach and pull on the clothes. It won’t eliminate my scent, but it will camouflage it enough that I won’t leave a trail out the back door. Leaving the clothes behind that have soaked up my scent all day will distract them enough.

I hear Sally talking to me in the kitchen as if I’m sitting in front of her.

I don't look back at her as I slip out of the bathroom and silently open the back door. I swallow thickly when I don't sense or smell any shifter. Moving fast, I tie up my hair and add the baseball hat, pulling it low on my forehead.

I take a deep breath and run.

I run fast.

I run as if someone is trying to kill me.

I run as if someone is trying to kidnap me.

I run as if my whole life is at stake.

I run as if someone is trying to control me.

Because it's all true.

I have to run four miles until I get to the car that Sally left for me. There is an envelope full of money and a backpack full of clothes. I have to get as far as I can from this little town.

This was the plan.

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I distantly hear roaring behind me. However, they are still at the diner, and I'm almost in the car. I pray that they don't hurt Sally. We made plans to reach out when it is safe to. I hope she is alive when I do. I made sure she knew the risks of helping me. I told her all the sick things they had done and what they might do to her. She agreed anyway. She insisted.

My breath is steady when I reach the car and jerk open the door. I don't waste time starting it and peeling out of the spot. I speed down the road, never taking my eyes off the pavement in front of me. I don't dare open the windows to relieve the oppressive heat inside. The men that are after me would be able to smell me.

That sounds weird, right?

The world is filled with shifters, vampires, warlocks, and witches. The men tracking me are cheetahs, like me. I've been hiding and running most of my life. I've picked up tips and tricks over the years, trying to evade the shifters who want to get to me. I know about the smells that identify shifters versus humans. I know the factors that contribute to how long your scent can linger in an area.

My heartbeat is steady, even though fear courses through me. I have learned to control everything that would give me away. For years, I have practiced keeping it all shoved deep inside. If they knew how they affected me, they would use it against me.

I'm sad to be leaving the small town in my taillights. I lived there for six months—the longest out of all the places. It was quiet. It was peaceful. It was home. The people welcomed me with open arms. They knew me by name—or at least, by the name I gave them. I'll miss being Beth. Plain, quiet Beth who smiles quietly, talks

quietly, and listens to everyone.

Every new place, I have a new name. I make a game out of choosing one. I'm surprised I know my real one anymore.

I dream of the day I can live without fear. A day I can introduce myself as Saylor Spade. I think it's a killer name. I love it. I sigh. I dread picking another one at the next place I decide is safe, even though I pretend to be excited when I have to choose.

I force myself not to look at the seat beside me.

My mother should be next to me.

I loved her. She was my whole life. She protected me always. She gave up everything to keep me happy and safe. She was my best friend. She was my teacher, my protector, my confidant, and my safe place. She knew how to make everything fun and an adventure. There is a hole in my heart where she used to be. I remember fondly our nights sleeping in the car.

We would stuff our faces with chips and snacks from a vending machine and tell stories while snuggled under our thin blankets. We couldn't go to the movies, so we would make up our own. She would start with the first scene, and I would pick it up, and back and forth we would go. We would always give it a happy ending—life is already sad and challenging enough.

I can picture her dark, long brown hair blowing in the breeze of the open window. I see the same hair when I look in the mirror. Her laugh would burst out, loud and magical. I got my laugh from her, but it's been years since I had anything to laugh about. She was tall and thin but strong. I attribute my curves to all the chips we ate. Her eyes were dark blue with the darkest lashes I have ever seen, and they always shined with possibilities. My eyes are light blue, and I have to put on a pound of

mascara to get the same effect.

I always marveled at her ability to make it fun to be running for your life. But I must admit, if she were still with me, I would be smiling instead of frowning.

I do not waver in my concentration. I know exactly how far I can go with a full tank of gas. I know the town where I will dump it and pick up the next car. I know where that car will take me. Rinse and repeat.

This is my life.

I do not know any other way. I have been homeless since the age of five. I am thirty-two. Of course, I don't remember the early days. I try to so I can have more memories of my mom.

I am thankful he sent his lackeys in first. If he had come in, I wouldn't have been able to get away. I assume he wanted to be sure it was me before wasting his time coming to a diner in the middle of nowhere to kill or kidnap the wrong girl.

I am a cheetah shifter who has lived her life in a car, on the run from the Alpha of a pack of deadly cheetahs.

They killed my father when I was four. They killed my mother when I was twenty-eight. He now wants me. He wants to force me to mate with him.

I refuse to let him.

I will not let him win.

I will find a way to kill him. I will do what I must to get revenge for my mother and father.

That motherfucker will not get away with what he has done. I want him to think I will run the rest of my life. I want him to think I am weak. I want him to think he's going to win.

Then I will slit his throat and laugh as I watch the blood drain from his cowardly body.

Chapter Two

Elijah

"I love listening to a woman's pleasure, but this is getting ridiculous," I sigh.

"I don't think they're going to stop anytime soon," Logan says, disinterested.

I roll my eyes toward him. "Doesn't it bother you?"

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“No.”

I am super happy for my friend Laken and his brother Bishop. They found a beautiful mate in Penny. Not long ago, they mated and have been living happily ever since. The problem with this is I live in a cabin on their land. It's deep in the woods, but it doesn't matter when my cheetah ears pick up any sound from miles around. So I am forced to listen to two very healthy dragons claim their mate. Over and over again. If a shifter is experienced enough, with enough control, they can dim their sensitive ears. But, fuck, I can't do it all the time.

I don't want to hear it, especially since now I think of Penny as a sister. I wouldn't be surprised if this was the reason the dragon's sister, Saphira, decided to travel for a month. Her brothers built her a little cabin on the other side of their house that she barely moved into before she left. She is also a dragon and has become a good friend. Secretly, I think of her as a sister, too. We text back and forth frequently.

“Are lion's ears less sensitive?” I turn back to Logan with my fingertip in my ear.

“No.”

A little bit about my new lion friend.

Months ago, Logan was rescued from a madman holding shifter games in the woods. He was starved, caged, collared, and hunted for months and months. He was offered a place here in the local wolf pack; Kerian, the Alpha, made an exception. They like to gather all kinds of shifters here, but Logan turned the offer down. Then he disappeared for a while—he doesn't want to talk about it.

For some reason, I like him. We sit on my porch, drink beer, and I talk. He gives me one or two-word answers—it's our thing. Maybe that's why I can tolerate him better than others in my new town.

The world is filled with all kinds of creatures that turn into animals and practice magic. The worst are the vampires—I don't want to talk about all the reasons why. The vampires here are slowly gaining my trust, but I am still uncomfortable around them.

"I'm going to have to invest in some earplugs," I sneer, glaring in the direction that the sound of the most recent orgasm is coming from, removing the finger.

"Probably," Logan says before taking a drink. I don't miss the slight smirk on his lips.

"What's up with you today? You are a tad less talkative than usual." I lift the bottle to my mouth as I study him.

"Just a weird feeling." He shrugs. "Something's coming."

"Ominous," I mumble. "I welcome it. It's been way too quiet around here." Logan raises a brow. "You know what I mean." I wave a hand. "Besides the orgasm givers over there."

"You like trouble," he states.

"Well, yeah," I spit. "It's been way too long since I've killed someone."

Logan snorts.

I had to get my hands dirty while helping Laken with the threat toward his mate. I

regret nothing. The asshole that I buried in the yard had it coming. I have no issue with protecting those that I consider my family. Plus, I may have some control issues.

I pull my cowboy hat lower over my eyes, slouch back in my seat, stretch my long legs in front of me, and cross my ankles.

I love being a shifter—a cheetah. I'm fast in both forms. I have an excellent sense of smell and, of course, hearing. I can heal fast. While in my cheetah body, not much can take me down. I'm smart and scrappy. I will live a very long time. I can shift in less time than you can blink and have honed my skills every day for thirty-five years. I always want to be prepared for any threat.

I don't have a 'real family' anymore. I gave that up years ago—I was forced to give that up. I chose Laken to be my family; now, he has given me more. I will protect them. I would die for them.

“Have you decided to take the job Quinn offered?” I ask.

“Not yet.”

“It's not a bad place to be.” Quinn is a bear shifter who owns an investigation company. I started working for him after everything calmed down here. You would think I would find the trouble I was after there, but it can get pretty boring. I mostly follow rich assholes that are cheating on their wives.

“Maybe.” He sits forward, his elbows on his knees. “You really like it there?”

“Once I got past working for a grouchy bear and working with a grouchy, deadly vampire—it's not half bad.” Bash is the white-haired vampire that was working there before I started. He's four-hundred years old and is seriously lacking in give-a-fucks. He's mated and is the son of the king of vampires.

“We’ll see.” He looks at me. “I’ve been toying with the idea of starting a construction business.”

“Really?” I ask with raised eyebrows.

“Just a thought.” He shifts around uncomfortably.

“Hey, I’m all for it. That’s something you are good at?”

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“I like to build things. I’m good with wood,” he mutters.

I intentionally pass up the perfect opening for a classic joke. “Do it.” Deep down, I want my new friend to be happy. He has too many shadows in his eyes.

“Maybe,” he repeats, turning back to stare into the woods.

We sit in silence, but it’s not uncomfortable. One thing I have realized with Logan is that he needs it. I can’t imagine what it’s like to live as he was forced to for so long. If it would have been me, I would have gone completely crazy.

“Do you want to shift and chase each other through the woods?” I suggest.

“No.”

“Do you want to shift and beat the shit out of each other in the woods?”

“No.” His lips curve.

“Do you want to go to the bar and pick a fight with a human?”

“Maybe,” he concedes.

“Cool. Let me change.” I stand.

“Why?” Logan frowns.

“Logan, these are my good jeans.” I motion down my body. “I don’t want to get blood on them.”

“Fuck, you're crazy,” he sighs.

“Well, yeah.” I down my beer as I go inside.

The cabin was a shithole when I moved in. I cleaned it and added another room. It’s still a shithole, but it's mine.

I left behind a ranch that butts up to Laken’s house that he left behind to come to Oregon. I was there for two years before he moved in. I had a good thing going. I had a few ranch hands working for me, a good business buying, selling, and training horses. It took some patience to get them to trust me, but they must have sensed my need to help them. I have been a wild animal most of my life—they could relate to me.

Real animals just instinctively know the bad from the good. They desire to be loved just as most of us do. Not me, but most people.

I left my ranch to help Laken. I gave up my business to stay here. He doesn’t need me anymore, but deep inside, I had a burning need to set up my new home in the middle of all these creatures like me. It’s as if this is what was meant to be.

Corny, I know.

But without Laken living beside me, my place didn’t seem like where I needed to be. Laken would be the first to tell you I walked onto his land and wouldn’t leave him alone. I knew he needed me to be persistent in our new friendship—he would call it annoying. But I know the truth. He was thankful I decided to be his friend.

I shove my cream cowboy hat on my head, replacing the black one. It is my least favorite out of all the ones I have, so I won't be sad if it gets blood on it. I shrug my plaid shirt over my shoulders, button it, and ensure I have several toothpicks in my pocket.

I pull my oldest boots on my feet and join Logan on the porch.

"Let's go through the rules," I tell him, shutting the door.

"Rules?" Logan questions, walking with me to my truck.

"Laken and Bishop told me the rules I have to follow if I am going to live here and not piss people off. Which, what's the fun in that?" I jump in the driver's seat. "Number one, and this one is the most important—they stressed that endlessly. Don't kill any humans that don't deserve it. Ever. If you are going to fight them, pull your punches; they are delicate." I put my arm on the seat and look behind me as I reverse. "Number two, don't hug anyone. I like to hug. This rule upsets me. I'm a friendly guy. But apparently, humans are suspicious of that." I speed down the road. "Number three, don't reveal that we are shifters. Even though several shifters live here, there are still more humans. Showing yourself is a big no, no. Plus, getting naked in a bar to shift would raise some eyebrows," I scoff. "People are so judgmental."

"Sounds like the basic rules of being a shifter," he mutters, but I ignore him.

"Last but not least, never leave a man behind. If we get in a fight, we end it together. We don't go running away like a little asshole. You are a lion. I am a cheetah. We are the kings of the jungle; we stay and finish it."

"I don't think we are the kings of anything," Logan muses.

"Let me have it."

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“Fine. Laken gave you that rule?” he asks suspiciously.

“No. I thought I would add it. It’s one he should have put on the list.”

“Where is this list?”

“I burned it. He wrote them all down. I figure those were the most important.” I smiled at the memory of Laken’s face when I threw it in the fireplace while he watched.

“You didn’t read the rest of them?”

“I skimmed it.” I shrug, glancing at him. “I don’t like to be restrained.”

“Right,” Logan drawls.

“Have you heard the joke about the cheetah and lion who walk into a bar?” I ask, smirking.

“No.”

Fuck, this is going to be fun.

Chapter Three

Saylor

Isit on my heels behind the tree and close my eyes.

I'm so freaking tired. I haven't slept in three days. I've barely eaten. I've put hundreds of miles between the searching Alpha and me. I hope I have covered my tracks, and my scent enough.

The plan hasn't exactly been perfect. I was going to ditch one of the cars, leave my scent in the wrong direction and pick up another. But the last car broke down while I was in the middle of nowhere. I have no problem traveling by foot, but it's difficult when I am running on no sleep. My body is failing me.

I open my backpack and grab a protein bar—my last one. I have two sips of water left. I was hoping in another hundred miles to stop and stay in a hotel, have a hot meal, and have a shower. I took the chance yesterday to stop at a rest stop and clean up. Luckily, they had showers. So I don't stink too bad.

I pull my baseball hat lower on my head and scan the area. I can see nothing but trees and grass for miles. I love the smell ofthe forest. The darkness and quiet feed my soul. This is where I always want to be. My animal needs this surrounding her. I have neglected her needs. I shift and let her out as much as I can. It's difficult to do when I am always on guard, hiding my true self. I don't want to do this forever. I have to decide how to end this. Since my mom died, I've been surviving on memories, anger, and panic. I can't live my life this way anymore.

My cheetah has been quiet.

I talk to her with pictures and feelings. She is different than me but the same. When we are in animal form together, we are one. In my human body, she has her own opinions and emotions. She has the same desire as me to get safe, kill the Alpha, and live in the woods.

She is pushing me to shift. She wants to run within the trees. She wants to be free for the first time in our lives.

Me too, bitch.

Grant is the Alpha of the pack of cheetahs that has been stalking me. Not everyone is lucky enough to find their mate and have children. Instead of waiting for the universe to choose the perfect mate for them, his pack have forced those who aren't to service them, even going so far as to force the bond. It's not just our kind who is being forced. Human women are at risk, too. Trying to change someone that is not chosen for you is risky and almost always ends in disaster. Humans usually become stuck in between forms, the animal and their human body. The process is too much for their fragile bodies without the universe guiding the bond.

Attempting it always ends in disaster. The universe can choose human women to be a shifter's mate. She then has to accept them and the bond to be turned into one. If she doesn't, the shifter will be forever alone, pining after them. For us, our mate is the one. Once we meet them, we are tied to them. Shifter women immediately go into heat when they meet their mate. It can be painful if it is ignored. Being around their mate will relieve some of it, but the ultimate goal is to be mated and filled with the seed from their mate to continue the expansion of the shifter community. The bond must be completed with a bite, usually during sex, to be completed fully. Most of the time, the bites are given at the same time, but they don't have to be, at least if they are both shifters. If one of them is ready to be tied to the other, they can choose to mark them first. The connection will start and build for the one who did the marking—they are now bound to the other. Even though this can happen, the one that is marked won't be as desperate in their emotions. But just the scent of them, being close to them, connects us. Once mated fully, they can feel each other's emotions and they can communicate easily in shifter form.

Grant wants me, regardless of my choice or the fact I am not his mate. He has a

handful of loyal pack members who blindly follow his lead. They are the ones he sends out to track me down.

My mom has told me the stories of their behavior within the pack. My parents were once part of it. Of course, at that time, Grant's father was the Alpha, but he was no less cruel. They treat women as their pets, and not in a good way. The women take care of them in every way.

My dad walked into the Alpha's house and witnessed him violating a young cheetah. He defended the woman. He paid for his interference with his life. The Alpha trained his son at a young age to kill, rape, and torture the innocent. Grant was ten and dealt the killing blow.

I feel guilty I don't remember, but in the same breath, I'm glad I don't.

My Mom fled in the middle of the night. She waited until the men were drinking heavily. She tried to get the other women to come with us. They chose to stay. She did what she could to convince them, but they were too terrified of the consequences.

God, I miss her.

I miss physical touch. I miss hugs. I miss having someone give a shit. I miss going to bed, knowing someone will still be there in the morning—until the one day when they aren't.

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A soft step on the forest floor snaps me back into the present.

Fuck.

I take a breath.

It's not Grant or any of his pack.

I take another, deeper breath.

No.

It can't be.

My heart speeds.

My legs shake as I push up, and lean against the tree, my claws transforming, digging into the wood.

My mind shuts down as I stare into the dark.

My eyes turn into my cheetah's, probing the area in front of me.

It's him.

A sleek, large, dangerous cheetah appears in front of me. His eyes are locked on my face. His legs take slow, steady steps, and his long tail swishes back and forth through

the grass. He moves as if he has all the time in the world, yet he keeps me frozen, waiting for him.

His head cocks, and his nostrils flare. He's taking in my scent. My body decides this is the best time to become wet, heavy, and totally turned on.

This is not happening. I shake my head slightly, and he speeds up, sensing my desire to run.

His paw lands a foot away from me. His big head reaches just below my chest. I suck in my breath when his nose touches my shirt. He breathes in, ruffling the fabric, and growls. I don't dare move. I use all of my training to stay completely still. I shove all the surprise and fear deep inside.

I can't stifle the gasp when he rolls his head on my stomach. He's leaving his scent on me. He wants me covered.

He continues down. Down my legs, one after another, to my feet and back up. He pauses in front of my crotch. He licks his lips, baring his teeth, and his chest rumbles. He skims over me, not quite touching, but his hot breath sinks into my pants.

I shiver.

My mouth opens slightly as need slides through me.

He is my mate.

The one meant for no one but me. A shifter knows the second they meet their mate. We rely on our senses. Our sense of smell is the first clue. We can smell our mate and once we do, a knowing within our bodies takes over. A pull deep inside begins, and we are desperate to be with them. Everything else fades, nothing else matters but

being near them.

Such shit timing.

The air cracks, and he stands an inch away in his human form.

Naked.

And oh, so beautiful.

I keep my eyes on his, willing them not to stray downward. But they want to so bad.

He has dirty-blond hair that's long on top and falls over his eyes. He's tall, so I have to tilt my head back to keep my eyes on his. His bright green eyes are piercing in their intensity, burning into mine. His lashes are so dark and long. Out of the corner of my vision, I see muscles upon muscles; he's strong but still not too bulky. Tattoos are scattered over his skin, bright in the darkness.

Okay, maybe I peeked.

He brings his arms beside me, his palms resting on the bark over my head. He bends closer, his breath floating over my face, at the same time gently pulls the hat from my head. It floats to the ground soundlessly and my hair flows down my back. The heat from his body works its way through my clothes even though he remains an inch away. Not far enough, yet not close enough.

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My attention moves to his lips as they form the words that whisper through the night.

“Here, kitty, kitty.”

My jaw goes slack. Did he just really say that? And why did it make me drip?

I snap my mouth shut and swallow hard. I don’t know where to start. What do you say to that?

“Mate?” I blurt. Shit, not what I was going to say.

“It appears so. What are you doing in my woods?”

“Your woods?” I ask weakly. It seems my brain has gone on vacation. On the other hand, my body feels all kinds of warm things. My claws are still digging into the tree, now for the purpose of not touching every inch of his beautiful body.

“Yes,” he says softly. “I was out for my nightly stroll before going to bed. Imagine my surprise at finding a little kitty sitting in my home, my mate.”

“My car broke down. I was resting.” I’m proud of myself when the words finally come. “Who are you?”

He raises a brow. “Elijah.” His head tilts as he looks down my body to the bag at my feet. “Who are you?” His gaze travels over my face.

“Saylor.” Crap, I gave him my real name. I never give my real name. I’m more

messed up than I thought. I should be more on guard. I need to work to build my wall back up.

“Saylor,” he drawls. “Well, Kitty Cat, now you are here in my woods.” He eliminates the inch between us. “What am I going to do with you?”

Chapter Four

Elijah

I am torn between running the fuck away or throwing my mate to the ground and fucking her all night.

When I left my house for my nightly run, I had no idea my life was about to change. I didn't want a mate. I don't deserve one. I haven't given much thought to having one, since I had doubts the universe would gift me with a woman to spend forever with.

I have done, let's just say, questionable things over my life. I have been shoving all the things that happened in my old pack into a locked box in my brain to take out at a much later date to examine and try to move past.

I am a little off in the head.

Now I am standing in front of the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen, knowing she is my mate, not knowing what the fuck to do about it. She has a body that begs to be explored for hours—such delicious curves. Her head would rest over my heart, and I could imagine running my fingers through her long brown hair that almost reaches her waist. Her soft blue eyes are glowing, reaching into my soul with sadness and fear. I need to find out the reason for it.

Once I do, I will kill them.

I don't date much. I fuck women and move on. I don't form emotional attachments. I'm possessive and dominant in and out of the bedroom. Not many women want that for a lifetime. I get jealous. I don't want my woman to look at another man. I would break any hand that touched her. I would beat the shit out of someone for looking at her too long. I want whoever I am with to give me all her attention.

Don't get me wrong; she can have all the friends she wants. She can go out with them and dance the night away. I don't want to control her life. I want to give her all she wants.

I have a feeling my tendencies would be multiplied by a hundred with my mate.

She hasn't answered my question. Her mind is working; I can practically see the lies she plans to tell me.

"Why are you here?" I ask, watching her face closely. Most shifters can detect lies. We can smell them, just as I can smell her desire. The heat is hitting her.

"I told you. My car broke down."

She's smart. That isn't a lie, but it's not the whole truth. "Where were you headed?"

"A town a hundred miles from here."

"Why?" I feel her shutting down. I lean closer. My nose skims her cheek. She tenses. "Is that where you live?" Unconsciously, she tilts her head towards my mouth, seeking the comfort I can give. The longer she denies the heat, the more oppressive and painful it will become. My cock is the only cure available to her. Despite the storm of conflicting emotions, I want her to turn to me for relief. I need her to give in to me.

“I do not,” she whispers.

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Truth. “Do you have family there?”

“No.” Her chest shudders. “Someone is coming.” She freezes in fear.

“Laken, back the fuck up,” I bark over my shoulder. Saylor folds into herself. Fear saturates the air.

“I was coming by. Is everything alright?” Laken stops abruptly at my command.

“What is he?” Saylor asks, her voice trembling.

“He’s a dragon. A friend,” I assure her. “He won’t hurt you.”

“Are you sure?” She bites her lip, regretting her show of vulnerability.

“I am,” I say firmly. “I would never put you in danger.” I’m restraining myself from touching her with my hands. I don’t want to scare her, but also I fear I will never let her go once I did. I slowly lower my palm to the front of her neck. The fast beat there troubles me. I sense her urge to flee. “I’m going to turn to talk to him. Do not run.” I flex my hand to emphasize my point. “I will chase.”

I wait for her barely-there nod.

I remove my hand and pivot to my friend but keep my body close enough to grab her.

“Laken, will you get me my clothes? I left a pile fifty feet to your left at the bottom of a tree.” It is convenient to leave clothes at random spots. Even though we are careful

when we shift, a human could be hiking or wandering around while I'm shifted. I can't strut around naked back to my house. I keep my gaze on his retreating form, but my attention is centered on the woman behind me. "I'm going to get dressed, and then we are going to walk to my place."

"Do I have a choice?" she says snarkily. The strength is coming back to her voice.

"Of course," I say, offended. "But just to warn you, I will follow wherever you go. My animal knows we just found our mate. He doesn't want you out of his sight. I won't do anything you don't want. All I want to do is talk."

Laken walks over slowly, placing the pile at my feet, and quickly backs up. "If it would make her more comfortable, we could go to our house. Penny is there. Your mate might feel more at ease with a woman around."

"Would you agree to that?" I ask as I pull on my jeans.

"Yes," she admits, licking her lips.

"Good. We will accept your invitation."

"I will meet you there." He moves away to warn Bishop and Penny company is coming.

I put my shirt on, and her eyes follow the movement. I leave it unbuttoned because my animal likes her eyes on him. We both agree on that fact. I crouch to put my boots on and notice her claws gouging the tree. I stand slowly and move to her. Reaching out slowly, I run my fingers over her hands.

"Retract them," I demand. She does immediately, watching me carefully. Her hand is stiff in mine. I turn it over and trace the lines on her palm. "No one will hurt you." I

do the same with her other hand. The bark left impressions on her skin.

“I don’t know why I believe you,” she says, her forehead wrinkling.

“You can sense it. Your animal knows I’m your mate and would never harm you.” I have the urge to kiss her. I want to erase her fears. These are new feelings. I pick up my hat and give her some room.

She swings her backpack over her shoulder and shoves her hat inside, cautiously watching me. I motion with my arm and take a step. It’s hard to tell what she is going to do. I have barely taken my eyes off of her, and she hides so much. She can’t fake her body’s reactions to my presence.

Her steps beside me are light, but I am grateful she is willing to come with me.

“Laken is a dragon?” she asks.

“He is. He has a twin brother. They recently mated to Penny. She was a human. They bonded, and she was turned.”

“I’ve never seen a dragon shifter. I couldn’t recognize the scent.”

“There are not many left.”

“How did you meet a dragon?”

“He moved in next to me at the place I lived before. We became friends, and now he can’t get rid of me.” I grin in her direction. Her eyes dart away. “He would say I forced my friendship on him.”

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“Why? He should be happy to have a friend,” she snaps.

I am absurdly pleased she thinks that. Her response made me think she would defend me. “We have an unusual relationship. I can be a lot for a regular shifter to take.”

“How so?” she frowns.

“I am very affectionate. I also can be a bit brutal,” I admit.

“Affection is a good thing,” she says softly, focusing on my face.

“It is. He can be a bit of a grouch.” I smile at her. I pop a toothpick into my mouth.

Her eyes slip to my mouth. I roll the piece of wood with my tongue and see the heat the action causes. I smile, and her head flies forward.

She clears her throat. “Do you like it here?”

“I love it.” I chuckle. “The vampires are not like the ones I’ve known in my past; I’ve got used to them.”

“Vampires?” she asks weakly.

“Yep. Have you met any before?” I have the urge to know everything about her.

“No, I’ve heard stories. They aren’t usually good ones.”

“The ones here are mated. It’s hard to admit, but they are the good ones. I won’t ever be completely comfortable around them.” The lights from the dragon’s house appear in front of us.

“They won’t be here, will they?”

“No. Just the dragons.”

I lead the way and open the front door. All three of them are standing in the kitchen directly in front of us.

“Elijah,” Bishop says. “Good to see you. I hear you have good news.” He switches his gaze to Saylor, and I want to stab him in the eye with my toothpick.

I can’t stop the soft snarl that slips out. “My mate, Saylor.” I stay by the door with Saylor at my side, waiting for my cheetah to calm down.

“Saylor, so nice to meet you.” Penny walks forward cautiously. “I’m Penny. These are my mates, Laken and Bishop.”

Saylor nods. “Sorry to invade your house.” She looks at me and probably senses my mood.

“It’s no problem. Do you want something to drink?” Penny keeps the smile on her lips but glares slightly at me.

“I would love some water,” Saylor replies, licking her lips. “I ran out of water.”

“Fuck, Kitty Cat. Why didn’t you say something?” Her need overrides my possessive problem.

“I didn’t think you had any water since you were naked when we met,” she says dryly.

I stare at her for a moment and then burst out laughing. “True.”

“Would you like to sit?” Bishop asks, motioning to the table beside us.

“Please,” she says softly.

I place my hand on her back, and she stiffens but lets me guide her to a chair. Penny puts water in front of her and a beer for me. Saylor stares at the bottle. I reach for it and open it for her. I lean close to her ear.

“Drink. There is no judgment here.”

“Thank you,” she whispers. She grabs the bottle with a shaking hand and brings it to her mouth. The water is gone in seconds. I look to Penny. She quickly gets another. I would get it myself, but I don’t want to be out of touching distance.

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“Thanks, lovey.” I nod to Penny.

“How about some food? Laken was just making sandwiches for us. It would be no trouble to add a couple more.” Penny walks to Laken. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” Laken gets the hint and moves to the kitchen.

They are good friends. We all know they already ate. Saylor is dead on her feet, thirsty and hungry, not to mention tired. “I appreciate it,” I say. “Hey Laken, I would love a couple, too.” I hear him mutter asshole under his breath.

He loves me.

“I don’t want you to go to any trouble,” Saylor offers.

“You aren’t.” Penny waves at her as she sits on Bishop’s lap. “These guys have to eat all the time. We keep tons of food around.”

“I’ve never met a dragon,” Saylor blurts.

“Not many have,” Bishop says, his eyes crinkling.

“We are super rare. Penny is the first turned female dragon in many years,” Laken says as he brings the food to the table.

“What’s it like to fly?” Saylor asks her. I have noticed she hasn’t looked very long at Laken or Bishop. She keeps her focus on Penny. It pleases the animal inside, and the

man.

“It’s amazing. It’s total freedom,” she gushes. “It took some practice, but now I can fly like a pro.”

Bishop snorts. “Sure, Vixen.”

“Hey, I’m doing really well,” Penny protests, glaring at him.

“You are. I love you,” he says quickly.

Saylor smiles slightly, watching them as she slowly picks up her sandwich.

“How was your night out with Logan?” Laken asks.

“Good. Fuck, the lion can drink,” I say, smiling at how drunk he got.

“I haven’t heard about any charges against you, so you must have followed the rules.” He raises an eyebrow.

I felt Saylor staring at the side of my head. “Sure,” I shrug.

“Elijah,” Logan sighs.

I hold my hands up. “Honest. We were on our best behavior,” I swear.

“It must have hit Logan pretty hard. I haven’t seen him around,” Bishop says.

I tune out their conversation. Saylor is almost done with her food. Once we turned our attention to each other, she must have felt comfortable enough to eat. The exhaustion is flowing from her. I wonder when the last time she slept was. Her eyes

are heavy as she puts the final piece in her mouth.

I inch closer to her side as she sways. I don't have to know her well to know she will be so pissed at herself for letting her guard down enough to sleep.

Her head hits my shoulder as her eyes give up the fight. She turns into me, seeking my warmth. It only takes minutes for her breathing to even out. I slip my arm behind her, tucking her close. I close my eyes briefly. It feels so right to have her with me.

"What do you know so far?" Laken asks quietly.

"Not much." I open my eyes and look at them. "She said her car broke down. Which is true, but there's more to it."

"She was starving," Penny says, her voice breaking.

"Yes," I agree. "There is a lot going on with her. It's going to take a lot of patience to get her to open up to me."

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“You can do that,” Bishop says.

“Me and patience aren’t exactly friends,” I say wryly.

“You can,” Laken says firmly. “You have to.”

“Everything changed the second I saw her,” I admit. “I don’t know how to act.”

“Just be you,” Penny encourages.

“Yeah, that never works so well for me.”

“Bullshit,” Laken spits. “You broke through to me. You can do the same with her.”

“She will love you, just like we do,” Penny says.

“Well, not exactly the same.” Laken cringes.

“Fuck, I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” I groan. “I’m going to take her to my place.”

“She may not be comfortable with that,” Penny says hesitantly.

I ignore her and gather Saylor in my arms. Her arms automatically reach for my shoulders, and she snuggles in.

“I have to agree with Penny,” Bishop says as they stand with me.

“Does it look like she wants to run away from me?” I snap.

“Well, she is asleep,” Laken says.

“Fuck off,” I growl.

“I hope you know what you are doing,” Laken warns.

“I have no fucking clue.” I walk to the door with my mate. “All I know is this...I will keep her with me. I will find out who she is running from. I will learn everything about her. Then I will take care of the ones who put fear and sadness in her eyes. She will never have to run again.”

I hold tight to the woman in my arms as I make my way to my house. I’m not delusional. I know after Saylor gets some rest, she will come at me fighting. I am guessing she hasn’t been able to rely on many people, so gaining her trust may be difficult. Finding her hiding in the woods doesn’t scream loving family and friends.

The trouble I wanted was soft and pliant against me.

Like I said, I love trouble.

Chapter Five

Saylor

My skin is burning. A thin sheet is covering me. My legs are bare. I smell my mate all around me. It’s covering the bed I’m in. I turn my head and take in the wild scent that saturates it. I feel him close, but he’s not in the room with me.

I open my eyes and see the room I’m in for the first time. The walls are dark wood,

and the one window in the room lets the sunshine in, but the whole room is nothing but dark colors. The bed is large and takes up much of the room. Two bedside tables are on either side, holding a single lamp on each. The one on my right has change, wrappers, and a watch scattered upon it.

The only chair in the room is under the window; it's dark brown, old, and comfortable-looking. A well-used cowboy hat is sitting on the seat. There is a stack of books beside it on the floor. The dresser is covered in cowboy hats, most of them a variation of black and brown.

There's another door that I see the glare of a shower door through. The bed is made out of sturdy wood and covered in blankets that are shoved to the foot of it.

I should be freaking out.

I should be demanding why he thought he had the right to take off my pants.

Why am I not?

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I'm still wearing my bra and T-shirt. The light fabric is almost too much on my skin as the burn of the heat is getting worse. My body is heavy and in need.

I ache. The heat is demanding relief.

My one sexual experience was lacking in education. The one man I slept with was when I was twenty-four. I was a virgin until then. Being on the run with my mom didn't give me many opportunities to explore that side of myself. After she died, I was too concerned about my next move to find a man.

I met Rex in a little town we had settled in. We had been there a month when he walked into the grocery store where I worked. He was sweet. He told me I was pretty, and I sucked up his attention. My mom warned me. She knew we would have to leave eventually, and she didn't want me to get hurt. Of course, she also naturally distrusted anyone with a dick.

I didn't listen. I wanted something normal for once in my life. I gave him my heart and my virginity. He took them gladly and then proceeded to break up with me after he got them. Shortly after, we left.

I hid my heart behind a wall bricks after that. I never got close to anyone again.

So, I am as close to a virgin as you can get, alone in a house with a cheetah I can't deny is hot as fuck, and my mate.

I don't know how to handle it. I wasn't opposed to having a mate. I haven't given it too much thought. The problem was that he would demand to know about my life. On

one level, I'm ashamed of it. It is anything but ordinary. On another, wouldn't it be nice to share the burden?

I sit up and lean against the headboard as Elijah appears in the doorway. He's wearing light, worn-out jeans with rips on the knees, and nothing else. His feet are bare, and his hair is messier than usual. He takes a drink of what I smell is coffee.

My mouth waters for several different reasons. As I mentioned before, he's hot as fuck. I want to lick from his neck to the waistband of his low riding pants. He's built but sleek, like the cats we are.

I also can't live without coffee. If I were down to my last five dollars, which has happened numerous times, I would get coffee before food.

"Do you like coffee?" he asks, moving toward me.

"I love it." My head tilts, keeping my eyes on his face as he stands over me.

"I thought that was what your look was about," he teases. How does he know everything I am feeling? It's very annoying. "Drink," he instructs, bringing his cup to my mouth.

What can I do? I drink. "Sweet," I murmur.

"I like sweet." He takes the cup away and sits beside me. "How do you usually take it?"

"Just like that. I like sweet too." I blush. Are we actually having this conversation? I don't know how to handle him. All my usual defenses are frozen, staring at him in awe.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I say firmly. “You took my pants off.” I move on quickly, seeing the look of disbelief on his face. He can probably smell how not fine I am.

“I did. I thought you would be more comfortable without them.” He puts the coffee on the side table. He leans over my legs, bracing himself on his palm. “Are you feeling rested?”

He’s surrounding me. His yummy scent is even better coming from the source. He smells like leather and spice. “I am. I needed the sleep.”

“Are you sure you don’t need more sleep?” he asks suspiciously.

“Why?” I narrow my eyes.

“I’m just waiting for you to tear me to pieces. If you are rested, I assume you will lecture me.”

“I should,” I whisper.

We sit in thick silence, staring at each other. The warmth is becoming overwhelming. The longer I am around him, close to him, without his touch—the pain will come.

He lifts his free hand, watching me carefully, and cups the side of my neck. Without thought, I lean into it. God, I have missed the touch of another. The comfort it brings me cannot be denied.

He scoots closer so we are hip to hip. His other hand is so temptingly close to my bare skin. His thumb rubs back and forth on the front of my neck. I have the urge to press into it. I have always had the desire to let a man take over—the right man.

“You are beautiful, Kitty Cat,” he rasps.

His absurd nickname for me makes tingles spread deep inside. “Thank you.”

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He looks down at my body. The sheet slid down to below my hips. “I have to tell you a few things about me.” He stares for a moment where the sheet rests before traveling over my face, groaning lightly. “I’m possessive about those I claim. I like control. I want it how I want it. I instruct. I demand a woman’s pleasure how I want to give it. I desire her complete attention. I will always give before I get because it gives me immense satisfaction.” He moves his hand to encircle my neck. “But I will always get permission. I have to have full consent in everything I do. If you say no, everything stops. You decide on a word you can say if things become too much or something scares you. I will never force you to do anything you don’t want to. But if you like everything I do, game’s on. Do you understand?”

My pussy spasms. I lick my dry lips. “Yes.”

“I want to help you with the heat. It will ease if you orgasm. But it has to be me who gives it to you. I will not allow any other man to touch you and it wouldn’t help anyway. Possessive, remember.”

“I remember,” I gasp. The hand at my hip glides over me. Now that I have found my mate, physical touch of another would disgust me. We are the only two people in the world who can ease the heat.

“Tell me. Do you want my help?” he asks hypnotically.

“Please,” I beg. I might die if he doesn’t back up the tempting words.

“What is your word?”

I blink the haze of desire out of my eyes enough to think. "Pineapple," I blurt.

His eyes crinkle. "Pineapple?"

"I hate pineapple." I watch him nod, his sexy hair falling into his eyes.

He grins. "Do not move. Keep your eyes on mine and take what I give you."

I nod shakily. "Yes."

"Say yes, Elijah."

"Yes, Elijah."

"Such a good Kitty Cat," he rumbles.

My breath hitches at his praise. The desire is back in full force.

His eyes lock with mine. His fingers trace the edge of my panties, back and forth, back and forth. I fight the urge to close my eyes in ecstasy from the simple act. Shivers rack my body. He slips one finger under the band, so close to where I need him.

"Your smell," he growls. "I want to bathe in it."

"God," I moan.

"No, just Elijah." He bares his teeth. "Mate." His hand disappears under the fabric.

I moan as he glides through my swollen lips. His thumb hits my clit, and a finger enters me.

“Fuck, you are tight.” He buries his finger inside me. My head hits the wood behind me, and my eyes close. “Eyes,” he demands, and my head snaps up. “Do not hide from me. I want you to watch me give you relief. Your mate is the only one who can do this for you.”

“Yes, Elijah,” I moan. The command in his voice added another layer to the magic of the moment.

He slowly thrusts his finger, curving it as he pulls. His thumb doesn’t move; he just rests there, pressing lightly. I want to ride his hand desperately. I want so much. His hand squeezes my neck as if he hears my thoughts. His green eyes turn molten, flowing into mine. I want him to speed up, but I like his control. I want him to give it to me how he wants to. I hit a deep dark place within me. The fantasies I dream of are everything he is.

“Please,” I whisper. I want to come. I have had the need since he stepped in front of me.

“What did I say? I am in control of when you come and how many times,” he reminds me.

“How many times?” I gasp, shocked. I didn’t know you could come more than once. I didn’t get there with Rex. I have used my fingers on myself; those are the only times I have orgasmed.

“Have you never come more than once?” He smirks when I shake my head. “Oh, Kitty Cat. That changes the rules this time. I want you to come as many times as you want.”

He speeds up. He adjusts his hand. He adds a finger, and his palm slams on my clit. The pull in my stomach demands me to submit.

“Come, baby. Come for your mate,” he says, steel in his voice.

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“Fuck,” I groan. That’s all it takes for it to rise over me. Heat pushes out, soaking his hand.

“Good, Kitty Cat,” he whispers. “You feel so fucking good.” His fingers never stop.

The orgasm goes on and on. I pant, my mouth parting. I’ve never felt anything like it. I drop my head, wanting to see the magic of his fingers.

“No,” he barks. He tips my head back with his thumb, his palm never leaving my neck. “There will be times when I want you to watch what I’m doing to you. That is not today. Today, I want your eyes.”

Jesus. Why does that make me hotter? “Yes, Elijah.”

“Good. Now, I want another. I can still feel your need.”

“I can’t,” I say, the words automatic.

“Yes, you can,” he says firmly.

He leans forward, causing his hand to go deeper, faster, and harder. Okay, maybe I can. His lips hover over my mouth. I want them.

“I want them,” I demand, glancing at his lips.

“You can have them when you come again.” He adds a third finger, and I tingle at the bite of pain that comes with it. “This pussy will be mine. You will come to me when

it is hungry. I will feed it however I want.”

Fuck, I want to move my hips so badly. It’s building again. Bigger and bigger. I can’t imagine how I will feel when he uses his cock instead of his fingers. I won’t be able to move afterward.

“Elijah,” I yell as it floods over me.

“Yes, Saylor. You squeeze my fingers so good. The smell of it. The feel of it. You give me such a gift. Your pleasure is mine. We have so much more to come.” He slows down as I come down.

I slump back on the pillow, and little tremors continue. He doesn’t remove his fingers; he holds them deep. His face gets close. He waits until my attention switches from his fingers to his lips. He licks the seam of mine before biting my bottom one and pulls away.

I lunge forward, locking onto him. I feel the grin beneath them, and then he takes over. He devours.

What I lack in experience, I make up for with enthusiasm. I mimic what he does with his tongue, tangling mine with his. He growls into my mouth, and I know I did the right thing. His fingers start moving again as he eats at my mouth.

Ridiculously, my body starts the climb again. My hands reach for him, no longer able to lay still as he commanded. I grab a handful of his hair and pull him as close as he allows. His hand slides from my neck and circles my waist, yanking me close and pressing my breasts tight against his naked chest, his hand buried between my thighs.

I whimper at the pressure it causes. I want no clothes between us. I want to feel the sensation of my nipples scraping over his skin.

He rips his mouth away as I come again. My pussy flexes harshly around his fingers. My cry echoes around us.

He pulls out of me slowly as if he is enjoying the grasp of my muscles, trying to pull him back in.

“Fuck, stunning,” he says, his words heavy with arousal. “That’s three,” he says smugly.

I have no will to be annoyed at his announcement. I’m bone-less. My body is not able to obey any commands at this point. My brain has shut down. The heat has eased but still hovers beneath the surface. I’m sure if he demanded another, it would have no choice but to obey him.

I watch as he brings his fingers to his mouth, sucking them. “So addictive. I won’t want to wait too long for another taste of you. Be prepared.”

“Shit,” I gulp.

“I’m going to make you breakfast. I’m not the greatest cook, but I can make eggs and toast. Feel free to shower. You can wear anything I have—I would actually prefer it.” He inches away and then stands.

“How can you function after that? Are you not affected at all?” I snap, annoyed.

He bends abruptly, grabbing my hand and filling it with steel. “I fucking am.” He moves my hand up and down his very large, very hard cock. “If I don’t leave this room right now, I am going to shove down those sexy panties, shove my cock as deep as I can, and fuck you for days,” he growls. “I didn’t think you were ready for that. So, you are going to shower, put on my clothes, and give me some time to cook you breakfast. And I can calm the fuck down.”

“Okay.” My eyes widen when he swells further.

He takes my hand away, kisses me hard, and storms out of the room.

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I almost call him back, my need for more and the desire to feel him inside me overwhelming.

I want him. I want everything he can offer me.

Fuck.

Chapter Six

Saylor

I'm not wearing his shirt just because he ordered me to. My few shirts were dirty, and I didn't feel like putting gross clothes back on. At least I had one more pair of clean jeans. The button-down, flannel shirt was big and comfortable. I had to roll up the sleeves and knot it at my waist. Even though it was clean, it smelled like him, and right or wrong, it gave me a sense of peace.

I attempted to wall up my defenses against him while scrubbing my body. I lectured myself harshly.

You cannot depend on a man, especially one you just met.

You can't fall into his arms again.

You cannot blurt out your whole past when he asks.

You can't let the heat control you.

I left the bedroom firm in my convictions.

Now I stand at the edge of the small kitchen, looking around the cozy kitchen-living room combo. The fireplace is burning brightly. The room is just as dark as the bedroom, but it works so well. My attention lands on the hot cowboy plating up eggs and toast while still shirtless, smiling at me.

My lonely heart falls.

Shit.

“Have a seat, Saylor.” He motions to the small table.

I move stiffly and collapse into the chair. “You didn’t have to.” I love my real name coming from his lips.

“Of course I did.” He puts the plate in front of me and turns to get his. “Like I said, it’s not much, but it will fill you up. You need to eat and it gives me pleasure to feed you.”

I look down at the table. There is jelly and butter in the middle, along with salt and pepper. A tall glass of orange juice is added in front of me as he goes back and forth to the kitchen.

“Thank you. It looks great.” He cooked me three eggs and two pieces of toast.

“I didn’t know how you liked your eggs. I like a little run with them, and since we have the same taste in coffee, I took the chance.” He winks and puts a full cup of coffee in front of me.

“It is.” I swallow over the lump in my throat.

“What?” he asked, sitting across from me.

“That’s how I like my eggs, too.” Crap, how did I land here? I don’t know what to do. I can’t force myself to leave Elijah and my rapidly growing feelings, now that I found him, but I fear Grant will hurt him. Regular kids believe the scary stories they are told, like the boogeyman that hides under the bed, always lifting their feet, never leaving them dangle. Grant is my boogeyman. If I leave my feet in one place for too long, he’ll reach out and grab them.

“Eat,” he commands.

I reach for the fork. “Thank you.”

“Quit thanking me. I wanted to do this for you,” he says gently. “I really love my shirt on you.”

“I didn’t have any clean clothes left,” I defend. I shovel food in my mouth before I say something else stupid. The last person, besides at a fast-food place, to cook me food was my mom. I didn’t realize how much it would get to me.

“I’m glad,” he grins, taking a drink. “Tell me what brought you here.”

I chew slowly, stalling. He’s been nothing but great to me. There is no doubt he is my mate. I know he won’t let me go easily; plus, at this point, why would I want him to? I wish my mom were here to give me advice. She would know what to do. Finding your mate is not something that should be thrown away. Many shifters go years and years before finding one, if at all. The bond is never wrong. If it is ignored, we will live a life of loneliness, never finding fulfillment—we wouldn’t want to go on. We are only given one mate, and it would be stupid to give up such a gift. Plus, as a shifter, the heat is overtaking my body and it will become painful without my mate giving me relief. It’s nature’s way of ensuring the shifter gene is carried on.

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I close my eyes and look inside. I go with what my gut is telling me. “I’m running from a pack of cheetahs. The Alpha wants me. He wants to force the bond.” I open my eyes and look at him. His claws are digging into the top of the table. “I don’t want to be with him,” I add, just in case he was wondering.

“Who?” His guttural question drops into the tense air.

“His name is Grant.” He stiffens, and his head snaps to the door.

“What is that?” I don’t smell a shifter, but it’s weird the lack of scent.

“Vampire,” he snaps. “Bash, you have shit timing.”

A man opens the front door.

He’s beautiful. His presence is startling, from his bright white dress shirt, black pants, combat boots, and white hair. His face is hard. What stops you in your tracks are his eyes—they are so light blue, they are almost white.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he says. “I had some information for you and didn’t want to do it over the phone.”

“It couldn’t wait?” Elijah snaps. He moved quickly to stand partially in front of me, his claws still visible.

“No.” His eyes flicker to me. “I talked to Laken. He informed me of your mate.”

“You had a burning desire to meet her?” Elijah sneers.

“I thought you would want to know two men came to ask for our services. They claim their sister, Saylor, went missing.” He drops the bomb and my heart jerks.

I stand quickly, knocking the chair over. I forget my extensive training to keep my body from reacting. I forgot a deadly vampire was standing feet from me. I forget everything. All I feel is the need to run.

Now.

I back up, almost tripping over my feet in my rush. My back hits the wall, and Elijah is in front of me seconds later.

“I have to go,” I say desperately. My chest heaves with every breath. I can hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears. I look down at my hands, surprised my nails have elongated without my urging.

Elijah cups my face with both hands, bringing my wild eyes to his face. “Saylor, you are not running.” He bends down. “Talk to me. Is it the Alpha?”

I was fooling myself—I can’t have him. It would kill me if he were hurt because of me. Grant will never stop coming for me. My mom has infused our life with fear of him. He will do everything he can to track me. I thought I covered my tracks so well this time. I did everything right. I try to think of all my moves and where I went wrong.

“It’s probably some guys from his pack,” I say, swallowing harshly. “He sends them out first. Grant doesn’t like to waste his time. When they have me, that’s when he will come.”

“I have a video.” Bash places his phone on the table. “We have surveillance in the office.”

I pull myself together and slip away from Elijah, and he tenses. “I’ll take a look.”

“There were two of them. But only the one said he was your brother,” Bash explains, pushing a couple of buttons on his phone.

I wait as the video plays. Bash meets the two men at the front desk. He leans back on it, confident, as if he isn’t facing two dangerous cheetahs. I guess a vampire is not scared of much. I would recognize the two shifters from the dinner anywhere. I don’t have to see their faces to know, but I wait until the camera captures them.

“That is two of Grant’s pack. Two of his most trusted. Most of the time, they are the ones following me.” Elijah is growling low at my back, watching the phone with hatred. “If they are here, they caught my scent. They won’t stop until they have me.”

“Fuck that!” Elijah explodes. “Did they give you a contact number or where they are staying?”

“Yes, to the number. Not where they are staying, but that won’t be hard to find out. They are the only other cheetahs in the area,” Bash says calmly in the face of Elijah’s fury.

“Good. I will need your help. Maybe Ryker, too. The use of his dungeon would be helpful.”

“What?” I ask.

“You will be going to Penny’s. The dragons will guard you.” He walks into the bedroom.

I glance at Bash before hustling after him.

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“What are you talking about?” I demand. He hurries to put on a shirt.

“I want you with them while I take care of this.” His socks and boots go on. I blink as he grabs a long, wicked-looking blade and slams his cowboy hat on his head.

“How are you going to take care of this? This is my fight. I need to go. I have to protect you and your friends. I’m telling you, they’re dangerous. They won’t stop coming for me,” I yell.

“They may be dangerous, but my friends are, too. Not to mention, your mate is a cheetah who fights dirty.” He kisses me hard. “Grab your bag, and let’s go. We will walk you to the dragons first.”

I’m left staring at his back.

No.

I shove my things in my bag and run after him. “Wait.” The front door is open, and I fly through, stopping abruptly to see them both waiting for me. “You can’t do this.”

“Kitty Cat, yes, I can.”

“What are you going to do?” My heart pounds. I can’t tell if it’s because someone is finally on my side, or if I’m terrified he will get hurt. It would gut me if the promise of being with him forever is taken before it can start.

“Go hunting,” he grins.

Chapter Seven

Elijah

I have always thrived from the thrill of the chase. Stalking prey excites me. Capturing them is almost as good as getting lost in a woman.

But judging by the glare Saylor gave me, getting lost in her will not happen anytime soon.

I refuse to allow her to run. No one will take her away from me now that I found her.

“Elijah,” Ryker greets me as Bash and I enter the office.

Ryker is the king of the vampires and Bash’s maker. He’s ruthless and old as fuck. Since coming here, I have tried to avoid him as much as possible. I’m not scared—it’s healthy to be cautious.

“Ryker, thanks for coming.” I taste the air, memorizing the cheetah scents that still linger. “Did they know you were a vampire?” I turn to Bash.

“Yes. They almost pissed themselves,” he says with a straight face. “I doubt they will be coming back.”

“I’m sure,” I mutter.

“Congratulations, I hear you found your mate,” Ryker offers. He is mated, and his woman is pregnant. So, in my opinion, he’s more dangerous than before.

“Thank you.”

“Who is after your mate?” Ryker asks.

“An Alpha, cheetah,” I growl. “He wants her for himself. To force the bond.”

“So, the worse kind of shifter,” Ryker snaps.

“Yes. I’m assuming she has been running a long time from him.”

“You don’t know?” Ryker asks.

“No, she hasn’t exactly been an open book. Plus, we just met yesterday,” I admit.

“Of course, she probably wants to protect you,” he guesses. “The women who are chosen for us are warriors.”

“Well, my warrior is pissed as hell at me,” I say dryly.

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“Of course she is,” he says, grinning.

I roll my eyes. “Do we have the names of these men?”

“I do. I don’t know if they are their real ones, but they are registered in the hotel under them.” Ryker hands me a piece of paper.

“This is too easy,” I mumble.

“I don’t think they are too smart, considering it has taken them years to get this close to Saylor.” Bash leads the way out the door.

“I should have gotten more information from her,” I admit as we get in my truck.

“Little too late now,” Bash pointed out.

“That’s super helpful,” I growl, and he shrugs. “I can’t believe I’m going hunting with two vampires.”

“What is your problem with our kind?” Bash asks.

“Fuck off.” No way in hell I’m telling him anything.

“Just curious.”

“Don’t be,” I snap.

“Will killing them help your mood?” Ryker asks.

“Yes. Yes, it will. Can we shut the fuck up and do that now?” I glare at them both.

“Sure,” they say at the same time.

There is no good ending to a joke about two vampires and a cheetah walking into a hotel—except a bloody one.

“Why do they always cry?” I moan.

“It’s my least favorite part,” Ryker sighs.

“Why don’t we just kill them and get it over with?” Bash asks, leaning against the wall of Ryker’s torture dungeon in the basement of his club, swinging his huge fucking hammer back and forth.

“I think we can get some information from them. I think they want to live.” I look back and forth between the two men hanging beside each other.

It was ridiculously easy to overpower them. They were in their room, eating. Of course, the two ancient vampires almost scared them into complete compliance. I’m trying not to be offended. I did get a few hits in. I really did.

After they were unconscious, getting them into the back of my truck was easy. It was handy to have Ryker and Bash to mind-fuck any human witnesses. Vampires have the little trick of being able to change the memories of humans and some weak-minded shifters. They can make them remember and do whatever they want.

I’m not bitter about that, either.

“So, Fred and Sam,” I hiss. “Are those your real names?”

“Fuck you,” Fred spits.

“You aren't very cooperative for a man tied to the ceiling with chains.” I move over to the crying one. “You, on the other hand, Sam, seem like you want to get out of those chains.”

“Why did you take us?” he whimpers.

“Well, Sam,” I whisper, my face close. “You came here for a reason. You came here looking for someone.”

“You mean, Saylor?”

“Yes,” I confirm.

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“That bitch,” Fred yells. “How the fuck did she find you to protect her?” I do not take my eyes off Sam when I stab Fred in the leg.

I ignore his shout of pain. “What can you tell me, Sam?”

“We just want to talk to her,” he swears.

At his lie, I stab Fred an inch up from the last. “Try again.”

“Shit, alright. Our Alpha wants her. He’s obsessed with her.”

“Don’t say another fucking word,” Fred growls.

I stab again, this time in his arm. “I would keep talking, Sam. I know we heal pretty quickly, but not when there are hundreds of stab wounds.”

“He wants to mate her. All I know is we are supposed to bring her to pack lands. That’s it,” he whines.

“She is not his mate,” I point out.

“It doesn’t matter. He says he can force it.”

“You know what that means, don’t you, Sam,” I glare. The universe would deny the bond as they are not natural mates. Grant would cause Saylor immense pain if he touched her now that she found me. He could kill me, or try, but Saylor still wouldn’t accept the bond. Her body would reject it, and she would live in misery when he

forced it.

“No.”

“Leave him alone. He doesn’t know anything else,” Fred says through gritted teeth.

I take a step back. “You might be telling the truth.” I move to stand in front of Fred. “Saylor isn’t your Alpha’s mate. She will never be his mate.” I grip his neck. “Because she is my mate,” I whisper in his ear.

“Fuck.” He pales.

“Yes, fuck is an appropriate word, Fred.” I pull back to look into his eyes.

“You haven’t mated yet,” he says desperately. He would be able to smell Saylor inside me, her scent would be mixed with mine.

“That’s the response you want to go with in this situation?” I ask, shaking my head and tightening my grip.

“Alright, I didn’t know she had a mate.”

“Would it make a difference?” If Grant is determined to have her, he won’t care if we are mated or not. The only solution is to kill him.

He stays stubbornly silent.

“Are we going to kill them now?” Bash asks.

“No. Not yet.” I look at the vampires. “Let’s have a little fun with them now; maybe a few days hanging in your dungeon will help them remember what I want to know.”

“How long has it been since I have tortured someone?” Ryker ponders, a dreamy look on his face.

“I’m sure it will come back to you, vampire,” I say dryly.

“Probably,” he concedes.

“Jesus, can we do this now?” I demand.

They both nod, baring their teeth.

Shit, I hate vampires.

I stopped at my house to shower the blood off and change into clean clothes. The cheetahs didn’t want to talk, and after two hours of torture, they couldn’t speak. They will heal enough in a few days to start over again.

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The vampires bowed out of coming with me. For some reason, they found great humor in the battle I was about to fight. Well, Ryker did; it's hard to tell what Bash is feeling. His lips twitched, so I think he agreed with Ryker.

"Elijah, get your ass in here," Saylor yells inside the house.

I don't try to hide the grin as I open the door. "Have you been a bad girl, Kitty Cat," I purr.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demands.

She's standing with her hands on her hips. Penny is behind her glaring at me. Bishop and Laken are on either side of Penny. Laken looks as if he wants to laugh, and Bishop shakes his head at me. That's not a good sign.

"I told you. I had to go hunting." Should I not find her entirely desirable when she's pissed?

"That tells me nothing," she spits, stalking to stand in my space. "You have no idea what I have been through. I've been taking care of myself for a long fucking time. I don't need you to treat me like a child, patting me on the head, telling me to be a good girl, and going to take care of the men's work." She stands on her toes, shouting, "We are not mated yet. You are not in charge of me, cheetah. Just because you gave me three orgasms doesn't mean you get to decide anything about my life!"

Laken loses the fight, choking on the air. Bishop chuckles, and Penny gasps.

I take in my mate's flushed skin, the rapid beat of her heart, and the smell of her fury, mixed with arousal. I sigh, bend, put my shoulder to her stomach, grab her around her knees, and swing her over my shoulder.

"Thanks for taking care of her," I offer the dragons and turn to the door.

"Why do guys do that?" Penny asks.

"Because we can," Laken says.

"That's not the right answer," she says, snarkily.

The warm woman must have been in shock, but as I get down the steps, she gains her composure.

"Elijah, put me down right now," she grits. Her hands are bunched in my shirt.

"No."

"Elijah, I'm so fucking serious," she continues.

"So am I, Kitty Cat," I drawl.

"I can't believe this," she whispers to herself.

"Believe it."

"You realize when you put me down, I'm going to knee you in the balls and run."

"I want you to try," I growl.

“Shit, I am a grown woman,” she yells, kicking with her legs.

I use my free hand to spank her ass, fast, twice. She freezes. “I don’t want to drop you, so be good.”

“You just spanked me,” she gasps.

“I did.” I pat her ass lightly in the same spot. “If you want me to do it more, we can discuss it later.” Her offended tone doesn’t change the scent of pleasure mingling with it.

As I put her down gently in the living room, I expected her anger. I didn’t expect the tears in her eyes fighting to fall.

“What did you do?” she whispers.

I can deal with her fury. I cannot deal with her sadness and fear.

She is my mate. Her honest emotion reaches a neglected place in my heart that hasn’t seen the light for years.

Chapter Eight

Saylor

“Kitty Cat,” he says gently, his thumb ghosting over my cheek.

“No,” I say harshly, brushing his hand away and walking to stand in front of the fireplace. “What did you do?” I ask again.

“I found them. We escorted them to a safe place to guard them until I got answers.”

“Don’t bullshit me. Be honest,” I demand.

“Alright,” he says slowly. “We kidnapped them and took them to Ryker’s dungeon. We may have hurt them a bit.” He holds his fingers up, slightly apart.

“You have them?”

“We do.”

I stare at him, honestly not knowing what to do. I’m not sad he hurt them. I’m happy they aren’t out there following me. I don’t care how much blood he spilled of theirs. They deserve all that and more for what they have put me and many others through.

“Do you know where I spent most of my birthdays?” I ask. His head jerks back, not expecting the question.

“No,” he says slowly.

“In a car, at a park, or a sleazy motel.” I turn to look into the fire. “My mom would try to buy me something special. Most of the time, she would make me a card on notebook paper. But it meant so much because she would write what was in her heart—better than any store-bought card. Only a handful of times could she afford to get me a birthday cake. Candles were out—such a waste of money.” I close my eyes, my hand covering them. “Every birthday, she would get me Twinkies—at least one. That was such a treat. Even now, I have to find one on my birthday,” I whisper. “They're getting harder and harder to find.”

My arm falls back to my side. “She tried to make everything special. She would find whatever job she could to get gas in the tank, maybe a roof over our heads for a week, and enough food.”

“Where is she?” Elijah asks carefully.

“Dead,” I answer bleakly. “The only home I have known was with her. She was my home. I have been homeless almost my whole life.” The heat at my back tenses. “My parents were part of Grant's father's pack. He was also a horrible man. He abused the women of the pack. My dad defended one of the women. My mother watched them kill him. We took off that night. We have been running ever since.”

“What happened to her?” His rough voice came over my shoulder.

“We always had an escape plan. We would split up if we had to and meet at a pre-decided location. The pack got too close. We split up.” I cross my arms, the pain as fresh as if it was yesterday. “I got to the spot and found a note. She must have known how close they were and made a decision. She gave herself up for me. She begged me to forget about her and get somewhere safe. The idea was they would back off for a while since they had her. I wasn't willing to let her sacrifice herself.

“I followed her scent. I saw them slashing her to pieces. There was so much blood,” I sob. “I hid behind a building, watching them destroy the one good thing in my life.” I turn to him and pound my chest. “I hid. I watched the blood flow from her wounds. I decided to run. I didn’t want her sacrifice to be for nothing. I followed the plan. I did what she told me to do.”

“You’ve been running ever since,” he guesses.

“Yes,” I confirm. “Until now. Now, Grant will come. Now, he will know I am here. When his men don’t check in, he will follow. He won’t give me up,” I say, panicked.

“Let him come.”

“You don’t get to decide that. He will bring the whole pack. You may have vampires and dragons on your side, but his pack is ruthless,” I say desperately.

“You don’t know the people here well enough,” he says, cupping my chin. “They are the ruthless ones. He will not get near you. He will not lay one finger on you.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

“I can,” he says, steel in his voice. “We have more than dragons and vampires. You haven’t met the panthers yet, the wolves, the bears, or the lion.”

“I don’t want anyone to be hurt.” Just imagining Elijah dying is agonizing. How can the bond already be so powerful?

“We won’t.” His palm comes to rest over my heart. “You will never live in fear again.”

“I don’t live in fear,” I deny, trying to jerk away. He wraps his arm around my waist,

bringing me into his warmth.

“You have. You are. I see it in your eyes. Your scent is soaked in it.”

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“No...no, no, no.” My head twitches. “I loved my mom. I loved our life.”

“I know you loved her. She did the best she could under the circumstances, but it wasn’t a safe life. You must have been terrified.”

I swallow and look away. “There were times, especially when I was little, that scared me.”

“Of course, baby,” he says, his lips skimming over my forehead.

“The pack wasn’t the only thing we had to run from,” I admit in a small voice. “One night, a stranger tried to get into the car. I remember waking up to my mom revealing her claws and raking them down his arms when he broke in. I was still screaming when she was a mile away.” My head hits his chest. “I was nine. I had nightmares for months. She would sing to me before bed. She thought the music would chase the demons away. Sometimes it worked. Her voice was beautiful.”

“Tell me. What else?” he encourages, his hand caressing my back.

“I was twelve. My mom found a job at a bar. She worked really late nights, and I would have to stay out in the car. It was dark. She had to park in the back, and the lighting was dim. Sometimes, the owner would let me come in and sit in the office. He was really nice to us. I was reading on the couch. A regular stumbled in and saw me. He was drunk. I didn’t like him. My mom warned me to stay out of his sight. I developed early. I was already getting the attention I didn’t want.

“He had never come into the office. He said some horrible things. He was on top of

me before I could do or say anything. He was human but so strong and big. He started pulling at my shirt. That's when I found my voice. My mom came running in. She used her claws and teeth to take him down."

"Did she kill him?" Elijah growls.

"I don't know. We didn't stick around. Mom grabbed her tips, and we ran again." I lay my hands on his strong chest. "Always running," I whisper into his shirt.

"No more," he whispers back.

"I don't like remembering the bad things," I admit.

"None of us do," he agrees.

"What do you not like remembering?" I ask.

"We aren't going to get into that tonight."

"Why not?"

"You've had enough for the day. That is going to be something we have to work up to."

"You can tell me." I tip my head back.

"I will. Not tonight." He moves his hands to my hips. He must see the hurt on my face and sighs. "Do you want to know the real reason I like hugs? Physical touch?"

"Yes," I say, my face softening.

“My mom used to give the best hugs. My brothers, too. It was offered freely and without motive. There wasn’t a reason or event—just because. Then one day, the affection was gone. I miss it,” he whispers. “The details of why, I will share later.” He clears his throat. “Did the dragons feed you?”

I don’t push it. “They did. You were gone all day.”

“Shit,” he mutters.

I frown, but then the smell of a shifter reaches me. More than one shifter. “Who is it?”

“Logan,” he says, eyes narrowing, “and it appears he brought guests.”

He pushes me away gently and flings the door.

Three lion shifters are standing on the porch. Two of them are set apart from the one in the doorway. He is tall, muscular, and holds himself stiffly. His blonde hair is so closely cropped to his head he’s almost bald. His face is hard but very handsome. The other two look similar, except they have longer hair. All of them are wearing jeans and boots. They have to be family.

“A mate?”

“Yes,” Elijah says. “Where have you been? Who the fuck are they?”

“These are my brothers,” Logan says. “Lucas and Las.” He doesn’t sound happy about it.

“You have brothers?”

“Unfortunately. They found me and now won’t leave me the fuck alone,” he growls.

“You missed us,” one brother says.

“You almost cried when we found you,” the other says.

Logan grunts, but I don’t miss the hope in his eyes. I should know. A similar look has been in mine since I met Elijah.

“I would give out hugs, but I don’t know you. Plus, now my mate will get all my hugs,” Elijah announces, and I blink, shocked.

“I understand,” the dark blond brother says, nodding seriously.

“I’m a little sad I can’t hug the little cheetah,” the other brother says, tipping his head to look at me around Elijah, wiggling his finger my way.

“Fuck off,” Elijah snaps.

“Lucas,” Logan warns. “Don’t piss off Elijah.”

“Alright, geez, just joking,” Lucas says, holding up his hands.

“Lucas, we finally found our brother. Don’t disrespect his friend.”

“I get it, Las,” he grins. “I’ll be good.”

“Can we at least ask her name?” Lucas asks.

Elijah motions to me, and I move close. His arm bands around my waist. “This is Saylor,” he states proudly.

“Nice to meet you,” Logan says.

The other two nod.

“I hear you have guests at Ryker’s,” Logan says.

“I do.” Elijah glances at me. “It’s up to Saylor if she wants to share.”

I appreciate him getting permission, but what do a few lions matter at this point? “I’ve been stalked by a cheetah pack. The Alpha wants to force the bond.” The three lions suck a sharp breath. “Two of his lackeys are here. Elijah didn’t like the fact they got so close.”

“Jesus, what a dick move. Is the Alpha here?” Lucas asks, stepping closer.

“Not yet, but he will be.” My hand gravitates to Elijah, slipping my two fingers into his back pocket. “When he calls to them go unanswered, he will grow suspicious. They are extremely loyal to Grant.”

“We want to offer our help,” Logan says.

“I will take it happily,” Elijah accepts, smiling.

“Hey,” I protest.

“They won’t get hurt,” he defends. “They’re lions. Kings of the jungle. No Alpha cheetah will take them down.”

“Again,” Logan interrupts, “not the king of the jungle. We will help, though.”

“Don’t worry about us, babe,” Lucas says, ignoring the growl vibrating Elijah’s chest at the endearment. “We can take care of ourselves.”

“Anything we can do,” Las agrees.

“As much as I hate to admit it,” Logan starts, frowning at his brothers, “it’s not a complete disaster they are here. They are good fighters.”

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“Holy shit,” Lucas yells. “Did you hear that, brother?”

“I did,” Las says, rolling his eyes. “I’m standing right beside you,” he says dryly.

“You both are a pain in my ass,” Logan rumbles.

“As entertaining as this is,” Elijah chuckles, “Saylor doesn’t need to stand here, after a very stressful day, listening to it.”

“Why was it stressful?” Lucas asks.

“Shut up,” Las mutters.

“We will go,” Logan says firmly.

“I appreciate the concern,” Elijah says, holding out his hand. “I’ll call.”

Logan nods as their palms meet.

Elijah slams the door before the brothers can say anything.

“That was rude,” I point out.

“I can be rude. Like a lot,” he warns. “Did you really want to spend the rest of the night trying to get those three out the door?”

“No,” I admit with a sigh. “But it was still rude.”

“I will be rude again—so you know. The only person I won’t be rude to is you, Kitty Cat.” He turns us around. “Why don’t you go change? Get comfy. We are going to end the day relaxing.”

“I don’t know how to relax,” I cringe. When you have lived looking over your shoulder, you adapt to always being on guard.

“Well, I may not be a king of the jungle, but I am the king of relaxing,” he smirks.

This I can believe.

When I came out in Elijah’s shirt that came down to my knees, after giving me a heated look, he set us up in front of the television. He had popcorn (the extra buttery kind), a couple of beers, water, and some chocolate (explaining it was his emergency stash, and I should feel privileged).

He put in a vampire movie. He must have seen my confusion, given his hatred of vampires. He explained it was his version of therapy.

We preceded to have the most relaxing night I have ever had.

I ended up with my head in his lap, his fingers running through my hair, and my hand wrapped around his thigh. I tried to ignore the heat coursing through me, but just being near him eased me.

I drifted off halfway through the movie, Elijah’s soft humming voice soothing a special need in my soul.

I fell asleep with a mysterious, strong cheetah surrounding me and tear tracks on my cheeks.

Chapter Nine

Elijah

I stare into the flames, my eyes burning along with my rage. I tucked Saylor into my bed after she fell asleep on my lap. As much as I wanted to be near her, I didn't want my emotions to leak through the bond that was forming quickly.

Once two mates meet, even if the bond isn't complete, it starts to build. When we agree to do this together, bite each other, and accept the bond, our emotions will forever be tied together. I will always be able to find her and feel her.

Her story brings me equal amounts of sadness and anger. These men have made her life hell. I have to hold back from leaving now to kill the two we have. I don't care about their answers now. All I care about is Saylor.

I never imagined the pull to be so extreme. I have to make her happy. I have to make her safe. I have to be a better man for her.

Hearing her past has brought mine back. I usually fight to push all the memories deep inside my mind. It didn't help to see that Logan had reconnected with his brothers. That must have been where he disappeared to. He got a call when we were at the bar. Then he became quiet and that's when the drinks started flowing constantly down his throat. Tonight was the first time since then that I spoke to him. I assumed he had to have family, though he never confirmed it. The guy exuded sadness beyond what he had been through.

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As much as I hate it, I wonder what my brothers are doing. Do they think of me? Do they wonder what happened to me?

They were away from home when it all went down. They weren't there when my father kicked me out. They weren't there when he disowned me because I disgusted and disappointed him. I picture his face on the last day. His fury, even if misplaced, killed me.

I worshiped my father most of my life. He was big and gruff. I didn't get hugs or affection from him, but it didn't matter because that's what my brothers were for. My mother was timid and quiet. She would hug me and tell me she loved me. But that stopped when my dad yelled at her to stop babying me. My brothers didn't get the same treatment, he allowed them to have some physical touch from her. I was supposed to lead, and I was held to a higher standard in his eyes.

Why did I worship him?

I thought that was what a dad should act like. I thought that was what a man should act like. He was supposed to be tough. Work hard and take care of the family. Be a man. The only emotion you were allowed to express was confidence. Men don't cry or show weakness of any kind. We treat woman as someone who needs to be taken care of, not treated as equals. When the rules of how a man should act are drilled into your head every day of your life, you believe them. Most of the time I just pretended to believe all the crap he spewed, especially when I got older. The only time I would break those rules was with my two younger brothers. With them I felt free and loved for who I really was deep inside.

I tried to shield them as much as possible.

In the hierarchy of cheetah pride, the oldest son would be the one to take over the Alpha spot, which is much like all other shifter packs. Of course, you had to prove yourself. I had to be better than any other. We had weekly fights within the pack. The winners would move up in the pack and also in the Alpha's mind. I may not have been muscle upon muscle, but I made up for it by being fast and smart.

My dad was so proud until he wasn't anymore.

In the early days, a couple years after I was forced to leave, I checked on my brothers. I tracked down Draden, who hadn't left the area where we grew up, and found him in a bar. When he didn't seem to be heartbroken at my absence, I left him to his fun without showing myself. I'm glad that they are out in the world instead of stuck in our Dad's expectations. I never revealed myself. I have covered my tracks as much as I can.

The one thing I wouldn't be able to handle is seeing my brothers' disappointment. I don't think I could deal well with that.

I realize I am going to have to deal with my issues. Everything changed now. I didn't see Saylor coming, but I can't imagine giving her up. To humans, our bond would seem weird. Being attached so quickly to another is abnormal. Only shifters understand the pull to a mate. The absolute loyalty to another person. We look human and act human, but our animals are just under the surface. We talk to them. We love them as a separate entity, yet we are one. When one of us dies, we both die. We cannot go on without the other. Not many can relate to that level of love.

When we meet our mate, it is exactly the same. If Saylor got hurt or died, I would follow. I wouldn't be able to go on without her. Everything about her draws me in. Her scent. Her beauty. Her soul. Her heat. Her heart.

I look towards the bedroom. I hear her heartbeat. I sense her conflicts. I feel her need for a home.

I want to be her home.

I slowly get to my feet, determined.

I will be everything she needs me to be. I will be selfish and keep her, even though I know I am not a good man. Keep her safe. Loved. Happy.

If she will let me. If she denies me, I won't be able to live in this world without her.

I wake to moans and a hot body curled over my side. Saylor's soft breasts are pressed against my bare chest, her hard nipples lighting rubbing. Her leg is thrown over mine, the heat from her pussy burning my skin.

I slowly open my eyes to the early morning sun bathing us. Her long hair is tangled around my arm, helping to secure her to me. I flex my hand resting on her hip, causing her to wiggle closer.

Fuck, I've been trying to be a good cheetah.

This shit is not helping.

I've wanted to bury my cock inside her ever since I scented her. As her mate, it is my responsibility to ease her suffering (and pleasure), but I don't want to rush her into something she will regret.

Her head twitches, and her lips graze my chest.

"Elijah," she sighs.

“Right here, Kitty Cat,” I rumble.

“I...” she trails off.

“Can I help you, Saylor?” I know she doesn’t want to ask.

“Can I help you, too?” she asks and boldly runs her finger down my extremely hard cock.

I hiss. “Fuck, why would I turn that down?” I nudge her with my shoulder, encouraging her to sit up, and gently remove her hand from me. Her forehead wrinkles. “I have something in mind.” I want to ask her questions about her experience, I would hate to scare her with my needs, and I don’t want to ruin the moment. I want her to see no one but me. Of course, I don’t want to think about her time with other men—it pisses me off. “How many partners have you had?” I choke on the words.

“One,” she admits.

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“You’ve had a relationship with one man? For how long?” I want to find him and cut off his dick.

“No, I’ve had sex with one man. Once.”

My brain malfunctions. “Once,” I state, extremely relieved and then feel like a jerk for hoping she didn’t have any fun with the one.

“Being on the run wasn’t the best scenario for being in an honest relationship. Having one-night stands scared me, especially with humans.” Her hands twist on her lap.

“I am grateful. But I don’t want to scare you,” I growl.

“You won’t. I want you to teach me,” she says, a slight smile tugging at her lips.

“Teach you?” Fuck, I think I just came.

“I still don’t want to complete the bond yet. But I have a burning in my whole body, and you are the only one who can help with that.”

All my attention is fixed on her face. She wants me to teach her. Her words run over and over again through my head. Are there any sweeter words she could have said?

“What is your word?”

“Pineapple.”

“Take off your panties,” I snarl.

Her hands are steady, and her eyes are excited as she does what I say.

“Stay,” I say as I leave the bed. I use the bathroom and wash my hands. I walk back to the bed to see her as I left her, her legs bent beside her, eyes on me, and my cock leaks. I stop at the edge of the bed and strip off my pants. I resume my spot, except lower on the bed.

I take in her tousled image.

“Elijah?” she questions.

“You can use your hands or your mouth; your choice,” I start, stroking myself. “I’ll let you leave my shirt on this time, but soon I will want to taste those beautiful tits.” Her eyes widen. “I want you to climb on, your head over my cock, and your sweet pussy over my mouth.”

“What?” she whispers, her arousal perfuming the air.

“You heard me.” I curl my finger. “Come sit on my face.”

Chapter Ten

Saylor

I’ve never sucked a man’s cock before. I’ve barely even seen or touched one. I have nothing to compare it to. His can’t be normal. If this is normal, Rex was tiny. My eyes are glued to his hand that surrounds it.

It was heaven waking up next to him, touching him. The fire inside me is getting

more powerful and harder to control. I let my eyes roam. Elijah has a beautiful body. Tight muscles encased in tattooed skin. He's not covered in ink, but I count fifteen at least. He doesn't have any reservations about being an object of fascination. He lets me look my fill.

In my singular experience, Rex's mouth didn't get anywhere near my crotch. I'm not sure how I feel about it. In theory, it seems as if it could be enjoyable.

I have the urge to look down at myself and make sure I shaved. It hasn't been a top priority to keep it under control.

I restrain myself. My brain switches directions and tries to picture his view if I do as he asks. I cringe.

"Kitty Cat," he calls. "Do you want this?" He continues softly, "We don't have to continue. I can use my fingers again, make you come. I never want you to be uncomfortable with anything we do together. We can take a break, talk about what you want, what you expect. I will never pressure you."

His words calm me. Do I want this? I really want his hands on me. I really want his mouth on me, everywhere. "Yes," I admit.

"I will only do things you are comfortable with." He sits up, cupping my neck. "There are many ways I can relieve you. We can work up to this way."

I am too curious to stop. "I suppose it's the fear of the unknown," I confess. "I'm just a little nervous."

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“Nervous. Wondering if you will like it?” he asks, stroking my skin.

“No. Wondering if you will.”

“Baby,” he breathes. “I can guarantee I will love it. It is one of my favorite things to do. There are no words to describe the desire I have to taste you.” He closes his eyes. “Your scent is intoxicating. I smell your heat. The wetness is coating your skin. I imagine it is so soft and sweet. I’m sure you are swollen and pulsing in your need. I want to see you. Touch you.” He opens his eyes and stares into mine. “You may be the one that is in heat, but I am the one that craves your sweet juice coating my throat.”

I think I just came.

I gulp back the saliva pooling in my mouth. He is so dirty.

I want him to make me dirty.

“I want this,” I state.

“You’re sure?” he asks.

“Yes.” I nod.

“Do as I said then.” The softness that was in his tone is gone. He’s gruff and hard as he demands.

It hits a secret, dark place inside me. My fantasies have come to life and are lying in front of me. Why wouldn't I want to fulfill them?

He waits for me to make the first move. When I move over him, my knee rising to get into position, his hands grip my hips to help guide me.

I find my head hovering over his stomach, not sure what to do.

When his lips ghost over my inner thigh, I forget about everything except the need for him to ease the heat.

He moves slowly, kissing closer and closer. He softly separates my lips. His tongue laps up the wetness already covering me, and a gasp of surprise leaves me. His cock jerks closer to my mouth. I wrap my hand around him, feeling the steel that's all for me.

"Fuck, you are so sweet," he growls.

The vibration from it causes me to leak more.

My hand unconsciously tightens as he suddenly pulls me roughly down. My thighs widen until there is no space between us.

He consumes me.

I throw my head back.

This is everything.

His warm mouth. His tongue. The suction.

Holy fuck.

I want this every day for the rest of my life. The sensations he demands from my body are something I never thought I would happily give to the right man. My desire is almost overwhelming in intensity. So much so, I almost forget about the cock I hold in my hand.

I turn my attention back to him. I have to give him as much pleasure as he is giving me. I stroke lightly, experimentally. Again. And again. Gaining speed and rhythm that soon matched the thrust of his tongue. I revel in the moans coming from him. My thumb brushes over the tip with every slide.

“Lick,” he snarls against me.

Yes. I want a taste, too.

I lightly curl my tongue over the head and earn a drop of his pleasure.

At the same time, his tongue enters me as deep as he can and brings me to the edge of exploding.

“Elijah,” I pant.

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“Harder,” he demands. “I want to come in your mouth as you do in mine.” His voice is muffled by my pussy. The heat from his words floods over me.

“Please,” I beg. I wiggle my hips, needing to be as close as possible.

“You will come when I do,” he rasps.

I hold his cock with one hand and slide him into my mouth, sucking.

He doubles his efforts as a reward. I try to concentrate on him. It takes everything in me to stay on task. I feel the deep pull of my orgasm just out of reach. I love how he feels on my tongue, the steel under softness. I squeeze harder and hollow out my cheeks, taking him as deep as possible.

His hands are gripping my hips in a punishing grip. My cheetah pushes forward, and I know she is in my eyes, enjoying the sensual assault our mate is giving us. She wants him as much as I do.

His cock swells in my mouth, and I hum.

“Come,” he snarls quickly before attacking my pussy.

That’s all the permission I need to let go. I close my eyes, still sucking, and euphoria takes over me.

I distantly hear him shout and jerk. Hot come floods my mouth, dripping down my chin. My body shakes, my hips grind, and my arms collapse.

Elijah tenderly moves me to lay beside him and crawls over me. My glazed eyes meet his satisfied ones. He straddles me; his hands braced on the bed on either side of my head. He tilts his head as he focuses his attention on my mouth.

He puts all his weight on his left hand and raises his right. His finger trails over my chin where his come dripped. He scoops the drops and holds the digit to my lips.

“Open,” he commands. I part my lips. “Suck.” My mouth surrounds his finger, pulling it deep. Sucking up every drop. “Good, Kitty Cat,” he purrs.

My pussy spasms. He hovers over me with heavy eyes. I can see his animal in them, watching, waiting.

“Your cheetah likes me,” I state.

“He does. He wants to meet yours.”

“Mine is very impatient. She thinks I am wasting time.” She wants me to complete the bond, but the human side of me thinks it’s too soon.

“We don’t have to rush this. I want to get to know you. Don’t get me wrong—I would complete it now if you wanted to.”

“Are you that sure? What if you don’t like what you learn about me?” Logically, I know it’s normal for shifters to move fast. To commit for the rest of our lives as one. My heart is bruised, though.

“I could say the same about me to you.” His palm rests on my neck.

“That doesn’t hold you back, though,” I state.

“Maybe it should. But I just don’t give a fuck.” He watches his hand squeeze lightly. “I won’t let you go. I will do anything to convince you to stay with me.”

“I don’t think it’s going to take much,” I admit softly.

A smile curves his lips. The smile turns to a frown, and his head snaps up. A low snarl leaves him.

“Fucking vampire,” he spits, jumping from the bed. He shoves his legs into his jeans and points at me. “Get dressed. Do not shower. I want you to smell like me.” He storms from the room.

I slowly scoot to the edge of the bed and stand. My legs are still shaky from what we just shared. Maybe I should be pissed he demanded to leave his scent all over my body. But I find myself thrilled. I guess it depends on who is possessive of you.

I use the bathroom and find more of his clothes to put on. I desperately need to buy some clothes. My heart protests, though, perfectly happy to keep wearing my mate's clothes. I love his smell—it gives me comfort.

My usual steady emotions have been all over the place since meeting Elijah. I can hide them so easily. Being around him gives me the safety to let them out. He’s already so dedicated to me. I see in his face, his actions, and even his scent. I shouldn’t feel so safe considering Grant is still searching for me, and the future is so uncertain.

I hear Elijah growling something at Bash as I leave the room. They are standing at the bottom of the porch, glaring at each other.

“What’s going on?” I slide next to Elijah, leaning into his side, looping my finger in his pants pocket, hoping to ease the tension.

“Nothing. He’s leaving,” Elijah says.

“Bash?” I ask, not giving up.

“The cheetahs are being loud. They are chewing through the duct tape with their abnormally sharp cheetah teeth,” he complains. “I can’t mind-fuck the extreme asshole one. The other asshole is less strong. I was able to convince him to shut up. Ryker wants them contained before the club opens tonight. I need you two to agree what we are going to do with them.”

“I want to see them,” I say, ignoring the roll of my stomach. I need to confront them. They have been built up to this level of untouchable in my mind—seeing them vulnerable will help me move on.

“Fuck, no.” Elijah turns to me.

“Yes,” I say firmly. I pull with my finger. “I need to.”

“I am not putting you in danger,” he persists.

“You aren’t. You will be right beside me.” I look at Bash. “Will you be there?”

“I can be,” he nods.

“No.” Elijah crosses his arms.

I glare at him. “Yes.”

He rakes his hand through his hair. “Shit.”

“Put a shirt and shoes on. Let’s go,” I say, trying not to smile.

He stomps back to the house.

“I’m surprised he left you out here with me,” Bash ponders.

“He knows you are no threat to him. You are mated. Plus, I’m not without weapons.”
I shift my claws, flashing them.

“I suppose.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I’m used to being feared.”

He sounds disappointed. “I’m sure you are to humans. Some types of shifters are more afraid of different species than others.”

“Yeah,” he sighs.

“Poor Bash,” Elijah sings as he leaves the house. “Must be losing your vampire touch,” he taunts.

Bash shows his teeth. “Fuck off.”

“Alright, geez,” Elijah says, giving me big eyes when Bash turns away. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes. I have to.” For some reason, I feel compelled to confront them. Maybe I need to do this to move on.

“Okay, Kitty Cat. Let’s do this.” He grabs my hand and leads me to his truck.

Bash already left. He must have run here as there wasn't a car. Elijah lifts me into the truck and leans in to buckle me in.

"What is your hatred of vampires about?" I ask him again once he gets in.

"It's a long story. Not for today," he says quietly.

I study him as he starts to drive. He has demons. He has parts of his life he keeps in the dark. He won't open those doors easily. I should be worried about that.

I'm curious. I'm eager. I'm excited. A life with Elijah would be anything but boring.

I am all those things and more.

The one thing I am not is worried.

Chapter Eleven

Saylor

“Just so you are aware,” Elijah starts as we are about to go into the basement of the club. “If they make a move towards you, I will kill them. I will kill with no remorse. There will be lots of blood and screaming.”

“Okay,” I say calmly.

He blinks. Chuckles come from the two vampires at our backs.

Elijah leads the way down the stairs. The shouts of anger and arguing cut off abruptly as we get closer. I look around the room. An actual torture chamber. I should be leery of Ryker. He built this with a purpose. I suppose an ancient vampire gathers many enemies over the years.

Seeing Fred and Sam hanging from the ceiling in chains in the dark concrete room, helpless and bloody, gives me a zap of satisfaction. These two men have made my life hell. Fred is cruel. He was an active participant in the killing of my mom. Sam didn't land any blows but he blindly follows Fred and Grant. His passiveness in the abuse and killing of women is no less cruel.

For years, when I saw them all I have felt is fear and the desire to flee. With Elijah by my side and two vampires in the room, the fear is gone.

All I feel is anger and glee that they are under Elijah's control now.

And mine.

"Sweet, sweet Saylor," Fred coos. He grins his crooked grin, his lips dry and cracked from lack of water.

"Watch yourself," Elijah warns. His hand grips Fred's throat in an instant and he lets his claws scrap his skin.

"Alright, alright," Fred wheezes.

Elijah drops his arm and steps back.

I stay silent. The silence in the room makes Sam uncomfortable. His feet are barely touching the floor but they shift restlessly. He watches me carefully, almost seems...ashamed. Fred's eyes blaze with anger. Which I don't understand. I study him closer. I take in his scent without the barrier of my fear blocking it.

I close my eyes and concentrate. I shove all the other smells out and hone in on him. I move to stand close without opening my eyes, letting him guide me. As shifters, our sense of smell is everything. We use it to distinguish between friend and enemy. Prey. Mate. Food. Fear. Arousal. Liars.

I wade past the sick scent of rotten meat. The anger. What I land on is surprising.

I open my eyes and frown. "Jealousy." And a sliver of guilt.

He jerks back and the chains rattle. "Fuck you."

"Why? Why are you jealous of me?" I delve into the emotion behind his eyes.

Panic.

“Why would I be jealous of you?” he spits. “We have stalked you for years. You had no life at all.”

“This is what I am wondering. As you are fully aware, the scents don’t lie.” He shakes his head violently.

“I’m not admitting to anything. Either kill me or let me go. I don’t give a fuck.”

“I vote for option one,” Ryker chimes in. “He’s fucking too loud.”

I ignore the vampire even as Elijah chokes. “Why?” I insist. I put my fingers on his cheek, my nail resting close to his eye.

“He wants you,” he screams. “Everyone wants you. We had to put our lives on hold to chase you around the world. We never get to settle. He sits in our camp, thinking of you. Sending us wherever he wants. He’s obsessed. We could be trying to find our own mates. We could be setting up a home.”

“You don’t think I had wished the same. Don’t you think I wanted a home? A safe space? I wanted to live somewhere with my mom and be happy. I wanted a yard and maybe a pet. I wanted to live a normal, boring life.” The anger is bringing my claw closer and closer to his wide eye.

“There was a girl,” Sam whispers.

“Shut up,” Fred snarls.

“There was a quiet girl that he liked.”

“I’m going to kill you.” Fred thrashes violently, causing a cut to form on his skin.

“She stole from us,” Sam continues.

“Was she his mate?” Elijah asks.

“No, but she liked him. Grant doesn’t like humans that harm us.”

“Fuck,” Fred utters, falling still.

“What happened?” I ask Sam, but my attention stays on Fred. This is where the guilt comes in.

“Grant found out about the theft. She was homeless. She came across our camp. She was allowed to stay a few days on the terms that she do everything Grant commanded. She was allowed to eat with us as long as she did all the cleanup. She was small and pretty. She got attention. Fred was the only one who was kind to her. He thought it could be his chance at...something.” Fred’s face shuts down, his jaw clenching. “She was tired of the leers and demands. She was cleaning Grant’s tent. She found some money. Grant came in just as she pocketed it. He flipped out on her. He,” he swallows, “he raped her.”

“Holy fuck,” Bash whispers.

“Sick assholes,” Ryker hisses.

Elijah rumbles, his chest touching my back.

“What did you do?” I ask. I don’t want to hear anymore but can’t help but ask.

“He made Fred participate. And then he killed her.” Sam hangs his head.

“He made you?” Elijah sneers. “How could he make you?”

“He would have kicked me out of the pack if I didn’t,” Fred defends.

“So you take her and leave,” I growl. “You tell him fuck no. You attack him. What you don’t do is help him violate an innocent girl.” Bile rises in my throat. I thought I knew what I was dealing with here. This is so horrible—it’s next level horrible.

“You are a sick fuck,” Elijah grits.

“You don’t know. You don’t know Grant,” Fred says weakly.

“I for one don’t give a fuck. Can we kill him now?” Bash asks.

“How could you do that?” I whisper almost to myself. How are you able to understand men like this?

“I remember that sweet little man who took you. What made you spread your legs for him?” Fred taunts.

I have to push back on Elijah to keep him from taking off his head. “What?” My breath leaves me. He shouldn’t know anything about Rex.

“You see, we came up with a plan. We send him in, he gets close and keeps you distracted until we can get to you and your mom.”

My hand shakes. I have to force myself not to plunge it into his eye. “How do you know about him? He was human. He wasn’t part of this.”

“He was. He was another of Grant’s charity cases. Rex wanted to be part of the pack however he could. We got close so many times but you would scent us before we got close enough. We thought if we sent in a human, it would soften you up, and you’d let your guard down.” He laughs. “It did that. But then the little shit grew a heart. He broke up with you when he knew we were on the way.” He closes his eyes and smiles. “Grant is coming. I can feel him.”

Packmates can feel the location of those within it, especially bonded or close relationships. Red covers my eyes. “That’s when you caught my mom.” The pieces fall into place. Was any of it real? Was any part of my life real?

“That was the best part. She found out somehow. She gave herself up.” He licks his lips. “She was delicious.”

Death. All I can see is his eminent death. I feel Elijah jump back as I shift immediately. My clothes shred as my cheetah burst out. We land quietly, snarling and snapping at the man who has been an active participant in ruining my life. I will never be able to run as a cheetah with my mom again. He took away the memories of sweet love. He took away the life of so many innocents. He took away my ability to trust easily.

All I want is his blood.

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I smell the fear now.

And it's not coming from me.

I stalk closer. My eyes, which are normally bright blue, morph. Bright yellow shines out, only a hint of blue remains at the rims. My long claws clack on the floor. My head tilts dangerously. We are shifter cheetahs, bigger than just the animal.

I bare my teeth. Then I pounce.

I take great pleasure in tearing him apart, piece by piece. Blood and guts fly across the room and cover my coat.

I distantly hear Elijah instructing the vampires to not interfere. I hear crying and screaming from beside me as Sam witnesses one of his own kind killing his packmate.

I care about none of it. I want this evil man to be nothing but bones. I want no possibility of him coming back. He won't be able to heal from this.

I don't know how long it takes. I have no concept of time in this form. All I can see is the fear and desperation on my mom's face as they killed her. All the women they abused with the power of being stronger. I know I am done when I am standing in nothing but blood and bones where a man used to be. His flesh sticks to the walls.

My chest heaves. My head swings low as I turn to Elijah.

My mate. Mine.

“Kitty Cat,” he says. “You are stunning.”

He steps closer.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Bash asks and I turn blazing eyes to him and bare my teeth.

No one will keep him from me.

“I would back off, my friend,” Ryker suggests.

Elijah never stops, crouching before me. “Good girl,” he whispers. Regardless of the blood on my coat, he runs his hand over my head. “You did good. He’s gone now. Shift back and we can go home. I’m anxious to hold you.”

I hear the words but I’m not ready. I but my head on his palm, silently urging more petting.

He smirks. “The next time you shift, I promise to pet you all you want. Now I want to hold you,” he urges.

I sigh.

“Turn the fuck around,” he snaps at the vampires. “Close your eyes,” he demands Sam.

The magic works over me and then I am laying on the dirty floor. Elijah quickly takes off his shirt and covers me.

“What should we do with him?” Bash asks, nodding at Sam.

“Leave him. I’ll come back and take care of him myself.” He gathers me in his arms and I wrap myself around him.

“It was all a lie,” I sob. My legs tighten around his waist. He pulls down the shirt, his hand under my ass. “My poor mom.”

“I know, Kitty Cat,” he says. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“He can’t come back.”

“No.” He starts walking but pauses on the stairs. “Sorry for the mess. You have someone to clean that up, right?”

“Jesus,” Ryker sighs.

“Take care of her. We’ll worry about this,” Bash concedes.

“Thanks,” Elijah says.

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I keep my face tucked into the neck of my mate. Trusting him to take care of me.

Trusting him to get me safely home.

Chapter Twelve

Elijah

Saylor clings to my neck as I walk into the house and straight to the bathroom. I have to balance her to turn on the shower, fearing she will fall apart if I try to put her down. It's not easy but I somehow get my shirt off her body and my pants off. I try not to react to seeing her beautiful body.

I take us both under the water and stand still. I run my hand down her hair and back, hoping the motion soothes her enough to let me clean her. The water runs red, the blood washing away.

"Baby, can you stand?" She twitches. A minute later, she eases her legs down.

Her chest is plastered to mine, her hands curled under her head resting on me. I grab the soap and clean everything I can reach without disturbing her. I hum softly. I have no idea what the song is and it doesn't matter.

I am insanely proud of her. She confronted her abusers and kept her cool. Well...until she shredded the one. Funny, I'm just as proud of that moment. We are animals at our core. We aren't humans. Of course, there are plenty of evil humans. Shifters live by their own set of rules. We protect our own at all costs. He asked for the consequences

when he brought up her mom.

Brutal. They all have brought on everything that will come to them. I will delight in killing Sam for standing by and doing nothing about the sick things they have done. When Grant shows his face, I will laugh as I take the heart from his chest.

Saylor has hidden for way too long. I see all the emotions she shoves away. There are times I can physically see her shut them out. She needs to know she is allowed to feel everything.

“Can you turn, Kitty Cat?” I want to give her all the time she needs but I would rather do that when she is clothed.

“Yes,” she whispers.

She leans on my chest. I bite my lip until it hurts when I look down and see her perfect tits. I am a sick, sick man. I can’t control my hard cock as she pushes her ass back.

How am I supposed to wash her?

“Baby, give me your hand. I’ll give you the soap,” I say desperately.

“No, I want you.” She puts her hands on the outside of my thighs and gives me all of her weight.

Fuck. I am a saint.

Now is not the time to jump her. She just went through a traumatic event.

I close my eyes and run the soap over her soft fucking skin. I thought it would help if

I couldn't see what I was washing, but I know what they look like now. I know what her sweet pussy tastes like, looks like. I can still hear her moans ringing in my memories.

"Elijah?" Saylor asks.

"Yeah," I respond.

"Make me come," she states.

"What?" I ask, thinking my man brain is playing tricks on me. I open one eye.

"I want to forget. You can make me forget."

"I doubt those are the right reasons," I stall when all I want to do is grant her request.

"You make me feel so good. I want you to do it again. Please," she begs, pressing harder against me.

What can I do? Say no?

"If you are sure?"

"I am. Please, Elijah," she whimpers.

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I drop the soap and glide my hands over the top of her slippery tits. Shit, they overflow in my palms. Her nipples are dark pink and hard. I dip my head, my lips skating over her shoulder and up her neck. I let my teeth gently scrape her skin. I can't wait until she lets me mark her. I want my bite to be visible for all to see.

“Do you touch yourself, Kitty Cat?” I purr.

She hesitates. “Yes.”

“Give me your hand,” I demand.

I wait patiently as she slowly puts her right hand in mine. I use my left to play with her left tit. I lace her fingers with mine, my hand on top of hers, and lay them joined on her other breast. She gasps in surprise as I control our joined hands.

I circle her, getting closer and closer to her nipple. Before we make contact, I back off, and she groans.

I grin and bite her earlobe. “I am in control.”

“Yes, Elijah,” she pants.

We cup her, holding the weight of her, and squeeze. I want to suck them so fucking badly. I move on before I pin her to the tile and take what I want.

I travel down her soft stomach and cup her pussy, the wetness there having nothing to do with the water. I take two of our fingers and thrust inside and we both sigh in

relief.

“This pussy is mine,” I growl. “I will be the only one to ever be inside it again.” I gain speed. “You are so tight and wet.”

“Please, let me come.”

“Not yet.” She is so soft, sucking our fingers back in, not letting go.

Her hips are grinding, rubbing, taking me to the edge. I press hard against her, encouraging. I can hear how wet she is for me over the pounding of the water.

“How do you feel?” I ask, moving our hands faster, deeper.

“Soft. Wet. Hot.”

“Fuck, yeah,” I whisper. “What do you think of when you masturbate?”

“Someone...like you,” she says quietly. “Someone to take control.”

“Perfect.” Our palms slap against her clit and her chin comes up. She turns her head. I take what she is offering. Her mouth opens hungrily under mine. I time our motions to match our tongues.

She tightens. Her pussy starts to spasm.

“Elijah,” she pleads against my lips.

“No,” I say, testing her desire to be under my command. She holds it back. “Beautiful,” I praise. I want to prolong her pleasure. “A little longer, baby. Hold just a little longer.” I knead her breast.

I add two more of our fingers, stretching her. Her hips thrash wildly. I bite her lip before taking it again. This woman is everything to me. I will do what I have to to keep her. I dream of doing this every day for the rest of our long lives. I want to make babies with her. I get turned on thinking of my seed making her swell with my child. I will tie her to me in every way.

“Please, please, please,” she chants, losing total control.

I wait another minute. “Come, baby,” I demand. I roll her nipple as I increase the speed again and rub my cock harder against her back.

“Yes,” she screams and clasps down so hard I can barely move our hands anymore.

My come shoots out, covering her. “Fuck,” I groan.

I don’t move, letting us both come down. She has come dripping down her legs and I want to drink it up but don’t. I rest my chin on her shoulder and release my grip on her nipple. It’s red and rock hard.

I glide once, twice, in her pussy before pulling out. I bring my fingers to my mouth and suck them, cleaning every drop. I feel her attention on my face.

“Delicious, Kitty Cat,” I purr.

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She blushes and ducks her head. “Thanks?” she giggles.

I rinse us both off. I put her on a towel and dry her. “Stay. I’m going to get you something to wear.” I grab the first shirt I see.

She watches me carefully as I dress her and take her to the bed. “It’s not nighttime yet.”

“It is for you. You are going to take a nap. The shift is draining under normal circumstances. I want you to rest.” I pull the blankets down. “In.”

She doesn’t put up a fight. I push on her hip encouraging her to lay on her side and I lay at her back.

As I wrap myself around her, she says, “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. Seeing you take back control from those sick fucks made me so hard.”

“I’m glad?” She laughs softly.

“There isn’t anything you could do that would turn me off.” I squeeze her. “Just be you, Saylor.”

“Okay, Elijah,” she whispers.

She falls asleep quickly. Her whole body loses all the tension it usually holds.

This woman.

How is it possible the universe sent me the perfect partner? I haven't been around many mated pairs until I moved here to be close to Laken. I didn't have many examples. Laken and Bishop are the closest to me that are totally dedicated to each other. I didn't grow up with much dedication.

I lift my head. The dragon is here.

I slowly unwrap myself and leave the bed, making sure to tuck the covers around her. I put on my jeans and shut the door.

I take two beers out to the porch to find Laken sitting on it. My friend is huge. He has shoulder-length golden hair which he has pulled up in a bun. I have given him endless hell over that. I have always scoffed at the men who do that, but it definitely works for him. He is shirt-less as usual. Dragons, like most shifters, run hot. But because of his heritage, and the fact that he breathes fire, he does more than most.

His skin is covered in tattoos. They glow in the dimming light.

I hope he came with information. I discreetly sent him a message asking if he would look into Grant. I don't want to worry Saylor, or any of the others, but I need to be prepared for his arrival.

I hand him a beer and take a seat.

"How is she?" he asks.

"I assume you heard what happened then?"

"Yes."

“There are no secrets within this group,” I sigh.

“You’ve been here long enough to know information moves fast.” He takes a drink.

“She is sleeping. We haven’t talked much about it. I was proud of what she did,” I defend.

“Of course you were. I would be, too. Those assholes deserved nothing less,” he agrees.

I should have known he wouldn’t judge her. “It was brutal. They are brutal. Fuck the things they have done. I’m sure there is more. They only admitted to some of it.”

“Penny was distraught. She wanted to come with me. I had to have Bishop stay behind to distract her.” He chuckles.

Bishop probably didn’t put up a fight. “I’m sure he was successful, judging by the sounds I hear coming from your house,” I say, shaking my head.

“Fuck off,” he barks.

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“I get it now. I won’t complain about it again,” I say, holding up my hands, the bottle hanging from my fingers.

“That would be a nice change from the daily phone calls about it.”

“You love my daily calls,” I say, offended.

“Sure.” His grin slips. “I have news.

“I assumed. Hit me,” I encourage.

“Grant is evil but not exactly smart. He doesn’t hide his actions much for a man who wants to be stealthy.”

“Or he’s cocky as fuck and doesn’t think he will get caught.”

“Or that.” He keeps his eyes on the sunset. “He’s done the same things for years. He brings humans into his world, grooms them, gives them promises of becoming a shifter, and then abuses them in numerous ways. He isn’t afraid to tell them all about shifters.”

The unspoken rule of being a shifter is to shut up about being a shifter. You are allowed to reveal your true self to your mate if they are human. There are some humans who know about us but they are trusted beyond doubt.

“He promises to change them?” Changing a human who isn’t your mate is dangerous and rarely works. The only time you change a human is if they are your mate.

Vampires are different. They can change anyone.

“He does. He makes it glamorous and of course, he doesn’t go into the dangers. He has changed several, or tried to. They died a horrible death.” He scowls. “He is the worst kind of shifter.”

“How did you find this out?”

“It’s not hard to connect the dots. He left a string of dead bodies everywhere he has been. The bodies were disfigured. The human police are ignoring the animal parts on humans. They don’t want to accept the truth of it. I talked with a shifter today who confirmed many things. He was going to join their pack. He was a drifting cheetah. He came across them. He spent a few days with them. What he saw changed his mind. He left during the night and never went back.”

“Shit. It’s worse than Saylor ever imagined.”

“She may know more than you know but she has spent her life trying to get away.” He looks at me intensely. “This guy is the most dangerous kind. He doesn’t care. He has no moral code. Even some criminals have a rule against hurting children and women. That is who he preys on.”

“I don’t want Saylor anywhere near him,” I growl. “Whatever I have to do to make that happen.”

“He reminds me of Serenity’s dad.”

Serenity is Ryker’s mate. He turned her, and in turn, brought out her witch side. She became pregnant shortly after. Anytime now, she is due. The first vampire born to two vampires in many years. Her dad was kidnapping humans and shifters, trying to turn the humans outside the mating bond.

“Have you spoken with Ryker about it?”

“Yes. I have talked to everyone,” he admits.

“Laken,” I warn. I wanted to keep this quiet. I will take care of my mate.

“Elijah, they want to help. You know you may not be with a pack, but we are all part of one. It’s unofficial, but there. River is beside himself with glee. He’s ready to shed some blood.”

I snort. River is a wolf shifter. We were very uneasy with each other at first, but the shit has grown on me. “I bet.” He can be a tad crazy. I have to admit, he’s one of the reasons I thought I would fit in here.

“Tell me why you have been acting different,” Laken asks.

“I’m not, really.” He gives me a look. “I have a mate. She changes things.”

“That’s not the reason. You haven’t been the same.”

“I don’t want to scare her with my crazy,” I confess.

“Are you insane?”

“That’s the worry. She may not like my type of insanity.”

He throws his head back and laughs. “Holy shit.”

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“Fuck you, it’s not that funny.”

“A woman has tamed Elijah Sharpe.”

Shit, it’s true.

Chapter Thirteen

Elijah

“You’re delusional.” He continues to laugh.

I ignore the fact that months ago he had nothing to laugh about and continue to scowl at him. “This is not funny.”

“You have only known her for two days,” he points out.

“I haven’t hugged you since I’ve met her.”

“That’s what you are basing this off of?”

“Well, it’s an important fact.”

“This is only the third time I’ve seen you since you met her. One of those times, you had her over your shoulder.”

“I will hug you right now,” I threaten, starting to stand.

“Let’s not get crazy.” He grins, holding his palm low.

“Fuck off.” I sit but lean forward, my elbows on my knees. “What if she doesn’t like what she learns?” I ask softly, running my hands through my hair.

“I know exactly how you feel.” I turn my head to him surprised. “When I met Penny, I felt the same way. I’m not exactly the most sociable guy.”

My lips twist. “No shit?”

“I had doubts and fears. The thing you have to remember is the universe picked this one person to match you. To walk with you for the rest of your days. You were gifted with a mate who will love you forever.”

“Maybe the universe got it wrong?”

“That is not possible. She will accept you,” he says firmly.

“I haven’t told her about my life. She doesn’t know all the shit I’ve done. All the mistakes I have made.” I take a deep breath. “The people I have hurt.” Even though they did things to deserved it.

“It’s about time you’ve told someone.”

“I don’t know.”

“You have to. It will make it so much sweeter when she accepts the bond and completes it,” he urges.

“I suppose you’re right,” I concede.

“I know I am,” he smirks.

“Elijah,” Saylor says softly from behind me.

I was so involved in my head I didn’t hear her get up. I look over my shoulder and then back at a grinning Laken.

“Asshole.” He heard her, but the dick couldn’t give me a warning.

“I’ll leaving you two to talk,” Laken says, winking. “Have a good night, Saylor.”

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“You too,” she replies.

We watch him walk away as Saylor sits in his vacated chair.

The silence expands until I can't take it anymore. “How much did you hear?”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. With our ears, it's difficult not to listen,” she reminds me. “I didn't hear much. Just the past couple minutes.”

“I didn't want to talk about myself. Not for a while yet, anyway.” I sigh, “I want you to stay.”

“Why would you think I wouldn't?”

“I'm not proud of my life.” I cringe. “That sounds bad. There are parts I love. Parts I am proud of.”

“Elijah, you know how I lived. Do you think I am proud of that?” She reaches over and puts her hand over my joined ones. “If you aren't ready to tell me, that's okay. I don't want to pressure you. I know what it feels like to want to keep some things inside.”

“I haven't told anyone here about my past. Laken has guessed a few things but he doesn't know any of the details.” I swear I'm going to give him endless shit about setting me up. “I'm ashamed.”

“This is very sudden,” she starts. I look at her hesitant face. “All this is new to us. We

are thrust together and the bond is pushing us to be together. Honestly, it feels right. I want to see where this goes. I want to give us a shot. I think it's only fair, for both of us, to be honest with each other about everything."

"I agree," I concede. "I can't give you up." I squeeze her hand between mine, lacing them. She moves her chair closer so she doesn't have to strain. "I grew up in a cheetah pack. We went to a normal high school, had normal friends, went to parties, and worried about grades.

"I had to worry about more than that though, because my father was grooming me to be the Alpha of the pack someday. I had two younger brothers he ignored because they weren't next in line. Even though they were both bigger than me, he felt I had the qualities an Alpha needed. He was all about tradition, even if those traditions were outdated and sometime cruel. He pushed me to be better than anyone else. We would have weekly pack fights. This is normal for all packs. Everyone is always tested. You can move up in the hierarchy of the pack if you win against the guy above you and you knock him down. Women can also be in the fights. There are also very strong females, although my Father didn't exactly agree with that, he let them fight too. He had to walk the line—if he refused, he would take the chance of all the females leaving or causing unrest. He had his traditional rules but had to bend some of them to keep the control. He could pair them up with the men or women.

"Would they win against the men? Would they move up?" Saylor asks.

"Sometimes they would win, if the fight was fairly matched. They would move up, but they would have to always defend their position. The men were given some slack. It was never fair for them. If they used intimidation tactics outside the fight, no one would want to challenge them when the time came."

"Your dad didn't give you any slack," she guesses.

“No. He took pleasure in pushing me to the breaking point. I have to admit, for a while I thrived on the challenge. I wanted to be the best. He drilled his lessons relentlessly.”

Her hand twitches in mine. “The older I got, the more things I noticed. The more I questioned the rules and traditions. The more I just wanted to be a teenager. When I was a senior in school, we gathered a bigger group of friends. Most of them were shifters of different kinds. But there were a few humans. It’s not like there were more shifters than humans anyway in the school. We agreed to never tell our human friends the truth. That is the rule and we stuck to it.

“My father hated that we had human friends. He believed we should stick to our kind. He conceded on the different shifters, but would lecture me constantly about the humans. We even went so far as to let a vampire into our group.”

“Vampire,” Saylor whispers. “You were friends.”

“I allowed him into the group more out of spite for my father, but he turned into a friend. He was genuinely a good guy, or I thought he was at the time. He stuck to the rules. He did everything with us. He didn’t have a family. He was bitten by a vampire who disappeared after changing him. He looked our age but he didn’t know exactly what age he really was.”

“Why was he in high school?”

“He got bored. He didn’t remember if or when he finished school. He said he lost all his memories and he didn’t feel that old. Who knows? We didn’t question him.

“There was a girl. She was human. She was picked on by the other humans. She was small and didn’t fit in anywhere, so we let her hang out with us. The humans left us alone. They were scared of us. They could feel we are different and a threat. She was

very timid at first but she adjusted and became part of the crew.

“I thought of her as a little sister. My brothers teased me endlessly. They knew she had a crush on me. I didn’t feel anything but friendship. I tried to make that clear. One day, she was getting pushed around by a popular boy, and I got in his face. Threatened him. I thought it was the right thing to do. Everything changed after that.

“She would follow me everywhere, without the presence of the others. I would find her conveniently walking past my house at odd hours. I would find love letters in my locker. She would show up at my work and want to hang out. If I went to the movies with a friend, she would be there. I tried to be gentle with her but firm in where I stood, but it didn’t work.”

“She wanted to date you?” Saylor asks. “But it was more than that.”

“Yes, she wanted to be the center of my everything. I couldn’t tell her she wasn’t my mate. I didn’t reveal my shifter. I didn’t break the rules. It went to another level when I started finding things in my room. Notes. Underwear. Things started going missing. I confided in my brothers and they thought it was creepy. They thought I should distance myself from her. I tried but some of the others didn’t know why. The vampire was the bigger problem.

“He liked her. Genuinely liked her. He wanted to be with her, even though she wasn’t his mate either. He hated that she wanted me. It caused a strain. He became hostile towards me. He thought I was leading her on. He wanted me out of the way. He thought if I was, she would fall for him. She barely spoke to him. He would find ways to fuck with me. He hated everything about me then. He questioned everything. Rumors about me started circulating. People would whisper behind my back. I finally heard some of them from my friends. Stupid shit.”

“Tell me,” she urges.

I lean back, bringing our joined hands to rest on my stomach, and played with her fingers. “That I slept with anything with a pulse. I used women and threw them away. He mind-fucked one girl I had dated. She said I was too rough with her, that I hurt her. People believed it because he made her believe it. She would run out of the room when I entered. Before that, we were on good terms. We both agreed to end the relationship. He made her and many other women terrified of me.” I swallow the memories, bitter on my tongue.

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“This is why you don’t trust vampires.” Saylor’s hands lay passive, letting me caress them.

“Yes. Because it got worse.” I grab my hat from the floor beside me and pull it low over my eyes. “The girl didn’t care about the rumors. She twisted it in her head. She thought I started them myself for some weird reason. That I did it to stay undesirable to others, except her.” I pop a toothpick in my mouth, always going back to hold Saylor’s hand. “It was so fucked up. Christmasvacation was days away and I thought I would be able to get away from her. That everything would get better.”

“It didn’t,” she says softly.

“So much worse. My brothers were going skiing with friends. My dad wouldn’t let me go. He didn’t think an Alpha in training needed to go away. I stayed. My brothers left. I kept going to work. I stayed away from all my friends. I would see the girl outside my work, just watching. The notes didn’t stop. They were becoming more disturbing. Threatening. She thought I belonged to her.

“I would see the vampire, too. Out of the corner of my eye and then he would be gone. That is why I am so attuned to them. I trained myself to know what they feel like even though they don’t have a scent. I couldn’t get away from either of them. I lost sight of what his goal was.” I chew on the wood nervously. I don’t want to finish it. “One night, I decided to go out to party. I’d been ignoring everyone and I was tired of it. I wanted to relax. I wanted to be normal for one night.

“It was in the woods. Unfortunately, the vampire was there. I didn’t speak to him. I had a couple beers, tried to ignore him. I was talking to another shifter when the

humans started screaming. They were running. Panicking. We went to see what was going on.

I pull my hat lower and concentrate on our hands, tracing the lines in her palm. “The girl was hanging from a tree. A rope around her neck. Dead.”

“Oh, Elijah,” Saylor whispers.

“There was a note pinned to her chest. ‘He made me do it.’ I remember the exact words. My name wasn’t on it, but it didn’t matter. I saw the judgment in their eyes. The fear. I don’t know how I got home but when I did, I was met by my father. He heard, or someone told him. He knew everything. He believed it, and was furious. He couldn’t believe I would put the pack in danger. He told me to get out and never come back. He allowed me to pack my clothes and nothing else.”

“How could he?” Saylor asks, angrily.

“It was so fucking easy for him,” I growl.

“What about your mom?”

“She was so far under his control, she did nothing. She watched him do it.” She gasps. “I left and have never gone back to my dad’s house.”

“Your brothers?”

“I haven’t spoken to them since before they went on vacation. I threw the phone my dad bought for me away days after. I don’t know if they hate me too. I don’t know if they agreed with him. I went back to at least see them once, but they didn’t see me, and we never talked.” I clear my throat. “The kicker is I know the vampire had to have something to do with the hanging. She wouldn’t have been able to get the rope

over the tree. There was no chair or stool under her. He had to have talked her into it.”

“Why? How could he hurt someone he claimed to love?”

“People do it all the time. But I think his thirst for vengeance was greater than his love for her. He knew my father and the kids at school would believe I did it. He trained them to believe the worst of me.”

“This is crazy,” she says.

I pull my hand away. “I told you. You would see me differently.”

“Not you,” she yells. My head whips her way and I push back my hat. “This asshole vampire could get away with fucking with your life. That your mother didn’t say, fuck you, my son is staying. That your fuck of a father didn’t say, I’m sorry you had to go through that.” She jumps from her chair, pacing. “Plus, your brothers didn’t spend their days searching for you. What the fuck? They should have fucking believed you. You shouldn’t feel fucking ashamed of your experience.” She ends with her arms out wide.

“That’s a lot of fucks,” I say, smiling at my irate mate.

“Elijah, this is serious,” she admonishes. “What’s the vampire’s name? You never said.”

“I want to forget it.” She stares at me. “Silas.”

“The girl?”

“Tiffany,” I say quietly.

“Well, this just makes me want to be with you more. What fuckers. They are not going to ruin this for us,” she says, firmly.

I watch her anger turn into resignation. I reach out quickly, yanking her into my lap, doing something I’ve been aching to do every minute I am with her.

Give her a hug.

Well, one of the things I always want to do to her.

Chapter Fourteen

Saylor

Fuck, sometimes you just need a hug.

Elijah gives the best ones. He wraps you up. My legs lay off the side of his lap. One of his arms is low around my hips, the other runs up my back until his hand is threaded in my hair, cupping the back of my head, tucking my face into his neck.

His face is buried in my hair. I'm bound completely.

I hate what he went through. I'm pissed at all of them. I wish I could go back and be there for him.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," I say into his neck.

"I could have handled it differently." He rubs his lips over my head. "Looking back, I think I liked her attention at first. If I would have done something sooner. I could have encouraged Silas to tell her how he felt or got them together more."

"We can't think about the 'what if's'."

"So easy to say, huh," he mutters.

"It is," I agree.

I sigh and enjoy his warmth. The falling sun leaves us in the shadows. There is a chill in the air but I don't feel it. My body registers the lowering temperature but adjusts to

it quickly. Our animals can survive in all kinds of weather. We prefer the warmer weather. There is no feeling quite like sunning in the summer in our cheetah form.

I miss shifting. It's been way too long since I did. My cheetah chuffs in my head in agreement.

"Will you run with me soon?" I ask.

"I would love to." He pulls back. "But, right now, I should feed you. Unfortunately, I haven't gone to the store yet." He pinches my chin, tipping my head back. "Will you go eat with me?"

"Elijah, I have nothing to wear. I would love to continue to wear your clothes because they are comfortable, but I need some that fit." Plus, they smell like him.

He closes his eyes and opens them and they are filled with reluctance. "I know someone who is your size. Well, before she got pregnant. Now all she wears are her mate's clothes. I would call the dragons but they are busy tonight." He lifts me from his lap and stands. "I have to call Ryker. You can borrow some of Serenity's clothes until we can buy you more."

"You don't have to do that. I understand why you are uneasy around them."

"I'm getting used to them. Besides, since meeting Ryker and Bash, I've seen a different side to vampires. I have to remember not to judge their species by one who was cruel."

"If you are sure?"

"I am. I'll call them." He pulls out his phone.

“Alright. I’m going to jump in the shower.” As much as I like smelling like him, a girl has her limits. Going out to eat around strangers with his come mixed with mine, is mine.

“I’ll leave them on the bed.”

“That fast?”

“Ryker is super fast. He will probably be overjoyed to be able to go for a run,” he snorts.

When I walk back into the bedroom in a towel, the clothes are laying on the bed. I like Serenity’s style. A pair of dark-wash, skinny jeans and a black tank top are folded neatly on top of the covers. At the end of the bed on the floor are a pair of combat boots—black, of course.

I dig out my emergency pair of underwear. You know the pair that is the last resort. They are either too big, very ugly, or the pair that are super uncomfortable. Unfortunately, my pair is the third option. They go up my ass. No one likes a permanent wedgie. I thought I would try a different cut and have regretted it.

I snort as I tug the jeans up my legs. I have to lay on the bed to button them—guys have no idea about women's sizes. I stand stiffy and shake out my hand, my thumb throbbing. The damn button was tricky. Thank god for stretchy material. I have a little extra love padding on my ass and stomach. Serenity is at least a cup size smaller than me too, so the tank fits tight. I throw on one of Elijah’s shirts over it and tie it at the waist.

I brush my hair, slap on some powder and lip gloss. There have been many times I wish I had the money to buy more makeup to experiment, but it definitely wasn’t a priority. I love my skin, though. I’m lucky. I don’t get many blemishes. I believe

being a fast-healing shifter helps.

“I’m ready,” I announce, leaving the room.

“You look yummy,” Elijah says. He stops close. “I have good news and bad news.”

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“Give me the bad.” My stomach rolls. I’ve had enough bad news.

“When I called Ryker, Serenity was listening. She is eager to meet you. She demanded Ryker bring her to see you. I then explained we were going out to eat.” He rolls his eyes. “She then agreed to meet us at the restaurant and demanded Ryker bring her there. Of course, the fearsome vampire caved like a baby in the eyes of his very pregnant mate.” I’m smiling at his pouting face. “What’s the good news?”

“The clothes fit. You look edible, and I get to eat a meal out in public with you.”

“That’s so sweet,” I say, blushing. I say nothing of the fact that I hope the button doesn’t pop when I eat.

“Another warning,” he starts. “I will only be sweet to you. I will break a motherfucker’s hand if he touches you. I might even gouge out an asshole’s eyes if he looks at you too long.” He sighs. “We haven’t discussed my anger issues.”

Maybe that should scare me, but all I feel is humor and pleasure. “I’ll take my chances.”

I should be more worried about meeting the vampires than keeping my eyes off Elijah. He’s wearing a soft green flannel that brings out his eyes, crisp dark blue jeans, and cowboy boots. A black cowboy hat is pulled low over his eyes.

I want to jump him.

I have never had a cowboy fantasy, but I do now.

My shaky hands were in my lap most of the ride until he reached over, grabbed one, and smoothed it over his thigh.

The heat is almost suffocating.

I want to turn around and go home. My body is screaming for the release only he can give me. He makes me want to show my neck and submit.

The shit knows it, too. How can he miss the smell filling up the truck? His ever-present smirk tells me he hasn't.

We pull up to a cute building with tables spread around the front.

"I would never let anything happen to you," Elijah assures me.

"I know," I say softly, squeezing his thigh.

"If it's too much, we can go."

"I want to meet them." I'm ninety-percent sure I do. Okay, maybe seventy-percent. I don't have much experience around vampires. Elijah's story is fresh in my mind.

"They're here," he says gloomily.

He lets my hand go and gets out. My door is opened and my hand is taken back. I press close and watch as the stunning couple who is clearly waiting for us appears.

Ryker is dark from head to toe. Black dress shirt covers his giant frame, and black slacks encase his muscular thighs. He has on shiny black shoes and I spy a shiny knife tucked into his waist band. He has long black hair, and startling eyes. He is stunning in his beauty.

His mate is no less stunning. She has long blonde hair, an angelic face, and a blinding smile. She has curves that would attract anyone and her men's clothes do nothing to take away from it. She is dressed in a long black dress shirt that must be Ryker's and black leggings. Her belly is so big that I expect she could give birth any minute. Her skin almost glows in the street lights. She looks gloriously happy.

Ryker has his arm wrapped around her with his fingers gliding softly over her stomach. Love shines from both of them.

"Saylor," Serenity says. "I'm so happy to meet you. I'm sorry we invaded time with your mate."

"It's fine. It's nice to meet you." I wave off her concern. Her eyes are what startles me.

"I know, they are white. I have contacts, which I usually wear when I go anywhere but I don't feel like putting them in anymore," she huffs.

"They're gorgeous," I assure her. They are both so beautiful it's hard to look at them.

"Saylor," Ryker says, tipping his head.

"You're paying for the meal," Elijah says, glaring.

"Elijah," I whisper shout.

“I’m not kidding. He’s got plenty of money.”

“I accept those terms,” Ryker agrees with humor.

“Guys, can we sit?” Serenity asks. “My feet are killing me.”

Ryker looks alarmed and ushers us all to a table. It’s such a normal thing for a panicked man to do, I lose some of my nervousness.

“When are you due?” I ask.

“Maybe a month.” She lovingly rubs her bump. It unexpectedly makes me miss my mom. “It could be longer. We are just guessing at the time frame for a vampire baby.”

“We should be at home,” Ryker grumbles. “But it seems as if I can’t deny you anything.”

“You said you wanted to come.” Serenity frowns.

“I did not. I said I would come if you insisted,” he reminds her.

“That is not the same thing at all,” Elijah says, taking great pride in pointing it out, placing his hat at the end of the table.

“Don’t make me use my knife on you,” Ryker sneers.

“Bring it, vampire,” Elijah hisses, but his eyes are twinkling.

“Can we order? The baby is hungry,” Serenity cuts into theirmy penis is bigger than your penisbanter.

Ryker waves over a waitress.

My mouth is watering from all the choices. How long has it been since I’ve been to a nice place to eat? It seems like forever. Out of habit, my eyes go to the prices first. The diner seems dirt cheap compared to this place.

“Order whatever the fuck you want,” Elijah says quietly in my ear. “I may not be rich like Ryker kind of rich, but I can buy you a meal here, if that’s what you are worried about.”

Even though I know the vampires can hear, I’m distracted by his breath in my ear and I shift restlessly. He sits back with a knowing look in his eye.

I glare and settle on a small steak with a baked potato. They bring a basket of fresh bread and I have to wipe the drool off my chin.

Elijah picks up a piece and spreads butter on it. I hold myself back from snatching a piece. I stare stupidly when he puts his piece on my plate. He goes back for another. I look from the bread to his face. Why does the simple act shake me so much?

“Eat,” he commands.

When was the last time someone thought of me like he does? Why wouldn’t I want to be his mate? I shove my feelings away to examine at a later date and take a big bite. I have to stifle my moan.

“So, what brought you here, Saylor?” Serenity asks, interrupting my moment with my bread.

I swallow too big of a bite, gulping harshly. I stare at her a moment too long.

“Ryker didn’t tell you?” Elijah asks.

“He summarized,” she admits. “I was trying to be polite.”

“Sometimes, being polite is a waste of time,” Elijah says.

“Elijah,” I say, my eyes big.

“What? It’s true.”

“I actually agree,” Ryker says.

They grin at each other.

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“Great, you’re bonding.” Serenity rolls her eyes.

I lose track of the conversation because the food is placed in front of us and all I can think about is the explosion on my tongue. An average person can lose sight of the treat food can be, unless you never have it.

Jesus, I could come just from the rich flavor of the steak. I slather butter all over the potato.

I clean my plate in record time and sit back with a pleased sigh, thankful for the delicious food and for the fact that my jeans didn’t bust open. That’s when I notice the silence. I look around the table to the shocked faces and look back down my cheeks on fire.

“I want to fuck you so bad,” Elijah says, making my head fly up. “That was sexy as fuck. Kitty Cat, the noises,” he groans, his hand on his chest.

The waitress buzzes by to pick up my empty plate. Elijah scoots back, picks up his hat, and puts it on his knee.

“You think I say inappropriate things,” Ryker snorts, thumbing his hand at Elijah.

“You do this all the time.” Serenity shakes her head. “He does all the time,” she tells me. “You get used to it. You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

“There's nothing wrong with saying what you mean,” Ryker says. He stares behind us. “Right now, I have to ask, why is there a fucking rabbit speed-walking towards

us?”

My chair almost tips over when I catch the scent of her as I turn. I take a few shaky steps forward. My mind is racing. This is the first time anyone from the places I’ve lived has ever seen me again. No one has ever sought me out.

“Sally,” I whisper. Her shoulder-length blonde hair is blowing behind her, as she practically runs toward us. Sally has never told me her age. As shifters, we age slowly and live a very long time. If I had to guess, she must be in her nineties, but she looks forty at most.

“Who is Sally?” Elijah asks as we watch her advance on us.

“She is the woman who helped me escape the last time. She was the cook at the diner where I worked,” I explained. She is the only one I trusted with my real name. She barely stops before she reaches me, giving me a hug.

“Girl, you are hard to track down, even though I knew the plan.” She pushes me back, her hands gripping my shoulders. “Fuck, you look good.”

“Sally, what the hell are you doing here? How did you find me?”

“I followed the plan. But then the plan must have gone off the rails. I know your scent,” she shrugs. “What I didn’t expect is for you to be cozied up to a table, perfectly fine with vampires and another cheetah.” She looks at Elijah. “Hey, cowboy.” She winks at him. “Where did you find this one? He’s super cute.”

I would never call Elijah super cute. “Sally, this is Elijah. He’s my mate.”

“Holy shit, that’s handy. Does he know about your trouble?”

“Yes.”

“I like him. He didn’t run away,” she cackles. “Don’t wrinkle that handsome nose, vampire. I don’t want to hear any jokes about rabbits. I haven’t taken a shower in days,” she snaps at Ryker.

“I didn’t say anything. But now that you brought it up, I was going to refer to the smell of smoke.”

“Oh, well, that's because I was in a fire,” she states.

“What?” I gasp.

“The diner burned down. That asshole lit the fuse. Grant showed up. He didn’t believe I didn’t know where you were, so he decided to burn it down with me in it.” She ignores my cursing and looks back at Elijah. “I don’t enjoy being roasted. I don’t enjoy my life’s work being turned into nothing but ashes.”

“I bet not,” Elijah says dryly.

“Nobody likes roasted rabbit,” Ryker mutters into his glass. Serenity smacks his arm.

“I escaped through the crawl space, tracked you, and here I am. I need a bath, some food and a good night's sleep.” She turns and drags over a chair. She helps herself to a piece of bread. “I figured you needed my help, and I needed to warn you. I assumed I would be too late since he was ahead of me and it wasn’t the plan to stop here. I didn’t know you already found some powerful allies.”

“So, you led him straight to Saylor?” Elijah asks harshly.

“Of course not. Did you miss the part I said he was ahead of me? He led me. I drove

part of the way, my legs are little, I couldn't run the whole time," she scoffs. "The vehicle dimmed my scent."

I shake myself and slowly sit. "You saw Grant," I whisper. "He hurt you?"

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“Oh, girl. I’m fine.” She taps my hand. “I’m tougher than I look. I’m sure he thinks I’m dead. I waited until he left to come out of hiding. I zigzagged my way here, not wanting him to catch my scent.” She waves her hand at Elijah as if proving her point again. “He’s headed this way, though, or is already here somewhere. I ran across his fading scent many times on the way here. He has others with him.”

“How many?” Elijah demands, sitting forward.

“Four, I think.” She shoves the rest of the bread in her mouth. “So when are you two going to mate?” She motions between us with the fork she stole from Serenity’s plate. Ryker hisses when she digs into his mate’s food. Serenity watches her in fascination.

“I don’t think that is the important topic of conversation right now,” I snap. “What did Grant say?”

“Oh, the same as every man...she’s mine. I will find her. She belongs to me. Does that hurt?” she mumbles through bites of food.

It’s Elijah’s turn to hiss.

“He hurt you,” I say weakly. My mind is trying to catch up. The anger is brewing inside. Sally is the only person I have met who has been truly good to me. She is the only one I have missed.

“Listen, girl,” she says, putting her elbows on the table, putting the food down. “Over the years I’ve lived, I have met many, many assholes. Ones who think they are better, stronger, more valued than a woman rabbit shifter. They assume I am weak. They

assume they can beat me. I have spent my life proving them wrong. I am tougher than I look.” She nods. “Grant is just another evil asshole who thought he could take me down. He failed. He will fail in his mission to get you. If I’m reading your mate correctly, he will do what he has to do to kill the asshole before he touches one hair on your head.” She resumes her demolition of Serenity’s food. “So, you fucked her yet? I can smell the heat. You need to do something about that, cheetah. I can’t have my girl in pain.”

Ryker howls with laughter.

“Sal,” I whisper furiously.

“What? We were all thinking it,” she says to Serenity.

“You’ve never found a mate?” Serenity asks her.

“Pregnant, huh?” Sally easily sidesteps her question. She closes her eyes for a moment and tips her head. “You have witch blood in you.”

“I do,” Serenity confirms.

“Hmm...the baby does, too.” Serenity rocks back and Ryker pulls her close. “She’s going to come in two months and be very powerful.”

“What?” Serenity whispers.

“Just saying,” Sally gulps down my water.

There have been rumors about rabbit shifters. Besides that they are a little crazy, they whisper about having powers of premonition.

“How the fuck do you know that?” Ryker growls.

“I just do. I don’t question it,” she responds, her shoulders moving.

“I am happy the baby is going to be fine, but can we get back to Grant being on the way and planning on taking my mate?” Elijah spits.

“Everything will be fine,” she says, waving away his concern.

“Is that another prediction?” he asks.

“Well, no,” she says blinking. “I can’t tell the future.”

“Jesus,” Elijah sighs, rubbing his hand over his mouth.

“I think you need to fuck him. He’s tense,” Sally whispers, leaning toward me.

I put my hand on Elijah’s leg when he snarls. “Sally, I understand his frustration. Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“Let’s see,” she says, leaning back. “He wants you. He considers you his. He burned down my diner. Tried to kill me. He’s on his way. Has four others with him.” She counts with her fingers. “I think I covered everything.” She frowns. It’s my turn to growl. “Oh wait, he’s hiding something.”

We all leaned forward expecting a big reveal. “What?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I just know he is.”

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“Holy fuck,” Elijah says, slapping the table with his palm.

“This has been...” Ryker starts, but doesn’t finish, shaking his head. He moves his chair back and reaches for Serenity. “We are leaving. Saylor, good luck with all...that.” He waves at the table in general. “If you need anything, call.”

“Nice to meet you, Saylor...Sally,” Serenity says as her mate drags her away.

“Damn,” Elijah says. I turn worriedly to him. “Fucker stuck me with the check.”

“You hard up, cheetah,” Sally laughs.

“No, I just enjoy sticking it to him when I can,” he pouts.

“Men never change,” Sally says.

“Where are you staying?” I ask.

“Oh, don’t worry about me.” She scoots her chair back. “I’m really glad you are good. I’ll find you when you need me.”

“How?” I ask, flustered by her non-answers.

“Don’t worry about it.” She leans over me. “Trust yourself, and your mate.” She kisses me on the head. “Love you, girl. See you soon.”

I stare at her as she walks away. “What the fuck?”

“For a first date, it was fun.” I just stare at him blankly while he pays for the check. He silently holds his hand out to me.

The closer we get to his truck, the more I feel as if there is a presence lingering in the air. I can’t figure out what is causing the strange sensation. I look around us but don’t see anything unusual.

I brush it off, blaming it on the weird night and the threat of Grant, until I see the note on Elijah’s windshield.

“Elijah,” I whisper, nodding towards it when he looks at me.

His head swivels before touching it. I press close and read it as he does.

Did you miss me?

The famous temper Elijah keeps warning me about, that I have not witnessed yet, makes its presence known.

Elijah officially loses it.

Chapter Fifteen

Elijah

The paper falls from my hand. A buzzing sound thrums in my ears. Memories of the notes I received bombard me. I didn’t notice anyone out of place except the rabbit. Nothing bad. No one was there to hurt us. My claws burst from my nails. My hands partially shift. The anger bubbles up from deep inside.

I have to protect Saylor.

I have to kill Grant for scaring her.

Her body shakes next to mine and I step back so I don't hurt her accidentally. I slap my palms on the hood of the truck, paint curls in the path of my claws as I bow my head, breathing deeply. I don't think about anyone seeing me. All I can feel is rage at the asshole that wants my mate.

"Elijah," Saylor says cautiously.

"Stay back," I growl through my cheetah's teeth that emerged. "We want to kill him. All I can think of is killing him. Kill, kill, kill," I repeat.

"We will," she assures me. I turn my head to the side to see her approaching me with her hands out. "He won't hurt me."

"He's a dead man," I snarl gutturally.

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“I know.” She lightly places her palm on my back, but it’s still slightly shaking.
“Let’s go home.”

“No, I don’t want him to follow us.” I panic, I usually know what steps to take, but my cheetah is more in control now. I’m frozen. My human side fighting to stay still, if I don’t, my cheetah will fully emerge and then we’re all fucked. With what little reasoning I have left, I say, “Take my phone out of my pocket. Call Bash. He’s the closest. He’s strong enough to control me and the humans who may see me turn.” She does as I say. Bash is the logical choice instead of Ryker. He wouldn’t want to put Serenity in harm’s way, even if they are still in the area. My nails gouge into the hood further as my control rides the edge. All I can see is Saylor being taken, hurt, or worse.

What if I’m not strong enough to stop it? What if I let my guard down for one minute?

I distantly hear Saylor speaking to Bash but I can’t concentrate on the words. The yellow bleeds into my eyes and my cheetah’s vision takes over. I have never felt such blinding fury, even when the vampire twisted my life to shit. I finally found something good.

Something pure.

Something just for me.

“I will not allow anyone to take it away from us,” I thunder. Vibrations flood my body, the magic of the change skating under my skin.

I grimace, struggling to hold him back.

“Elijah,” Bash says harshly.

My nostrils flare and my head twitches his way.

Vampire. Enemy.

“No.” I hate them.

“Yes, you are scaring your mate,” he says firmly, coming closer.

“No,” I deny. I don’t ever want to make her fear me.

“Find the control.” He almost brushes my side.

“No one will take her from me.”

“I know. I know the feeling well. You can’t let the beast take over. You are in control.” He puts his hand beside mine. “Who will protect her if you lose yourself?”

“Never,” I snapped. “She is mine. Mine to protect.”

“She is. But you are putting her in danger being out in the open. Do. Not. Let. Him. Control. You,” he says.

“Fuck,” I say, gritting my teeth, cutting my lip open.

“Saylor,” Bash calls. “Come here.”

“No, don’t want to hurt her,” I cry in agony.

“You won’t.” He moves his hand to my shoulder. “You have to trust me.”

“You don’t know what you're asking.”

“I don’t. I don't know why you find it hard to trust my kind, but you have to. I have never hurt you.” He motions over his shoulder. “Look, my mate is here. I would never do anything to put Saylor in danger. Marie would not allow it, even if for some reason I did.”

I roll my bright eyes Marie’s way. “I can try,” I concede.

“Saylor,” Bash repeats and she continues to close in. “He will never hurt you, even when he is like this. He would rather kill himself than cause you any pain.” He moves back a step. “I want you to duck under his arm and get as close as you can.”

“Vampire,” I snapped.

“Trust,” he reminds me.

“Go slow. Wrap your arms around him.” She starts to do as he says but he stops her before she can dip under. “I need you to agree with something first,” he starts.

“What?” she asks.

“He needs to hear something from you now. If he feels the urge to mark you, which may happen, you need to give your consent. He will forever be tied to you, even if you don’t mark him yet. You don’t have to complete the bond, but he would be bonded to you.”

I want to deny his words but can’t. My cheetah has been pushing me to mark her but I have held him off. I want it badly but haven’t wanted to rush her.

“I give my consent,” she agrees.

“You have to be sure,” he urges.

“I am,” she growls, and the words come from her animal.

She isn't hesitant then.

Her warm body is inches away. My cheetah centers his attention on her.

“Elijah,” she whispers. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. It’s okay.”

Her hands lightly touch my chest and then slide up to cup the sides of my neck.

“You're sure?” I ask, holding back the urge to grab her.

“I am. I’m right in front of you. Take what belongs to you.”

She gasps as I retract my claws a second before I seize her hips, and lift her. Her legs wrap around my waist tightly. I don't leave any space between us. I wrap her hair around my fist, thrusting her head onto my shoulder, and bury my face in her neck.

"Get in the truck," Bash instructs. "Marie, follow me to their place. First, I need to change the memories of a few people."

I pay no more attention to them as I open the passenger door and climb in. The moment we are seated, my teeth scrape her delicate neck.

All I can concentrate on is her scent, her warm pussy against my cock, her soft hair gripped in my hand, and her blood calling to me just under my mouth.

"Do it," she urges. "I know you need it, Elijah."

"Saylor," I rumble.

"I want you to. Please, Elijah," she begs.

"Don't hate me," I say before I sink my teeth in deep and pull. Her moan rings out. I have been told the bite of your mate is orgasmic. I want to give her nothing but pleasure.

"Yes," she whimpers.

The driver's side door opens and I hiss at Bash, pulling my teeth out before I am ready.

"Easy, Elijah," Bash says. "I'll get you both home safe."

I loosen my fist and run my fingers gently through her hair. I spend the drive licking

the marks on her shoulder. My cheetah is satisfied with the progress in completing the bond—for now. Saylor runs her knuckles over the side of my neck.

Her blood is running through me now. We are not like vampires—we don't need our mates blood to survive. The only time we take blood is when we bite deeply, usually the first few times. Our teeth leave the mark and our saliva keeps the marks visible to all shifters. Humans don't have the ability to see them. We can choose where to mark our mate, but most want it to be visible. The next time I bite her it will be on other tempting spots on her body.

The red is finally leaving my vision. My cheetah is not as close to the surface. The rage is still hovering, though. I think it will continue to be until the threat is eliminated. My adrenaline is high.

I'm going to have to thank Bash.

I hate that.

I'll do it later when my blood is not running hot.

Bash stops my truck in the driveway. We don't say a word as we leave it and I don't look back when I unlock the door. I don't stop until I am in the bedroom.

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“Hold on,” I tell her as I crawl onto the bed, her arms and legs locked around me. Once her head is over the pillow, I say, “Let go.”

She releases me and she gently drops, her knees cocked at my hips. I trace my bit with my fingertip. I can feel Saylor inside of me. Once she bites me and we complete the bond, it will become stronger. The more I’m around her, it will grow bigger, and bigger, and more powerful.

“Elijah, are you alright?” she asks.

I realize I’ve been tracing her neck and staring for far too long. “I am.” I look into her eyes and then down to her lips. “I want to fuck you. I want to bury myself so deep inside you, you will never want me to leave.” I lower my hips and show her how hard I am for her, just in case for some reason she missed the evidence on the ride. “I probably should apologize for what happened, but I can’t find any remorse for it, because of the end result. I will never regret marking you.”

“I don’t need you to be sorry.”

“I am sorry I scared you.” I frown, remembering how shaky she was.

“I wasn’t scared of you. I was scared for you.”

“What?”

“I hated that the note brought back memories. I didn’t want you to lose yourself,” she says, her fingertip tapping the side of my head. “I know how bad the demons of the

past can fuck with your head.”

“It seems a lot of us have those demons,” I say, thinking of what Bash said.

“I think all of us do. But it’s how we deal with it that matters. I will always be here for you. Whether you just want to talk, or just need a hug.”

“You know what I need now?” I ask, looking down at her body and then back to her face.

“I do.”

“If you don’t want to get fucked, tell me now. I want to slide inside of you,” I purr. “I want to worship you, my way.”

“Do it,” she challenges.

“If at any time you want me to stop, say it.” I sit back on my heels. “I will never force you. I will want to do things to you that may give you pause, and that’s what we will do. We stop and talk about it. I may thrive on control but it is only fun for me if it brings you pleasure. That is what this is all about—you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Elijah.”

“Remember your word.”

“Pineapple.”

“I didn’t understand before, but my cheetah only wants to protect and please you. I was stuck in the past. I didn’t want to repeat the mistakes I’ve made. I get it now and I trust his motivations.” I hate that I lost sight of our goal. Saylor will always be our

center. “Do you want this?”

“I do.”

“Do not move,” I commanded. I turn on the bed and sit on the edge to remove my boots. When the second thuds to the ground, I unbutton my shirt while turning to face her. Her eyes track the progress of my fingers. “I like to use toys,” I start conversationally, “maybe, some ropes, or anything handy to tie you up. You have never been bound?” I wait for her nod even I guessed as much. “Are you open to that?”

“Yes, because you would be the one doing it.”

I close my eyes as I jerk off my shirt. Her trust in me is humbling. “I won’t be doing that this time.” I snap the button of my jeans but leave them on. “Take off your clothes.”

Her eyes widened. Her unsteady hand works at the jeans as she lifts her hips. I stand at the end of the bed, watching as she reveals her beautiful body. I love all the dips and valleys of a woman. I have never been attracted to slim. I want a woman who is soft in all the right places. I like fucking soft and warm.

Saylor has the body I have dreamed about. Her legs are strong yet soft. Her thighs are abundant enough to cradle me. Her stomach pooches out enough to cushion the blows as my hips slap. I groan as her pants are thrown to the floor.

She unties the knot at her waist and draws my shirt off, sitting up, never taking her eyes off me for long. Her tits are gorgeous. I’ve been thinking about them since I saw them in the shower. Pillows of soft deliciousness begging to be sucked and bit.

She lays back, bared to me except for her panties. I was glad she left them on, though.

I want this to last and it won't if I see her pussy open to me.

“You are stunning,” I say in awe.

“Thank you,” she whispers, red traveling all over her body.

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I put a knee to the mattress, and then the other. My eyes are shaded by my hat, never leaving hers. I crawl closer until I am over her bent knees. I slowly reach out, pulling them straight one at a time. I tip my head down, and she loses my gaze.

As I crawl up her body, the brim of my hat slides over her. The fabric of it dusting her skin joins the sound of her harsh breathing and my low rumbles of approval. I lick her hip, her stomach, the tender underside of her breast, before sucking one nipple and then the other. My hat grazes her nipple and she moans. I groan from her sweet taste and then hover over her mouth.

“Should I leave the hat on?” I tease.

“Whatever you want, cowboy,” she grins.

“Hmm...not this time.” I take it off, throwing toward the side table. “I want you to have something to grab on to.” I smirk, running my hand through my hair.

She lunges for my mouth. I don’t scold her for taking control—I was heading there anyway. I let her play for a moment before taking over. Jesus, I love her plump lips, the upper lip is slightly over her bottom and I don’t resist the temptation of biting it. I grip her cheek, my thumb on her chin, pressing, urging her to open wider.

I take another sip and pull back. “Are you ready for a ride, Kitty Cat?” I whisper.

Chapter Sixteen

Saylor

The rollercoaster of emotions that has flooded my body the past few hours needs to go somewhere. Elijah is the perfect outlet.

Deep down, I knew he wouldn't hurt me.

Now, I want to get lost in his love. His control urges me to let go of it all.

"Please," I pleaded, moving restlessly underneath him.

"Stay still, Kitty Cat, or this will be over too soon," he reprimands.

He drags his palm down my neck, squeezing slightly, before moving lower, between my breasts. He pinches my nipples and cups me.

"Elijah," I gasp. His skin against mine caused delicious sparks to fly through me.

"God, I love these tits." He presses, bringing them to his mouth, and sucks deep. My other breast is getting the same attention. He lets go with a pop. "Fuck, I could suck on these forever, but there are other places that I can smell the heat coming from."

"Holy shit," I cry.

He smiles as he rubs his mouth over the skin leading to my panties. The mouth he has is going to kill me. The things it can do and the words that come out of it.

The books I used for fantasies cannot compare to the real thing that is slowly sliding my underwear down my legs. I didn't think a man like this could be real. I didn't think I could actually like a man who talks dirty, but the more he does it, the more turned on I am. The word Sir is on the tip of my tongue. The word Daddy flashes in my head, too. Would he like it?

“I’m not doing my job if your brain is still working, baby,” he purrs. I look down at him as he props his chin on my hip, his breath coasting over my wet heat. “What were you just thinking about?”

I shake my head. No way am I telling him. “Nothing,” I say fast.

“Lying, are we?” He traces his finger through my lips. “I don’t like that.”

I whimper when he takes his touch away. “No,” I protested.

“Tell me,” he demands. He puts his finger back to tease me and then stops again. “Tell me,” he repeats.

“Fuck, please.”

“Be a good girl, and tell what you were thinking about.” He blows on my pussy.

“Shit, alright,” I moan. I gulp and say, “I like that you talk dirty to me, more than I thought.”

“I’m glad. But that’s not all.” He sits on his knees between my legs and puts his hands on my hips, his thumbs sitting in the crease of my thighs. So close to where I desperately want them. “No lying,” he scolds.

I give in quickly when his voice goes deep. “The words Sir and Daddy went through my head. But I didn’t know if you would like it,” I say in a rush, my eyes going down.

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“Eyes on me,” he growls and they snap to tangle with his. “Thank you for telling me. You are my mate. I marked you, so you will be mine forever, regardless of when or if you bite me. We have to be honest to each other, like we agreed, in all things. I don’t want you to be embarrassed of anything that happens between us. We are the only ones in this relationship. We are the only ones that will know. Do not be afraid to ask me anything.” I nod and he goes on. “I like both words coming from your lips. I will accept either or both. I have been called Sir before but not Daddy. I find that I like it. You can call me whatever you want. Whatever you decide.” He drags his finger over me again. “Let’s do an experiment. Call me both at separate times while I’m fingering you, and I’ll tell you which one you like more.”

He doesn’t wait for me to agree. His thumb goes to my clit as his finger goes deep and fast. I burn.

“Such a good, Kitty Cat,” he hums. “You are so hot and tight. Does that feel good?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I responded easily. He adds a finger, swirling and my eyes cross.

“Oh, I like that, and you like that, too. You are squeezing the fuck out of my fingers.” He drags them and curls. “How about now?”

“Yes, Sir.” Fuck, I love it.

“We both love that one,” he says, the fire in his eye burning brighter.

He removes all contact. “No,” I growled.

“Patience, Kitty Cat. I need inside you.” He stands and removes his jeans.

I’ll never get used to his beauty. I want to lick him all over. I want to trace all his tattoos with my tongue. But right now, he’s right—he needs to be inside me. “Hurry, Sir,” I urged. The words come without thought or embarrassment. Sir fits Elijah so much better, it seems right.

“Spread wide,” he growls, getting back on the bed.

What else can I do but spread for my Sir?

“Fuck, good baby,” he praises.

He grips his cock and slides it through the wetness covering me and I dig my head into the bed, closing my eyes. Who knew the touch of the right cock could be so much pleasure. He slips inside and stops.

“Eyes.”

I give him what he wants and he slams inside. His hips meet mine and I grimace at the amount of cock filling me. I’ve always wondered how much a girl needed. Apparently, I need Elijah’s size.

He rocks out and watches himself as he dips back in slowly. He looks at me and gives me the weight of his body. My breasts rub his chest.

I love it.

“Yes,” I sigh.

“Yes, what?” He lifts a brow.

“Yes, Sir.” This is going to be fun.

He palms my ass. “Fuck, I can’t wait to fuck you on your hands and knees. I want to play with this ass.” He slaps it lightly, causing his cock deeper. “The way your pussy is gripping my cock, I think you’ll like your spankings.”

“Please, Sir,” I beg. The heat is demanding he fuck me. The pressure is building, hovering just out of reach.

He doesn’t respond with words.

He pulls out and slams back in. His hand on my ass holding me still. I am at his mercy. He tips my head back with his other hand. Once he has me completely secure, he continues to thrust. Harder and harder. Deeper and deeper. He fills me, stretching me, riding me.

I have the compulsion to bite him but I hold back. My cheetah disagrees, but I am not ready. I want no doubts when I do it. I settle with biting his chin and he responds in kind. He leaves little bites over my chin, neck, and chest.

He never slows his hips, taking me higher and higher until I can’t take it anymore. I explode.

“Yes, Sir,” I chant over and over again.

“Such a good girl. Squeeze Sir’s cock,” he coos. His hips pressed me deeper into the bed. “Take my come like a good Kitty Cat,” he purrs.

He floods me. His warmth combined with mine. His shout echoes throughout the room and my body fills with pleasure.

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He drops, covering me completely. His breath ruffles my hair, and he continues to glide slowly as we both come down.

This is everything I have always wanted. Elijah can give me the home. A home filled with acceptance, love, of belonging to someone in every way. The things my mom and I have always searched and hoped for.

The ache of not having her with me suddenly wells up inside. I wish she could meet Elijah. I wish I could hold her in my arms and feel her joy. Her dream of me finding my mate someday, a reality.

I can't let Elijah go. I don't have to run anymore. I don't want to.

My arms tighten around him.

I have to fight for him. I have to protect him.

I think I already love him.

Then why am I filled with regret? Not for what we just shared, but for not biting him and completing the bond.

But I couldn't ignore the little voice inside saying, 'It's not time yet.'

I have always listened to my gut. I will hold on as tight as I can and when it's time, I will know.

“Saylor,” is whispered in my ear.

I swat at the offending object that pulls me out of the best sleep I’ve ever had. Living on the road and most nights in the backseat, spread out as much as possible is less than comfortable. Plus, the constant worry of someone finding you or someone breaking in. Every night I sleep in Elijah’s soft, big bed is wonderful, but after last night, it’s more so.

I almost fell asleep with him on top and inside of me. He worked me to that point. He took care of me before I was fully asleep. He cleaned me and tucked me in. I fell asleep with my body pressed to his side, my head on his chest.

I have never felt so loved and safe.

“Kitty Cat,” the amused voice comes again.

“No,” I protest and try to roll away.

“Nope,” Elijah says, stopping me. He scoops me out of the covers and across his lap.

“Hey,” I growled. I’m still naked.

“Time to get up.” He drags the blanket over my lap as I cross my arms and glare. “As tempting as that glare is, and I would love to play, we have guests.”

“What time is it?” I ask, blinking blearily.

“Nine.” He brushes the hair from my face. “Unfortunately, I woke up to a rabbit pounding on my door. Then the dragons showed up. Then Bash showed up, along with the lions. I have a freaking menagerie on my porch,” he grumbles. “I need you to run interference. I’m likely to be very mean. I would rather be in bed with you

ignoring the world all day. The only good thing is, they brought doughnuts.”

“Sally is here?” My eyes brighten.

“Yes, she smells much better today, but is annoying the vampire. The dragons and lions find her hilarious.” He rolls his eyes.

“Why didn’t you kick them out?” I ask out of curiosity.

“That would be rude.”

“It’s okay to be mean, but not rude?”

“Well...yeah.”

“That makes no sense.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “They’re probably listening to this whole conversation.”

“Great,” I sigh, smiling and shaking my head.

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We both laugh. We fall silent, staring into each other's eyes.

"It was a great night, baby," he whispers.

"It was...Sir," I whisper back.

He kisses me gently, but pulls away quickly. "Bash has some information. That was the main reason I let them stay."

"It can't be good. Did you thank him?"

"No yet," he mutters.

"I'm glad he was there."

"Shit, I'll do it. Get dressed." He stands up, sliding me down his body, and I tingle. "Fuck, let's get this over with." He drops his head to my shoulder, right over his mark.

"Put a shirt on." His eyes crinkle as he pulls away.

"Why?"

"Is Penny here?" I ask instead of answering.

"Yes."

“And Sally?”

“Yes.”

“That’s why.”

I grab clothes and walk to the bathroom, his laughter following me.

I hurried and put on the jeans from last night and another shirt from Elijah’s. My hair is a mess so I just brush it and throw it up in a bun. I don’t worry about shoes or makeup. Now that Elijah isn’t clouding my brain, my stomach knots at the prospect of what Bash has to say.

Elijah thought he was being sneaky asking his friends for help, but I had a talk with Penny and she told me about the work some of them do. I knew it wouldn’t be long until they all knew about everything and offered to help.

Elijah might complain about them, and treat them as pests, but they are his family. They want to help. He doesn’t know how lucky he is to have them. I was uncertain if I should allow them into the ugliness that Grant will bring here. Not that I think I could stop it. But I am almost certain this is going to be my home—or wherever Elijah is.

Is it so wrong to lean on someone else for a change?

I have worried every minute for so long, it feels nice to give away some of the burden.

I open the front door and see the crowded porch.

Sally is talking a mile a minute to Penny, who seems to not hate it, her head nodding

every so often. Her mates are standing at her back. Laken is scowling at nothing in particular. Bishop is grinning at his mate and Sally.

The lions are talking quietly to each other. Logan fights to keep the stern look on his face. Elijah hasn't told me much about him but you can tell by the pain in his eyes it affected him greatly. Las is joking around with Lucas and Logan can't help tipping his lips up.

Elijah did put on a shirt but it blew in the breeze since he didn't button it. He is leaning on the rail beside Bash but staring at me. I smile stupidly back.

Fuck, he's just so hot. The memories of the night bring a flush to my skin.

"Are you going to eye-fuck your mate all morning or greet your guests? Some of us have traveled a long way to see you," Sally reprimands but grins wide.

"Sally," I say in exasperation. "Good morning. Did you find a place to stay?"

"Don't worry about that." She hugs me. "How was your night?" She wiggles her eyebrows.

"You are ridiculous," I laugh.

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“Life’s too short to be anything but.” She winks and sits.

“Hi, everyone.” I wave lightly.

“Morning,” Penny greets, stepping close. “I tried to stop them. I couldn't, so I thought I should just come.” She shrugs.

I wish I would have been more comfortable that first day and gotten to know Penny better. We talked some but my nerves were shot and I was so worried about Elijah. I hope we can get to know each other in the future after this mess is cleaned up.

“We came for the doughnuts we smelled,” Lucas says. “We were running in the woods nearby.”

Logan elbows him. “We also wanted to check on you.”

“That’s sweet.” I smile at him.

“Not sweet,” Elijah glares at him. “Don’t be sweet.”

“Shit,” Bash says.

Elijah walks over and wraps me in his arms, his front pressed to my side.

“I like it here.” Sally looks around at everyone. “I think I’m going to stay.”

“Sally, we would love to have you around.” I get glares and groans from most of the

men.

“They love me,” she smirks.

“As entertaining as the morning is so far,” Bash starts. He pulls something from his pocket. “I came because I found a note on the door of the office.”

Elijah stiffens. “To me?” I ask.

“No, to me. Or to your friends.”

I frown and he hands me the paper. “Your friends don’t scare me.”

“Motherfucker,” Elijah hisses. “He knows about you. How does he know about all of us?”

I was concerned he would have the same reaction he did last night, but I’m grateful he didn’t. “I don’t know,” I whisper, still staring at it.

“Has anyone come across anything suspicious? Any new smells in the area?” Elijah asks.

“No, but we haven’t been here long,” Las says.

“We haven’t either, but we haven’t left the house as much lately,” Laken says.

“When I came to help last night, I didn’t smell anything, but I did sense something...off,” Bash offers.

“Can we maybe get fingerprints off this?” Elijah takes the note from my hand.

“No. There was nothing traceable on it.” Bash takes it from Elijah and puts it back in his pocket. “Jax is going to have Stephan put Grant’s picture in his system and see if he can get any hits from the cameras in the area.”

“Who’s Jax?” I ask.

“He is a panther Alpha. His brothers and he own a club. They're mated with a child. He has many friends, but his manager of the club, Stephan, has massive computer skills,” Bash explains.

“What about Quinn?” Elijah asks. “He could do a search.”

“He has been. But he’s been doing it remotely; remember, he went to see family.”

“He’s getting close,” Sally suddenly says. We all turn to her. “I can feel his rage and determination.” She ignores our shocked stares. “I went for a run late last night. I went miles around the area in rabbit form, I can smell better that way. I caught his scent, but not recent enough to track him.” She locks eyes with Elijah. “Cheetahs have superior tracking skills.”

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“I don’t know about all of them, but I do.”

“Then what the hell are you waiting for?” she scoffs, waving her arms. “Track.”

“Simple as that, huh?” He clenches his jaw. “I won’t leave Saylor alone. Have you heard all the stories yet of what the women here have been through? I won’t join the ranks of leaving my mate alone.”

“Hey,” Laken growls.

“You know it’s true,” Elijah says.

“Whatever,” Laken replies.

“No,” I snapped. I push out of his arms. “I am done with this.” I take a deep breath, knowing he’s not going to like what I have to say. “I want to draw him out.”

“No.” His eyes narrow.

“Yes. Let’s get this over with. I don’t want to run anymore. Before I met you, I was determined to somehow trap him, draw him out alone. I want him dead. He’s been fucking up my life long enough. I’m done,” I say firmly.

“I’m not going to let you be used as bait,” Elijah growls.

“Let me?” I glare.

“Uh-oh,” Sally whispers.

Chapter Seventeen

Saylor

My hands land on my hips.

“I won’t purposely put you in danger,” he says, stubbornly.

“I won’t be alone for long. If your friends are willing, we ask them to be close. The vampires can hide so much better than the others, and you. I leave my scent. I make a trail even an asshole like him can track.” I watch him carefully, hoping he will see reason.

“No,” he repeats, his teeth clenched.

“Elijah,” I say softly, getting close. I put my palms on his chest. “You know you can find me fast. We will make a perimeter. Everyone will be on the same page. We can do this.” He softens and I slam my point home. “I don’t want to run anymore. I would hate to have to draw him away from here. Away from you and your friends. One way or the other, I have to end this. He took away so much. Don’t let me take away what we could have. Don’t let him take me away from you.”

“Not fair,” he sighs. He pops a new toothpick in his mouth. “But I hear you. I know it’s the truth.”

“We have to do this.” I press against him and tip my head back. “You won’t lose me. Your mark will lead you to me. The bond will guide you.”

“No shit. Who could miss the teeth marks on your neck?” Sally shoves a doughnut in

her mouth. “Good job, cowboy,” she garbles around the food.

“Jesus, she’s going to be living here.” He adjusts his hat.

“Yep,” she smiles, her teeth filled with food.

“It’s a good idea,” Bash interjects. “We are fast, too. If Grant is preoccupied with Saylor, he won’t notice us. Some shifters don’t know how to track us.” He looks pointedly at Elijah. “You’ll have to trust us again.”

“Can’t wait,” Elijah says dryly.

“Can we help?” Las asks, stepping close.

“I think we are going to need all of you,” Elijah nods.

“Especially if Grant touches her, you’ll have to hold him back from slaughtering them all,” Sally says wryly.

“That would be a bad thing?” Elijah sneers.

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“I want some answers before that happens. I can get those answers while I’m alone with him,” I point out. I have no problem with killing him.

“What about the others the rabbit said were with him?” Bash asks.

“We have to herd them in the opposite direction,” I suggest.

“That’s going to be difficult if they are protecting him without revealing ourselves,” he offers.

“Difficult, but not impossible,” Elijah says. “We have to get the others. Whoever wants to be involved can be. There are no hurt feelings if they say no.”

“Asshole, no one is going to say no. We are family now,” Laken finally says. “We will protect Saylor and watch your crazy ass.”

“We will, too.” Logan steps forward.

“I would rather watch Saylor’s ass,” Lucas smirks.

“Death wish, brother,” Las says sadly.

“Watch yourself, Lucas,” Elijah warns.

“Just a joke,” Lucas pouts.

The women look at each other and roll our eyes.

“What about the man you have hanging in the club? You could use him as bait for Grant’s friends,” Sally suggests, licking the sugar from her fingers.

“How the fuck do you know this shit?” Elijah demands.

She shrugs. “I’m small. You need to learn how to trust, cowboy,” Sally tells him.

“Can we all agree to not say the word trust anymore,” Elijah shouts, his fists clenching.

“Why don’t we meet up later?” I keep one hand on his chest but turn to address the crowd. “We can make a plan.”

“Of course,” Bash concedes first, nodding once and then disappearing.

Literally.

I have heard how fast vampires are, but hearing and seeing with your own eyes is different experience.

“I’ll find you,” Sally says, squeezing my shoulder as she leaves.

The lions leave without a word, but Laken stops beside us.

“We will do whatever you need us to do. We want the threat to your mate gone.” He tips his chin and follows Bishop and Penny down the stairs.

I watch them until they are all gone before turning back to my struggling mate.

His eyes are pained. His teeth are destroying the toothpick.

“Do you want to go on a run?” I ask.

He startles but nods.

I let him take the lead and my hand, following passively behind the house.

The trees surround us out here, the dense forest swallowing us the further we go. I’ve been dying to explore the area. Nature is where our animals feel at home.

Elijah slows next to a large tree. He releases me and turns to face me as he removes his shirt. When we shift, we need to be naked if we don’t want our clothes to be shredded. I can’t help the thrill that goes through me at the sight of him, though. When he pushes down his pants, I decide I need to push away the heat and catch up.

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When we are both bare, the change comes easily. Magic sparks in the air.

My cheetah has been so eager to come out to play.

My paws land on the soft, slightly damp earth, and peace rushes over me. Tears come to my eyes from the relief and joy of being in my cheetah form again. I don't remember the last time she was able to run free. For the first time, I see Elijah in cheetah form through my animal's eyes. I can see better through her eyes. Every sense is enhanced. The smells. The sounds.

Elijah is stunning.

He is bigger than me even like this. The shine from his coat almost blinds me. I bet it feels like silk.

He nudges with his head, rubbing gently. He runs his nose down my side, and I shiver. The mark on my neck, visible even in this different body, throbs. My animal loves being on display for her mate. She wants to show off. To preen under his attention. To run with him and show off how fast she can be.

I stand still, letting him circle me, smelling, tasting, and basking in his love.

I talk to my cheetah in my head, almost as if she is a different person. Some shifters don't acknowledge their animal as a different part of themselves. We all have our own ways of relating to our animals. Some may not see a difference. I think of her as part of me, but at the same time, she has separate feelings. We communicate, similar as with other shifters, in pictures.

Elijah finishes his examination and steps in front of me.

I dip my head and bump his chest with my head, communicating my submission with the action. I then slide my forehead up and tilt my head in front of his mouth. He licks his mark in approval and respect. He is my Alpha. I will let him guide me.

He eases back and turns.

I follow.

We run.

Sometimes side by side. Sometimes with him in the lead. We race through the trees and grass. We leap over random rocks. The wind skates over our coats. Not many shifters could catch a cheetah. We are in our element sprinting through the trees.

Fuck, I missed this. I needed the freedom it brings me. Having Elijah with me makes it so much sweeter. I may have not expected him, but I don't regret finding him.

Even when I was with my mom, I didn't feel so free. We were always looking over our shoulders. We tried not to shift for long periods of time. Our scent is stronger while we are in animal form. I don't miss the constant fear. As much as I miss her, there are things I don't want to remember. Elijah is right—it wasn't always good. I shove the bad things deep down inside.

My ears perk at the sound of water. A small creek comes into view. I follow Elijah into it. We drink and then play. I don't remember the last time I have seen water.

We lay on the grass beside it in the sun, drying our fur.

He shifts back and I watch him as he walks a few yards away, picking up a pile of

clothes from behind a bush.

“I always keep some clothes around the area,” he explains. “Shift back, Kitty Cat.”

I do immediately, taking the shirt he holds out. “Thank you.”

“It’s more for my benefit. I can’t concentrate with you naked,” he grins. Once we’re covered, we sit, our arms brushing. “I needed that.”

“I did, too.” His body is relaxed now, the anger lessened. “I understand your frustration.”

“I can’t make a mistake,” he admits, staring at the water. “I can’t lose you. I am already very possessive of you. The thought of something happening to you makes me sick. Having you out of arm’s reach makes me anxious.”

“You don’t have to explain. Even though I haven’t bitten you yet, I feel the pull.” I pull my knees up to my chest, my chin on top of them. “Sometimes, I’m so fucking angry at my mom.”

“Why?” He turns so he is facing me.

“You were right. Things weren’t always good. I ignored the bad. She was an amazing mom, but I wish she would have fought. All those years, we ran away. Always worried. Always scared. She did try to make it seem normal—fun even. When I was little, I didn’t know any better. As the years passed, and I grew up, I knew it wasn’t normal. I would see other people sit with friends.

“One time, we were in the car across from a school. I was so jealous of all those kids. They had no idea the horrors of life. They got to have sleepovers, go out with their best friends, and have boyfriends. Their parents always had food for them. They

would have birthday parties, get presents. I was so envious of their normal lives. I'm sure some of them had it hard. But I didn't see that then. Maybe they were putting on a mask like I was."

"A mask?" he asks lightly.

"My mom would get sad and quiet anytime I would complain or whine about something we had to do. If we had to leave a town in a hurry because he found us, or if I voiced my wish for new clothes. I stopped doing it then. I put on a happy face. I tried so hard to always be positive. I felt as if I couldn't have feelings. I always had to stay in control. I couldn't let a frown slip through or a tear.

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“I had to be strong,” I whisper. “Always strong.” I swallow and fight the tears. “My feelings didn’t matter. My mom took care of us, so why should I add to her burden by being sad.”

“Saylor,” Elijah says, wrapping his hand around my calf.

“I hated it,” I blurted. “I hated living in fear. I hated that fucking car with the uncomfortable back seat. I hated the thin blankets we had to keep warm. I hated never having a home. Not knowing when I was going to eat next. If someone was going to think we were easy pickings while we slept unaware in the car at night. I didn’t have friends or social skills to make them once I grew up.

“I couldn’t go to school,” I say angrily, turning my head toward him. “I don’t have a diploma. My mom taught me how to read but that is the extent of my education. Do you know how much shame that brings me? We couldn’t stay anywhere for long enough for me to enroll into a school. What would be the point? I would have to be pulled out at any minute. I’m so fucking angry at her, yet I miss her so goddamn much it hurts. How is that possible?

“She didn’t fight. Even when they killed her—she didn’t fight. Why? I just wanted her to fight them. Maybe we could have found other shifters that would help us. But she avoided any others we came across.

“You don’t know how lucky you are to have found this community. I know they frustrate you, but they love you. I would have given anything to have what you have here.”

“Shit,” he says, opening his legs and pulling me into his body. “I’m so fucking sorry, baby. I’m an ungrateful asshole sometimes. It’s hard for me to accept the help.”

“I’m sorry. I realize it’s difficult for you, too.” I put my ear over his heart.

“What a pair we are,” he sighs. “Thank you for sharing that. It’s not easy.”

“I’ve kept it in for so long.” I grip his shirt. “I want you to understand that I need to end this. I have to fight. I have to take my power back. I have the opportunity to borrow your friends to watch out for me.”

“They are your friends, too. You don’t know them well yet, but once you are on their fucking radar, they don’t let go. It’s super annoying sometimes. But I am grateful to have them.” He kisses the top of my head. “Don’t tell them though—I have a reputation to protect.”

“Of course,” I say, smiling. I sober quickly. “I don’t want you to hate my mom.”

“Why would I? Even though she could have done things differently, she did what she could. She was protecting you.”

“She did protect me. I wish it was different but I can’t change it.”

We hold each other in silence. As much as he has relaxed, I can feel his anger simmering under the surface. Whether it’s from what I went through or the things we are going to have to do to get rid of Grant, I don’t know.

“What do you think about forgetting about all this shit for one night?”

“Sounds amazing.”

“Have you ever been to a nightclub?”

“Uh, no,” I admit. “Not a lot of time for dancing.”

“Have you ever met a panther?”

“Again, no,” I say, sitting up. “Why?”

“You're going to meet the ones who started it all,” he says mysteriously.

Chapter Eighteen

Elijah

Saylor's eyes are shifting nervously as she looks around the club. It's still early so it's not nearly as full as usual. This is a good thing—I would hate to kill a human. Saylor is wearing a dress borrowed from Penny. It's tight as fuck, long, and so sinfully sexy. My first instinct when she walked out of the bedroom was to demand she change. Did she have no sympathy for me? I was going to go through torture watching her walk through the club with all the eyes following her. I wondered about the sympathetic looks from Laken and Bishop as the bag that held the dress was passed over.

I couldn't kill her excitement. I was going to have to control every instinct I had. I was not starting the night right—I may have shoved the bouncer on the way in. Saylor walked by him and his eyes were glued to her ass. I waited until she cleared the door before I did it, but she smirked at me when I caught up.

The club was two levels. The second floor had several private rooms for VIPs and behind those were offices and the rooms of some of Jax's pack. The bottom floor had a large dance floor and two bars. Numerous tables were scattered around the dance floor, along with booths behind those. The windows were shuttered, so even though it

was early, the whole room was dark.

The music was loud. With our hearing, it could be grating on our ears. We have learned to almost mute them.

I tear my eyes off my mate's delicious ass to notice my surroundings. There are more people than I thought. I already want to cut their eyes out as they stare at my stunning mate. There are shifters of all kinds around us. I smell bear, lion, wolf, fox, and panthers of course. It will be harder to sense any vampires here with all the other ones bombarding us.

My arm locks around Saylor's waist, anchoring her to me.

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Control, Elijah, I lecture myself.

We walk to the bar and I help her onto the stool. I place my body behind her, on alert. I wanted this to be fun for her. Something to take the worry of what is coming away for awhile, but it's going to be harder for me.

"Drink, Kitty Cat?" I whisper in her ear.

"Please," she says sweetly, turning her head slightly so my lips taste her cheek.

I tip my chin to the bartender. He braces his hands on the bar and leans close. I narrow my eyes when I realize he is the bear I smelled. He's huge. And he's smiling at my mate.

I growl low, but he hears me clearly. He must respect the bond as he leans back and loses his smile.

"Beer for me," I say. "And whatever my mate wants."

He nods and I tune out what Saylor orders as I catch the presence of the panthers coming at my back.

"Elijah," Jax says behind me.

I turn around to face the Alpha of the pack of misfits. He's taller than I am. Many people have called him stern but fair. He has black hair and blue eyes. His eyes hold the story of many responsibilities but also a deep happiness that could be attributed to

the woman he has under his arm.

Harmony is beautiful. She has black long hair and wide green eyes. Her body is amazing—not that I want to notice. It's more of a clinical examination of it. The contentment that emanates off her is powerful. She is perfectly happy to be surrounded by three large mates.

James is the middle brother. I like him best. He's funny. But he's super protective of their little family. His brown hair seems to be constantly messy. His green eyes dance with humor, like he has his own running commentary in his head. Sometimes, he is overlooked because of his humor, but he's huge and can be brutal to those who want to hurt them.

Blue. Harmony's third mate. Now that guy is a force of nature. Don't let his blonde hair with blue tips fool you—he is one tough asshole. He's quiet but sees everything. His eyes can change from calming blue to pissed off in a second.

I haven't spent that much time with all of them together but I have gotten to know James quite a lot over the past few months. This group likes to have parties, too. I've been to BBQs and pack gatherings.

They are who started this growing community of shifters.

They are who you want to emulate. Their relationship started a chain of events that can't be stopped. I hear now that Harmony has found her happily ever after, she wants everyone to.

“Jax,” I responded respectfully, holding out my hand.

“I hear you have a mate?” he asks, clasping my hand.

“I do.” I look at Saylor as she takes in the group before us. “This is Saylor. Kitty Cat, this is Jax, Harmony, James, and Blue. The panthers.”

“Hi,” she says, giving a little wave.

“You are stunning,” Harmony says. “I love the dress.”

“Thanks, but it’s not mine. Penny let me borrow it.”

“Penny?” She laughs. “Of course she would. She’s my sister.”

“I didn’t know that.” Saylor looks at me as if I did something wrong.

“What?” I ask.

“Ah...man. I know that look,” James says.

“Brother, all of us have to go through it,” Jax says.

“What do you mean?” Harmony glares at her mates.

“Nothing,” James says quickly. “So nice to meet you, Saylor.”

“We heard about the situation you are in,” Blue starts, “We offer our help if it is needed.”

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“Thanks,” Saylor says shyly. “It’s weird to have strangers know about me before I meet them.” She shakes her head.

“Get used to it in this group,” Blue mutters.

“I’m so glad you came out,” Harmony says. “All the drinks are on us. Just a welcome to the neighborhood. I’m glad I decided to leave the baby with the sitter and come with my mates.”

“I still don’t like her,” Blue growls.

“She is a perfectly nice girl,” Harmony snaps. “You gave her the third degree for over an hour. I’m surprised the poor girl stayed.”

“What if she leaves Alexa alone?” he responds.

“Blue, she won’t. She’s a daughter of one of the pack, for fuck’s sake,” Harmony says frustrated.

“Doesn’t matter,” he grumbles under his breath.

Harmony gave birth a few months ago and I imagine her mates are very protective of their first girl. Plus, she is the first girl born to a panther mating in years.

“She’s fine,” Jax assures them. “The girl’s father knows I would kill him if his daughter hurt mine.”

“Oh my god,” Harmony whips her head to him. “Did you tell him that?”

“Of course not,” he scoffs.

“It was heavily implied,” James offers.

“Fuck.” Jax sighs closing his eyes.

“That’s insane,” Harmony yells.

“What’s insane is that we are having this conversation, instead of at home with our princess,” Blue states.

I almost laughed. Blue is not the type to say the word princess, but he means it.

“Blue,” Harmony growls.

“What?”

“Clueless,” James whispers.

“Fuck off,” Blue snaps at him.

“All this time, you are still clueless about our mate,” James continues.

“Guys,” Jax says in a tired voice.

“Are you saying you wouldn't help Jax kill the girl’s father if she hurt Alexa?” Blue demands an answer.

“No, of course I would help him. The man would be nothing but pieces of flesh,”

James says ruthlessly.

“Thank you.” Blue nods, his point proven.

“Will you guys shut up? Saylor is going to think we are nuts.” Harmony takes a step closer to Saylor and away from her mates.

“We aren’t?” James asks.

I look at Saylor watching their interaction. Her expression doesn’t say nuts. It says fascination.

“Not at all.” Saylor touches Harmony’s arm, gaining her attention. “You have a baby?”

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Harmony's face gets soft. "We do. She is so beautiful. It's been hard to leave her," she starts, and pointedly looks at the guys. "For all of us."

"I'm sure. I would love to meet her."

"Do you want to see a picture to hold you over until you do?" she asks, not waiting for an answer before pulling out her phone.

I turn to the guys. I've seen many pictures. Not from Harmony, but James. The men love their little girl.

"So, I hear we have a crazy fucking rabbit in the ranks now," James smirks.

"We do. She has a big personality." I take a step away from Saylor. "She helped Saylor, so I will put up with her," I concede.

"We do what makes our mates happy," Jax says, looking softly at Harmony chatting with Saylor.

"We do," Blue agrees.

"What do you need us to do to help Saylor?" James asks.

"We are going to draw him out. Trap him. The bad part is Saylor is going to be the bait."

"Oh, shit." Blue crosses his arms.

“What he means to say is, we will help in any way we can,” Jax says.

“No, he meant that her being the bait is a horrible idea and can only lead to bad shit,” James says. “But it is better that you know she is bait beforehand. Harmony made the same plan but didn’t inform us until she was in the plan.”

“Oh, fuck.” Jax rubs his head.

“Excuse me,” Harmony angrily puts her phone away.

“Are you guys hungry? We can get you a menu. We added some things since the last time you were here,” Jax says quickly.

“Sounds good,” I say.

Their bar manager Stephan runs up behind them through the growing crowd.

“Jax, I need you. There's a fight breaking out in one of the rooms.”

“Who?” Jax demands, suddenly turning into the fierce leader he is.

“It’s a coyote.”

“Fucking coyotes,” Blue hisses. “Can’t we ban them?”

“One of these days, there is bound to be some good ones.” He shrugs. “Sorry to leave you. Blue come with me,” Jax instructs. “James, with Harmony.”

When they disappear, James slides close to Harmony. “Do you want to find a dark booth and make out?”

She playfully smacks his chest. “James,” she scolds, but quickly follows him as he drags her away. “Have fun,” she yells at us when the crowd swallows them.

“Overwhelmed yet?” I ask.

“No.” She squeezes my hand. “They are great. I knew there were multiple mates, but I’ve never seen them. It’s interesting.”

“There will not be any more mates for you,” I growl, leaning down to lightly bite the exposed mark on her shoulder. “I’m not built to share.”

“Yes, Sir,” she says, her breath catching.

Everything was going great...until it wasn’t.

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Saylor was having fun. We ate some food, we drank, we laughed with the panthers as they came over periodically through the night.

It was entertaining to watch Blue and Jax herd a group of coyotes out the front door. I tried not to stare as James did, in fact, take Harmony to a dark corner. I was thinking about doing the same with Saylor.

She was more carefree than I had seen her yet. We kept the conversation simple, nothing intense. At one point, she stood up in front of me and rubbed her ass against me with the excuse that she was dancing and sick of sitting down.

I knew the truth, though.

So, as I said, it was going great. I was excited to find the perfect dark corner. Then I had to use the bathroom.

Fucking beer.

I couldn't see any of the panthers. They probably all escaped to Jax's office for some fun. I had no one to watch Saylor for me.

I shouldn't have said the last part out loud.

I received a firm lecture from my mate.

So needless to say, I left her to use the bathroom.

As I walked back to her, the scene in front of me became clearer. The clearer it became, the redder my vision became, until I couldn't get to her fast enough.

A man. A dead man was leaning into her, his hand on her waist, trying to pull her body into his. She was pushing against his chest, her face tilted to the side, her neck clearly visible. Obviously, the man was not a shifter or else he would be terrified when he saw the bite.

I didn't care that he was human. I didn't care we were in a room full of humans and shifters. I didn't care that he knew nothing about the mark.

I cared that he dared touch what was mine.

Mine. Mine. Mine...was on repeat in my head.

It continued to repeat that as I pulled him away. And as I punched him in the face. And as he went down on the floor.

I followed him down and continued to hit him. I didn't care about the blood that was flying. All I could see was the terrified expression that was on Saylor's face when his hand was on her.

After his squeak of surprise, he fell silent.

Or it could have been the pounding in my ears drowning out his screams of agony.

"Fuck." Arms surround me and I fight the pull. "Elijah, Jesus, you're going to kill him," Jax says.

Should I care?

“Elijah,” Saylor says calmly.

That breaks through and I finally notice the silence in the room. The crowd moved away from us, watching in horrified fascination. I feel the blood on my face and hands.

I let Jax assist me off of the man on the floor. His eyes are wide, swelling fast. There is blood on the floor and trickling from his mouth, but he’s still alive.

“It’s alright, Elijah,” Saylor says, stepping close.

“Is it?” I didn’t scare her off yet.

“Sure...” James says. “It won’t be the first time this month we had blood on the floor.” He rubs his head. “It won’t be the first time this week, actually.”

“He didn’t tell me she had a psycho boyfriend,” the man whispers, his split lip bleeding steadily.

“Excuse me,” I ask, narrowing my eyes. I crouch over his body, my hand firmly at his neck. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“Fucking Grant didn’t tell me about you.” His body starts to shake. “No amount of money or promises are worth this,” he slurs. “He can’t wait to taste her again.” His eyes flutter shut.

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“Shit, Blue,” James says, bending and tilting his head. “Elijah has that look on his face you always have, but worse.”

“What the fuck,” I growl and twist my head toward my mate.

Chapter Nineteen

Saylor

“Elijah, take your mate and go to my office,” Jax says as Elijah stands and stares at me. “I have a bathroom. Clean the blood off. I have spare shirts in there also.” He faces his brothers. “Let’s get to work. Blue, get him the fuck out of here. Make sure he lives, but doesn’t get away. James, call one of the vampires. Baby girl, you are with me.”

Elijah snaps to attention, swiping my hand and pulling me quickly across the floor. I jog to keep up with his long legs. His anger surrounds us and I know I will have to answer some tough questions. I didn’t want to talk about it. I wanted to forget the small incident in my life as if it never happened. I got away safely so what was the point of bringing it up.

I almost trip halfway up the stairs and he slows down. My fingers are almost numb from the death grip he has on them. I don’t complain. He’s running on rage and adrenaline. The fact that he just learned I have been close enough to Grant to kiss, I’m sure is fucking with his head.

He storms into a large office, slamming the door behind us after we clear the

doorway. I flinch but he doesn't notice as he hustles us through another door to the bathroom.

He slams that door, too.

He releases my hand abruptly and turns to face me. His eyes are working furiously as he studies me.

"What did we say about honesty, Saylor?" He demands an answer.

Fuck, that makes me feel like shit, because he's right. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Let's start with what happened." He jerks off his ruined shirt. "What did the human say to you?" He balls up the shirt and throws it in the garbage.

"He asked if he could buy me a drink. I said no. He was insisting. Then he asked if I wanted to dance. Again, I said no. He didn't listen."

"He said nothing to lead you to believe he was involved with Grant?" He tugs a towel from the rack and starts the water in the sink.

I step forward and steal the towel. "No." I push at his waist. I wait until he faces me and then wet the rag. "I was getting up to come find you when he tried to pull me to him. I have no idea what the plan was."

"Alright, on to the next," he says tightly. "What did he mean by taste you again? I was under the impression that you have never been close to Grant."

I wipe off the blood from his neck, avoiding his eyes. I can't bear the hurt in them. "I was seventeen. We had been in the same town for months, longer than any other. My mom had to work late. I decided to go to a park nearby. I had no reason to think

anything bad would happen and I was sick of sitting in the car. I just wanted some time to be normal.” I rinse the rag and start on his chest. “There were a few people there but I didn’t pay attention. I was sitting on a bench and I smelled him. At this point, I didn’t know what he looked like up close. But I recognized the scent.

“He was good-looking. I was startled by that—I didn’t run. I’m ashamed of that. He talked calmly. He can be charming when he wants to be. He asked where my mom was, which I refused to tell him. He said he’d been watching me for so long that he forgot how beautiful I was.” I can still see his blinding-white smile. “He asked me why we felt like we had to run. Why didn’t we want to join his pack? We would have family and friends. We would be taken care of for the rest of our lives. He knew what to say,” I said shamefully.

“Of course he did. He’s a predator.”

“I so wanted to believe it. For just a moment, I thought, what if my mom is wrong? It would be so easy to give up. I was so tired.” The blood soaked through his shirt, even his arms had splatters. “He kept the compliments coming. For a lost teenager who wished to have all of those things, be all those things, was tempting. That’s when he leaned in. His lips barely touched mine when I snapped out of it. But I stayed still, wanting him to think I was accepting. I slowly reached into my pocket while I moved towards him as if I was wanting more. I had a knife. My mom got it for me years before.

“I stabbed him. I stabbed him in the thigh and ran. I’m fast and I knew the suddenness of it and the wound would slow him.”

“You went to your mom?”

“I ran straight to the bar. She knew the minute she saw me. She grabbed her things and was beside me before I even stopped. We ran out the back door without a word

and got in the car. I didn't tell her what happened until we were safely away."

"Kitty Cat," he says tenderly, stopping my furious cleaning. "I think it's all off."

I come back to the present, focusing on his skin. "Sorry."

"Thank you for telling me. He won't get the chance to get close to you." He tugs a shirt from the rack in the corner. "We need to talk to everyone. This needs to happen soon."

"He's close by," I say, hating the tremble in my voice.

"Hey," Elijah whispers. He stops buttoning the shirt to cup my face. "I hate that you had to go through that. You shouldn't feel any shame. He knew what to say to pull that reaction from you. He played you. He's going to pay for it."

"Okay." I nod, grasping his wrists.

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“If the panthers are still talking to me after that shit-show I pulled, we’ll make a plan.” He smirks and makes the fear ease.

“Holy shit, those panthers know how to throw a party,” Sally yells from the office.

We leave the bathroom to see Sally strolling in with a drink in one hand, Elijah’s cowboy hat in the other, and dressed in the shortest miniskirt I have ever seen. Her hair is puffed up as big as possible. Her face is contoured to the max and the lipstick on her grinning lips is bright red. Her generous chest is barely encased in a white corset.

“Sally, how did you find me?”

She twitches her nose. “I’ve told you, I let smell guide me.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to catch the show,” she says, pointing the hat at Elijah. “Nice right hook, cowboy.”

“I’m not thanking you for the compliment,” he says dryly.

She shrugs. “Whatever.”

Elijah takes his hat, placing it back on his head. “Did you hear what that asshole said?”

“I did.” She gulps down the remaining drink. “That’s why I thought I should bring the note that was under Saylor’s drink at the bar.” She waves the piece of paper in the air after retrieving it from her bra.

Elijah rips it from her fingers.

So close, but not close enough.

“Who the fuck is this guy? He has to have help,” Elijah growls. “Did you notice the guy he sent putting this there?”

“No. My drink was behind me when I was facing him. He didn’t even put his hands on the bar,” I cry. “We have to end this.”

“We will.”

“Welp, I’m getting another drink,” Sally declares.

“Jesus, Sally,” I sigh. “Can you take this seriously?”

She stops turning toward the door and her face clears. Suddenly, she is an inch away. “Girl, I am. You mean everything to me. I think of you as my own daughter. That’s why I am here. You don’t know how relieved I was when I got here to see the people, the friends that surrounded you. I was so afraid I would be too late. But when I saw that, it all became clear. You are meant to be here, with these people, fighting this battle. It will end. It will end happily. But you have to walk through it by yourself. I will always be behind you, close by, to guide and watch out for you.” She hugs me, whispering in my ear, “You will free the cheetah.”

“Sally,” I choke.

“Alright, enough of the mushy shit.” She prances to the door. “I saw a bear out there that I wanted to chase me around.” She wiggles her eyebrows and leaves.

“Baby, she is an original.” Elijah wraps his arms around me.

“Understatement of a lifetime,” I agree.

“Was that a rabbit?” James asks from the doorway, the others coming behind him. Blue shoves his shoulder into his to move him.

“Yes, she is a friend.”

“Right on. Rabbits are fucking crazy,” he grins.

“Are we banned for life?” Elijah asks Jax.

“No, as James pointed out, it happens often. I approve of your protection of your mate.”

“That’s a high compliment,” James informs us.

“So, what now?” Harmony asks.

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“The rabbit found this note on the bar.” He hands it to Jax. “It’s not the first one. We have to draw him out. I’m fucking sick of this shit. He wants to hide and stalk us. I want to pull him into the light.”

“We’re in,” Blue says seriously.

“First, we need to go to Ryker. He has a man from Grant’s pack.”

“Why is he there?” Blue asks.

“We kidnapped him and tortured him for information.”

“Bad ass.” James grins.

“I approve,” Blue says, his face expressionless.

“Why do you need him?” Harmony asks.

“Bait,” Elijah simply says.

“We also need Ryker and Bash to watch out for me until we trap him,” I add.

“The whole band back together?” James rubs his hands together.

“Real mature,” Blue scoffs.

“Don’t be the killer of my fun,” James pouts.

“Children,” Jax scolds. “What do you need us to do?”

“How do you feel about herding a man through the forest?” I ask.

Their surprise quickly turns to eagerness.

The smell is horrendous.

Ryker was eager to get rid of his unwelcome guest. Sam has been hanging in his basement for days, rotting. His numerous wounds have stopped healing.

If we don’t have any nutrients, there comes a point when the body gives up. He will eventually heal if he is able to shift and eat. Unfortunately for him, he won’t get the chance.

“The customers have started to complain about a lingering smell,” Ryker says, turning accusing eyes to Elijah. “When I go home to my mate and she can’t stand to be near me until I shower off the stench, it pisses me off.”

“We will take him off your hands,” Elijah says, fighting a grin.

“Thank you, Ryker,” I offer.

“Your mate has manners,” he says, turning with pointed look at Elijah.

“She does.” Elijah runs his finger down my cheek. “I don’t.

“Can we just get the fucker out of here?” Bash asks.

The vampires were willing to help us. I realize what it means that Elijah is prepared to allow them to protect me when he can’t. I am coming to terms with the idea that he

is committed to me. That is difficult for me to trust.

Sam has been watching us with a glazed half-mast gaze. He hasn't said a word. He's given up the fight. I have to fight the urge to be sympathetic to him. All the things he has witnessed and participated in don't deserve my forgiveness.

Bash walks to the table at the side of the room and picks up the duct tape. Sam limply holds his head up and easily allows Bash to put it over his mouth. Elijah searches the table and comes away with handcuffs. He puts them around Sam's wrists before Bash takes him off the hook, letting him fall heavily to the floor. Ryker passes them cuffs for his ankles, which have a long chain connecting them.

"How are we getting him out of here without someone seeing?" I ask, pushing aside everything we have to do.

"The underground tunnel," Ryker simply says.

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My eyebrows raise as they pass me, Sam slung over Bash's shoulder.

"We built this after I found my mate. I wanted another way to protect her." He stops at a steel door in the corner of the room. "Also another way to escape." He pulls out a large key from his pocket.

It squeals as he pushes it open. Elijah laces our fingers and pulls me into the darkness.

I do not like this. It's way too dark. Our vision adjusts quickly, but that's not the point. It's too creepy.

Ryker leads, while Bash ambles behind him as if he doesn't have a shifter over his shoulder. Elijah stays close to me but slightly behind, which I'm grateful for. No one wants to be the first or the last in a dark, concrete tunnel.

I remember when I was fourteen, I begged my mom to take me to a haunted house (as if our life wasn't scary enough). She caved and took me. So horrible. She was in front of me. These assholes in masks would run up behind me. One startled me so badly, I ran and then fell into my mom.

No one wants to be charged. Cheetah or not.

I jump when I hear laughter ahead of us.

"Easy, it's the wolves," Elijah murmurs, but I hear the smile in his voice. "That is River."

“Fuck, this is awesome. Why haven’t you invited me to your tunnel?” River pounces closer.

“You are why,” is Ryker’s reply.

“You’re no fun.”

“You got my message?” Bash asks the other man.

“We did.” He looks at me. “I’m Kerian. This is my brother River.”

“Hello, Saylor.” Are all the shifters around here gorgeous?

River has black hair and bright green eyes. Kerian has brown hair and light green eyes. They both are built but Kerian is more muscular. Their mate must thank the God’s above for her luck.

“Ava went to stay with Serenity. She will be safe with her,” Kerian assures Ryker.

“Is Marie coming?” River asks Bash.

“I couldn’t stop her,” Bash says glumly.

“Of course, she wants to come. All I heard was we got to chase a man through the woods and I was ready to go,” River yells, jumping up and down, his fist swinging in the air.

“So mature as usual,” Ryker says, but I can see the respect on his face.

“So what is the plan?” River asks. “Saylor, you haven’t heard yet, but I am amazing at pulling off the best plans.” Ryker snorts, and River glares at him. “Dude, that was

one time.”

“The one time you went with a plan that put my mate in danger?”

“She was fine. You have to admit, she is more dangerous than the men in that house,” River points out.

“I don’t have to admit shit.”

“How about we get to the car so I don’t have to hold the stinky, dying cheetah anymore,” Bash growls.

“Oh, yeah.” River jumps back. “I was wondering what that smell was. I didn’t want to ask.”

“Crazy wolf,” Elijah greets as we pass him.

“Cheetah,” River sneers. But both seem at ease with each other. I think it’s all for show.

“So I hear there's a crazy rabbit in the mix now,” River says.

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“There is. Don’t fuck with her though, Saylor is fond of her,” Elijah says.

“Hey, I wouldn’t. Like I said, they're crazy. And vicious. They may be small, but they make up for it with guts and determination.”

The guys throw Sam into the back of a van.

“This is where we part,” Ryker reminds us.

He looks between us and walks with Bash to a shiny black car.

The plan is to separate. I go with the vampires and Elijah with the wolves and panthers. They are going to meet up with the dragons and give the signal.

I don’t like it. Elijah really doesn’t like it.

But it’s what we have to do. Grant will not come close enough if he knows the shifters are near.

He reaches into his pocket and hands me a phone. “You will call me or message me if there are problems. Scream, yell, run, whatever you have to do,” he stresses.

“I will. We won’t be far away.” I step into his body. “It will be over soon. I smelled traces of him around the building.”

“If the vampires don’t protect you, I will kill them.”

“We heard that,” Bash calls.

“I meant you to,” Elijah returns.

“I’ll be fine.” I lift up on my toes and he meets me halfway.

The kiss goes wild. He holds my head in place, my hair threaded through his fingers. I can taste his desperation and his fear. His hat falls from his head when I grasp his hair at his neck.

“Alright, you’re acting like the plan is shit,” River calls to us from the passenger side of the van.

We break apart, breathing heavily. He drops his forehead to mine.

“I’ll see you soon,” I whisper.

“Be careful, Kitty Cat,” Elijah whispers back.

“Let’s go, cheetah. I don’t want to be stuck in this van with him longer than I have to,” River says. Elijah bends to pick up his hat, his eyes never leaving me.

I turn and walk to the vampires waiting patiently. I don’t look back. I have nothing to worry about. It’s a good plan. How can it go wrong?

Right?

Chapter Twenty

Saylor

“Trust,” Bash says as I reach the passenger side door he holds for me.

His comment may be meant for Elijah but also for me. I haven’t had a real conversation with either vampire. But I’m following my gut, and my gut tells me they are good men. They have helped me when I needed it. Their mates are happy and dedicated to them as Elijah is to me. I have to trust them.

The plan could be shit.

We decided that Elijah, along with River and Kerian would take Sam to the opposite side of the woods that surround Elijah’s and the dragon's houses. The forest is extensive and dense. The panthers will join them there, minimizing their presence. Using the vehicles to get there will ensure their scents will not leave a trail.

Sam will be let go once there.

The vampires and I will start at the beginning of the woods. The scary part is we will ditch the car and go on foot. I have to leave the breadcrumbs for Grant and his pack. I can guarantee if he is confronted with either going after me or after a member of his pack, he will choose me. Yet, he will want someone to find Sam to see if he has answers.

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The powerful smell coming off of Sam can't be ignored.

The plan is to herd and surround the men with Grant, while I confront the man who took so much from me. I reach down and outline the knife I have in my pocket. I will see the dream of watching him bleed out a reality.

"We will always have you within sight," Bash assures me.

"Of course." I nod.

Ryker is driving us to meet Marie. Bash is sitting in the backseat calmly.

"We will know if you need us." Ryker glances over at me. "Elijah will be fine. He will see you soon enough."

"I have to believe that. How can we fail when we have so many on our side?" Maybe I shouldn't have voiced that question as the many ways it could go wrong run through my head.

Ryker stops the car.

Marie gets out of the one in front of us. From what I know, Marie was human when she met Bash. He turned her, mated her, and they have been living happily since. She has long blonde hair and a beautiful aura surrounds her.

As we leave the car and meet on the sidewalk, I notice the change that comes over Bash. Everything softens on his face. His eyes are clear and become tender. The

harshness that is ever present is gone.

That's what love is.

He is completely devoted to her.

Is that how Elijah looks at me?

I hope I look at him like that because even though I haven't admitted it to myself yet, I am so in love with him.

"Saylor," Marie says softly once she is in her mate's arms. "We will be close. If we think you need us, we will interfere."

"Thank you. Are you going to walk behind me? How does this work?"

"Something like that," Ryker says, which tells me nothing.

"We will hide. Our forms can blur as we run. We have other tricks, too," she offers, grinning slightly.

"Sure. How about I just let you do your thing," I say.

"I will walk beside you for a bit. The guys will fall back. We will be able to tell if he is near."

"Okay. When are the others going to release Sam?" We need him to bring them to where we want them.

"They are almost there," Ryker informs us.

I nervously start walking as Marie falls into step beside me.

“I have your clothes,” I blurt.

“I’m glad they fit. Elijah was sure they would.”

“He tried.” We both giggle.

Jesus, what is my world coming to. I’m walking down the road with three vampires, giggling with a human turned vampire while expecting soon to kill a man who has been stalking me for years.

“It’s alright,” she says, watching me.

“What?”

“To have a human moment in the middle of chaos.”

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“How could you tell that was what I was thinking?”

“I’ve had many chaotic moments.”

“It would be nice to get to know you when those moments are over,” I suggest.

“That would be great. We’ll get the girls together after,” she agrees.

“Baby,” Bash calls quietly.

She looks back at him and then at me. “Be careful, but be confident. You can do this.”

She stops walking as I go on. The guys must have made it to the location and let Sam out of the van. With our shifter noses, we can pick up the scent from miles away. Also, Grant will be able to feel that he is close and not obscured by concrete.

I keep a steady pace, touching the things I pass.

I don’t like being separated from Elijah. We haven’t been further than a room away from each other much since we met. It’s like a piece of me is missing. If the need to be near him is as strong as it is now, I can’t imagine what it will be when I mark him.

The pavement turns into a gravel road and the noise from the town settles to a distant hum. I can smell the trees and see the black outline of them. The closer I get to them, the only sound I hear is the crunch of the gravel and dirt under my feet and the natural wildlife coming awake in the dark.

The vampires have disappeared. They made no sound and gave me no clue of their location.

Shivers rack me for a moment at the thought of them not keeping their promise—but only for a brief second.

I am totally alone.

There is a gentle breeze that ruffles my hair and chills my skin. I can hear the creek, the soft tinkling water flowing slowly. With my nose, I can smell the deer running away from a cheetah entering their home. Birds and squirrels watch from the trees above. It seems as if there is no human life around for miles.

Once I enter through the trees, everything holds its breath.

I stop and do the same. I reach down and take off my shoes, kicking them to my side. I love sinking my feet into the earth in either of my forms. I run better and connect more in my environment without them. Elijah had someone put spare clothes around the area. He knew we would probably need to shift at some point. I was grateful as I didn't want to be naked in front of my new friends.

Most shifters were completely comfortable with being nude in front of others. It was natural for us. The dragons are the only ones who can shift with clothes on and keep them when they turn back. It's only been my mom and I. I didn't have a large pack to run with and to get used to shifting around them. Plus, Elijah doesn't seem like the type of mate that would appreciate anyone seeing me that way.

I rely on my senses totally.

I walk forward, my eyes still closed, my hands trailing over the rough bark of the trees as I pass. I hear the leaves and smell the dirt that covers the forest floor. My

nose pinches when the odor of Sam floats lightly by me. I pick up others. The cheetahs are on the hunt for their packmate. I can't separate them as they are too far away.

Grant is closing in. I barely catch his scent. I have time before he gets to me.

Still no sign of the vampires.

I don't know how I will react to seeing Grant after all this time. We have been running for basically all of my thirty-two years. He's like the ghosts that you believe are around you but can't see. I want the games to end.

I wander deeper into the dark woods. My eyes adjust as my cheetah takes over. She wants her mate. We are in agreement. It's funny how fast I fell for him. Sure, the bond pushes you together, but it can't compel you to love each other. I guess there is something about the universe being all-knowing. There is that perfect person out in the world who is meant for you. I never dreamed I would stumble into this little world of shifters Elijah was hiding among.

A cowboy.

He's wild and rude.

He loves control and violence comes easy to him.

Why do I find all of that charming?

With the way I grew up, it's not shocking that I don't find it easy to trust people. My mom always preached that we were alone in the world. We had to take care of each other and screw anyone else. Logically, I realized it wasn't a healthy mindset to have. My heart ached for the love of a big family—to have somewhere soft to fall.

My mom never talked about her family. I have always wondered if she had brothers or sisters. Uncles or aunts? Did she know her parents? I asked her many times about her past, but she shot me down. She said they gave up their relationship a long time ago. I would give up after she would get so upset. She would shut down. I assumed her childhood must have been very traumatic if she left them in the past, never to see them again.

But I still wonder.

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It's true that I want revenge on Grant. But I also want answers. I doubt he will be truthful, yet there is a chance he will give me some kind of closure. He did grow up around my parents. He knew them before when I was too young to remember. As hard as I have tried, I can't recall the years we spent in their pack.

I have so many regrets regarding my mom. I should have pushed for more answers. I should have asked more questions. Even though she was upset about it, I could have assured her that whatever happened with her family, I would understand. It kills me that she isn't here anymore. We both got comfortable with all the running and moving. When you do something for so long, it becomes the norm. Sure, I still missed all the things I couldn't have. The important thing was that I was with her. Now that she is dead, I have no one to ask all the things I have wondered about.

Can I depend on Grant to give me those answers?

I have to try.

I'm getting closer to the water. The air is becoming cooler, and the smell of fish floats through the air. The breeze picks up and with it brings the knowledge that Grant is coming. He is on my trail and will come across me soon.

I don't run. I don't panic.

I stand my ground.

The plan is working. He is alone.

I brace myself to see him again.

The past few days I have gotten used to being around Elijah. He has been my barrier that stood in front of me and the rest of the world. I have relied on him to deal with all the hard things. Which, he has done without complaint—but he isn't here now.

I have to do this alone.

The grass crunches under heavy boots getting closer as my heart pounds louder. I have to force my heart to slow, falling back into the habits I developed.

Calm...calm...breathe.

He will not hurt you.

I will take my power back.

Grant steps into the clearing. He's grinning as his eyes sweep over me, leaving me feeling as if there are thousands of ants crawling over me.

"Well, hello, Sweets," he says, his tongue sweeping over his bottom lip. "I'm excited to taste you again."

Maybe running isn't a bad idea.

Chapter Twenty-One

Elijah

This is the worst plan in the history of plans.

I stare out the window of the dragons' house at the half-dead cheetah at the edge of the trees. He's not moving. We left his cuffs on so he wouldn't be able to shift yet, so that may be hampering his mobility. Still, he isn't even twitching.

We had planned to stay in Laken's house that is surrounded by rock to minimize our scent. The dragons have many capabilities. One of them is to move heavy shit with their bodies and their mind. Laken built this place by himself. It's impenetrable by all sides. He has state of the art security—facial scans even.

The panthers, Jax, Blue, and James are sitting with their mate Harmony in the living room talking quietly with the dragons, Laken, Bishop, and Penny. The wolves Kerian and River are sitting around the counter with Las and Lucas, the lions.

Logan is standing at my shoulder watching the cheetah, too. I feel his quiet contemplation of the situation. He is a quiet one but his mind is always working.

I am agitated by the fact that I had to leave my mate to face a psychopath in the woods. I hate that I am not there to protect her. I hate that I know this is something she has to do. I absolutely hate that I have to rely on vampires to jump in if she is in trouble.

I feel helpless.

I don't like feeling this way. It's an unwelcome emotion I have tried to avoid for years, since I was kicked out of my home. I've chewed through many toothpicks since the kiss with Saylor. The bond is humming just under the surface of my skin, begging me to go to her.

A weak line is connecting us. Because the bond isn't completed, we aren't completely in sink. Once Saylor bites me, I will be able to know everything she is feeling. I would know if she was scared or sad or in need of help.

I want my mate's bite. Badly.

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But I want it to be her decision. I hope after all this crap is over, she will be comfortable enough to finish our bond so we can move on, together. If she turns away from me, I will be miserable forever.

“She is fine,” Logan says quietly.

“How do you know?” I ask.

“She’s not human. She tore a man apart. She is far from helpless. She is strong,” he replies.

“I know she is,” I start, adjusting my hat, pulling it down further. “But she doesn’t have to be. She has spent her life having to be strong and relying on herself. Why should she have to be when she has me? I will be her strength when she is weak.”

“You will be.” He steps beside me. “This is something she needs to do.”

“I don’t like it,” I say gruffly.

“I realize that. You won’t stop chewing, and you’re messing with the hat.”

“So?”

“Those are your tells,” he says.

“I don’t have ‘tells’,” I deny, stopping my hand mid-motion as I was going to pull at my hat. “Fuck off.”

“She will need you once this is done. She won’t appreciate you swooping in before she does what she needs to do,” he informs me.

“Don’t you think I know that?” I snarl. “I would be beside her right now if I thought for one minute she would welcome it.”

“You love her,” he states.

“Of course, I fucking love her. She is everything to me. I know it sounds crazy.” I cross my arms. “We’ve known each other for less than a week, how can I love her? I am nuts about her.”

“That’s a good thing,” he whispers.

“What if she can’t return my love?” I ask the burning question that has been haunting me. “She has been through so much. How can she trust me?”

“We all have been through something.” He leans against the window, his body pointed towards me but his gaze focused outside. “I have been chased, tortured, hunted, starved, and humiliated. I somehow lived through that, thanks to Ava and her mates that set me free. I had lost my brothers and never thought I would have them back. I haven’t spoken to my parents, afraid of their judgment and condemnation,” he whispers, his words so quiet I have to strain to hear him. “I lost myself but I am slowly building my life again. I have scars, physically, and emotionally. I am a weak man right now, but I know if I met my mate, I would never let her go. I would thank the universe for giving me that gift. I would do whatever I had to, to be the man she needed me to be. I have never felt so low as I did stuck in a cage. Do whatever she wants to make her comfortable in completing the bond. Don’t let her slip through your fingers because of your pride.”

I blink, and blink again. “I believe that is the most words I’ve ever heard you say at

one time.”

“I am your friend. I want you to be happy. I appreciate all the times you have let me sit in silence with you on your porch. You don’t realize how much I needed it. I just needed someone to be there with no judgment or pressure.” He looks at me directly. “You mean something to me. Now Saylor means something to me. I will be beside you tonight, whether you go to her now or later.”

“Fuck,” I whisper, once again shielding my eyes with the brim of my hat. “Thanks.”

“Of course.”

“You didn’t tell me how you connected to your brothers again,” I accuse, effectively changing the subject.

He looks over at them. “I wasn’t sure it was going to last,” he muses. “I didn’t plan to see them. After my freedom was granted, I wanted to disappear—lick my wounds. Instead, I went to find them. I wanted to at least see them at a distance. They had other ideas.”

“I’m glad. You need them.” I look back out the glass in front of me. “I would like to get to know them when everything is settled.”

“I’m sure we can work that out.” He clears his throat. “How long are we supposed to wait?”

“Jesus,” I sigh rubbing my jaw. “Grant’s pack needs to make an appearance before we show ourselves. Then we kill them and ride to the rescue.”

“Great plan,” he says dryly.

“Yeah.” I look at the others around the room as they try to hide the fact they can hear everything we have said. “Are you sure the vampires will protect Saylor?” I can’t get rid of the pit in my stomach telling me to never to trust one of their kind.

“Dude, they are the good ones,” River says.

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“Marie is with them. She would never let anything happen to Saylor, even if Ryker and Bash didn’t act soon enough,” Harmony says.

“They are not like the ones from your past,” Logan reminds me.

“I know,” I concede. “I just hate waiting.”

“It would pass the time if we had food,” River suggests. Everyone groans. He is famous for his love of food. I can’t blame the guy—food is amazing. I am not the best cook but I can order it like a pro.

River always has food in his hand. I am surprised he doesn’t have something hidden away for a moment like this.

“Help yourself,” Bishop offers, motioning to the cupboards.

River hops off the stool at the counter and starts opening cupboards. Kerian rolls his eyes but smiles.

“He hasn’t moved?” Jax asks.

“Nope,” I say, putting my forearm on the window. “Maybe we should take the cuffs off? What if they can’t find him?” My fingers tap along the edge of the brim of my hat.

“How can they not smell that?” James asks. “I can smell him through the walls.”

“It almost put me off eating,” River mumbles around a mouthful of chips.

“It is powerful,” Penny wrinkles her nose.

“You weren’t the one that had to ride with him,” Kerian complains.

“Can we stop talking about the damn smell?” I yell. “Does everyone get that my mate is out there with a man who she has been terrified of her whole life? The only person she has had looking after her is dead, and now I am the one that will be taking over that role. But she doesn’t want me right now. I have to stand on the outside, waiting for that fucking stinking cheetah to lure his asshole pack members here so I can kill someone. I need to kill something. That is the only thing that will make me feel better since I can’t have my mate in my arms.”

“Elijah,” Logan says.

“What?” I growl.

“Look.” He nods to the window.

I turn sharply. Four cheetahs stalk slowly toward Sam, their heads low and swiveling.

“They’re here,” I say harshly.

Finally. Let the killing begin.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Saylor

Time hasn’t dimmed Grant’s good looks. Is it too much to ask that evil people with

black souls have their outward appearance match their insides? Why can't he have no charm? A deformed face? Horns?

His midnight black hair is thick and wavy. He has pretty dark blue eyes, and they are filled with satisfaction. He is tall and muscular. Any woman would look at him twice, maybe three times. You would never guess the sick things he has done by looking at him. I guess that is what they all say... 'he was always the nicest guy'. Most of the world would be surprised at what happens behind the facade some show the world.

"You grew up fine, sweets," he oozes. "Did you miss me?"

"Not at all," I sneer. I have to force my feet not to move as he moves closer.

"I don't believe that." He smirks and comes closer still until I can smell his stench.

"Believe it," I snap. "Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why follow me? Why do you want me?" I can't hold the questions inside any longer.

“Why not?”

“Fuck off, Grant. Give me an answer,” I demand.

He tilts his head, his eyes burning into mine. “I want you. I knew when you were little that we would be perfect together.”

“That’s not possible. Plus, we aren’t mates,” I point out.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Don’t you know how mates work?”

“I do. I just choose not to fall into the bullshit,” he shouts. “Why should I wait for the fucking universe to choose my mate? What gives them the power? I don’t let anyone hold their power over me. I should be able to pick who I want as a mate. I choose you. I will have you.”

“No,” I growl. The universe knows he doesn’t deserve someone to call his own.

He shakes his head sharply. “That is not your decision.”

“Pretty sure it is,” I spit.

“I have watched you for years. I have waited for you. I won’t be denied what I want.”

“Grant, what’s the big deal? What is so special about me? Years of following me,

never catching me. Why keep coming?" I don't understand his obsession.

"You are mine," he declares. "My father gave you to me."

"What?" I ask weakly.

"He promised you to me. He said I would be the one to break you. He said you would make me a powerful Alpha. I swore to him as he was dying that I would find you and mate you. He chose you for me and I will complete his wish," he says, his breath becoming ragged in his passion.

"He had no right to give me to you." I take a step back.

"He did," he says, eliminating the space I created.

"What gave him that right?" I ask, inching backward away from his advance.

"Your father did," he says, blowing my mind.

"What?" I gasp.

"Did you know they were best friends?" he asks, his body stopping.

"No," I whisper.

"They were the best of friends for years," he says, almost overjoyed at my shock. "They grew up together. My dad always knew he would be Alpha and yours didn't care and didn't want the position. They did everything together. They spent years building a friendship that nothing could tear apart. Then they met your mother. She was everything they wanted: beauty, kindness, and fearlessness. She changed them. She was your dad's mate. The bond started to work its magic between them. Except,

my dad was left out. He loved her, too.

“She hurt all they built. She threatened their friendship. Your dad saw the longing in mine’s eyes. At first, he hated the wall that grew between them. He did anything he could to ease it. One night, your dad convinced your mom to be with both of them. He thought if he gave them a night to be together it would help.” I cringe. I don’t think I want those answers I was seeking any longer. How could my dad do that?

“She agreed. I suppose she loved my dad in her own way and could see the trauma she was causing between them. After that night, my dad was never the same. He became obsessed with getting a repeat of that night. He had to have her. He knew she felt more for him than she admitted.” Grant runs his hands through his hair and stared out at the water. “He told me she did things to him that no other woman did. That the universe got it wrong. She was his.”

“Stop,” I protest, swallowing the bile that crept up my throat.

“Fuck, he said, the mouth she had on her,” he says dreamily.

“Stop,” I say, my voice getting harsher.

“He wanted more. Your father wouldn’t allow it. So, my dad had to do what he did. He snuck into her room and gave her what she was begging for.”

“No,” I cry.

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“She wanted it,” he shouts. “They all want it. You can deny all you want. Women want a powerful man that takes over.”

“No. No...not like that,” I deny, violently shaking my head. “He raped her.”

“He didn’t,” he seethes. “She loved every second.”

“Bullshit,” I growl, my claws shifting.

“She wanted it so much that they did it again, and again. Your father found out. He was upset that she wanted him more, so that’s why he accused him of rape. Of your mother and of the other girl he walked in on. My dad was just seeking comfort with another from his heartache because he couldn’t have who he wanted. My dad, the Alpha,” he snarks, “told him to back off. To walk out and not say anything. He wouldn’t listen. He pushed and he pushed.” He spins toward me, pointing at my face. “He warned him what would happen if he didn’t drop it. It had been five years of hell for my dad. Six years of watching and waiting for her.

“Your dad didn’t wait long after they met to knock her up. You were born and it didn’t shake the love my dad had for her. That’s when you were promised to me. The Alpha swore he would take care of you if something happened to your dad.”

“The Alpha was the one that killed him,” I remind him, sneering. My cheetah pushing me to act. My claws are itching to scratch his eyes out.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Your Alpha killed my dad. You and your pack killed my mother. What more do you want? I will never be with you.”

“You will.” He circles me and I pivot to keep him in sight. “What makes you think I killed her?”

Shivers rack my body. “What do you mean?” Circle. Pivot.

He grins mysteriously and I grit my teeth, sick of his evasion. “Your mother had another child,” he whispers in my ear.

I jerk back. Circle. Pivot. “No.”

“Yes,” he hisses. “My dad didn’t like condoms. You were two years old when she got pregnant again. She gave birth to another baby girl with the same black hair as my dad. She looked just like him.”

“I...” I stumble back. “No.”

“Deny it all you want, it’s the truth. When your mom ran away with you, she left her other daughter behind. Of course, I have to give her credit—she did try to make up for it, just twenty-plus years later.”

“Is my mother alive?” I sob. “Do I have a sister?”

He smirks. “Another story.” He rubs his hands together. Circle. Pivot. “You see, your mom knew how to reach out to me. She knew my dad was dead. She knew I had your sister—my sister. The day we found you, your mother told me where to find you both.”

“No,” I yell through gritted teeth. “She wouldn’t do that.”

“Would she do it to protect her other daughter? She gave herself up. She let you go. We decided that I would get you both to come with me peacefully. I would have you and she would be able to see her other daughter again. She didn’t hold up her end of the bargain,” he tsks, his finger waving in my face.

“Is my mom alive?” I growl. Circle. Pivot.

He slowly smiles. “I had to punish her. Your sister too. Just because. I have a reputation to uphold.” He leans forward and whispers, “I hurt her just enough to cause massive pain. She healed. But she has been my guest for four years.”

He lunges for me but doesn’t make contact. Bash is there. He shoves his hand against Grant’s chest and he flies into the trees. Suddenly, Marie and Ryker surround me.

“Saylor,” Marie says, her eyes filled with tears.

My mind is racing. My mom? Is she alive?

I have a sister. Can I trust what he said?

“Vampires,” Grant shouts as he stumbles back toward us. “You brought vampires.”

“Stay the fuck back unless you want to die with my hand around your heart,” Bash threatens. “I took it easy on you.”

“You have no right to interfere. This is not your business.” He jerkily brushes the leaves from his pants.

“You are mistaken,” Ryker says. He slides a knife out of the leather sheath that is strapped to his chest. He turns the wicked blade in his hand. “Saylor is our friend. Her mate is also.”

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“What?” Grant takes a threatening step. “What is he talking about?” he asks me.

I grab the neck of my shirt and stretch it to show the very visible mark. “You are not my mate. I have a mate. He marked me.”

He lurches back. “No.”

“Yes. Where is my mother?” I demand.

He flexes his hands. “The minute I signal my pack they will kill her and your sister,” he threatens.

“Well,” Elijah drawls, sauntering between the trees. “That would be difficult.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Grant snarls as he turns to keep all of us within his sight.

“Me?” Elijah asks him but his eyes are on me. “I am Saylor’s mate. She is mine. I am hers.” He looks at Grant. “And you are going to die. Just like the rest of your pack.”

“Fuck,” Grant bellows, looking around wildly.

“Yeah,” Elijah says gleefully, and I want to kiss the shit out of him.

“You killed them all?” he asks. “By yourself? That’s not possible.”

“I think I’m offended.” He tips his hat. “But I did have some help.”

Four panthers, two wolves, three lions, and three dragons step from the shadows surrounding us, circling us. Everyone is in their shifter form except for the dragons. The sight is beautiful.

It's Grant's turn to pivot. His eyes go from one deadly shifter to another and then flit to each of the three vampires around me. He finally settles on my face.

I can smell his fear.

He inches away from us. There is no way he can escape even if he runs.

"Wait," he pleads when Elijah takes a step. "We can forget about this."

"Forget," I scoff. "Where is my mom and sister?"

"If I tell you, will you let me go?" he asks helplessly.

"Sure," I agree. "You have to tell me the truth, though. The vampires will know if you are lying," I bluff. I have no idea if they can or not. Most shifters can sense deception but it is easier with humans.

He licks his lips, and his eyes bounce around us. "I brought them. I thought I could use them to get you to come with me."

"Where?" I snarl.

"At a hotel. I left one of the pack with them." He holds his hands out, his back curled.

"Which one?" I demand.

Everyone is surprised when Sally runs into the clearing. "I said it before, I'll say it

again. You all sure no how to throw a party. Hey, cowboy,” she says, winking at Elijah. “I took care of the remaining pack and your family is staying with me now. It took some convincing to get them to come with me. They don’t trust easily.”

“They’re okay?” Why am I surprised by the things Sally does?

“Yes, physically,” she pauses, “Mentally, it’s going to take some time,” she finishes softly.

I can’t even imagine.

“You’re going to let me go now?” Grant asks desperately. His first mistake was taking his eyes off of Elijah.

Elijah eliminates the space between them in seconds. He’s behind Grant, his claws around his neck. “I don’t think so.” He looks at me. “Kitty Cat?”

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My fury wells up inside me and I shift, shredding my clothes. I bare my teeth as I prowl to them. I think of all the moments I missed, the time I could have spent getting to know my sister. All the women Grant damaged and traumatized.

The kill is so easy.

Elijah steps back, letting me take Grant's body down to the ground. I tear out his throat first. I bite through skin and bone. I relish his screams until he can't voice his pain anymore. I don't stop there. I finish him, making sure he can't come back. He can't hurt anyone ever again.

Once again, I am standing in a pile of bones, flesh, and blood.

This time I shift back quickly.

I'm naked when I do and covered in blood.

"Sally," Elijah calls while he takes off his shirt and covers me. "Go to the hotel and stay with her family. We will be there soon." He grabs my hand and pulls me into his body. "The rest of you, leave." His eyes bore into mine. "Now."

They are swallowed up by the trees.

Elijah pushes me into the nearest tree and holds my wrists high above my head. The smell of him intoxicating me. My eyes travel over him. His jeans riding low on his hips, showing me the delicious view of his muscular chest, and the vee leading to what I desperately want. His cowboy hat shadows his glowing eyes.

“Elijah,” I gasp.

“I am going to fuck you,” he says. “If you don’t want this, tell me now.”

I look at his gorgeous face so close to mine and smile.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elijah

“Do you want me?” Her smile is a sweet sign of permission but I need her words.

“Yes, Sir,” she says firmly.

“Leave your hands above your head. Do not move them.” I squeeze her wrists once before I let go. “I need you so fucking bad, baby.”

“Take me, Sir.”

I grin wickedly and slide my hand around her neck. “Do you know how difficult it was to let you do that? I had to wait, helpless to be near you.” It pained me, but she is a fierce warrior. Logan was correct; she is strong, and her cheetah is ruthless to those who want to hurt her.

“Yes.”

“It was such a rush when I saw you again.” I flex my fingers and her eyes heat. My Kitty Cat likes my style of love. “I got so hard seeing you kill that asshole. Does that make me sick?” I muse, not expecting an answer.

She gives me one anyway. “No,” she assures me. “Did you really kill his pack?”

The vibrations from her question make my hand tingle. “I did.”

“I’m glad you did. Does that make me sick?”

“Fuck no.” I release her delicate neck and move down between her breasts, feeling the heavy thud of her heartbeat. “Are you wet for me?”

“Why don’t you find out, Sir?” she dares.

I glide two fingers down further through my unbuttoned shirt and it falls open further. I reach her belly button but go no further. Instead I travel up again, circling her nipples that have become rock hard from the chilly wind and her need for her mate. She hisses when they pebble further at my attention.

“You are so stunning, holding still for me in nothing but my shirt. How did I get so lucky?” I repeat my path down. But again I stop. Over and over again.

“Please,” she whimpers.

I chuckle and decide to reward her. I tease her, slipping my fingers through the wetness that covers her, lightly—barely touching. My claws on my other hand dig into the bark by her head.

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“Spread,” I command. “Good girl,” I praise at her immediate compliance.

I rub deeper, giving her more. Her hips push against them. Her need as fierce as mine.

“Elijah, Sir,” she begs.

“Give me your mouth.” She tips her chin, her gaze leaving the sight of my hand working her. I tilt my head and take her lips. Her head hits the tree behind her at my force. I could kiss her forever. Her taste. Her enthusiasm. The tasty way she swirls her tongue. I look forward to many years of making out with her.

My adrenaline takes over when the kiss goes wild. I didn’t want to scare her with the force of my need but her eager responses change my mind.

I rip my mouth from hers and latch onto her nipple at the same time I thrust two fingers inside of her. She throbs around them, sucking them further in her sweet pussy. My hat slides back further when it hits her chest as I feed from her tits.

“Sir,” she cries. Her hips greedily push. Faster and faster.

I pull away abruptly and she sobs in protest.

“Don’t worry, baby,” I soothe. “My cock wants to feel you gush around him.”

My hands grip my pants, releasing the button and unzipping them. The sound is loud in the quiet woods. As I do, I relish the vision before me. My mate. My love. Just mine. She is so fucking beautiful. She waits for her man to take her. Her arms still

above her head, her hands clasped together. Her fingers twined together, fidgeting. Her legs spread wide, her bare feet digging into the earth in impatience. Her eyes are watching my hands as I pull out my cock, leaving my pants to hang, framing it.

“Sir, please,” she wails, her impatience evident.

I step into her holding my cock. With my other hand, I grip her leg, pulling it to my hip, and out, opening her wide for me.

My hips meet hers in one powerful push. She takes all of me. Eagerly.

“Eyes on me,” I growl as her eyes close. They snap to mine. “I want to live inside this pussy. This is mine.” I emphasize my point with a thrust. “You are mine.”

“Yes,” she moans. “Yours, Sir.”

At her words, I go wild. Her ass hitting the tree with my actions. Her cries echoing around us and egging me on. I retract my claws and circle her back with my free arm, my fingers grasping her hip. Her pussy clenches my cock, the squeeze euphoric.

I drop my head and lick her tits. My teeth elongate and I scrape them over her nipple. Her harsh breath ruffles my hair, and I pound into her.

“Fuck, yes,” I say, my voice ragged from the pleasure she brings me. “Take me, baby,” I encourage.

“Sir, I’m going to come,” she whimpers.

“Do it.” I bite her chin. “Cover me in that delicious come.”

“Jesus,” she yells.

“Yes, fuck yes,” I grit as I feel her spasming around me. “Such a good girl. Take my come. Feel it covering you. Do you want it?”

“Yes, please, Sir,” she begs. “Give it to me.”

I thrust, one, two, three times. I hold deep, as deep as I can be, and my come releases. Her pussy sucks it from me, squeezing me so tight I can’t move anymore.

I nuzzle my face into her neck, licking my mark. “Mine.”

Her pussy convulses and I smile. Yes, she loves being mine.

I slowly pull out and adjust my pants. I cup her cheek and kiss her gently.

“Are you okay?” I ask. I hold her hip. “You can lower your arms.”

They drop heavily. “I’m good.” She smiles.

I grin back and pick up each arm, massaging them lightly. “I love how soft your skin is. I hope the bark didn’t scratch you too bad.”

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“If it did, it was totally worth it,” she says, smirking.

“Well, isn’t that sweet,” a voice drawls from the trees.

My body goes rigid.

Vampire.

I turn quickly so Saylor is pressed to my back.

I curse myself for not being on guard. I was so wrapped up in my mate that I blocked everything out.

“Elijah?” Saylor puts her hands on my back.

“Don’t move,” I instruct, my hand reaching back to grip her thigh.

“So sorry to interrupt.” A face is put to the voice as she walks out of the dark and closer to us.

No.

It can’t be her.

“No,” I whisper, my face draining of color.

“Oh, yes,” she says smugly. “Did you get my notes?”

“Tiffany,” I say in horror.

“Did you miss me?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Saylor

Elijah is so still that it scares me. I’m shaken, going from a horrible confrontation with Grant, to killing him, to the best sex ever with Elijah, to a dead woman coming back to life. She ruined a perfect moment. I was on the verge of marking my mate. I wanted to tell him what his support means to me.

I wanted to tell him how much I love him.

This bitch had to walk back into his life.

I did as he asked and stayed behind him. I won’t move until he tells me to. I can’t imagine the shock he is going through.

Well, I guess I can. My mom is alive. I thought we would be going to her soon.

“How?” Elijah asks.

“Well, that's a long story. Are you sure your friend wants to stand around half naked to hear it?”

“Will you let her go?” he asks.

“Sure, she means nothing to me. I want you.” She tilts her head, her eyes devouring my mate.

A low growl escapes before I can stop it.

“Let me talk to her and then we can catch up.” Elijah turns to me after she shrugs her shoulders and crosses her arms. She gives us her back but we are both aware she can still hear us.

“No,” I snap.

“Yes,” he responds. He starts to button my shirt. “I know I promised you would never have to run again—I’m going to have to break that promise.”

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“Elijah, no,” I cry.

He looks at me sadly. “Yes,” he says gently. His lips touch my ear, his voice below a whisper. “You have to.”

He tries to be as quiet as he can but there is still a chance she can hear us. “I won’t leave you,” I say just as softly.

“Kitty Cat, I need you to,” he begs. “You are fast.”

“I can’t,” I say, clasping the top of his jeans. “I need to be with you.”

“I know. I need to be with you, too, but I have to take care of this.”

“Elijah,” Tiffany sings. “What’s taking so long? If she doesn’t go, I can just kill her.”

“Just wait a fucking minute,” he grunts, his teeth clenched.

“Don’t make me leave you.” My eyes fill with tears. Maybe we can take her. Vampires are more powerful than most shifters. We don’t know what tricks she has learned. But together maybe it’s possible.

“It’s not,” he says, reading my face easily. “We couldn’t.”

“No, please,” I beg.

“Baby, do you remember the night we went out?”

His random question startles me. “Yes.”

“You remember all the people you met?”

“I do.” The panthers.

“All the ones that you wished you could?”

The vampires weren’t there. The dragons either. The wolves. “Of course.”

“Run.” He kisses my ear. “Run, and think about that night.”

“I’m running out of patience,” Tiffany hisses.

“Fuck, Saylor, please.” He runs his thumb over my lips. “Run, baby.”

I look at his pleading eyes and nod reluctantly.

He mouths the words, See you soon.

“I’m going to rip her heart from her body if she doesn’t leave in three seconds,” Tiffany yells.

“Go,” Elijah says, nudging me away from the tree.

Fuck.

I run.

And I run.

As the tears fall down my cheeks, I run faster than I ever have.

He was right. A vampire is lethal in most cases, but a deranged one who faked her death and has found him after all this time is deadly. She wants my mate. It's tearing me up inside that I left him. If I stayed, she would have killed me in front of Elijah. I saw it in her eyes. I couldn't do that to him.

My legs fly across the grass. My body fluidly threads through the trees. My heart is breaking as I get further and further away from Elijah.

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My mate.

My Sir.

Mine.

I swallow down the bile wanting to escape. I almost turn around the pain of leaving him is so intense. I don't know what to do. I need him. He is my home now. I don't want to run away from him.

But I keep going.

I keep running.

Because he asked me to, and because I know he was right.

"Fuck," I scream, the sound absorbed by the wind and trees around me. The agony in my voice is painful even to my ears.

I cross miles in minutes.

My goal is the dragon's house.

I see a dim light coming quickly. I will not roll over and not fight. I will not leave my mate for long. I don't know where she will take him. I hope not far.

Hope.

It's been so long since I have had any. Elijah gave me that.

I barely stop before I hit the door to their house. My hand automatically goes to the doorknob but it's locked. I start pounding. Loudly and repeatedly.

"Laken," I shout. "Penny. Bishop." Over and over, I say their names. "Please, please, please," I sob.

The door swings open so fast I fall forward into Laken's arms. "Jesus, Saylor. What happened?" I register Bishop and Penny behind him.

"I need help. I need the vampires. Now," I say urgently.

"Why? What's going on?" Penny asks.

"She has Elijah. He made me run. He said I had to. I didn't want to but she would have killed me in front of him."

"What the fuck?" Bishop snaps, reaching for his phone.

"Saylor, slow down," Laken says gently. "Bishop is calling Ryker. Start at the beginning."

"A girl from Elijah's past is back. He thought she was dead but now she is a vampire. He made me run."

"She let you go?"

"She said she just wanted him." My throat closes.

"Alright, come and sit. It's going to take a little time to get everyone here. I need you

to tell us everything once they are.”

“We have to go now,” I clench his shirt. “We can’t let her take him away.”

“Hey,” Penny cups my shoulder. “Nothing will happen to Elijah. He will take care of himself until we get there. He wouldn’t want you so upset. Would he?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Can you believe I used to never show my emotions?” I ask, shocked at my actions.

“I do. Mates can change so many things,” Penny says, putting her arm around me and guiding me to the couch. “Laken, will you get her a drink?”

“Of course.”

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“Now, we will have a drink and wait for the others.”

“She is a vampire now. I don’t know what she is capable of.” Something Tiffany said dawns on me. “She was the one that was sending the notes.”

“That makes sense,” Laken says as he hands us a drink. “There wasn’t a scent on them.”

“We assumed it was Grant.” I take a sip and close my eyes when the alcohol hits my tongue. I try to center myself.

“That is where the evidence pointed,” Bishop says when he walks back into the room.

“Are they coming?”

“Yes, all of them.”

“Okay, good.” I look at Penny. “I’m sorry, you were in bed.” I notice she is wearing a long t-shirt.

“Don’t worry,” she hushes me.

“Shit, I’m getting dried blood on your couch.” I jump up.

“Saylor,” she says, tenderly. Her hands clasp mine. “How about I take you in the bathroom to clean up. Not because I care about the blood, but I think it will make you feel better.”

“Sure.” I follow her through a bedroom into a spacious bathroom.

“This is the guest room. It is yours as long as you need.” She grabs a towel and puts it on the counter.

“I’m a mess.” My eyes fill again.

“You are allowed to be a mess when your mate is in danger.”

“I don’t do this. I don’t get emotional,” I say again.

“Hon, we all have our ways we cope with trauma. You can be however you need to here. In our house, you are safe from judgment. You are safe. If you need to break down, do it.” She hugs me close. “Let it out if you need to.”

“Thank you.” I hold her for a minute, breathing deep. “I hate that I left him.”

“She would have killed you. That would have been Elijah’s last memory of you. He would have lived in misery if he couldn’t protect you. He knew you would come to us.” She pushes back. “He knew we would look after you.”

“Logically, I know that.” I sigh. “It’s the stupid emotions that are fucking with me.”

“I get it. You are not alone. We got this. This group is good at being there for each other and finding a way to solve the problem.”

“Thank you,” I say, smiling at her.

“Why don’t you take a shower? By the time you’re done, everyone will be here.” She waits for my nod. “I’ll put some clothes in the bedroom for you.”

She leaves, shutting the door quietly.

So I can cry without an audience in the shower.

Penny put sweatpants and a long-sleeved soft shirt on the bed for me. I am grateful for her kindness but I still pause with my hand on the doorknob. Embarrassment over my panic is flushing my cheeks. I have trained myself to shove all the emotions I feel down inside, and I never show them in front of people.

Elijah and these people have changed me. Or they have given me the permission to let it out.

I step lightly into the living room and all eyes turn to me. Ryker, Bash, and Marie are here. Kerian and River are standing by the door. River has lost his carefree expression that normally embodies him. The panthers look fierce, Harmony is surrounded by her mates.

My throat closes, and I have to fight the tears that want to fall. I want this. All these people would drop whatever they were doing to come to Elijah's aid—it's heartwarming.

"Tell me exactly what happened," Ryker says. He steps forward, but the powerful anger that emanates from him doesn't scare me. Instead, I am grateful that he gets right to the point—his anger is directed at the bitch that has my mate.

We're coming, Elijah.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Elijah

I straighten as the pain from seeing Saylor running away from me almost brings me to my knees. It was the only option. She will go to our friends. She will find the vampires. I'm afraid they are the only ones that can take Tiffany. I have no doubts about my strength, but I can admit that a vampire is more powerful than I am. I have tried to avoid all vampires until I moved here. I had hoped to never see Silas again, but I had no idea that Tiffany would be the one to worry about.

Tiffany isn't a young innocent girl anymore. She is still thin but her posture is tall and confident. Her hair is short and she's dyed it red since the last time I saw her. She's wearing a tight, long skirt and a tank top.

I feel nothing but anger and sadness.

"You look even better than you did in high school." She saunters over to me.

"You do to. The last time I saw you, you were tied to a tree," I say dryly. I had just turned eighteen when I left. Sixteen years is a long time, yet the memory of it is still so vivid. I pick up my hat from the ground.

Her tinkling laugh echoes around us. "Walk with me," she offers, which isn't really an option. She sees my hesitance. "Elijah, you know I could break your neck with a

flick of my wrist.”

I fall in step beside her. She is taking me further away from my mate. “Why are you not dead?”

“Did you know that I can hold my breath for a very long time?”

“No, that’s not something we shared with each other.” I pull my hat low.

“I can. As a vampire, it’s even longer.” She twines her arm through mine as if we are two friends taking a stroll, and I have to hide my disgust at her touch. “I was so in love with you. You were everything to me. Did you know?”

“I knew you had a crush,” I respond carefully.

She laughs. “So much more. I knew that you were hiding something. It was in the way you carried yourself. You were so confident. So agile and fierce. You were not a normal boy. I would have never guessed at that time that you were a cheetah.”

“Silas told you.”

“He did. He told me when he shared his feelings for me. I was shocked on both counts. I felt nothing for him, and his revelations about you made me want you more than ever.”

“Where is Silas?” I need to be prepared if he is hiding in the shadows.

“You’re skipping forward in the story,” she scolds, digging her nails into my arm. “But he’s dead. A man lets his guard down when a woman is fucking him. I cut his head off.” She giggles. “He lost his purpose. I needed him until I didn’t anymore.” She sighs. “A man in love will do just about anything to make the woman happy.”

“Right.” I know the feeling. I feel no sympathy for Silas.

“I waited for you to return my love. I waited for you to do something to show me you felt the same way,” she hisses. “But no, you saw me as this little poor human that needed your protection.”

“I saw you as a friend,” I correct her.

“You saw me as a fool,” she spits. “I gave you everything. You had every opportunity to love me as I did you. What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t you love me? I was completely devoted to you.” Her nails dig deeper with every word, and I hide my wince of pain.

“Do you know about mates?” I ask.

“I’ve heard something about them. Why? Do you think that woman is your mate?” she asks harshly.

She may be within the same world as I am, but her knowledge is seriously lacking. This is a good thing.

“No,” I lie, so bitter on my tongue. “But every shifter is waiting for their mate. You were not mine.”

“So that is the only reason you didn’t love me?” she pouts.

That is a loaded question. I could tell her the truth but I want to stay alive until my mate comes for me. “Is that why you pretended to die? How did that happen?”

“Silas came to me. He told me what you were, what he was. He professed his love and told me how I could get back at you but at the same time live forever. He lured

me in with the talk of power. I would never die. I would be able to see the world, and never have to worry about anything. He wanted to be with me and I let him think that was what was going to happen. I felt less than excited to spend so much time with him when all I wanted was to get back with you.

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“The night of the party, everything fell into place. You had been avoiding me. We had planned to do it soon but didn’t know how to lure you out. He came to me when he knew you were going and we set the plan in motion.”

“He was following me too?”

“Yes, he wanted revenge. I wanted you forever.” She smiles at me. “I wrote the note. Silas had the rope. He explained how to still my body, how to hold my breath. He counted on you not taking a closer look.”

“You were already a vampire?”

“Yes. It was so hard not to drain everyone at that stupid party. I was starving but my love for you held me back from killing them all.”

“What about when the police came?” They had talked to me before I left the party.

“They sent everyone home. Silas changed their memories. No one talked about the missing girl that was hanging from the tree. They didn’t have a funeral for me, there wasn’t a body to cry over, and my parents conveniently forgot they had a daughter,” she says with little feeling. She starts to walk faster, pulling me along.

My eyes scan the area, staying alert. “Have you been following me since?”

“I didn’t know that your dad would kick you out. That put a wrench in my plans,” she groans. “By the time I found out and taken care of everything—you were gone. It pissed me off. I wasn’t used to my new body yet. I couldn’t focus on anything but my

urge to drink blood, have sex, and block out all the noise.” She hits the side of her head. “It was too much. Way too much.”

“Silas helped you?” How long have we traveled? I don’t think I have been this far in this direction. I don’t know where she is leading me.

“He did the best he could. I may have killed a few humans.” She grins. “Oops. They served a purpose but I was still thirsty. Always thirsty.”

“It took this long to find me?”

“No,” she growls. “I found you again and again, but Silas would fuck everything up. He didn’t want me to go after you. He kept me distracted by giving me bodies to drain. One time, we went to a party, we sipped on their bodies for weeks, living in the luxurious home. I think we were there for a couple months. No. Maybe a year?” She shakes her head. “But time has no meaning anymore.” Her eyes glaze over. “The days and years blend together.” She blinks. “I also wanted to be everything you wanted before I showed myself. I wanted to be perfect for you.” She motions wildly down her body with her free arm. “Don’t I look perfect?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “Silas failed to tell me how hard it would be to control my actions. I always have this fucking buzzing happening in my head.” She taps her finger on her forehead. “It was so distracting—all the wonderful smells. I can smell a deer over there.” She points to the side. “I’m attracted to its blood.” She jumps excitedly and turns slightly towards me as we walk. “Did you know that I can drink blood from anything?”

“I did not,” I drawl. I believe that if a human turns into a vampire, they take all the traits from their human life and bring them into their new form. If you are evil before the transformation, the change will enhance that trait. Tiffany is no different.

“You can,” she says joyfully. “I like to sample from everyone.” Her gaze slides to my

neck. "I can smell you too," she whispers. "I always wondered what you would taste like."

Fuck. "Have you traveled a lot?" I'm counting on her easily being distracted.

"Ohhh...yes." She turns, releasing my arm, walking backwards in front of me, her face animated. "I've been everywhere. It's so easy, this life. I can talk anyone into letting me on a plane, into all the best clubs, the best restaurants, and hotels. I can have anything I want, and what they don't offer freely, I take." She claps her hands. "I've been missing one thing," she says, touching my nose. "You."

"Where are we going?" I ask. How do I handle her? She is unstable at best. She makes it seem as if we are just catching up and that I could get away easily. I don't trust it.

"I'm so glad you asked. I wanted some alone time with you," she whispers, her hand cupping the side of her mouth. "While I was walking around, I found this dilapidated cabin. It's not the best, but I figure you won't mind, now that we are together. It has a cellar. I found some old wine inside. I bought some snacks." She smirks. "I even found a place that sold me some cuffs."

"You want me to tie you up?" I ask. This may be easier than I thought.

"No, silly." She stops abruptly. Her hand lands on my chest, her nails scraping down to my stomach. My blood follows the path of her finger. "They're for you."

"Tiffany, I'm not the kind of guy that enjoys being cuffed." How can you reason with crazy?

"You'll do it for me." She leans forward, and her eyes close. "You smell so good." I freeze as she tilts her head, bends, and breathes in my blood. Her nose skims my skin.

“Will you let me taste you?”

My jaw clenches. I might be sick all over her head. My body is repulsed by anyone other than Saylor touching me. “I don’t want that.”

“I guess I should rephrase that. You will let me taste you,” she demands, her eyes meeting mine. I watch in horror as her tongue hovers over the blood on my skin.

I can’t do this. I may be dead by the time they find me but I can’t allow her to drink from me. If I surprise her with an attack, I may have a chance—maybe.

I fist her hair and jerk back her head. Her fangs flash and she hisses. “I don’t fucking think so. You do not have permission to drink from me, vampire.” I should not take so much pleasure from the murder lurking in her eyes. “I don’t love you. I definitely will not have sex with you. I am always the one in control in the bedroom—my wrists and cuffs,” I wiggle my finger in front of her face. “Big no-no. You wasted your time coming here. We have nothing. You are nothing to me. I will give you a chance to leave.”

She touches the tip of her tongue to her fang and grins. Her eyes fill with red. “Is it time to play?”

I barely skimmed my claws against her throat before I’m flying to the forest floor after she hits her palms to my chest, and I have one thought.

I hope I’m alive when Saylor finds me.

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Make that two thoughts, while I push myself up, preparing to shift, and Tiffany appears in front of me in a second.

Fucking vampires.

I wake up cuffed to a chair. Shit. I put up a fight—honest. Vampires are too fucking fast. I lost my hat, so my hair is falling in my slitted eyes. I lick my cut lip. I hear humming. She's in the other room, fucking humming.

She must have dragged me to the cabin. At least we aren't in the cellar, but the run down room is less than welcoming. Busted furniture is scattered around. Cobwebs cover everything. An old couch is across from me, the springs sticking out. There's a fireplace to my side that she somehow got to work. The stonework is chipping and falling to the floor in front of it. Black soot covers the once-nice stone.

The clink of glasses rings out. Great, she's getting the wine.

So maybe I could have handled the situation differently. I could have gone along with her plan until I could figure out a way to catch her off guard and kill her.

I have never had anyone bite me. That is reserved for my mate. She is the only one that will drink from me. I couldn't do it. It would have been the smart move but I have a history of doing reckless things—why stop now?

My eye is bleeding. She hit bone when she punctured my thigh. I have numerous wounds on my chest from her nails. I'm pretty sure I have internal damage, as it's hard to breathe. I think I broke a finger—it feels swollen and throbs. I would check it

but my fucking hands are cuffed behind the chair.

I knew it would be a vampire that killed me. Ryker and Bash, as far as I'm concerned, are the only good ones. Marie and Serenity too.

I haven't forgotten how they jumped in for Saylor. They kept their word to me to protect her. I hope they continue to do that when they track me. It should be easy. My blood is all over the forest floor.

I need to shift, but once again, my hands are tied. I am not good with being restrained. The only one that I would let do it is Saylor. I close my eyes and picture her. The bond is shaky, but I swear I can feel her fear.

I open my eyes and think they are playing tricks on me. Why else would I see a giant bunny in the corner of the room? I blink and she is still there.

The universe is fucking with me.

I would be the only person that gets rescued by a fucking rabbit shifter.

Until she hops out a hole in the wall.

I don't know which is worse, being rescued by a rabbit or the rabbit leaving me to my fate.

"I bet you are thirsty," Tiffany says. She's grinning when she comes around the corner holding two glasses.

"Nah," I scoff. "I don't drink wine anyway." I tip my head back, watching her advance.

“Take the drink, Elijah,” she says harshly.

“I don’t have hands, Tiffany,” I reply just as harshly. I’m over this shit. “Maybe if you untied me, I could make a toast to a short life with you.”

She chuckles and sinks to her knees in front of me. “You always had a good sense of humor. Drink,” she demands, losing her smile, pushing the cup to my lips.

I have no choice but to swallow when her other hand squeezes my jaw. The taste is bitter. “Bitch,” I mumble.

“How is it?” she asks, pulling back and sitting on her ass.

“I’m more of a beer man, myself.” I watch her eyes twitch.

“You need to be more grateful,” she scolds. “I could have killed your little play thing. I could have just killed you both.”

“Why didn’t you? What the fuck do you think will happen here?”

“I didn’t need her,” she says, frowning down at her glass. “I wanted you.”

“You think I’m going to be with you willingly? Leave with you and live happily ever after?” I ask, sneering.

She shakes her head, once, twice. “I don’t know,” she whispers.

For a second, I see the lost girl I first met in high school. “That’s not going to happen,” I say gently.

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“But,” she starts, but her eyes close and when she opens them the past is gone. Her anger and hurt is alive again. “You will be with me.”

“Tiffany,” I sigh. “I won’t. The only way this ends is with one of us dead. Your obsession over me is done. I don’t think you really know why you are doing this to me. It took you years to face me, to do something about it. Why? Why not move on?”

“Fuck you,” she shouts, throwing her drink on my chest and standing.

I hiss as the alcohol seeps into the cuts, which is nothing compared to when she brings her leg up and digs her heel into the open wound on my thigh.

“Motherfucker,” I roar.

“You will love me,” she shrieks. “I came all this way for you. I need you. I need someone to silence the voices. I need someone to love me.”

She breaks the glass against the leg of the chair and hold the biggest shard to my neck. “Tiffany,” I call out.

“I get what I want now. I was a weak little girl that nobody loved, but then you did. You rescued me. I’m not weak anymore,” she snaps, her hand shaking, nicking my skin.

“No,” I gulp. “You aren’t weak anymore. But you also are a fucking bitch that has to tie a man to a chair to get what you want. I am not weak. I may be the one in cuffs but I won’t go quietly. I won’t go with you thinking for one second that I love you, want

you, or in any way miss what we could have had. You are the reason I hate fucking vampires. Just because you are physically strong does not make you the strongest one in the room.” I ignore the glass that is sinking deeper into my skin and the rage on her face. “You are weak. To kill a man that is tied to a chair is weak,” I repeat.

She screams in my face.

“Are you trying to die, cheetah?” Ryker drawls from the doorway.

“No, just getting some things off my chest,” I slur. She must have punctured my neck deeper than I thought. I smelled them coming about the time she put the glass to my neck.

“Elijah,” Saylor sobs as she skids to a stop behind Ryker and Bash. The others are here too, most surrounding the cabin.

Saylor tries to run to me but Bash circles her waist.

“Vampire,” Tiffany cries, her eyes wild as they bounce between Ryker and Bash.

“We are.” Ryker glides calmly closer. “You have broken many of our laws.”

“What laws?” she hisses.

“I had my friend look into you. You have left a river of dead bodies everywhere you have been.” Ryker stops when he is directly beside her. “Give me the glass.” He holds out his hand.

Even Tiffany can’t resist the power of the king of vampires. It fills the room. The pressure of it makes it even harder to breath. She pulls the glass from my neck, placing it in his open palm.

“I was hungry,” she pouts.

“I don’t give a fuck,” he growls. “They were not willing and certainly didn’t agree to give you their life.”

“Who are you?” she sneers, but it’s more of a groan as he directs his gifts at her.

“I am the king of vampires. I am older than you can imagine. You have taken a friend with the intention of killing him. You took him away from his mate. You caused her endless worry.”

I cringe when he calls Saylor my mate in front of Tiffany.

All it takes is a split second of Ryker’s attention turning to Bash to yell at him to keep Saylor back. The agony and rage that flows from Tiffany causes me to struggle fiercely with my cuffs. I know it is useless but I see her intentions before anyone else. I give up on getting out of them and stand with the chair attached to me a second before she lunges toward Saylor.

I knock her to the floor just in time and the chair busts into pieces around us.

“No,” Saylor screams.

Tiffany’s fingers reach for a broken leg of a chair and I am powerless to stop her from shoving it into my chest.

“Fuck,” Bash curses and reaches for me.

The sound of Ryker’s knife scraping when he pulls it from the sheath is loud in the silent room. I watch with closing eyes. He swings and takes her head.

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The last thing I see is a huge lion biting the rolling head and throwing it into the fire.

My mate's arms clasp my face as my eyes close.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Saylor

"Saylor," Penny calls, "Can I help you clean up?"

I tear my attention from Elijah's still form bleeding on the bed to Penny's gentle face. I don't know how we got back to Elijah's cabin. It's a blur consumed with terror.

I will have nightmares forever of seeing him tied to a chair with that psycho leaning over him. The amount of blood that he lost isn't good. He is unconscious. He hasn't even twitched since the guys carried him away from the vampire corpse. I had to stop myself from shifting and tearing into her.

The guys assured me that she won't be coming back. A vampire is almost impossible to kill. The key is to take the head off and burn it. Otherwise, they can grow it back. My vampire knowledge is lacking. I have just enough to know to stay on their good side.

Jax called a doctor to come to examine Elijah. He introduced himself as Estes. He looks ancient but carries himself as if he's years younger. His hands are capable. He enlisted Ryker to helphim. Apparently, he's been around forever and took care of Jax and his brothers when they were young. He's helped shifters for years so I shouldn't

be doubting his ability now, but Elijah still hasn't moved.

Tiffany's hand was a blur when she picked up the stake. It plays over and over again in my head. Time stood still, yet not slow enough to stop her.

"Saylor," Penny says again.

I glance up from my bloody hands to her concerned expression. "I'm okay," I say automatically.

"Of course you are," she says kindly. "Can I help you clean up?"

I look at Elijah on the bed, and then back to her face. "I don't want to leave him."

"We will only be in the next room. Let the doctor work."

"Ryker?" I ask, not knowing exactly why.

"Go with Penny. He's in good hands," he assures me gently.

I allow Penny to guide me into the bathroom. She leaves me standing next to the sink to get a towel. I stare at my white face and the red that covers my cheek, hands, and shirt. My eyes are haunted.

"I can't lose him," I whimper softly.

"You won't," Penny says firmly. She places the towel on the counter and starts the sink. "Do you want to shower?"

"No, I can't leave him for that long."

“Of course.” She tests the water with her fingers. “Estes is good. He’ll bring him back to you.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.” I rip my gaze from mine in the mirror. “He hasn’t moved.”

“His body has sustained a lot of trauma.” She tenderly pulls my hands under the water.

“I don’t know what she did to him before we got there.” The thought of the things she could have forced him to do makes me sick. “I need him to wake up and tell me.” I watch the red swirling down the drain.

“Have some faith.” She runs her hands up my arms, washing the blood. “He wouldn’t leave you without a fight, now that he found you.”

“I want to believe that.”

“Can we take your shirt off? I’ll get you another.”

“Yes.” My shaky hands fumble with the buttons.

“May I?” Penny asks.

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I nod and drop my hands to the sink.

She slowly works them through the holes. Once the shirt lays open, she moves behind me and carefully removes it.

I stand still as she goes to get me another. “They aren’t saying anything.” The only thing I can hear from the bedroom is the movement of the covers and the depression of the mattress.

“They will when there’s something to.” She uses the towel to clean the blood that seeped through the shirt.

My eyes fill with tears when she rubs my cheek gently. “Thank you, Penny.”

“We girls have to stick together. All of us are here for each other when we need it. You may not know me well, but know that I will always be here for you. There's too many of us out there that tear others down. If at any time, you want to talk, or get a drink, or bitch about your mate—because they may be hot, but they are still men—call me.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

When I am free of Elijah’s blood, she helps me put on his shirt. It gives me a small amount of comfort.

“Saylor,” is shouted from outside the house.

I know that voice.

My heart races as I scramble out of the room. I pause by the bed, torn between my two worlds. Estes sees my indecision.

“Go. I’m not done yet.”

“The minute you are, get me,” I growl.

“I will, girly,” he confirms.

I run from the room and out the front door. I sprint down the stairs and push past the lions that are standing in front of my mom.

She’s alive.

It’s really her. I hit her with a thud and our arms surround each other.

“Mom,” I cry.

“My girl,” she sobs.

“It’s really you.” I bury my face in her neck and breath in the familiar scent. “You’re here.”

“I am. I came back to you.”

“Mom,” I choke. All the emotions fall on top of me with hearing her voice, and giant sobs rack my body. Painful shudders vibrate through me, my hands shaking so hard it hurts.

We fall to the ground, her arm holding me tight, her other hand stroking my hair.

“Let it out, baby,” she coos. “Give it to your mom. Let me take your pain. I have strong shoulders.”

She starts humming in my ear. I distantly hear Penny crying and her mate soothing her. Everyone else is silent but I feel their presence around us.

All the good memories rush over me and her humming fills the empty void her leaving me caused. I don’t care about the reasons for her calling Grant. I don’t care what kind of relationship she had with my dad. Right now, all that matters is her return to me. I don’t ever want to let her go again.

“What’s your name?” I hear Penny ask.

It reminds me of the woman that was standing with my mom.

My sister.

I pull back and my mom wipes my tears. “I love you,” she says, smiling hesitantly.

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“I love you, too.” I take in her appearance. She looks the same, just a bit older, with a few extra scars, and there’s a world of pain in her eyes. Maybe it was always there and I didn’t notice. “Nothing else matters right now except that you are here.” I see her shoulders relax. “I have a mate. He’s injured badly.”

“I’m so sorry, baby. I’ll be here for you when you are ready.”

I nod and look up.

I slowly stand up and face my sister. Her posture is rigid, afraid of my reaction, or afraid of hers. She taller than me, her stunning face delicate but filled with pain of what she has lived through. Her pitch-black hair teases her shoulders and is paper straight. I glance at her hands that are clasped in front of her, her knuckles white, her fingers strangling the others. Her clothes are baggy, hiding much of her body. She’s hiding.

“Hi,” I say softly.

“Hi.” Her voice deep and husky.

“What’s your name?” I ask, taking a step closer, grateful she didn’t back away.

“May,” she replies.

“I’m Saylor.”

“I know.”

We fall silent, studying each other.

“I’m glad you are here,” I offer.

“Me too,” she confesses. The pain falls over her face.

“Fuck it,” I mutter and hug her tight.

Her arms pause and then return my embrace. She lets out an unsteady breath. “It is nice to meet you.” She pulls me closer.

“I’ve always wanted a sister,” I tell her, a smile in my voice.

“Me too.”

“I’m excited to get to know you,” I rasp.

“Me too.” We break apart, both of us let out a laugh. “I’m sorry about your mate.”

My laugh disappears. “I need to get back to him.”

“I understand.”

“Please stay,” I say, reaching back for my mom’s hand. “Both of you.”

“Of course,” my mom says with a small smile.

“I’ll take care of them,” Sally steps forward.

“Thank you, Sally.” I’m grateful to her for more than just that. She found where Elijah was before us. She met us in the woods and showed us the way. We had

already been on the trail but Elijah's scent veered off and we didn't know which way to go.

"Anything for you," she says.

"How about I go get something to eat and drink?" Laken offers.

"That would be great," Sally says. "I'm partial to doughnuts, dragon."

"Noted." He kisses Penny before walking away.

"Thank you all for being here." Bishop is holding Penny, her eyes still wet. Kerian and River are sitting on the porch. Logan and his brothers are standing close watching me solemnly.

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“Whatever you, or Elijah need,” Logan says.

I nod and turn to my Mom. “Will you come in with me?” I ask her.

“Of course.” Now that I have her back, I don’t want to let go.

I squeeze May’s hand. “Would you come with us?”

She nods tentatively. “Sure.”

I look at Penny, silently asking her to follow. She has been so supportive. Mom encircles my waist and we walk into the house. I take a deep breath before going into the bedroom.

Elijah is still laying so still in the middle of his bed. Estes is putting all his tools back into his bag. A needle is sticking out of Elijah’s arm, connected to a bag of blood above his head. Ryker is standing at the end of the bed beside Bash and Marie.

I move to the end of the bed. “Tell me,” I demand.

“He has internal injuries. I cannot fix them all. He needs blood and rest. If he was awake, he could shift and heal. It is going to take longer this way. I stitched what I could. I want to stay in the other room. I want to give it twenty-four hours, if there is no change, I have another idea.”

“What’s the other idea?” I ask, none of this sounds good.

“I will tell you in twenty-four hours.” He smiles kindly and leaves the room.

I look at the vampires. “You can trust him. If there was no hope, he would tell you,” Ryker says.

That’s a small comfort.

“You need to eat and rest. Elijah would want you to take care of yourself,” Bash says.

“We’ll all stay with you, if you want,” Penny offers, her hand on my shoulder.

There was a time where I would shrug off their presence and comfort. Not this time. “I would like that.”

I hug the side of the bed beside Elijah, my back against the headboard, turned toward him, staring at his chest. His breathing seems easier, at least that’s what I’m telling myself.

All of our friends are still here. Laken brought back a feast. They started a fire in the pit at the side of the house and gathered around it. They are talking quietly and giving me space. Ryker left briefly to check on his pregnant mate, but returned relieved. Ava is with her but he had to see her for himself. His devotion is clear.

Sally is entertaining them all—every little while I hear laughter, and it’s a good sound. The doctor quickly fell asleep on the couch despite of the noise.

“Hey,” my mom says from the doorway.

I look over and see May hovering behind her. “Come in.”

May sits on the floor underneath the window while Mom finds a seat in one of the

chairs facing the bed.

“How’s he doing?” Mom asks.

“I can’t tell. His heartbeat’s steady. He’s alive,” I say quietly.

“He’ll be fine,” she says.

“How do you know?”

“The universe wouldn’t be so cruel as to give him to you and then take him away so soon.” She smiles.

“I hope so,” I whisper.

“You found a group that will do anything to help their friends,” she says.

“I stumbled into it.” I shake my head. “I can’t imagine not being here now.”

“I’m so glad.”

We sit in silence, watching him. It’s surreal to have them here. I don’t know how to handle the situation. I’m at a loss.

“I don’t know what to say,” my mom confesses. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions but I don’t think now is the time.” She glances at Elijah.

“Grant said some things,” I start. I rub my eyes. “Maybe, now is the perfect time to get answers. Once Elijah is awake, we will have things to discuss and I want to dedicate time to him.”

“I understand.” She rubs her hands together and leans forward, her elbows on her knees. “I don’t know what he told you but I am going to tell you the truth. When I’m done, I’ll answer any questions you have.”

“Okay,” I agree.

“Your father was best friends with the Alpha, who was Grant’s dad. They were so close. I met them in town at a bar, of all places. I had been traveling, so I was new in town. It was instantaneous, the bond, as you know. I knew with everything in me that your dad was my mate. He was so handsome and tall. He made me feel...” she closes her eyes, “Needed and the only woman in the world. I felt special. He wanted me to move in right away—I was hesitant. One of the problems I saw was that Roger, Grant’s dad, was always there when we saw each other. He always had to be involved, going on dates with us, out to eat, to the movies. It was too much. I didn’t know how to approach it with your dad. At first, I don’t think he saw anything wrong

with it.

“He loved Roger like a brother, and he didn’t want him to be left out. I wanted time with my mate without any distractions. We had to sneak around, which could be fun but turned annoying when we couldn’t pull it off. Roger would find us. Finally, after you were born— which was a miracle, considering we hardly ever got to be alone—I talked to your dad about it. He admitted that he noticed and he didn’t know how to approach it with him.

“He finally did and it didn’t go well. Roger was very upset and confessed his love for me. That didn’t go over well with your dad, but his shock didn’t last long. Roger was good with talking people into things, especially his best friend.” She bows her head, hiding her eyes from me. “He was very convincing. He wanted to be with me, but I refused. He then asked if he could be in the room while I was with my mate.” She turns shameful eyes to mine. “I agreed. I didn’t mind being watched,” she whispers.

“You don’t have to defend your preferences,” I tell her. As much as I don’t want to think about my parents in that way, she doesn’t need to be embarrassed.

“It was supposed to be one night. We planned it with very strict rules. Roger wanted to join. I said no—I couldn’t stand anyone else’s touch.”

“Grant told me that you were with Roger that night.”

She shakes her head violently. “I wouldn’t let him. He tried. We let him watch and that’s it. Neither of us wanted him to be involved past watching.” She closes her eyes and drops her head back to the wall. “It was over. The deal was that one night. For me, it was in the past. It was something I never wanted to do again. He made it weird and uncomfortable.”

“That wasn’t the end though,” I say softly.

“No,” she says. “He wouldn’t leave me alone. Every time I turned around he was there, watching me. It made my skin crawl. We lived next to each other, close to the whole pack.”

May makes a pained noise and I look at her. Her face is buried in her knees. I remember that we are talking about her dad. I can’t imagine what she is thinking.

“What did Dad do?”

“He was...” she whimpers. “Distraught. He was stuck in the middle of a situation that he didn’t know how to get out of. We made plans to leave. It wasn’t easy with a baby, but we decided on when. We had to figure out where we were going. We didn’t tell anyone. There were many people in the pack that were scared of Roger, scared of what he would do to them. He had become unpredictable. Some of his actions became questionable, but no one had the power he had. No one wanted to fight him, and that is what had to happen in order for an Alpha to become unseated.”

“What about Dad?” I know nothing about him. I don’t even remember what he looked like.

She looks at me sadly. “As much as I loved him, he wasn’t an Alpha. He didn’t have the guts to take him on. Your dad wasn’t a man that stood up and took actions.”

“Grant told me that he walked in on Roger violating a woman, tried to stop him, and that’s why Dad was killed.”

“It’s true.” She crosses her arms and stares at the wall. “It was me. I was in the room with the Alpha. It wasn’t the first time he did it. I kept it from your father.” She quiets when May whimpers.

“Why?” I ask weakly, my heart aching for her.

“I wanted to protect my mate. I wanted to deny it, maybe.” She covers her face. “Your dad was in denial also. I had already gotten pregnant with May. When I had her, he saw her black hair, so different than our brown. We didn’t have anyone in our families with black hair. I knew she was the Alpha’s. On some level, he did, too. I had nightmares. At that point, I couldn’t stand the touch of anyone.

“After so many times, I would revert to a place in my head. I would become desensitized. I would pray for it to end.” Her face is filled with horror.

“How was it possible for you to get pregnant outside the mate bond?” My skin is chilled as our hushed words fill the room. My mom’s painful past turns my stomach and I don’t want to know more. “You don’t have to say anymore.” I hate that May has to hear it.

“I have to get it out. I have realized, the longer I hide what happened, the worse I feel.” She sits up straight. “You shouldn’t be able to,” she answers my question. “My guess is that May is supposed to be here. There are no mistakes,” she says roughly to May.

This must be a conversation they have had often. They lock eyes until May lowers hers.

“Why didn’t we have May with us when we ran?” I hate that there is accusation in my voice.

“I trusted the wrong person. She betrayed me,” she sneers.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Saylor

The bitterness and rage in her voice causes May to burrow further into her lap. My throat closes.

“Who?”

“A friend who was in the pack. After your dad died, I knew we had to escape. It was never going to end. Even though he wasn’t much protection, once he was gone, Roger would be able to take over completely.” She takes a deep breath. “He guarded May. He had friends that watched her closely. I knew we couldn’t all go together. We were supposed to leave in different directions. I would take you. She would take May. We agreed to meet up in a few weeks. She never showed up.

“I tried to call. She wouldn’t answer. I didn’t know what to do,” she sobs. “I couldn’t go back there. You have to understand,” she cries. I place a hand on Elijah’s chest and she softens her voice. “I couldn’t live through any more.”

“So you left her?” I can’t wrap my head around it all. She has been violated in so many ways, but I can’t understand leaving a daughter. She knows what kind of monster the Alpha was.

“I tried to go back so many times. I kept calling my friend, hoping she somehow got away but lost her phone, or she forgot where to meet me.” Her self-loathing is clear. “I moved on. I couldn’t stay in one place for long.

“Years later, after the many times I called, she answered. She told me to stop calling. That someone killed the Alpha. She said she gave May to a couple that couldn’t have children. She didn’t remember me and wouldn’t want to see me. My friend found her mate and left the pack.”

“It wasn’t true,” I guess.

“No,” she sighs. “She did marry and move away. She left May in the pack to be raised by them. She was shuffled from me, to my friend, to the remaining women in the pack.”

“So how did you find out?”

“I was so tired of running. I thought maybe I could reason with Grant. I thought maybe he would be different that his dad. He wasn’t. He said that May was with the pack and had been the whole time. He wanted to make a trade. You for May.”

“Why would you think he would be different, or that he would keep his word?”

“I was desperate. I needed to know that she was alright. I wanted my girls together. I wanted a normal fucking life,” she grits.

I rub my head. “He didn’t keep his word.”

“He didn’t bring May with him. He wanted all of us in his pack. He wanted to control us. I had to get you away. If I could make sure you were okay, I would go with him and meet my other daughter. I knew you could take care of yourself but May was in the middle of hell.”

“You were badly injured.”

“I was but I healed. I met May,” she says, directing her words to her. “She was angry. She had been told many things that weren’t true. It took over a year for her to have an honest conversation with me. I understood her resistance.” She looks back at me. “I would understand your anger too. I didn’t want to leave you, but I had to make it right with May.”

“And did you?”

“We still have work to do,” she answers. “I have a lot of time and trust to make up for.”

We fall silent. I give my attention to my mate. His heart is steady. Right now, all I want is for him to open his eyes and tell me that everything is going to be okay. He would know how to handle the situation.

I desperately missed my mom, but I don’t know how to feel about her actions. I do know that she has been through something that I can’t totally relate to. I can imagine how such a horrible experience would feel, but not fully. We can’t go back. We have to move forward.

“I want to get to know my sister,” I say and look at May. She is watching me and Elijah. “I want to be a sister to you.”

“I would like that,” she says quietly.

“I love you, Mom,” I start. “I won’t pretend to agree with all the things you did, but I don’t think I have to in order to love you and have a relationship with you again.”

She sighs in relief. “Thank you. I want to be here for you.”

I jump when I hear, “Where the fuck is our brother? And who the fuck are all of

you?”

“I’ll stay in here with your mate if you need to take care of that,” May offers.

I just nod and push off the bed carefully.

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I walk outside to see two men chest to chest with Logan and Las.

Elijah's brothers.

They smell similar to him. One has brown hair and the other blonde, similar to Elijah's. They are built the same too. Their faces are filled with longing and confusion.

"You are his brothers?" I ask and their heads snap my way.

"We are. Who the hell are you?" the brown-haired one growls.

I walk calmly to stand in front of them. I have to squeeze between the protective lions.

"I am your brother's mate." I pull my shirt, showing them Elijah's mark. "He is mine."

They look from me to each other. "Where is he? We want to talk to him."

"Now you want to talk to him?" I laugh. "Where were you when he was thrown out of the only home he knew? Where were you when he had a psycho girl stalking him, or the vampire that joined her, and eventually turned the girl? She came back to kill him and almost succeeded." I step closer, my head tilting. "These are our friends. They became Elijah's family once the one that was blood gave up on him. You will be polite to them. You will treat everyone here with respect. My mate, your brother, is lying in bed, injured, with no sign of waking up soon. So sit your ass out here or go

to town, and when Elijah is healed and ready, he will find you.”

“You can’t make than decision for him,” the blonde brother snarls.

“Saylor,” Elijah rasps. I turn so fast I almost fall. He’s braced against the front door, his hand wrapped around his chest. There is blood dripping down his arm where he pulled out the needle “Here.”

I almost sob as I do as he commanded. I raise my hands to put them on his chest, but pause, not wanting to hurt him. Instead, I cup his jaw. “You’re okay,” I whisper.

“Yeah, Kitty Cat,” he says, his voice weak. “I could be better. I need to shift.”

“Elijah.” His brothers walk to the bottom of the stairs. I swear I hear longing in his voice.

“Draden,” Elijah snarls, directing his anger towards the brown-haired brother. I move to his side and he rests his hand on the back of my neck. “Brae. This is my mate Saylor. If you ever talk to her with anything but absolute respect again, I will rip your heads from your body and bury them separate. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Brae responds.

“Fine,” Draden agrees. “We have been worried.”

“Really?” Elijah scoffs. “For how long? Since I was eighteen? It didn’t seem as if you missed me at all.”

“There are things you don’t know.” Draden takes another step.

“I imagine there is. There are bound to have many things happen over so many years.

Yet, I knew where you were. Did you not catch my scent until now? Why now? You both seemed happy enough when I tracked you down.” Elijah shakes his head. “I don’t want to hear your answers now. I need you to go. Saylor was correct. I will find you again when it is the right time for me.” He looks at everyone else gathered around. “Thank you for coming for me. For taking care of Saylor. But right now, I want you all to go. I need to be with my mate. I have to shift to heal the rest of the way.”

“Of course, cowboy,” Sally walks over. “Glad you’re upright.”

“Me too.”

“Please, Elijah,” Brae begs.

“What did I say?” Elijah asks harshly.

“We’ll be in town when you are ready,” Draden says, reaching for his brother.

Everyone stays still as we watch them get in their car and leave.

“I’ll take care of your mother and sister.” Sally squeezes my hand.

“Thanks, Sally,” I sigh. I move out of the way when I feel my family behind me. I hug my mom. “We’ll talk soon,” I promise.

“Take care of your mate,” she says, her sad eyes connecting with mine.

As she moves to join Sally by the car, May takes her place.

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She puts her cheek to mine and whispers, “Take care, sister.”

I feels like she’s saying goodbye, but I refuse to let her go. “I will see you soon.”

She smiles slightly and leaves.

Many respectful nods follow before we are left in the quiet. I turn to Elijah just as the doctor appears. I completely forgot about him.

“Good, you’re up. I had every confidence.” He shuffles down the stairs.

“Wait, what was the other idea?” I ask, hurriedly.

“I was going to tell you to mark the man. That would have woken him up and healed him.” He walks away whistling.

“Well, shit,” I mumble.

“Kitty Cat, I would love to find out what that was about, but I need to shift.” He drops his arm. “I feel like complete shit. I’m barely holding myself up.” He stumbles down the stairs.

“Elijah, you should have done that right away. Fuck everyone else,” I scold, watching him strip off his pants.

“I had to get rid of my asshole brothers first.” Magic moves over him and I can almost feel his relief.

I sit on the top step and watch the power of my mate as he prowls the yard, his cheetah healing him. He walks to the bottom of the stairs, back and forth along the length of it, his eyes on me. Why do I feel as if he's stalking me? He has to spend some time in this form to be completely healed. I wanted to greet him properly but was afraid to hurt him. My emotions are so scattered after everything that happened.

The one thing I really want is to hold him. I could have lost him. I could have lived the rest of my life without him. I have heard of many shifters that lose their mate and they are barely alive after. A part of them is missing and they don't want to go on. The universe gives you the perfect person for you and I have never heard of someone getting a second mate.

My mom lost hers and I never asked her how that affected her. I realize she went through so much more before he was gone, but it had to have gutted her. It sounds like my dad didn't protect her the way she deserved—she loved him though.

Elijah stops suddenly and turns to face me. He slowly comes up the stairs. He rubs his head against my chest. I lean into him and lift my hand to run it down his neck.

The peace that settles over me is all encompassing.

He shifts quickly. A naked Elijah is crouched over me and I gasp.

He scoops me up and starts walking.

“Elijah, you shouldn't lift me,” I lecture.

“I'm fine now,” he says firmly. He crosses into the house and slams the door with his foot. “Lock the door for me. My hands are full.”

He bends enough for me to reach it.

He takes me through the bedroom and into the bathroom. He gently places me on the counter and backs away. I stare at his ass as he leans over the tub to turn on the water. He then moves to the shower.

“Do not move. I need to rinse the blood off before we get in the tub.” He opens the glass door and steps in.

I get a front row seat of my mate gliding his hands over his body. I’m getting hotter the longer he’s in there. He washes his hair quickly and turns off the water.

Water drips off of him as he goes back to the tub to shut off the water. I watch a drop of water trail down his chest, to his stomach, to his hard cock as he prowls towards me. He stops at my knees.

He takes a deep breath and drops his head. He reaches out and pulls my legs apart to step between them. Both of us stare at his fingers wrapped around the underside of my knees. His gaze then moves up, only to lock onto my shoulder.

“Show me,” he demands.

I don’t pretend to not know what he’s asking. I unbutton the top three buttons of my shirt and shrug it off of my shoulder. He wants to see his mark and I am more than willing to show him.

He lifts a hand and traces the bite. I shiver and goosebumps cover my skin. His touch is tender and calming after so long without having it—at least it seems like forever. Finally, he covers the mark with his palm and looks into my eyes.

“I’m sorry you had to run,” he says seriously. “I will never ask you to again. But I had to get you as far as I could away from her. I didn’t know what she was capable of. I couldn’t risk you. It killed me to ask you. It killed me to watch you moving

farther away from me.”

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“I understand. I don’t blame you for it.” I saw his pain.

“She didn’t understand the concept of mates, and I didn’t enlighten her. She has been around the world but wasn’t educated about the world of shifters or even her own kind. Silas was not a good maker.”

“What happened to him?”

“Apparently, she killed him while she was having sex with him. Although, I don’t know if she knew how to get rid of him permanently.”

I voice the question that has been haunting me. “Did she force you to be with her?” I choke.

“No, Kitty Cat,” he soothes. “I wouldn’t have let her do that. What little she did touch me made my skin crawl.”

“Good.” I smile slightly, the knot in my stomach releasing. “What did she think was going to happen?”

“She didn’t even really know.” He drops his hands to my shirt, to the remaining buttons. He continues as he works. “She wanted us to be together, but she also wanted revenge. When a human is turned into a vampire, it doesn’t change the person’s personality, just enhances it. She didn’t adjust well to having the power she did.”

I watch his hands as he pulls the shirt off. I didn’t have time to put on pants before

my mom came. His shirt is big enough to be a short dress on me, so it covered me enough that it didn't bother me. But obviously it must bother Elijah, as he frowns at my bare legs.

"I didn't have time for pants," I rush to explain.

He blinks and looks up. "I was more concerned with the healing scrapes on your skin."

"Oh," I sigh. "I didn't notice." As I was running, I felt the sting of branches but had more pressing things on my mind.

"I'm not crazy that the whole crew got a look at what's mine," he rumbles.

"Elijah," I laugh. "Most of them are mated, and we are shifters. They're used to no clothes."

"Most," he pouts.

I take my bra off to distract him.

It works.

His eyes heat.

He lifts me off the counter, grabs my hand, and leads me to the tub. He hooks his thumbs into my underwear and pulls.

"Wait," he says. He lifts his leg and climbs in. Once he is settled, he motions with his hand and I move. He supports me with one hand in mine and the other on my hip.

"Straddle me."

I hiss at the contact of the hot water on my sores and his throbbing cock when I sit on his lap, facing him. My hands are gripping the lip of the tub behind his head, my breasts skimming his chest.

My hair is pushed back and his fingers fist it. We stare at each other for a full minute before I burst into tears.

“I was so scared,” I admit in between sobs.

“Oh, baby,” he says. He pulls with his hand, encouraging me to tuck my face into his neck before running fingers gently run up and down my spine. “I’m so sorry, Saylor.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I knew you would know what to do. With my mom, with my sister, your brothers—even the doctor,” I blabber into his neck.

“I would have done my best, but I think you did great,” he whispers. “Was that your sister in my room?”

“Yes.” The skimming of his fingers lulls me.

“She was startled when I shot up in bed. I didn’t pay much attention. Your mother really is alive?”

“She is. There is so much more to that. But I don’t want to talk about that now.” My tears have tapered off and my other senses have come alive. “Are you really alright?”

“I am. My cheetah worked its magic.” The fingers that were bringing me comfort moments ago are giving me a different sensation now. “What wasn’t soothed by the change is now, having you so close.”

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I press my forehead to his shoulder. I don't know how to seduce him. It should be easy, since we are both naked. He wants me. He marked me. I can feel how much he wants me. But I have never made a first move. Elijah has initiated everything between us. I have to show him how much he means to me.

I love him desperately.

And I want to complete the bond.

I wiggle on his lap—the heat coursing through me can't be denied. The air is perfumed with it. I push my chest tighter to his. I rub my face over his neck. I can feel his pulse and veinthrobbing where I want to mark him. I kiss the area lightly and he sucks in a breath.

“Do you want something, Kitty Cat?” he asks, silkily.

“Please, Elijah,” I whisper.

“Please, what?”

“Please, fuck me, Sir,” I whimper.

“Hmm...since you asked so nicely,” he purrs. “Lift up.”

He clasps my hips.

I perch on my knees, my breasts at eye level. Our eyes meet while he holds his cock

in position. He waits.

He is allowing me to have some control. If I want him, I have to make the move.

I don't wait long before I sink down, and he fills me. My head drops, my neck bared to him, taking control but also giving my submission.

"Ride," he commands.

I hesitantly press closer. Sparks bounce over my skin and center where we are joined. I push up slightly with my thighs and back down. It feels so good, I do it again. And again. And again. Gaining speed.

His hands dig into my hips but don't influence my motions. I can tell he wants to.

I watch him struggle to allow me this control. He does it, but barely.

I grip the tub behind him again, pushing my breasts closer to his tempting mouth.

"Elijah," I moan.

"Do you want my mouth to suck you?" he asks, a devilish grin forming on his lips.

"Yes."

He dips his head, catching my nipple, sucking. He releases one, only to move to the other.

Back and forth. My hips glide faster, reaching for the pull I feel deep inside.

"Fuck, baby," he says through his teeth. "You feel so fucking good wrapped around

me.” He licks both nipples. “Are you close?”

“Yes,” I cry. My hips stutter and I lose the rhythm. “Sir,” I plead.

“Do you want me to take over?”

“Yes, Sir.” I barely finish voicing the words before his hands urge me to move how he wants.

His hips push up as he pulls mine. Our skin making an obscene noise, the water expanding it. It splashes all over the floor by the force of his thrusts.

I cannot hold myself up anymore, leaning heavily on him, bringing my face closer to his neck.

The moment that will change everything is here. As much as I want to come, I want to mark him even more.

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“Elijah, Sir?” I ask, not knowing exactly how I want to ask.

“Do you want to complete the bond?” he asks, hissing through his teeth. “Do you want to mark me?”

“Yes,” I groan as he grinds into me.

“Do it,” he demands.

That’s all I need. I sink my teeth into his shoulder. His harsh grunt fills the air. I suck deeply, greedily. Fuck, his taste. His smell. The magic that floats around us, covering us within a bubble. It binds us together forever.

My skin vibrates with energy just as I come.

“Shit, yes,” he roars.

His cock pulses, shooting his come deep inside me. Covering me with his scent.

It goes on and on as I drink from him, ensuring the bond is fulfilled.

He suddenly stands with me in his arms, my mouth locked on his neck, and his cock still inside me. Water rains off our bodies, but neither of us cares. My hands thread through his hair, holding him close.

He drops us to the bed, never losing contact, he crawls to the center of it.

I pull back slowly, licking the tender spot, and immediately I feel it.

I feel him inside me. Not the cock that still is rock hard. But him. His essence. So many feelings shoot through me, sliding into every nerve, every corner. It flows into my legs, my arms, even my fingertips.

“You feel it?” he asks, his eyes burning into mine.

“I do,” I gasp. I close my eyes, pushing my head deeper into the pillow, the sensations overwhelming. To be so connected to someone is a magical experience. It feels as if I have lived his life, stepped in his shoes, gained all the power he has. I will be able to feel him, find him, love him, forever.

“We will be with each other always. The bond is complete,” he growls with satisfaction. “You are mine. I am yours. I will protect you with everything I am. I will love you with everything I am.”

“You love me?” I ask as I open my glassy eyes.

“Of course.”

“I love you, too,” I confess.

“I know,” he smirks.

“Elijah,” I cry, my eyes narrowing.

He taps his heart and then mine. “I can feel you.”

“I can feel you, too,” I whisper.

He thrusts once. “I’m not done with you, mate.”

“Okay,” I smile.

“Are you ready for me to take over?”

“I am,” I reply happily. “How?” I ask curiously.

He pulls out and I almost protest but he raises an eyebrow. He sits back on his heels.

“Are you ready to be tied up?”

My heart thumps.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Elijah

Her eyes flare and she shifts. Her legs unconsciously fall open further. Her pussy is swollen and dripping, the combination of our come leaking. Her nipples are hard.

She wants my control.

“Saylor, I need the words,” I remind her. I could go with what her body is communicating to me but I need absolute agreement.

“Elijah,” she starts and I raise an eyebrow. “Sir, tie me up and fuck me.”

“Good girl,” I praise her courage. She is shy with her needs but all she needs is a little encouragement to voice her desires. We have our whole life front of us, filled with pleasure and experimenting. “Leave your legs wide and put your arms over your head.”

My lips tip at the corners when she complies quickly.

I leave the bed and go into my closet. I keep a bag of toys in here. I haven’t used any of it on anyone else. Not long ago, I had the urge to go shopping. I didn’t know why at the time since I haven’t been seeing anyone—now I know.

I take out the cuffs. A long chain connects them. I prefer using them over the ropes because of the amount of chain. It will give her enough slack to move, and her arms

won't get tired holding them clasped closer to the slates in the headboard.

I grab the matching foot cuffs. The cuffs themselves are leather but are lined with fur to protect her skin.

I would never want to hurt her.

I am pleased that she is just as I left her. The sound of the chains rubbing together brings her attention to them. She shows no fear, only curiosity.

I sit beside her near her head. "Hold out your wrists." There is no hesitation. "The rules. The rules are simple. If you feel any pain at all, you say pineapple. If you have any doubts about our play, you say pineapple. If you have any questions or are nervous and want to change it up, you say pineapple. We can talk about it. I need your honesty at all times. If you want me to do something else, try something else, tell me. If you aren't having fun, I'm not. I do all of this to see your pleasure." I hook her cuffs to the end of the chain on either side that I threaded through the headboard. "I also will never ignore the wordstop. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you have any questions?"

"No, Sir."

"Move your hands. Test out the feel and amount of give," I instruct. I watch as she slides the chain back and forth. "Good?"

"It's good."

I move to her feet and repeat the process. "Move them," I tell her.

The chain rattles as she does. The sound shoots shivers down my spine. I love it. I have a feeling I will be hearing it a lot as I'm fucking her.

"Elijah?" she asks.

"Yes, Kitty Cat," I reply. I stand at the foot of the bed.

"I love you. I'm ready."

"I love you, too." I tilt my head. She waits but I don't move. I widen my stance and cross my arms. I let my eyes travel slowly over her. She is under my complete control. Her feet slide across the sheets as far as she can, her impatience clear. It makes me grin.

Fuck, she's perfect for me.

She is my reward.

My everything.

I want to have babies with her. I want to fuck her every minute with that goal in mind. I close my eyes and picture her round with my child, and I don't care what it makes me—I want it to happen as soon as possible. I need to fill her with my come as much as possible.

"Do you want babies?" I ask, opening my eyes.

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She startles but answers, “Yes. I’ve always wanted a family.”

“Good,” I say gruffly. “I am your family. We will add to it as soon as possible. Are you ready for that?”

She nods. “I would love that.”

“You could be pregnant now,” I mutter, listening intently. “I don’t hear a heartbeat but I haven’t been using protection.”

“Elijah,” she snarls.

“Impatient, mate?” I tease. I wait another minute, enjoying her annoyance. “My poor, baby.” I put a knee on the bed. “Make as much noise as you want.” The other knee hits the bed. “I want to hear you.” A hand lands beside her thigh. “Every whimper.” My other hand on the other side of her. “Payback for the dragons making their mate come constantly,” I whisper as my head hovers over her pussy. “Now.” I eat her.

It’s magic in my ears as her moans fill the room. I leave nothing unexplored. I lick, suck, and tug. I open the communication of our mutual bond. Her desire consumes me. It is nothing I have ever felt before. My own emotions combine with hers and I almost come. The intense arousal is almost too much.

I have to give her more.

The metal clangs against the wood when I push my feelings through to her. Our time together has been fucking fantastic before but now it’s another level.

I lean on my elbow so I can use my fingers on her. I thrust two as far as I can go and she comes. Over and over again. I drink it up.

“You taste delicious,” I say, licking my lips. I move up her body to her heaving tits. I lick them, covering them in her scent. “I love your tits. I can’t wait until they are filled with milk. Will you give me a taste?”

“Jesus, Sir,” she groans, pushing them closer to my face.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I say, grinning. “Are you ready for my cock?”

“Yes, please, Sir,” she begs.

Her hips lift as far as they can. I slide my hands under her shoulders, holding her still, and adjust my hips. I glide my cock over her, hitting her clit. I do it again. And again. Until she is thrashing underneath me.

When I am satisfied that she is out of her mind with need, I pound into her.

“Take your Sir’s cock like a good girl,” I demand.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted, welcoming my thrusts.

“Such a good Kitty Cat.” I speed up.

I pull her shoulder, going even deeper, harder, faster. I open my mouth over her tit, never losing the angle and depth. Her pussy squeezes my cock harshly. She loves her breasts sucked on.

“I need to mark you again,” she pants.

I lift my head and give her access to my neck. I am thrilled that she feels the pull so desperately. “Do it,” I growl. I curl over her as she breaks the skin. My hand cups the back of her head, keeping her in place.

Her pussy locks down on me and all I can do is grind deep and let the come be pulled from my body.

I yank her head back and she releases me. I don’t wait to cover my mark and bite deep. It’s her turn to yell.

She pulses, covering me with more of her come, and I fill her even more. I don’t think I will ever finish coming. I lick my bite, sealing it so it won’t bleed, but not enough to heal it completely. Grateful that it will always be there.

I stop my movement completely when we are both drained. I press my forehead to hers and glide my knuckles down her cheek.

“My mate,” I whisper.

“My mate,” she whispers back and we lock eyes.

Our powerful connection ties us together.

I will protect it always.

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I will kill anyone that seeks to tear it apart.

My sweet Saylor is sleeping heavily, tucked to my side. I lay awake, staring at the ceiling. After I took the cuffs off, massaged her wrists and ankles, and cleaned her up, she fell asleep almost instantly.

The day has turned into night and I have no idea what day it is. The past forty-eight hours are a blur. Since I have met her, time has lost its meaning. All that matters is that we are together now, that her presence is beside me and inside me.

I know what I need to do now.

I slowly slide from the bed, putting my pillow in place of my body, and Saylor curls around it but doesn't wake. I slip on my jeans, shirt, boots, and hat, leaving the room. I shut the door and grab my phone from the table.

I hit the number I want and wait.

"You alright?" Logan answers.

"I am. We are mated," I say with pride.

"Congratulations," he says softly.

"Thanks. Will you come over?"

"Of course." He pauses. "Are you going to them?"

“Do you know where they are?”

“I do.”

“Good. See you soon.”

I hang up and put the phone in my pocket. I look around the room and think about expanding my place. I need room for babies. I still haven't gone grocery shopping. I want to give Saylor everything she deserves. If she wants to tear down the place and build new, I'll do it. I joked with Ryker but I am far from without money. My horse ranch brought in plenty to support a mate and kids. I wonder if I still have a job? Working at the investigation firm was just a way to kill the time more than to make money. Plus, it was fun hanging with the guys and sticking it to cheating spouses. But I haven't been to work for a week. I'm sure the cranky bear has been advised of my situation by someone in the group.

I take another look around the room and the bedroom door, listening to Saylor's even breaths, before locking the front door and walking outside. I wait on the porch for the lion to arrive. Logan has been a supportive friend and I trust him to watch over for my mate for a few hours. I think she likes him, so if she wakes, she won't be scared.

I listen to the waking woods around me as I lean on the rail of the porch. This is my home. I feel at peace, or almost—I have to confront my brothers first.

I straighten when Logan's truck pulls into the drive.

“This is where they are staying,” he says, walking over and handing me a piece of paper.

“Thanks, Logan.” I glance at it and then put it in my back pocket. “If she wakes, tell her where I am.”

“I will. I’ll stay out here. Nothing will harm her,” he promises.

“I know. I trust you,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “Thank you for that.”

My friend has lived through hell. I need to find the time to have a conversation with him about his own brothers and how that came to be.

“I’ll be back soon.” I playfully knock my shoulder into his as I move down the stairs.

My stomach sours at the thought of seeing my brothers again and what they will say. I wish our reunion could be a happy one. Instead, I have this hurt burning a whole inside me.

Why didn’t they come to me before now? Deep down, I hoped they would.

Will they have a good enough reason to ease my pain?

I fucking hope so, because I fucking love them.

My headlights shine brightly on the two figures sitting around a campfire. They always loved the outdoors as much as I did, so I’m not surprised that they rented a camping spot. Of course our animals are the most comfortable in the open air. Their tents are behind them. They both stand as I turn off my truck.

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I wait a moment, watching them. I try to leave my feelings out of my inspection. Their faces convey their own pain.

I remember all the fun we had as boys. Our close bond was never tested until later in life. We loved to fish and would take every opportunity to cast a line. We would camp regularly. Life was filled with possibilities at that time and we swore we would always be together.

I open my door and step out. I pull my hat down further and pop a toothpick in my mouth as I move closer.

“Brother, it’s good to see you walking,” Draden says.

“You look better,” Brae says.

“I am better,” I mutter. “I’m mated.”

“She completed it?” Draden asks.

I nod and stop in front of them.

“You want to sit?” Brae asks, motioning to the empty chair between them as if they were just waiting for me.

“I suppose.” I take the offer.

We all sit and the quiet that descends is uncomfortable. I fiddle with the brim of my

hat and lounge back in the chair, stretching out my legs.

Staring at the fire and not at their faces, I blurt, “Are we going to do this shit or just sit here all night?” Draden leans forward, his elbows on his knees and joins me in my study of the fire. “I’m trying to decide where to start.”

“How about the night I was kicked out? When both of you were on a trip. What happened when you got home?” I ask harshly.

Brae clears his throat. “We got back two weeks later, having no idea what had happened. Dad told us that you ran off with Tiffany.”

I straighten sharply. “He what?” I growl.

“He said that you found out she was your mate,” Draden explains. “He said it suddenly hit you and you left everything behind and left with her. He didn’t know where you went.”

“What the fuck? I thought Tiffany was dead. Didn’t he tell you? Mom?”

“We know that now. Logan informed us what happened,” Brae says softly.

“As far as we knew then, you found your mate and left us,” Draden adds.

“Why would you believe that? You knew that she was stalking me.”

“Dad showed us notes,” Brae says.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I snarl, and they look at each other and then back at me.

“He had notes that you had written to her, and her to you. He said in your rush, you forgot them. Tiffany expressed her love and devotion to you. You reciprocated. There were stories of the time you spent together. Some were explicit. There were details of your plans to run away together. In some you wrote about the burdens of the prospect of being the next Alpha and that you didn’t want it.” Draden clasps his hands. “We knew that you didn’t want it. We knew that you were fighting the expectations Dad had for you.”

“Elijah, we remembered all the nights we spent talking with you, all your fears about taking over,” Brae continues.

“How?” I ask weakly.

“He must have written them himself, or Tiffany had planned things more than she admitted,” Draden guessed.

“Why? I don’t understand why he would go so far.” My dad must have hated me that much.

“You know he was all about appearances. We knew, as your brothers, what his pressure did to you. It wasn’t a stretch to us, that you would find a way out.” Brae leans toward me. “We thought you found a way out,” he says.

“I didn’t want her. She wasn’t my mate. Don’t you think I would have found you to tell you that I had a mate?”

“We assumed you would eventually. We know how much a mate consumes you. We waited for you to call us. To reach out,” Draden says.

“When I didn’t?” I ask.

“We tried to track you,” Brae drops a bomb that makes my heart thud in hopefulness.

“The trail was cold. You left your phone so we couldn’t call. We even tried to go to Tiffany’s family with no luck—apparently, they moved with no trace. We waited. We worried the longer you were gone. Dad told us to give it up. He wanted us to move on and assume our roles in the pack.” Draden shifts in his seat. “He wanted me to take over the role when he was ready. He started to groom me as he did you. Only, it was worse. He became harder. Stricter with me.” He gulps. “I didn’t adjust well.”

“I imagine,” I whisper, tipping my hat back.

“I was seriously lacking in his eyes. I couldn’t do or say anything right. We were still young and we didn’t know what to do.” Draden gestures helplessly. “I hated everything. I was so fucking angry. You were gone. You were the one that held the three of us together. We felt abandoned by you.” I start to protest automatically and he flattens his palm towards me. “We know now that wasn’t the case, but then, we felt it regardless. I tried to be what he wanted and failed. I tried to be the brother to Brae that he needed and failed. We both tried to find you, again and again with no luck.

“I was so fucking angry at life and everyone in it. Our relationship suffered,” he says, motioning to Brae. “We fought all the time. I fought with Dad and Mom. I hated them both for different reasons. I hated you for leaving us and Brae for not being strong enough to take your place,” he confesses.

“Draden,” I sigh.

“I know most of it was unwarranted, but I couldn’t help it.”

“Things got bad with Dad. And us,” Brae says. “Draden left after a huge fight with Dad a few years after you left. He left everything behind. Including me.” The hurt still oozes from him.

“I tried to build a life away from everyone. I made some stupid, reckless mistakes and paid for them. Brae found me two years later, drunk off my ass in a bar. He picked me up, sobered me up, and chewed me out.” He smiles slightly. “He saved me. He saved me after all the hurtful things I spewed at him. I owe him my life.”

“Fuck that,” Brae spits. “It was truly for selfish reasons. I needed my brother back so we could continue to search for Elijah.”

“You didn’t search for me,” I deny. “It’s been so many years.”

“We did, brother,” Brae says. “We even hired an investigator.”

“What?” I ask weakly.

“He was total shit,” Draden laughs. “He cost a lot of money and didn’t find anything.”

“I found you. I saw you,” I say accusingly, pointing a finger at Draden.

“When? What was I doing? Where?” he asks rapidly.

“You were in a bar, dancing with a woman. She was blonde and seemed really into you. It was in a small town—”

“A biker bar?” he interrupts me.

“Yes,” I confirm.

“Elijah, I was drunk off my ass. That was my lowest point. The woman I was dancing with was someone that supplied me with the powder that I put in my drinks to allow me to get the most out of alcohol. It takes so much for shifters to get drunk that I needed the help to keep me in that state. She was a witch I met. She made the powder and gave it to me at a price.” He cringes.

“What price?”

He turns away from me, staring into the dark around us. “I slept with her. She wanted to experience sex with a shifter,” he says shamefully. “It’s one of the many sick things I did.”

“Draden,” Brae scolds.

“I know. It’s hard to forgive myself.”

“Brother,” I say, his pain affecting me deeply.

“Fuck it,” he spits. “I just want our brother back. We didn’t intentionally leave you. We want you back in our lives. We want to be a family again.”

“What about Dad?”

“We haven’t been back,” Brae says. “We have no idea what he’s doing and we don’t care.”

We fall silent. I feel their honesty and pain. I believe everything. I want my brothers

back too.

“Where do you live now?” I ask and their heads snap to me.

“We don’t live anywhere,” Draden says.

“We travel,” Brae says.

I nod, taking off my hat, and running my hands through my hair. “This is a nice place. Lots to do. But lots of quiet when you want it. The woods where I live has space for another place. Not too close. I have a mate. I know the horrors of hearing sex constantly. You think it would be great, but after awhile, days and days of it, you just want them to shut the fuck up. We have rules here, according to the dragon, which I’ll get into later. If you stay, you will apologize to my mate, beg her forgiveness, and pledge to protect her when I can’t.” I stand. “I told her she and I are family now. We plan to have lots of babies soon. I would like it if my brothers would join it. I want to give her everything she wants, and she has always wanted a big family.”

Draden stands beside me. “I would be honored to call her sister. I will beg her forgiveness.”

“Good.” I turn to Brae, the youngest of us.

He looks up at me with a sheen in his eyes and then joins us. “I would love to get to know her. We will protect her and your babies as if our own,” he swears.

“Good. I will allow you both to stay.” I grin, and they follow.

“Love you,” Draden grumbles, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“I do to,” Brae says, his hand on my other shoulder.

I pull both of them close, pounding their backs. “Love you guys, too.” I push them back roughly. “Enough of that. I have a mate to get back to.”

I start to walk away when Brae asks, “What were the rules you were talking about?”

“Fuck, I can barely remember then now. I burned the list.” I turn, but not before I see them looking at each other in confusion.

I’ll have to ask Laken to give them their own list. I have a feeling they’re going to push the boundaries of the rules.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Saylor

I drift out of sleep to the sound of a song being hummed softly. My head is resting on the chest of my mate, my leg and arm thrown over him, holding him close. The sun is barely starting to rise. I keep my eyes closed and enjoy Elijah’s deep soothing voice and his hand slowly caressing my back.

It’s been three weeks since I woke up to Elijah sliding back into bed after he saw his brothers and got the answers and closure he needed to move on and form the lost bond with them. It freed him. I can see the light he now has for them when he looks into their eyes.

Three days after that, his brothers came over. They begged my forgiveness and we had a meal together. I like them. I see the demons that haunt them and I hope being

here around Elijah and the misfit crew of shifters and vampires will heal them. It's going to take time for the trust to build between them, the relationship they once had was as teenagers, and it will never be the same. They are hopeful for the bond they can grow as adults and get back to the easy connection of brothers.

Elijah made a deal with Laken and Bishop to buy another spot of land, close but not too close, for his brothers to build their own house. They are planning it now and the supplies will be delivered to start construction in another week. Elijah, Logan, and his brothers are going to help them build it. They aren't going to hire someone; they want to use their hands to put in every board. I believe it will be a bonding experience for both sets of the brothers.

Elijah has decided to expand our little cabin, which I protested—it's homey. But he insisted it wasn't big enough for the family we want to have. He certainly is putting all his effort into getting me pregnant—not that I protest much. The demanding heat has eased but I will never get enough of my mate. He brings out the animal in me.

We decided to build a horse ranch. He told me about the one he left behind and I think it brought him peace working with the animals. I am curious but I haven't had any experience with them. Elijah is eager to teach me, just as he does in the bedroom.

It's important to have many lessons in that area.

He quit his job at the investigation firm. It wasn't fulfilling for him and he wants to dedicate all his time to the business—and me.

He gave me the choice of staying home, or working. I decided to stay home so we could learn about each other more, and have an adjustment period. The horse ranch won't be ready for a while but he assures me that we will be fine. I love waking up with him, having a meal, running through the forest, and snuggling in front of the fire at night talking.

My mom is staying in town for now. She got a job at a bookstore and is doing well. At my encouragement, she is talking to a professional about the past trauma. She went through so much and has so much shame from her decisions. Talking to someone has brought her some clarity and the ability to move on. No matter what, she makes sure she goes to her appointment every week.

We are learning about each other every day. I thought we would fall back in to how we were, but I discovered she hid so much of herself from me. Plus, always being on the road wasn't exactly relaxing enough to have an honest conversation. She comes over to eat often with us, and sometimes we go out. Elijah usually is always with me. Sometimes, he insists that we spend the time alone—he knows I need the time with just us. It's almost unbelievable that I have her again. I wake up every day expecting to be in the past and it's always a pleasant surprise when it dawns on me that I have her back. There are many moments that I catch myself looking at her and basking in her presence and the laughter that I missed so much.

May.

May left. My heart squeezes thinking about it. She needed to find her way in her new life. I wish I would have had more time with her, but I understand her decision. We talk on the phone once a day and she plans to visit often. I fear that she will eventually pull away. I try to take every opportunity to tell her that I love her and I will always be here for her. We share the stories of our lives—hers are very painful to hear—and our hopes for the future. Her pain leaks through my phone. I want to take it for her. She has only told me about some of the things that happened in her childhood. I want her to be comfortable enough to give me the burden of her memories.

Our relationship will take time. All I can do is welcome her with open arms when she decides to trust me with it all and come home to me. I won't push her. She has had her choices taken away too much already in her life.

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Tonight we are having our first party. We invited the panthers, the dragons, the wolves, and the vampires. Elijah's adopted family has welcomed me. We didn't have tons of time to get to know each other while I was adjusting to having a mate, running from a vampire, and screaming for help when Elijah was taken. I'm excited to have an actual conversation with them. Of course, Draden and Brae will be here. Logan and his brothers haven't answered Elijah's calls. He's worried about them, which causes me to worry.

But there is nothing that we can do but wait.

Sally.

Sally is a force. She has crashed into this town and all the heart of our friends. She has made the decision to stick around. She rented an apartment and got a job at a restaurant. She told me she loves cooking and can't imagine doing anything different. She let the bear catch her—they have been seen around town holding hands. When I ask her if she is worried that her mate will find her and she will have to break the poor bear's heart, she responds with, I don't hold my breath that I will have that gift given, which makes me sad. I wonder why she feels that way, and what story she has to tell.

Maybe someday, she will tell me, or tell someone. Hopefully she will eventually get her happily-ever-after.

Also, she informed me that the bear is just lonely and they are having fun, nothing more. I can't argue with her. The bear is gorgeous.

She will be bringing her sassiness to the party and is bringing donuts for dessert.

Elijah.

My Elijah.

He has given me a safe place.

A home.

A love that is consuming and can never be torn apart. He loves me like the fantasies that have lived in my head and my heart, but so much more. He's crazy, funny, and so loving. He gives me peace. He freed me. We run together often, our cheetahs as one. We revel in life and the joy of two strangers that the universe handpicked to enhance our lives—as one.

I hug him all the time.

He often hums to me as we are falling asleep or in the morning as he is now. Not to replace my mom's or for the reasons she did. He hums to me to expand the gift he has given me.

He protects me.

He encourages me to find myself and takes pride in the things I find. He shows me in every minute of our day the beauty of our bond.

Late last night, after he made love to me, with no cuffs or ropes, he fell asleep before me for once.

That's when it happened.

My eyes were heavy and I was satisfied. I felt it.

I felt a soul join mine. I heard the tiny thud of a heartbeat that was not mine. I felt the beginning of a life that we created. I closed my eyes and thanked the tiny beauty for giving us another gift.

“Morning, Kitty Cat,” Elijah’s raspy voice ghosts over my hair.

“Morning,” I say softly. I’m wondering when he will realize we have another life in the room. I’m surprised he hasn’t yet, but the heart is soft, just beginning.

His hand stops and everything goes quiet, except the three separate beats.

I lift my head, propping my chin on his chest. I find his eyes blazing and glassy.

“Saylor?” he gasps.

“Sir, you are going to be a father.” He freezes, his nostrils flaring. “Are you happy?” I ask. I have no doubts now as to his devotion to me.

“Happy?” he asks in disbelief. He sits up abruptly, his hands cupping my face, my legs falling to his sides. “Kitty Cat, happy doesn’t describe all that I am.” He drops his head to mine. “This is real, right?”

“It’s real.” Tears gather in my eyes.

He gulps and lifts his head. “I didn’t dare hope that a woman would come into my life and make it worth living. I feared that I would walk through this life without the other half of my soul. I pretended to be okay with that. I pretended that I didn’t need anyone.” He pulls me closer. “The night I found you, I found my purpose. I was supposed to protect you, fulfill you, love you, and give you the family you were

searching for. I prayed that I could give you a baby that you could love just as much as I love you.”

“Elijah,” I cry. “I love you. You are the family that I had been searching for. The number of members doesn’t matter—the love that family contains does. This baby will be so loved and you are going to be a wonderful father.” I run my fingers through his hair. “Do you feel like celebrating, Sir?”

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He bursts out laughing and relish the sight. “I just have one question—maybe two.”

“What?” I grin.

“Do I get complete control? And should I wear my cowboy hat?” He grins devilishly.

“Yes, to both...Sir.” I bite my lip and eagerly await his first move.

Elijah doesn’t disappoint, ever.

Epilogue

Logan

The bass thuds beneath my feet and vibrates up my legs as I move through the club. I ignore the naked bodies around me and up on stage. I have nothing against sex clubs. I figure if you want to explore your pleasure in different ways, more power to you. The sweaty bodies swaying on the dance floor are nice to look at if I was in the mood, but I’m not here for that.

I left my brothers at the hotel—they don’t know where I am. I tried to leave them back home but they refused. We have so much to work out between us, but I have been avoiding it. That has been my coping mechanism—ignore it and it will go away.

Trust me, I know it’s not healthy.

When I close my eyes at night, I dream of being stuck in a cage, alone, cold, and

ashamed. A prospective Alpha wouldn't be in a cage.

I am not the man I used to be.

A lion's mane is his pride. The longer it is, the more powerful his is in the pride. Before I was taken, I had the longest in the pack. When I was rescued, I shaved my head—I couldn't shave my lion's mane.

I didn't deserve the distinction of being powerful.

I was weak.

I run my palm over my scalp. I might shave again. The stubble is getting longer.

I move around a couple with their hands in each other's pants and walk past another couple having sex in a booth, the woman riding the man. Two women are sitting close, their hands gliding over the others tits in the opposite booth. A handful of spectators watching the beautiful sight.

I don't judge. However or with whoever you want to be with. As long as everything is consensual, it doesn't matter how you find your pleasure.

I meet the woman standing outside the closed door down the back hallway. She's stunning and is dressed in leather and as little of it as possible.

She is not the reason I am here either.

Well, not directly.

"Is he in there?" I ask, my lips at her ear.

“He is. The chains are in place.”

I hand her the envelope of cash. “Thanks, I’ll take it from here.”

She nods and walks away.

You see, a friend of mine thought the man inside the room was dead. He’s a vampire that set off a chain of events that caused my friend and his mate pain.

I found out he was very much alive and killing his way through sex clubs.

I open the door and lock it behind me.

Silas is chained to the bed. His head lifts and his eyes widen.

A vampire is almost impossible to kill. But it’s easier when the vampire is in chains, as high as he can be, and drunk on sex and too much blood.

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“Who the fuck are you?” he spits, the rage falling over his face.

“I’m a friend of Elijah’s.” I wait as the recognition enters his eyes. “I’m here to make sure his happiness is not threatened again.”

I undress quickly or else my clothes will be shredded.

“How do you plan to do that?” he asks, yanking at the chains that bind him.

“My lion is angry. He’s angry all the time. He’s excited that he gets to come out and play. That he gets to expend some of that anger on someone that deserves it.”

I shift.

A huge lion stands in my place.

Even though I will never find happiness, I will protect those that have it.

The music drowns out Silas’s screams, but they feed the dark place within me.

Someday, I will have to confront the dark place that fills me.

But not today.