



Her Cruel Alpha

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: First, he rejected me. Now, I have to give him my plus-size curves and breed his baby.

I'm the awkward human everyone avoids. The Alpha humiliated me and didn't want me.

Now I'm selected by Operation Human Mating to be the Alpha's forced mate.

I run, but he ties me up and drags me back, because he wants to impregnate me.

I'm the weird nerd. I helped design the algorithm that matches Alphas with humans.

But it betrays me by spitting out my name, to be mated with the guy I hate.

He publicly broke my heart and made me feel as small as possible. If he thinks I'll come easily, he's sorely mistaken.

But the problem with Alphas is that they'll get their way even when you don't want them to.

He hunts me down and carries my trembling body in his arms.

He locks me in his house and smirks at me, saying that I'll be begging soon enough.

I hate that he's right. I hate how my full body is completely helpless in his rough hands.

How much longer until my cruel Alpha knocks me up?

The Alphas of Honeycomb Valley are matched with a human mate to breed their babies and save their packs from extinction. The chosen couples are expected to begin the mating ritual as soon as the match has been made. Zero choice involved...

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Chapter 1 - Katie

I chewed on the tip of my pen, trying to find an answer to the problem I had written down on my notepad. I had over a hundred women that I was working with to help get them pregnant, and I had only managed to help a few. People were becoming discouraged, including Nessa, who I wished had been the first to see the little plus sign on the pregnancy test.

I pinched my nose, knowing I was getting to that point myself where I didn't know if we would ever get out of this mess. This was a big task, but I had hoped I would have had better outcomes. I'd been working on the virus and the women for a year now, and I didn't feel I had gotten anywhere. I was going in circles, getting the same results.

I glanced up at the door and then looked at my phone, checking the time. Sam said she was going to meet me here after her meeting, but it was already running late compared to the time she had given me.

"Do you need a refill on your coffee?" Lily, one of the waitresses, stopped at my table, giving me a gentle smile. Sam and I started coming to the cafe regularly, which meant we got to know the people working there. It was one of the few places where I felt I could relax. I wasn't known as a scientist. I was just another customer.

I shook my head. "No, but thank you for asking. If I have any more, I'll end up pulling an all-nighter at the lab again." Maybe that wouldn't be a terrible idea. When I lacked sleep, my brain seemed to work better. But at the same time, it didn't.

I looked back at the door and heard my phone ding. I glanced at it, seeing a message popped up.

The meeting is running longer than I anticipated. Won't be able to make it to lunch. Eat a sandwich for me.

I frowned. I had looked forward to our time together. In truth, Sam was one of the few people I could really consider a friend, and she was one of the few who managed to get me out of my lab. Anytime she asked, I was more than willing to go out.

I set my phone aside and took a sip of my coffee, looking back down at my notebook. The math problem was still unsolved.

I decided to flip the page a few back and read the names of some of the girls I needed to call and check in on. There were a few we were working on fertility treatments, and others we were working on birthing plans.

There was Sasha, who had gotten pregnant, finally, after working for three months. She was overjoyed when she called me, nearly bursting my eardrum with happiness.

There was Natalie, whom we had tried several times, but nothing worked. The virus had taken full effect on her uterus and put her into menopause. Nothing I had done was reversing the effects.

I had learned that the inability to get pregnant was only stage one of the virus. It was terrible, but it was nothing like the next stage. It would travel from the uterus and start attacking the entire immune system.

I had managed to find out that each person lacked vitamin D, folic acid, and vitamin B. But with the added knowledge now that this was magic, it was changing my understanding. It could remain the same even if I were doing everything right.

Even though a lot of the girls were doing everything I wanted, they were still failing to get better. They were still failing to conceive.

I sighed and leaned forward, resting my head on the notebook. I was tired of feeling like I was going in circles with no answers. I worked hard to solve the unsolvable. I had always done extremely well with every other project. I mastered everything thrown at me, yet this seemed to have me at a standstill.

Why had I agreed to this job? What made me think I could do this?

I thought back to when the council called me to see them. It was just a simple day for me, but it all changed when I received that letter. I had questioned why they would want me. I was a nobody, and no one really knew who I was.

They explained that I was the person they wanted to solve this. I had the qualifications and was probably the only one in the entire Valley who had a background to back it up. It was true I had worked on other viruses before and that I excelled in microbiology, but this was different. It was... harder.

When you mix magic with science, anything could happen. What should have made sense suddenly wasn't going to, and it was making my life hard. I wanted to go back to the work I was doing. Stuff that I understood.

I flipped back to the other page and scowled at the equations. I had eraser marks and notes. I didn't know magic, but I needed to. I should start getting some books and read more into it. I knew the basics, but the person that Sam described was not some newbie doing this. This person was meticulous, and they knew what they were doing. They had likely planned this for a long time and worked hard to make sure there was no room for error. We knew so little about whoever was doing this besides that it was a man.

Sam had told me she saw a glimpse of a man, but more than she heard him. She had said he was filled with anger, and so much that she felt it vibrating around her. I couldn't imagine feeling what she had told me. Having nothing but darkness surrounding you and feeling such pure...well, rage.

It had been eight months since it attacked them, and I knew that I was working on a timer, but didn't know how much time was left. I didn't know if this guy was going to release another virus or if he was changing the one we already had. We didn't know anything, and that was the scary part. I had been working on this for almost two years with few answers.

I knew so little, and I needed to know more. Everyone was counting on me to know more.

My phone dinged, and I glanced down. I couldn't help but smile.

PS: Put your notebook away. I know you're probably spiraling. Eat your meal and take a walk. Get some fresh air.

I shut the notebook, wrote back to Sam a response, and took another sip of my coffee. I threw everything into my bag and headed out the front. I was checking my phone as I pushed the door open and felt my body smack into something hard.

My phone slipped out of my hand, and my bag popped open, spilling all the contents onto the ground.

"Shit!" I said, quickly bent down, grabbing my phone and laptop. I hoped neither was damaged. My boss would not be impressed if I ruined another company's computer.

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"Sorry. I didn't realize how fast you were moving."

My eyes widened, and I looked up. My body went cold as I looked at Henrik. He looked as amazing as I expected, and I hated it a little. I wished he looked like crap since our last conversation, but of course, he didn't.

I looked away, grabbing the rest of my stuff while trying to shove it into my bag. "It's fine," I said, feeling my face going hot. I felt embarrassed and wished I had dolled myself up a little more this morning. I had just thrown my hair into a shitty bun and pulled on clothes. I wasn't even sure if they were clean or dirty.

His hand grabbed my notebook, which fell closer to him, and he glanced at it. "Looks like some serious math."

I snatched it from him, feeling my blood boil. I tried not to let it show as I shoved it into my bag. "That's because it is."

He gave me a half smile as I pulled myself up, slinging my bag over my shoulder. "Are you okay? You hit me pretty hard. Sorry, I didn't see how fast you were coming out."

"I'm fine," I said, chewing on my lip.

Do not scan him. Don't look at him. Don't do it.

My eyes did the opposite of what I wanted. They scanned down Henrik quickly. I took in his perfect build and his beautiful, dark blond hair. His eyes looked softly at

me, and I hated how I stared into them. They were almost golden and comforting. He had recently shaved, and he smelt like a shave and had a hint of musk.

Damn it, Katie. Do we not remember what happened?

Of course, I remembered what happened. I could still feel the rejection even months later. It was my own fault. I shouldn't have thought Henrik liked me just because he was being nice. It was probably because I was friends with Sam, his sister.

"How have you been?" He asked as he shoved his hands into his pockets. "You look well."

I swallowed. "I'm fine. In a bit of a hurry, actually. Wouldn't want to waste anyone's time." I said, being sure to say it the way I did. Was I still mad? A little bit.

Henrik looked a little hurt, and I didn't understand it. He was the one who told me he didn't want to waste his time with me, yet he was the one trying to have a small conversation with me? Why treat me nice at all if you didn't actually want to be around me anyway?

"Katie, if we could..." The door opened, and someone walked out. Henrik fell quiet for a moment, and I shifted the bag on my shoulder. I was uncomfortable and wanted to run away as quickly as I possibly could.

"I really do need to get back to work. I'm on lunch break," I said, stepping back so I could get going.

Henrik frowned and gave me a single nod. "Was nice to chat with you....Hope you're doing well."

I turned, not bothering to say anything back. I walked quickly, gripping my bag with

a death grip. So many emotions were bubbling up, and I didn't know how to handle them all.

And then I thought back to the party at Sam and Jay's house.

Standing next to Henrik, I felt my entire body was hot. I chewed on my lower cheek as I stared at him. I had said how I was going to ask him out at least twenty times, and ten more before in front of the mirror at home. I was giddy with happiness. I thought maybe I stood a chance. Sam always said he would date me and that out of any guy she knew, he would treat me nicely.

I tapped my fingers onto the counter, finally mustering up the courage to speak. "So, Henrik, I'm going to an event next week with a couple of friends, and I kind of need a person to join me. Would you be free?"

Henrik had looked at me, but the softness he held before wasn't there. His eyes had shifted, and I didn't understand why, but I felt my stomach bottom down. He held a blank expression when he shook his head at me. "No, I'm busy." There was no remorse or caring in his tone as he spoke.

I frowned, feeling like someone had punched me in the gut. Henrik had always been so nice to me, and I was questioning who was standing in front of me now. But I shook it off. I was looking too much into his words. "That's okay. Understandable. Are you too busy for coffee? I'll be in..."

"Katie," Henrik's jaw clenched a little as he looked at me. "No offense, but I don't have time to waste with you."

My eyes widened, and I suddenly couldn't breathe. The person who stood there was someone entirely different from the person I had gotten to know. I felt the tears bloom instantly and tried to push them back. It wasn't like I hadn't been rejected

before, but this was the first time I hadn't been prepared for it.

Sam had told me over and over that she could see us together. She said how sweet her brother was and how understanding he was. I had expected him to accept. Or at least if he was going to let me down, he would have done it gently.

I quickly shook my head, wishing I could swipe that memory from my head. It hurt. I'd hardly had friends and didn't really have a dating history, but I had put myself out there and felt like I'd been thrown aside, like I didn't matter. He didn't even let me down gently.

I don't have time to waste on you. I had rethought those words over and over and over again. I couldn't deny it felt a little good to throw them back at him. Not that it did much damage.

I felt tears build up. What hurt the most was that I didn't understand what I had done wrong. Henrik would bring coffee for me when he stopped by the lab with Sam. I'd run into him when I traveled to his town, and he always offered to bring me lunch as a way of thanking me for going to him. He'd even texted me a handful of times, thanking me for the help with some couples in his town.

I quickly shook my head and wiped my eyes. We were not going to cry about this. He was just some guy, and that was it. We didn't need to see him or interact with him anymore. And if we did, we could just keep it professional. I was an adult, and I could move past this.

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Chapter 2 - Henrik

“Sam, if you don’t hurry up, you’re going to be late for work,” Jay said, standing across the kitchen. He screwed a cap onto a travel mug, setting it next to Sam’s car keys.

Sam came charging in, her eyes narrowed on Jay. Even angry, my sister still looked like a child in my eyes. My sister looked happy. She had lost her baby weight pretty easily after having their daughter. She still had a happiness to her, a glow that I knew wasn’t from the pregnancy but from how happy her marriage was.

“If you had let me sleep last night, I wouldn’t have struggled to get out of bed. And I wouldn’t be running behind in the first place.”

I cringed, pausing as I grabbed my coffee. Some topics I still didn’t want to hear. “I understand that I’m a visitor in your home, and you guys get to do what you want, but I’m not oblivious to what goes on.” I quickly add, looking at Sam. “I would rather not hear things.”

She rolled her eyes. “Get over it. Clearly, we had sex, Henrik.”

“I’m aware, but that doesn’t mean my mind needs to imagine it. I still see you as a little child.”

Sam smirked. “Keep it up, and I’ll give you details of every space we’ve done it on, including the chair you’re sitting in.” Sam grabbed her keys and coffee off the counter, giving Jay a softer smile. Then, she turned on her heels and marched away.

I looked at Jay, who was holding back a laugh. He waved a hand. "Sorry."

"You should have let her sleep. She's a bear when she doesn't get her rest."

Jay snorted, shaking his head. "She was the one who jumped me."

I shook my head. "Nope, no.. no." I set my mug down and glared at him. "I will gladly get a hotel room if you two can't keep your sexual habits together and private. I don't need to know anything."

Jay gave me a single nod. "Sorry."

I took another sip of my coffee and looked down at my seat. "She was joking about this chair, right?"

Jay's quiet was answer enough, so I got up. I pushed the chair in, wiping my hands onto my pants afterward. "You people are sick."

He laughed. "Oh please, don't act like you've never dated a woman and had her on every inch of your place."

I scuffed. "This is different. This is my sister. This isn't some chick I won't see around."

"And I didn't choose her," Jay added.

I knew that. They were forced together, and I had been worried. Jay had always been a reserved person, and Sam...well...Sam had dealt with so much growing up. I know that I didn't even know about half of it. Sam always just handled whatever was thrown at her. I wish I had handled more, that I had helped with more.

But they were happy now. I could see it on both of their faces. When I arrived yesterday and we all had dinner, I could see the happiness in their eyes. They were in love, and it showed.

Katie's face flashed before my eyes, and I scowled. I could see the hurt look in her eyes from the other day and the way her hands tightened on her bag.

I wanted to forget about that, but I couldn't. It kept popping back into my head, and I couldn't seem to move past it. I felt terrible, and I could see that after rejecting Katie, she had been hurt.

But I had to. I didn't have a choice, much like everything else in my life. I had to do what was best for my pack and everyone else before I could even think about my own needs. Rejecting her was the right thing, even if it hurt.

It was one thing to have a fling and enjoy myself, but all of those girls were aware that it couldn't be anything more serious. Katie wasn't that type of person. She was sweet and gentle. She was the type who looked at a guy and saw a future that went past animalistic sex.

Jay snapped his fingers at me. "Are you listening to a word that I'm saying?"

I quickly cleared my mind and took another sip of the coffee. "Were you blabbering about my sister still?"

Jay glared at me. "No, smartass, I was talking about the party. Which just proves that you weren't listening."

Shit. That's right, the party. I almost forgot about it. Jay was turning twenty-seven, and Sam was throwing him a huge party. She'd invited all of us guys to join and a bunch of their pack. She rented out the old barn just near the outskirts of Honeycomb

Valley. It was an enormous barn with a large open space. A lot of people used it for graduations and weddings.

“What about the party?” I asked.

“I’m just making sure you're still bringing the cake like you said you would. Sam said I should remind you because you might have forgotten.”

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I frowned. I had forgotten about that. Well, I hadn't forgotten. I was heading to the bakery when I ran into Katie. She had taken the thought away, and I forgot to order it. If Sam finds out, she will never let me hear the end of it.

Double fuck. Sam will kill me if I don't show up with a cake. I might as well go home if I showed up empty-handed.

I put on a hurt look. "Of course, I'm bringing the cake. I already made the order. She needs to think higher of me."

Jay nodded. "Good. I would hate not to have cake on my birthday."

"Which I should probably go and grab," I said, straightening my shoulders. I hoped that they would have something for sale. Anything at this point. A bakery should have cakes to buy on display.

Jay waved a hand. "Alright. Katie said she wanted you to meet us there at three."

I grabbed my car keys and headed for the front. "I know the way there. It's almost like I lived here before."

"You're a smartass, you know that, Henrik?"

"Where do you think I learned it?" I yelled over my shoulder as I slipped outside.

I drove across town and headed straight to the bakery. I parked my car and glanced towards the little cafe next to the bakery. The same door that I ran into Katie at.

A shiver ran down my spine. In another world, I would have happily accepted her asking me out; I might have even asked her out. But that wasn't the world I lived in. I didn't get to decide who my wife would be. How could I start a relationship with someone knowing that at any moment, Katie was going to get a match for me with someone else?

I did the right thing, turning her down. And maybe I was a little harsh, but I had to make it hurt. If I walked the line, she would keep asking. It was better to let her lick her wounds and pull herself back together rather than continue making little wounds over a long period of time that seemed to never heal. I did the right thing, even if it doesn't feel like it.

I shook the thought off and headed for the bakery. It smelt like sweets, and a young woman stood at the front. She gave me a soft smile. "Morning, Henrik."

The joy of being an Alpha is that everyone knows who you are. Everyone knew who your family was. The downside was that they didn't know who you truly were.

I plastered a smile on. "Morning. I made a mistake, and I'm hoping that you can fix it."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Oh?"

"I was supposed to order a cake a few days ago for a birthday today."

She smirked and leaned onto the counter. "You mean Jay's birthday? The birthday that the entire pack is talking about?"

My shoulders sank. "Yes....the very one."

The gal chuckled. "You really did make a mistake. If you show up empty-handed, I

have a feeling your sister will have words with you.”

“I’m aware, which is why I’m hoping you will save me from her wrath.”

She looked to the back and tapped her fingers on the counter. “When is the party?”

“At three.”

She seemed to count the numbers out with her fingers and tilted her head from side to side. “Would be cutting it a little close.” She looked back at me. “I guess I could make a cake, but it will cost you.”

“That’s fine. I’ll pay whatever you want.”

“Chocolate cake, three layers enough?”

I nodded. I glanced down, reading her name tag. “Yes, thank you, Jill. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“I can drop it off, since I will be there. Do you want to write on it?”

I nodded. “Yes, Happy Birthday.”

After making my payment and tipping Jill for the help, I headed out to do a few other things that I needed to do before Jay’s party.

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A little before three when I arrived at the party. A ton of people were already there, including all the other Alpha's. They stood next to Jay near the front. Everyone looked dressed for the occasion, and as I walked up, Frank was the first to notice me. He raised an eyebrow at me. "I thought you were bringing the cake?"

Everyone turned to look at me after that remark, and I glared at him. "It's being delivered."

"Fancy," Aaron said, his smirk growing. "Or did you forget?"

"I didn't forget," I snapped. I didn't need my sister to catch wind of those words and come barking at me.

"Where is your gift?" Maddox asked, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"I didn't get one."

"What?" Jay's eyebrows went up. "I'm your best friend, and you didn't bring me a gift?"

"Best friend?" Aaron turned to Jay. "What the hell?"

"Yeah, are we chopped liver?" Frank added.

Jones smirked.

“I didn’t bring a gift because you're married to my sister and sleeping with her. I think that's enough of a gift.”

The guys started to laugh when Sam walked over. My sister looked tired after a long day at work, but I could see the sparkle in her eyes when she looked at Jay. She loved him deeply. She wrapped her arms around Jay’s and tugged him to her.

“What are you all doing?” Sam asked, looking at each of the guys before she dropped her eyes on me. She raised an eyebrow at my empty hands. “And where is the cake?”

“It’s being delivered. Don’t worry.”

Her eyes flicked past me, and she smiled. I turned, spotting Jill walking towards us with the cake. “See,” I waved a hand. “I told you I ordered the cake.”

Jill gave me a smile, and I knew the secret was safe between us.

The party was in full swing within half an hour. The space was packed with people and I was ready to go home. It wasn’t that I didn’t enjoy myself because I did. I knew almost everywhere since I lived in this town for so many years before they offered up the town I live in now. But it was different. It seemed everyone was growing up, everyone was doing something different, and I was stuck being the Alpha.

I loved my job, but sometimes I wished I had more. I saw our friends having beautiful marriages, and some having children. People were getting promoted and switching fields. I at least had Jay, who was the same as I was. And then he was married and having a baby.

I took another deep drink of my beer and glanced around the room. My eyes froze when they spotted Katie standing in the corner. She looked uncomfortable, her fingers clutching a small glass tightly to herself. She was wearing a deep blue dress

that went from her neck all the way down to her ankles. It was different from everyone else who was wearing short dresses and their breasts half out. Katie dressed to cover herself up.

I wanted to ask her how she was. I ached to fix the words I'd thrown at her. Katie was sweet, and I didn't want to be the reason she was hurt. But if I had apologized, it wouldn't have fixed the damage that was done. It wouldn't change the future. I was destined for another, and she didn't deserve the heartbreak. It was better to appear a jackass rather than to string her along.

"Are you listening?" Tuck, a friend, raised an eyebrow at me.

"Sorry," I quickly apologized, pulling my eyes away from Katie, stuffing that urge down as far as I could. "I thought I saw someone."

Jay snorted, and Tuck glared at me, not impressed. "I didn't know I meant so little to you now, Henrik. What, you get a big boy job, and suddenly, I'm not good enough for you?"

I knew Tuck was teasing, but the words still landed. Some days, I felt I had left everyone behind. I missed the old days when my biggest worries were training to be an Alpha.

Jay patted my shoulder. "He's joking."

"I know that," I said, giving Tuck a smile. Tuck had been a good friend of ours growing up. He was funny and charming. Married a beautiful woman who had given him four wonderful children. He had the life Jay and I wanted. I envied him.

"My wife is waving me over," Tuck patted my shoulder. "It was great seeing you, Henrik. You should come down, and we should all go out for dinner." He turned to

Jay. "Happy Birthday man."

Tuck slipped away, and Jay raised an eyebrow at me. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I snorted. "I'm just hungry. Why don't you go mingle like your wife is? I'm pretty sure she's talked to more people than you have."

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Jay glanced at her across the room. She was talking with a group of girls. All of them were gushing over their daughter, Savanna. It surprised me how much she'd placed herself into a pack she wanted to leave so badly. I was proud of how much my sister had grown, how far she'd come.

"I'm going to grab food."

I moved past Jay and headed over to the food. I froze when I spotted Katie standing near the other table, grabbing herself a cookie. Her eyes dropped on me, and she looked away. I swallowed, knowing I couldn't just ignore her.

"Evening, Katie," I said as I stopped next to her. She gave me a head nod, looking at the table.

I searched for more words, knowing I needed to be able to have a conversation with her. We would have to talk in the future. We had to get past this awkward part if we ever wanted to be able to talk again.

I opened my mouth to say something when someone stopped next to Katie. It was a large man, and he scanned her. "Didn't know the scientists were invited to this."

He laughed at his own joke, and I watched as Katie chewed on her cheek.

I ground my teeth together and growled at the man. His eyes quickly looked at me. His eyes widened slightly.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets. "I didn't realize my sister invited assholes, yet

here you are.”

The man sputtered for words, apologizing and turning, hurrying off. I looked back at Katie, but she turned to me. She glared with her hands in tight fists as she snapped. “What the hell was that for?”

I blinked, surprised. “What do you mean? I was standing up for you.”

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “I do not need you to stand up for me. I don’t need you to do anything for me.”

She turned and marched away. I stood frozen, watching her leave.

Chapter 3 - Katie

I softly hummed a tune as I stood in front of my computer, waiting for it to spit out the next couple. I stared at the little bubble as it loaded, working through all the math and the information I had input.

Anger flared as I thought about how Henrik told off the guy who spoke to me the other day. A part of me was happy that someone wanted to stand up for me, but the other part was annoyed that it was him. He had made himself perfectly clear, so why the hell was he still hanging around me? Why was he asking how I was doing when he didn’t want to waste time on me? It didn’t make sense.

I took a sip of my coffee and surveyed my lab. It was clean, and everything was organized carefully. I enjoyed it, but Sam always thought it was a little too white. I had a few pictures of us hanging over my computer and a few that sat on my desk. I had to hand it to her. She knew how to spruce up a place. The little pictures added color and made it feel a little less empty.

I sighed, staring at the pictures. Sam and I went out to a restaurant. Another was when we were going hiking. There was even one at her baby shower with everyone. This was before Henrik rejected me, of course.

“Nope, enough of that,” I grumbled, looking away from the last photo. “It’s in the past. Let’s leave it there where it belongs.”

Henrik made his point. I could move on. It was just going to take longer than a few months. Besides, he was going to be married to a woman in no time, so he would be someone else's problem. Maybe then he would leave me alone.

My computer beeped, and I turned my attention to it. I read the screen. “Match found.”

I glanced at the printer as it started to print the results. I couldn’t help but be impressed, considering this was my baby. The algorithm behind the system was made by my own head. It churned through everything put in and worked quickly to assemble information. I had used it before to help the women find blood matches and quickly realized if I put in more information, it would be able to find matches for people.

The printer threw out the results, and I grabbed the paper and quickly scanned it. My eyes froze as the names were in bold letters right next to each other.

This had to be a sick joke.

My name sat next to Henriks.

I shook my head and started frantically typing into my computer, trying to get it to recompute because that couldn’t be right. There was no way I was Henrik’s perfect match. We had nothing in common. We had no similar taste, and the man disliked

me. The marriage would fail.

But the computer spat out our names together once more.

I started to panic and shook my head. “No. No. This can’t be. There is no way.”

But my computer didn’t lie. It had never been wrong. That was the thing about math...you only got the right answer.

I grabbed my purse and threw the papers onto the table. I made my way out. I wasn’t sure if it was from fear of the results or just needing to walk away and clear my head. Either way, I needed to get away from everything.

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I got to my car and took a few deep breaths. I pressed my forehead against my steering wheel and sighed.

“This can’t be happening.”

How?

How was it that we matched? Where did it put us together? Sure, I understood that I had a healthy body, but it also took in hobbies and activities with the equation as well. It took in everything.

I knew what was on my profile. A fat, pale lab scientist who spent all her time at home or work. She had odd hobbies, such as collecting bugs and working on math equations.

I didn’t know what was on Henrik's profile, but I was sure none of what was on mine would match with his. Henrik was built like a god, and he deserved someone who could hold her head high. I was not that person.

What if I plead my case? Told the council it was a mistake. No. They would argue that I told them there was no such thing. But this had to be! This had to be the exception.

I couldn’t tell them. They would make it happen. I wouldn’t get an option.

I could just ignore this match. I could say it was inconclusive. I could just move on to someone else. I could burn the papers and act like it never happened.

My stomach sank as I remembered that everything was uploaded to them. They would know I ran someone; if I ran another, they would expect two couples.

“Fuck!” I growled, running my hands through my hair. I was in too deep. I would have to tell them I was paired up.

God! Why had I thought I could do this? What made me think I could take on a project this big? There had to be better scientists out there.

I started my car and drove home. But my mind wouldn’t shut off. It spiraled.

You are unworthy of this entire situation. You’ll fail, Henrik, and you’ll fail everyone else here. You’ve only managed to get a few women pregnant during this entire endeavor. Someone else would have figured out a solution already.

I shook my head as I got out of my car. That couldn’t be true. I worked hard. I did good work. I was figuring things out. Slowly, but I was doing it.

But not perfect. You’ve failed. You were supposed to bring results and answers, but you haven’t. You’ve hardly done anything.

I didn’t even realize I was packing up a bag inside until I was looking around my apartment, trying to think of anything I couldn’t live without.

I was leaving.

It was the only answer that made sense. I didn’t know what would happen if I got caught, but that meant I needed to be good. I had to give fast answers.

I took a photo of me and Sam. Some clothes to last me a week and some food. I left my phone on my counter, knowing it could be tracked.

As I hurried out to my car, Dahlia, my neighbor, waved at me. “Afternoon, Katie. You staying at the lab overnight again?”

I shifted the bag on my hip and nodded my head. “Yep.”

“Seems like a large bag for an overnight.”

I nodded. “Might stay a couple. I have a lot of work.”

She nodded her head, giving me a gentle smile. She was a fragile old lady who had no real family. She lost her husband and kids years ago. She had always been sweet to me, and I was going to miss talking to her.

“Well, we will see you when you get back.” She gave me a wave as she headed inside her apartment.

I continued to walk, nearly running to my car. I threw my bag inside and started the car up. I looked at my gas, knowing I would need some, but I wasn’t stopping. I could stop once I was out of town.

I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t even know how far I was going to drive, but I needed out. Everything was suddenly suffocating me, and it was all too much.

A doctor would call it a panic attack, but I just called it being honest. I always gave myself a reason why I never had results, but maybe it was simple. I just sucked. I wasn’t cut out to be the person running this entire project. The Council had made a mistake picking me.

I parked in front of a hotel after the sun set, and I started feeling numb. I didn’t know how long I’d been driving or how far out of town I was. But I was exhausted. My entire body ached for sleep.

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I headed inside and got myself a room. The hotel smelled of chlorine and cigarettes. As I headed to my room, the smell of alcohol and musk mixed with everything else, and I cringed. So, I hadn't picked a good hotel, but it was going to be fine. I would only stay a day and leave. It was just one stop, and I wouldn't even remember it later.

I unlocked my room and stepped inside, flicking the light on. The light flicked on and off for a solid moment before flicking on. The room was filled with a dim light, showing a single bed and a small desk pushed against a closed window. The room was cold, and I shut the door, walked towards the air conditioner, and turned it off.

I looked at my watch and checked the time. It was a little past ten. I should just sleep. I headed into the bathroom and cringed as I took in a semi-decent bathroom. The tub looked gross, but the sink and toilet looked freshly cleaned.

I looked at myself in the mirror. A tired version of myself stared back, looking as I had expected. My dark brown hair was pulled back in a bun that was half falling out. My dark green eyes stared at me, looking lifeless. I was pale from lack of sun, and slightly bigger because, lord knows, I didn't have time to work out. I dug out a baggy sweater and a pair of jeans from my closet. I felt tears build up, knowing this was the downward spiral for me.

I would never get a good job again, at least not one in science. The council would look for me and if I wrote anything about this life on a resume, they would find me. I think that hurt more than anything. Just how fucked my life had become in a matter of moments.

Tears built up, and a few broke free. I quickly wiped them away and flicked the light

off. I opened my bag, grabbed a pair of pajamas, and quickly changed into them. Afterward, I walked towards the bed and yanked the sheets up. I wanted to hide under the covers and never reappear.

The sheets at least smelt clean, so I sank into them and stared at the window. I could hear the wind howling outside. I shivered, pulling the sheets even tighter against myself.

My mind doesn't settle, though. It keeps churning, going over every mistake I have made. It kept telling me how I'd screwed everything up. I should never have accepted the job from the Council. I was just a mediocre scientist, and my research would never amount to anything.

I curled into a tighter ball, feeling tears breaking free as my mind spiraled even more. I couldn't make it stop. Because it was all true. I had failed.

I heard the sound of a door click, and my body tensed up. I watched as light flicked into my room and then went black again. The sound of the door shutting made my heart race as my hair stood up on my body. Someone was in my room.

I searched for anything and grabbed the lamp on the side of my bed, holding it close as I quickly turned around. I pulled the lamp up, prepared to hit whoever was in my room. I would have to run since I didn't have my phone. I doubted the police would even help me, considering I was a runner.

Light filled the room, and my eyes widened as I took in Henrik. He looked exhausted as he stood there. His eyes narrowed on me, and his jaw ground together, but he looked relieved at the same time as he stared at me.

“What the hell are you doing, Katie?”

Chapter 4 - Henrik

I was feeling a lot of emotions until I saw Katie. It wasn't every day you got a message from the Council to go track a person down. I had no clue why they sent me, but I wasn't going to argue with them about it. It was better that I went than any of the other Alphas. They might not have been kind when they found her.

I knew how important Katie was to the survival of the pack right now. She was the one person who understood what was going on and was kind enough to keep trying. No one else had even come close. Other people were working on this and trying to figure it out, but no one was getting results like her.

And I needed her to find mine. If I wanted to keep my status as Alpha, she would be the only person who could find my mate. I didn't know what was going on, but I was going to get answers.

"What are you doing here?" Katie snapped as she stood on her bed holding a lamp. I would have laughed if I were so frustrated with the drive here. It started raining halfway, and now I was soaking wet and cold.

I crossed my arms. "I asked you first."

She scoffed. "You're the one breaking into my hotel room!"

I looked back at the door, which hadn't even been locked. Could we really call it breaking in if the door was technically open? "The door wasn't even locked."

She lowered her hand holding the lamp and ran her other hand through her hair. She shook her head as she sat down on the bed. "Why are you here?"

I scowled. "I got a call from the Council that you're running away? Are you kidding

me? Seriously? Running?”

She glared and looked away from me. “This doesn’t concern you. You shouldn’t even be here.”

I laughed. “It does. The Council called me. Are you trying to ruin your life?”

Katie fell silent, not answering my question, and I took a deep breath, trying not to snap at her. I was running on low sleep and had a long day of meetings. Half of this was because I was soaking wet and wanted to warm up, but I certainly wasn’t doing that here in this hotel, which looked like it needed an inspection.

I sighed. “Katie, grab your stuff.”

“No.”

I ground my teeth together. “Katie, I’m not joking. Grab your stuff. You can’t honestly be thinking you’ll stay in this shitty hotel.”

She crossed her arms. “There is nothing wrong with this place.”

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I laughed. “Really? Because the front desk didn’t ask for my ID when I came in, saying I was your husband. They just gave me a card, which I didn’t even have to use because your door wasn’t even locked. So, I wouldn’t call this a safe place to stay. Your car is probably more secure than this building.”

Her face went red, and her nostrils flared. “You don’t get to tell me what I can do, Henrik! You made that perfectly clear, so I don’t understand why the hell you’re going hot and cold with me.”

I rolled my tongue over my teeth. She had me there. “Katie, grab your stuff.”

“You can get out.”

I ran a hand over my face and sighed. “Why are you even here? Do you even realize the persecution you’ll face when you get back?”

I watched her fingers knit together in her lap. “Who said I was going back?”

So, she was trying to run. Well, shit.

I didn’t understand why. I thought she loved her work. She always spoke so passionately about it. So why the hell was she just going to desert it? And had she thought about what the Council would do when they got to her? How angry were they going to be? They told me she was running, but I didn’t believe it. This was Katie, after all. She was a smart girl. She wouldn’t just run for it.

Something was clearly going on, but I wasn’t seeing it. “Katie, what’s going on? It’s

far too late for me to have to figure out whatever the hell happened. You should just tell me.”

“Why? So you can tell me to pull myself together and be a big girl?” She slammed the lamp down and took a few steps towards me. “Henrik, get out.”

I watched as pain flicked across her face, and I knew it wasn’t just her running. She was scared, but I didn’t know of what. I felt a tug deep in my chest, wanting to pull her close and hold her. I had always thought Katie was a sweet girl, but I was seeing a different side of her. A side that was trying hard to hide her other half.

“Fine, sleep here. I’m taking you back in the morning.” I said, taking a step back. “We can talk more later.”

She looked almost relieved, and I turned towards her door. I pulled it open and stepped outside into the hallway. I wasn’t sure I wanted to stay here. My car was probably cleaner than the rooms, but I was too exhausted to even think about that. I stopped at the front, seeing that the front desk person wasn’t there. I rang the bell and leaned back on my heels. I didn’t even have a change of clothes or a toothbrush. I just left my meeting as soon as I got the call from the Council.

I yawned, looked outside, and froze when my eyes landed on a man in all black walking through the parking lot. A shiver ran down my spine as he rounded a car, his eyes glued to one of the windows. I looked at the window and quickly realized it was Katie’s room. The Council hadn’t just sent me, but someone else.

I watched him watch her window for a while before he started coming for the doors. He started to come inside and stopped at the door. I scanned the man, wanting to bare my teeth at him, but I offered a polite smile instead. I just gave him a head nod. “Needing a room?”

The guy scanned me and shrugged. He pulled his hood down, revealing thick black hair. He was older, possibly in his fifties. I didn't recognize him.

"Yeah. I'm getting a room."

I watched him for a second when an idea popped into my head. "Do you have your car insurance paperwork on you? The guy just told me I needed it before booking a room. Said something about needing to prove we have insurance in case of an accident."

The man's eyebrows went up slightly. "Really? That seems weird."

I nodded. "Yeah, that's what I said. He's running it through the computer in the back since this one broke down. I figured I'd save you the time, and you can grab it now."

The man nodded and headed back out the door. I watched as he walked back to his car, and the front desk man stepped to the front. "Sorry, I was putting some laundry away. How can I help you?"

I turned to the man and frowned. "You see that man out there? I'm pretty sure I saw that the police were looking for him."

The guy's eyebrows went up, and he looked out the window. "Seriously?"

I nodded, putting on a worried expression. "Yeah, and if I were you, I would call him in. You're responsible for all these people here, after all."

The man looked worried as he looked back at the window. "Why is he digging in his front compartment?"

"Couldn't tell ya. I bet he's going to show you a bunch of paperwork so he can book

a room. Maybe even show you that his car is insured. I think that was a trick he pulled at another hotel he was staying at.”

“What’s he on the run for?”

“Robbery,” I said, shaking my head. “Don’t think he’s dangerous, but I would be careful. Call the police, and don’t let him book a room.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

I nodded and slipped back down the hallway. The front desk guy was going to keep whoever that other guy was busy, so I had probably ten minutes to get Katie out of there before he realized that we were gone.

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I made my way back down to Katie's room and tried the door. She'd locked it this time, but I still had my key. I unlocked the door and slipped inside. The room was still light, and Katie stood near the foot of the bed. She scowled as she turned to look at me.

She waved her hands and groaned. "Jesus, do you not understand? I want to be left alone, Henrik."

I forced a smile. "As much as I'd love to argue right now, we don't have the time."

I crossed past her and ripped the sheets straight off the bed. Katie gasped. "What the hell are you doing!?"

I turned and threw them around her, tightly winding them so she couldn't break free. Katie yelled, trying to free herself, but I worked quicker, wrapping another sheet around her.

"Henrik! What the fuck are you doing? Would you stop!"

"I'm taking you back."

"No!" She wiggled, trying to claw herself free. "I'm not going back!"

I ignored her words and hoisted her up and over my shoulder. Katie was soft as she fumbled against my shoulder, wiggling hard to free herself.

"Oh my god, Henrik! You are such a fucking dick! Put me down! This is

kidnapping!”

I headed outside the hallway and took a right towards the back exit. I could hear someone talking in front of me, and I knew it was the guy. I had minutes before they would realize what happened.

Katie wiggled, and I tightened my hold on her. “Katie, stop wiggling. You’re going to make me drop you.”

“Then put me down! Do you have any idea how bad this looks? How humiliating this is?”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, it’s a good thing we are somewhere where no one knows who we even are.”

I shoved the door open and pulled us outside. The temperature had dropped, and it was cold. I headed towards my car, opened the passenger seat, and set her inside. I buckled her in and made it to the driver's side.

Katie was fuming. Her eyes were glaring at me angrily as she tried to free herself. She’d unlocked her arms, and I quickly locked the door as I started it up. “You have nowhere to go, so you might as well give up.”

I could see the fear fill her eyes as she looked back towards the hotel. “You can’t do this to me, Henrik. You don’t understand. I can’t go back!”

I didn’t understand, but I knew she couldn’t run. It wouldn’t solve anything. It would only make things worse for everyone, including herself.

“Katie, what were you even going to do? You can’t run. The Council will never let you. You will never be able to be a scientist if you do.”

“I already ran! They sent you after me. So, you might as well let me go.”

I couldn't accept that. “We can just say you were on a trip.”

Katie shook her head. “You don't get it! Just let me go! Please.”

I pulled the car into drive and started to turn us to exit. “Sorry, Katie, but no. You're coming back with me.” I had no idea what I was going to do when we got back to the pack, but I would need to figure something out.

Chapter 5 - Katie

I jerked awake as Henrik pulled into his house. I blinked as I looked at the time, seeing that it was just a little past four in the morning. I glanced over at Henrik and glared.

“Why are we at your house? Why didn't you just bring me home?”

He scuffed. “Because I don't trust you alone. You could easily run away again, and I'm too tired to try and track you down.”

I chewed on my cheek and looked away from him.

“Katie, I don't know what's going on, but I want to help. So, let me help you.”

“I'd rather you not,” I grumbled back.

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He sighed and unlocked the doors. He hopped out, and I tried to untangle myself from the sheet, but my door opened, and Henrik hoisted me up before I could.

“You don’t need to carry me.” I snapped, trying to get myself free.

Henrik simply grunted as he headed towards his front door. “Just go back to bed.”

I wanted to argue, but I was still clinging to sleep. I chewed on my cheek as I felt myself starting to drift off again.

I woke up and found myself lying on a couch. I scanned the space, finding a clock hanging on a wall. It was a little past six in the morning. I was in the living room. I looked at Henrik, finding he was sleeping on a reclining chair next to the couch. I looked away from him, scanning the room now that I was fully awake.

Henrik had a nice place. It was fashionably tasteful, with shades of blue and green around. He had a large couch facing a TV mounted on the wall. His lounge chair was in the corner, and to the left of us was a L-shaped kitchen. He had two spots to sit and eat and a large walk-out patio.

I slowly crept out from my blanket and stood up. I glanced at him as I took a few steps toward the kitchen.

“I have an excellent security system.” Henrik’s eyes slowly opened as he looked at me. “And you will not be so easy to sneak out.”

I rolled my eyes, feeling my shoulders sink. “Do you ever sleep?”

“I do, but knowing you're here and so quick to leave, I'm going off half of what I would prefer.”

I snorted. “If you have such a good security system, why would you worry if I were awake? Surely, it would keep me here.”

He half laughed. “That doesn't mean you wouldn't go ahead and throw something at a glass door to get out.”

He wasn't wrong. I turned, walking into the kitchen. “Do you at least have coffee if you're going to hold me hostage?”

“I'm not holding you hostage. I'm just keeping you here until we can get things figured out with the Council.”

I scanned the kitchen, spotting a small coffee pot in the corner. It didn't look like it had been used in a while, so I started going through the cabinets looking for coffee.

Henrik pulled himself out of the chair and yawned. “What are you looking for?”

“Coffee.”

“I don't keep coffee in the house.”

I turned, looking at him like he just grew another head. “You what? How the hell do you not have coffee? What kind of person doesn't keep coffee in their house?”

He shrugged. “I don't drink it.”

I stared at him in shock. “What do you mean? How is that even possible?”

He grabbed the blanket I had been using and started to fold it. “I’ve never liked the taste.”

“You know, there is such a thing as creamer.”

“Which is a lot of sugar.”

I ran a hand through my hair and turned back to the kitchen. “Well, I need coffee. Otherwise, I’m going to lose my shit.”

Henrik snorted as he threw the blanket onto the couch. He walked towards me, looking too sexy for someone who slept in the upright position. “Seems to me you already did that.”

I ground my teeth together. “You get me coffee, or I’m breaking one of your windows.”

“You’re almost as grumpy as Jay when he gets up,” he said as he walked into the kitchen.

I thought of Sam and suddenly missed her. I wonder if word got around about what I did. I wondered why they sent Henrik after me. Did he know we were supposed to get together? Or had the Council not figured that part out yet?

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I didn't know if he knew. I felt that if Henrik had known the truth, he wouldn't have asked me several times what was wrong. He would have been angrier if I had run when I was supposed to be with him.

I shook my head, not wanting to think of the expression of concern he had given me.

"I can order some coffee to be brought in."

I crossed my arms and leaned onto the counter. "What's your plan here, Henrik? Are you going to keep me locked up forever?"

He scowled. "I'm only keeping you here until I figure out what to tell the Council. I'm sure we can meet with them tomorrow and discuss this like civil adults."

I laughed. "Oh yeah, because the Council is always so civil."

He crossed his arms. "And maybe you should have thought about that before you ran for it."

I ground my teeth together. "Stay out of my business."

"I would love to, but it would seem they pulled me into it, so why don't you just tell me why you were even running in the first place."

I looked away, hating the feeling that crept over me. It was like someone had a large hand and just grabbed hold of me and wouldn't let go. I tried to take a deep breath in and gripped onto the counter.

See, you couldn't even run away because you're not good enough. Anyone else would have been able to. They would have been able to get free.

"Katie," Henrik walked closer, giving me that worried expression. "What's going on?"

Anger filled me suddenly. "You wouldn't get it. You were raised to be that perfect soldier."

I watched as he flinched, but I kept going. "Tell me, Henrik. Would the Council bat an eye if you stepped out of line? No, probably not. I'm sure they wouldn't be pleased, but you're a leader, so there isn't much they can do about that. I am not the same. They own my ass. They own everything I am and what I do."

He frowned. "That's not true."

I laughed because he truly had no idea. They found me. The Council sought me out. Just how mad would they be once they figured out I couldn't hold myself up to their standards. They knew how to get rid of people. One second, you were here, and the next, you never existed.

The space fell silent, and I turned away. "You're an Alpha, Henrik. You're above the rest of us. So, you wouldn't understand the pressure."

Henrik rubbed at his face and sighed. "Katie, I promise it's not that bad. Whatever is going on can be solved."

Just then, his phone started to ring, and he turned. He grabbed it and scowled. "Damn it." He looked back at me. "I have an emergency I need to attend to. I will grab your coffee on my way back. We can discuss this and deal with this when I return."

He walked back to the living room and grabbed his jacket. “Don’t even think about sneaking out because I have cameras all over this place. And all the windows are locked.”

I glared at him, watching as he pulled his jacket on and left. I could hear the front door open and shut. The solid sound of a lock turning. I huffed.

I did another scan of the space and walked over to the patio. Sure enough, it was locked and wouldn’t budge.

“Asshole.”

I searched his entire kitchen, looking for coffee. He didn’t have anything, not even a canister stashed away somewhere. And I was bored.

I wandered through the entire house. Henrik had a three-bedroom house with a basement, laundry room, and storage. I was a little surprised at the simplicity he lived for someone with such high status.

He decorated each room accordingly and had pictures of him and the over five Alphas together. He had pictures of his family and Sam together. He had the life people dreamed of.

I walked by his bedroom and found his bed made. The room was large, with a solid wood-framed bed and matching dresser. He had two bedside tables that each had a lamp. It reminded me of a catalog.

“I wonder if he has a maid?” I walked down the hall and noticed cameras in several spots. He had one in the living room and in the kitchen. He had one in the hallways and near all the doors and windows. He hadn’t been kidding when he said he would see it all. But I wondered why he had them to begin with.

I stopped in front of the bathroom and paused. He had a camera angled towards it, but surely not one inside. An idea formed.

I walked into the bathroom and shut the door. I scanned the room, and my eyes landed on the bathroom window. I smiled as I walked over and pulled on it. Sure enough, it was unlocked.

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I yanked it all the way open and leaned out. The roof was pretty flat, and I could see Henrik had shrubs that surrounded the house, so if I did jump, I would have something to land on.

I smiled as I crawled out of the window onto the roof. I scowled, wishing I had grabbed my shoes, but walking into the bathroom with them would look weird.

I didn't know when Henrik would watch the feed or if he just got a ping when things seemed off, but I wasn't taking a chance. I needed out, and I needed out now.

I walked down the roof, standing near the wall of the house. I walked to the right until the roof came to an end. I leaned over, glancing down, and swallowed. I felt my body lock up as I realized how high up I was.

“It's just a little drop, Katie. It's not that far down.”

Mathematically, if I landed on the shrub, my muscles might just clench up. I couldn't break anything, and my head knew that. I knew that. But my body didn't want to move.

I tried to build myself up and counted down. And jumped.

I held back a scream as I landed on a shrub, feeling the sticks grab at my skin, ripping at the fabric of my shirt.

I groaned as pain radiated through my body. I gave it a minute before I pulled myself up and smiled. I couldn't help the laugh that built up. “Ha, jackass! You can't keep

me locked up.”

I pulled myself out of the shrub and felt someone grab me from behind. I screamed as a hand covered my mouth. “I finally got you!”

I tried to get myself free when hands yanked my arms back painfully, pinning them together behind my back. I instantly knew this wasn’t Henrik. Even when he was manhandling me, he was gentle.

I wiggled harshly, trying to free myself, but the man wouldn’t budge, and from his grip on me, he was a larger man. Suddenly, I was yanked off my feet, and I was pulled backward towards a waiting car in the street.

I bit hard onto the man's hand, and he yanked it from my mouth. “Son of a bitch!”

I was thrown into the back of the car, and the door was slammed shut. I kicked at it, and quickly tried to shove at the door, finding my hands were tied behind my hands.

The guy was quick as he got into the front, and I got a good look at him. He was tall and bulky, probably easily two hundred and fifty pounds of pure muscle. My entire body tensed up, and I swallowed.

“Who are you!?”

He looked at me, and I took in dark blue eyes that narrowed on me. He was infuriated. “That doesn’t concern you.”

He turned the car on, and I sank into my seat, feeling my hands ache from the position they were yanked into. I looked outside, taking the town changing as he was speeding.

I tried to think of some way to get myself free. “I am...If the Council finds out...”

“They sent me,” he growled, looking in the mirror at me. “And if that Alpha hadn’t been blocking me for the past several hours, you’d already be with them receiving your punishment.”

My body stiffened. Wait. He’d been looking for me? And Henrik had blocked him? Was that why he dragged me back to his house? Why was he so pushy back at the hotel? He knew I was being followed.

I chewed on my cheek, suddenly aware I was in deep shit. Deeper than I thought. I bounced my leg and tried to think of a way out of this. But there wasn’t one. I couldn’t save myself.

As he drove, my anxiety started to get worse. I felt my body freaking out the closer we got back into Jay’s pack and closer to the Council building. My mind was on high alert as the guy parked.

I stared at the building I had entered so many times before. The guy opened the door and yanked me out. “Hey! You don’t need to pull so hard.”

His grip on my hands was painful, and I winced as he shoved me forward, practically dragging me inside. He walked quickly, and I was pretty much running to keep up with him. We went into the elevator and up to the second floor, where he turned me, yanking me down the hallway towards a room.

Once inside, he shoved me forward, and I couldn’t even catch myself as I landed hard face down onto the ground.

“Thank you, Marty.” A voice spoke up, and I looked up, taking in everyone on the Council. A shiver ran down my spine as I took each of them in and they all looked

pissed. I had gotten to know a little bit about everyone since I worked so closely with them all. But I knew them well enough to know they weren't going to let me off easy. I had signed a contract with them, and I broke it.

Ralph was the main person who made the final decisions for the Council. Jennisa was kinder, but she had a bark to her. Both Ralph and Jennisa dressed properly for every Council meeting. Ralph always had his white hair combed back, and even his mustache was trimmed. Jennisa always wore a pant suit, and her gray hair worked for her. It gave her a seriousness.

Derrick and Steve, who were paired to look after Henrik's pack, looked unimpressed, both their eyes staring into me with anger and distaste. Almost disappointment it seemed. They were both wearing suits, dressed for the occasion. I always thought Derrick and Steve were brothers because they have the same mannerisms and looks, with dark brown hair and deep blue eyes.

Willow and Zed were talking to each other, but paused. I could see Willow's brown eyes narrowing on me for a moment before her lips pulled into a tight line. I was pretty sure she hated me. Anytime I had brought something up regarding Frank's pack, she was quick to insult me or brush me off. Willow and Zed were certainly protective of Frank's pack, and it showed.

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Paul and Tray were the most relaxed of the group, but they held blank expressions. Neither giving away what they were feeling. They, much like Aaron, seemed more down-to-earth and understanding, which might have been why they were paired with him. Austin and Olivia were sitting next to them. Every meeting I had with them was quick and to the point. Olivia, a lot like Willow, was cold and held a pissed expression. Cris and Hannah, who were designated for Jone's pack were two that I couldn't seem to put my finger on. They always said little during meetings, even now I couldn't read them.

I swallowed because I was in deep shit with twelve pairs of eyes staring at me like they wanted me dead.

"Katie Armstrong, you have been caught running from your job and the responsibility you signed and agreed upon in your contract." Ralph broke the silence, tapping his fingers on the table.

I tried to find my words and think of anything I could say to make this better, but before I could, the door behind me was thrown open. I heard them slam against the wall and bounce off, the sound echoing all around us. I looked over my shoulder and spotted Henrik walking into the room. He looked fuming as he marched toward us.

"Henrik, you were not asking to attend this meeting," Derrick spoke up in a forward tone, sitting up slightly in his chair. "Please leave."

But Henrik's eyes weren't on any of us, but on Marty, who stood next to me. Henrik was shorter than Marty, but he didn't seem to care as he wound up and punched Marty square in the face. Marty stumbled back a few steps and looked ready to hit

back. Henrik bared his teeth and growled at him. “If you even think of fucking touching her the way I have you on camera again, I will happily send you straight to a fucking jaw specialist to fix what will come next.”

My eyes were wide as I watched Henrik turn his gaze from Marty to me. His eyes softened slightly before he looked towards the Council. His gaze darkened quickly. “And this meeting concerns me because I recall you asking me to fetch her and bring her to you.”

I looked at the Council, and Ralph leaned back in his chair. He ran a hand over his white hair, looking annoyed. We did, and you decided to hide her rather than bring her to us right away.”

“You also sent an animal after her as well rather than trusting me to get the job done. This could have been handled better.” Henrik waved a hand at me. “You have her tied up, for fuck sake!”

Jennisa waved her hands, and Marty moved to untie them. Once my arms were free, I rubbed them, feeling they were going to bruise tomorrow. I was going to feel everything tomorrow.

“She agreed to a contract, Henrik, and we caught her red-handed running from it. This part doesn’t concern you.” Jennisa said in a sharp tone.

My heart sank, and I swallowed, trying to think of what I could say. I couldn’t deny it because I had. Everything they said was true.

“And you think rather than asking what’s going on to just drag her ass back here? You didn’t even ask questions before you accused her.”

“You should know that signing a contract is binding, Henrik. You have your own.”

Steve spoke up calmly. “You know the repercussion.”

I looked at Henrik and suddenly questioned if all the Alpha’s had signed contracts. I shouldn’t be surprised. The Council made all the shots.

“Katie was caught running from her job and her duty as the next paired member of an Alpha,” Derrick said, his eyes dropping on me, and I saw it. The disappointment. Steve and he knew I was paired with Henrik, and instead of accepting it, I ran.

Henrik’s eyebrows went up at this news. Ralph leaned forward, placing his hands on the table. “She was paired with you, Henrik. And instead of facing it, she ran.”

Henrik looked at me and then back at them. He suddenly seemed to realize why they asked him to fetch me.

“We take this role very seriously, and you both need to accept the roles you were given. The packs need an alliance rather than a rebellion right now. We are already hanging by threads, let’s not pluck at them.” Olivia spoke up, folding her hands together. “Everyone has duties they don’t enjoy. That doesn’t mean you get to just ignore your responsibilities. Either get in line or be prepared to face what comes next.”

A shiver ran down my spine. I didn't want to know what came next. I heard how they just made people disappear.

“Then her mistakes are mine. If you want to blame anyone, you can blame me.”

I looked at Henrik, shocked. He couldn’t be serious, just wanting to take the blame for everything I did.

The Council was quiet for a moment before Ralph sighed. “We will have a meeting

with you to discuss how we will handle this moving forward. So, why don't you focus on getting married and getting her in line? Maybe we will lessen the repercussions."

"This isn't his fault," I snap out. "I did this. This.." But they weren't listening to me. Ralph waved a hand, dismissing us. I looked at Henrik, who looked defeated.

Henrik grabbed my arm, softly turning us and taking us out of the room. Once the doors were shut, he let go. He frowned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I stammered for words, still shocked at the outcome of everything. I then frowned. "Because it's not your mess."

"It is," he growled at me. "You should have told me."

"And you told me you didn't want to waste any more time with me." I snapped back angrily. "Do you honestly expect me to just run to you when I found that we were paired up!"

He looked hurt and ran a hand through his hair. "Well, either way, we need to get married to settle this."

"They made that very clear." I crossed my arms. While they may have stated we had to get married, that didn't mean I was just falling in line. "We may be married, but that will be all it is, Henrik. We will not kiss. We will not sleep in the same bed or the same room. And we will not have sex."

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Henrik nodded. “Alright.”

I expected him to argue back and not agree so easily. And the man smirked at me. “You’ll come to me in the end. Women always do.”

I felt my jaw drop slightly at his cockiness. Had he seriously just said that? After everything that happened?

“Wow,” I shook my head. “You’ve got balls on you.”

He smirked, nodding his head. “I do. And I thought you liked my cockiness?”

I had. It was what had drawn me to him so quickly, and it was how relaxed he made me feel. Even now, I felt that tug, but I shoved it down. Just because I wanted it didn’t mean I was going to get it.

I stepped closer to him. “Do me a favor, jump off a bridge, and don’t come up for air.”

Chapter 6 - Henrik

I stared at myself in the mirror, taking in my suit. It was a light grey color with a small blue boutonniere attached to it. Jay sat just behind me on the couch, stretched out. I felt a sudden déjà vu. This was just like his wedding, not too long ago, to Sam. He was being forced to marry Sam, not really wanting to. Sam would have run...

He looked up from his phone and glanced at me. “You alright over there? You look

ready to vomit.”

I nodded. “I’m fine. Just thinking how we were just here, not even a year ago.”

“I know for my wedding,” Jay set his phone aside. I had told him all about what happened between Katie and me since I knew he would understand. Jay had always been the one person I knew I could lean on, someone I knew I could tell anything to, and he wouldn’t judge.

“So, how pissed was the Council?” Jay asked, pulling himself off the couch and straightening his suit. “I imagine the tension was high.”

I cringed as I thought about the meeting I had to attend with the Council a day after the first. They were keeping a close eye on Katie from now on and would be watching to see if she stepped out of line again. Demanding that I remember that my main focus should be on the packs and that making an heir was ideal. They went on and on about how I was blessed to find someone who would be able to carry a child, and that I needed to remember that. Many couples out there wished they could have children, and I had found someone who would.

But I could see how hurt Katie was. She had voiced her opinion quickly, and sex and romance were not on the table.

“As you would expect it to go,” I grumbled. “They are pissed. They were going to be watching us from now on.”

Jay shrugged. “Well, she did run for it. That’s understandable.”

“Because she was paired off to be mated with me,” I counter. “Anyone would run.”

Jay scowled. “You aren’t that bad. Any woman would have been happy to marry

you.”

“I’m not saying that, I mean...Jesus, even my sister wanted to run Jay. This is....I understand the need for us to find someone, but to force people to be together...I understand why she wanted to run. We hold positions with power, and not everyone wants that.”

I knew there was more to it besides just that. But I wasn’t going to dig any deeper.

“Well, I’m glad nothing happened. I think Sam would have been devastated if something had happened to Katie. She’s her best friend. Sam was freaking out the other day when I told her.”

I was glad that Katie had someone to lean on, even if it wasn’t me.

A few moments later, we stood at the altar. Jay stood next to me, and we waited as the doors just across the altar were pulled open. My eyes widened as Katie stood in a pure white dress. It was a simple dress that hugged her curves with dropped sleeves. She was holding a bouquet of pastel pink flowers, and her hair was curled loosely around her. She looked stunning and breathtaking.

My mouth dropped slightly as Sam walked with her down the aisle. Sam was wearing a light red dress and smiled at Katie with happiness that shone. I had asked Jay before how Sam felt about the entire arrangement, and he’d said little about it. Considering she wanted us to be together, I’m sure she was thinking this was a good idea.

Katie stopped in front of me and swallowed, looking uncomfortable. “You’re staring.”

“You’re... you look amazing,” I said, scanning her again. If I were to picture her in a wedding dress, I wouldn’t have been able to imagine her looking this wonderful.

Her face went red, and the pastor cleared his throat. “Can we begin?”

The ceremony was quick. We didn’t have vows, and the kiss was short. Everyone clapped. Katie quickly left the altar with Sam in tow. I felt my shoulder sag, watching her walk away.

“That went well,” Jay said, patting my shoulder.

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“Better than yours,” I grumbled back. “Your wife was practically running from the altar.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “Besides the point.”

Frank came up, slapping his hand onto my back. “Now the fun part starts!” Frank yanked into a tight side hug. “Lots of beer coming our way.”

The party was in full swing twenty minutes later. I was talking with the guys near the food. Jone and Jay stood to the left of me while Frank, Maddox, and Aaron stood to my right.

“Can’t believe you’re the next one that got paired up,” Maddox said, looking at everyone who attended the wedding.

“What are you jealous of?” Jones asked with a smirk plastered on his face. He brought his cup up, taking a swig of his drink.

Maddox laughed. “Of giving up my single life? No. But if anyone should be married first, it should have been me. I mean, look at me.” He waved a hand at himself. “No offense, Jay. But I for sure should have been the first to be paired up.”

“What’s there to look at?” Aaron asked with a laugh, waving a hand at Maddox.

Frank started to laugh hard, and a few people turned to us. Maddox growled as he rolled his eyes. “You all know I’m the best looking, and you’re just jealous.”

Someone cleared their throat, and we turned to see that Sam had the microphone. “Alright, now that everyone has gotten settled, how about we invite the new bride and groom to the stage for their first dance?” Sam wiggled her eyebrow, and I scowled. I loved my sister to death, but this was cruel even for her.

All the guys looked at me, and I frowned. “I thought I told her to take that out.”

“What, you don't want to dance with your wife?” Aaron asked with a tilt of the head.

“We’re not exactly on steady ground right now.” I set my drink down and tried to straighten my shirt.

I quickly spotted Sam pulling at Katie’s arm, pulling her towards the dance floor. Jay elbowed me in the side. “You can’t run from it. Go dance with her.”

“I don’t recall you having a first dance,” I snapped back.

“He actually did,” Maddox said. “You were in the bathroom.”

I sighed and walked out to the dance floor, where Sam left Katie. Katie stood nervously, and before I could say anything, she whispered. “I don’t know how to dance.”

My eyebrows went up. “Really?”

She scowled. “Do I look like the type of person to take lessons?”

I offered her a soft smile. “Just follow my lead. Your dress is big enough; no one will see your feet.” I reached out, took her hand, and pulled her gently against me. I placed my hand on her back, gently folded my fingers around her, and spun her.

The world seemed to disappear as we moved gently to the music that played. She swallowed, looking around, and I chuckled. “You know, for someone who doesn’t know how to dance, you’re doing really well.”

She blushed. “Thanks. I’m trying hard not to step on you.”

Katie and I had talked a little since the blow-up with the Council. We had moved her into the house, and she spent most of her time in her room. I’d only seen a few times since, which was to grab food or sit outside. I could tell this was a hard change for her, and I had given her space.

“You do look beautiful,” I said, giving her another smile. “Stunning. I imagine Sam helped with this, so she did well.”

She blushed again as I spun us once more. “Thank you. You look nice, too. Very dapper.”

I stared at her, feeling a tug deep in my chest, wanting to stay near her. I wanted to protect her from anything and everything. Yet, I wanted the world to see just how beautiful she was at the same time. I wanted them to see Katie the way I did.

We danced for a few more moments before the song ended, and everyone started to clap. Katie pulled herself free and made her way towards our table. I followed after her.

Katie sat down and drank her water. I sat down next to her and looked over the crowd. Everyone was still dancing, and some people were grabbing food. It was loud but not terribly loud, and you could hold a conversation.

I glanced at Katie, who rubbed her fingers together nervously on her lap.

“Is something wrong?”

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She chewed on her cheek before she shrugged. “I don’t really know the people here. So, I don’t have many people to talk to besides Sam.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Don’t you have a lot of clients from Jay’s pack?”

She nodded. “Yes, but not that many. And none of them are here. I only really know Sam here, and everyone knows her. I feel like I’m interrupting when they talk with her.”

I looked over the crowd to find Sam with Jay. They looked like a happy couple as they sat at a table talking with someone else. Sam leaned on Jay’s shoulder, and Jay wrapped his arms around her.

And an idea sparked.

“Do you see that man?” I pointed towards the table with the number twelve on it. “Blond guy with dark brown eyes. He’s wearing a black suit with a grey tie.”

She nodded her head. “Yeah, what about him?”

“He’s a friend of Jay and me. He’s super sweet....also shit his pants in seventh grade.”

Katie’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open slightly. “And I imagine he loves it when you bring that up.”

“He’s married to the gal sitting to the right of him. They had a daughter. She’s three.

Sweetest little thing.”

I pointed towards another table. “The lady in the light blue dress runs a bakery just a few blocks from downtown. This is also the lady who burned soup in high school cooking class. Still have no idea how she became a baker.”

Katie offered me a soft smile. “You're just making that up.”

I laughed. “I’m not. I’ll call her over to prove it.” I waved my hand, and Katie quickly grabbed it, pulling it back down. “Don’t you dare,” she whispered.

I watched her eyes sparkle a little and smirked.

I pointed at another table. “Drew, the tall guy. Black hair and a stunning face. He’s a fireman. He is utterly scared of butterflies. No idea why. Julia, next to him, she can’t swim.”

She chewed on her lip. “You know they probably don’t want me to know that stuff.”

I shrugged. “All this you would learn anyway once you get settled here. I’m just telling you now.”

She blushed. “You know your people really well, it would seem.”

“I want to be someone that people can lean on.” I had always strived to have that image. I worked hard to be that person. I knew everyone had a way of running their pack, but I believed people should be treated fairly. I wanted the people in my pack to know I was fair and just like them.

I continued to point people out, giving Katie a secret about each of them. Katie soon started to chuckle, and it was the most amazing sound. My body wanted to pull her

close and hold her there.

Had I been denying her this entire time when it was so clear she was my mate? Had I been ignoring something that was so natural?

The party started to die down, and everyone started to thank us for everything. The guys stood in the doorway and I walked over toward them. “Well, you have a good night,” Aaron chirped as he elbowed me in the side. “Don’t stay up too late.”

I glared at him. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“What? You're married now, so maybe you'll actually get some action.”

Jones laughed, and I glared at him. “You don’t need to worry about me getting action, dipstick.”

Katie started to walk over with Sam, and I walked away from the guys towards them. “Your wife is ready for you,” Sam said, giving me a side hug. I held her tightly for a moment before letting her go.

“You guys have a good night,” Sam said, giving Katie a tight hug.

I turned to Katie, who looked tired. “You ready to head home?”

Katie nodded, but the calmness she had moments ago was gone, and she looked uncomfortable once more.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Sam said to Katie, giving her another hug before she walked over towards Jay. Sam had a skip in her steps as she walked away.

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I offered Katie my arm, and she took it. We headed out and towards my car. She had changed into a simpler white dress that looked nice.

“You good?” I asked as I started the car up. She nodded her head, her fingers rubbing together nervously. I could tell that wasn’t entirely true. Something was bothering her. “Katie, if something is bothering you, I would like you to let me know. How else am I supposed to know when something is wrong?”

Katie glanced at me and then looked back outside the window. All the guys were saying their goodbyes, still hanging around the doors. “Are you...expecting ...because...I heard the guys.”

I frowned, suddenly feeling bad that I hadn’t told them to hush it sooner. “Don’t listen to the guys. They joke a lot.”

She glanced at me. “Would you be expecting us to have sex?”

I shook my head. As badly as I wanted Katie, I knew she was uncomfortable, and I was forcing her into anything. She was marrying because she had to, not because she wanted to. That didn’t exactly sound romantic.

“Katie, we will live in the same house, so we will be like roommates.”

She nodded and seemed to relax as I took the car down the road.

“You know, you were saying that you don’t really know anyone in my pack.”

She nodded. “Yeah?”

“Why don’t you spend some time getting to know everyone in the pack?” I offered, hoping that would help. “Take some time off from the lab and get to know everyone. Or at least get to know a few people. It might help you feel more comfortable.”

She bit her lower lip. “I don’t know....a lot of people think I’m odd.”

“My pack is full of them,” I offered, giving her a smile. “Trust me. You’ll find people who are pretty odd themselves.”

She softly smiled in return.

The car ride was quiet for most of the drive, and Katie fell asleep. Once we were home, I shook her shoulder softly. “Katie, we’re home.”

She opened her eyes and stretched. Her dress moved up higher on her thigh, revealing a lot of her skin. I swallowed, gripping the steering wheel. Katie yawned, and I imagined what her mouth was capable of doing. It did not help. My cocked ached, and I knew I needed to retreat. I needed to take care of the issues before Katie realized I even had an erection.

I got out of the car, and Katie followed alongside me. She covered her mouth, yawning again. “What time is it?”

“A little past midnight,” I offered as I opened the front door. We both stepped inside, and Katie quickly stepped out of her shoes. She moved, and her ass looked good as she bent over, picking her heels off the ground.

“You know where your room is. I’m turning in.” I turned and headed for the stairs.

“Henrik.” Katie softly said my name, and I paused, looking over at her. She chewed on her cheek and offered me a half smile. “Thank you. For tonight.”

I gave her another nod and turned towards my bedroom. Once the door was shut, I sighed, leaning against it.

“You idiot,” I groaned at myself. I knew I did a good job by stepping away, but Jesus, I wanted her. I wanted to sink deeply into her and release myself.

A hot shower. That was what I was going to need, and god knew for how long.

Chapter 7 - Katie

I was working on my coffee when Henrik walked in. He rubbed a hand over his face, and my eyes widened as I took in his six-pack. Henrik was wearing a pair of shorts but no shirt. I expected he would be comfortable, but I hadn’t prepared myself for this.

I knew that the Alphas were in top condition. I heard about their training, and just looking at the guys, I could tell they were fit. But seeing it was another thing.

Henrik just finished a shower, and I could smell his cedar soap as he stopped near the fridge. His biceps were bulging, and his back muscles flexed as he opened the fridge.

I swallowed, feeling heat pool below. It was one thing to deny myself and say it was because he wasn’t that attractive, but that would be a lie. I knew my body was reacting to how perfectly his body was sculpted.

“Morning,” Henrik said as he shut the door, holding a container of eggs. “You want breakfast? I can make some eggs.”

I slowly nodded, unable to stop myself from looking back down at his abs. Henrik followed my line of sight and tensed. “Shit, sorry. I thought I was doing good remembering to throw a shirt on.”

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I felt a blush roll over my face, and I offered him a coy smile. “Well, you're not naked. So, I'll give you that.”

He laughed. “That would be Aaron. I feel the need to contain this.” He waved a hand around his crotch area. “But I can put a shirt on. I want you to feel comfortable.” He walked down the hallway and came back, pulling on a short-sleeved shirt.

I sat and watched as he made eggs. I sipped my coffee, watching as he flipped the eggs like he'd done it a million times before. It only took him a few minutes before he was setting a plate of eggs in front of me. “Do you want anything else to drink besides that nastiness?”

I looked up from my coffee. “What is with you and disliking coffee?”

He scrunched up his nose. “It's gross.”

I couldn't help but smirk. “You sound like a child.”

He chuckled. “You're just figuring that out now? I know we've only been married for a solid eighteen hours, but I thought you would have figured that out already.”

I couldn't deny that Henrik had made me laugh before and always made me feel comfortable. But I just thought of his rejection and how quickly that seemed to disappear. He suddenly seemed like a different person to me.

“So what you're saying is I married a child? Are there any other adult things you like to describe as gross?”

His smile grew. “Would you like a list?”

I laughed. “Why do I feel like it would be long?”

He leaned forward, and his eyes twinkled. “To some people. Would you like to see it?”

I knew he was joking, but I could see the twistedness in it. He wasn’t just talking about a list but his dick. And my insides twisted up because I couldn’t deny I was interested.

I swallowed, trying to make my expression flat as I sighed. “I’m sure it’s just like the rest.”

His mouth hung open. “Wow, you know how to destroy a man's ego without even knowing it.”

I smirked. I couldn’t help it. Henrik always made me feel different.

“What are your plans today?” Henrik asked as he stabbed a fork into his eggs.

I shrugged. “I don’t really have any plans. Why?”

“I have a meeting with some members, and I thought you should come along with me. You could meet everyone and get to know them a little. Would be a way to get you out of the house.”

I swallowed because I knew myself. I was going to embarrass him somehow, maybe even just by being there. Did he really want that? He was probably offering because he was trying to be nice.

“Are you sure you want me to join?” I asked, rubbing my hands together nervously in my lap. “I don’t need to go.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I think you’ll find that this pack is a little different from all the others.”

I wanted to say no and just spend the day hunched over my laptop, but I knew that I couldn’t do that forever. I needed to immerse myself in the pack, and now would be a good time to do it.

So, I agreed, and we were driving to the town hall twenty minutes later. I took in the town, enjoying the view. Summer was in full swing, and everyone seemed to be outside. There was a park that was filled with children and a couple having a picnic under a tree. Flowers were blooming everywhere, and the trees and shrubs were a lovely green.

There was a large river we drove by, and I could see a couple of people fishing in it. I had no idea if you could even catch fish, but they seemed to be having a good time.

“It’s very nice,” I commented as Henrik parked. The town hall was near the river and had a beautiful view.

“We used a lot of money to redo the roads and added new lamp posts, so they were solar-powered. It’s supposed to save money in the long run.”

I nodded as we got out of the car and headed up towards the town hall. The building itself was a bright blue with large open windows. It gave me a comforting vibe, which threw me for a loop. I was used to the one in Jay’s pack, which was run down and in need of a refurbish.

I could see that the outside of the building had recently been done with new mulch

and neatly trimmed grass. The windows looked like they had been cleaned and seemed to shine in the sunlight.

“Let’s head inside. Everyone is waiting.”

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I followed Henrik and tried to stand tall. I knew little about Henrik's pack, and it was a little embarrassing. I should have tried to learn more about the other packs when I was first told about needing to find them mates. Maybe I would at least know who I was meeting and could have prepared myself better.

As we headed inside the building, I noticed it was decorated nicely. There was a large open space with high vaulted ceilings. There was a large blue rug that covered the light wood floor. There were pictures hung up and I guessed they were previous Alphas.

I walked closer, taking some of the pictures in. I scanned the wall, looking for Henrik, not finding him. "Who are all of these?"

Henrik paused next to me. "Alphas."

I continued to scan the wall. "Where are you? Am I just not seeing you?"

"I haven't earned to be on the wall."

I looked at him, surprised. "What do you mean? You're Alpha, so shouldn't you be up on the wall?"

He shook his head. "No, the people of the pack make that choice. You get picked to be put up on the wall. Some never make it up there."

My eyes widened at this. "Seriously?"

He nodded and pointed towards an open door. "Everyone's in here."

I took another glance at the wall before following after him. The room was filled with a handful of people already in chairs. There were two chairs on the far end that remained open, and Henrik walked over to them. "Thanks for waiting, everyone. I brought Katie along with me today."

I scanned the group. There were three men and two women in the room.

"Katie, this is Kyle. He's my Beta, and Kent is my second in command if Kyle is unavailable."

I nodded as I looked at them. Kyle was the same height as Henrik. He had dark brown skin and deep blue eyes. His hair was a dark black that was braided. Kyle was a little short with a golden tan. He had brown hair and light blond hair that had blue tips.

"And that's Davina, Elli, and Ronald. There are a few of the Honeycomb Valley Council members who could join us today."

"Your others couldn't join?"

"Scott's wife is down with the flu, and he's watching after his four kids," Davina said with a soft smile. "And Quinn and Vivian are twins who are out for their birthday."

I took that information in and nodded my head as Henrik pulled his chair out and offered it to me. I sat down and swallowed as Henrik sat down in his chair. "Well, since introductions were made, let's get into this."

All of them quickly dove into different events and problems the town members had brought up. I was shocked at how they all voiced their opinions without concern.

Henrik was clearly the person who ran the meeting, but everyone was free to say what they wanted. They even argued back if they felt he was misguided.

Davina raised an eyebrow at me. “I am interested in how your algorithm works, pairing the Alphas. How is it that you two were paired together?” She pointed between Henrik and me. “I mean...no offense, but I don’t see how you guys would go together?”

“Why, because she’s out of his league?” Kent asked with a wicked grin.

“Yeah.” Davina nodded her head. “No offense Henrik but she’s a fricking scientist with several degrees, and you haven’t even made it on the wall outside.”

I blinked, staring at them, stunned. Were they honestly saying I was out of his league? How could that even be? Henrik was drop-dead handsome, and surely they saw that.

“I’m sorry,” I shook my head. “Aren’t you meaning to say I’m out of his league?”

Kyle snorted. “He may have the looks, but there isn’t a lot of thinking going on inside that head of his.”

“Hey now,” Henrik said, looking at Kyle. “Are you calling me stupid?”

“Well, we aren’t calling you smart.” Kent quickly added.

I swallowed, expecting a fight to break out, but Henrik laughed. He laughed hard, and it shocked me. I expected him to get angry, but he wasn’t. He was... laughing.

Henrik patted his hand on mine. “A few things you should know. Davina has a statistics degree, and Kyle has a degree in engineering. So, I wasn’t kidding when I

said there were other odd people out there.”

“Who are you calling odd?” Davina asked, raising an eyebrow at him. “Because you’re clearly the odd one out in this group.”

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I listened as they continued to joke and poke fun at Henrik. But it was friendly. I sank into my cushion, finding that the people surrounding Henrik were people he truly trusted. I could see it in the way he looked at them.

“Speaking of outside, how do you get onto the wall?” I asked.

Everyone went silent, and I felt I had spoken out of turn. But Kent gave me a soft smile. “The town has meetings every quarter, and if anyone thinks that the Alpha deserves to be put up, they have a vote. You have to have the majority vote to get your picture up.”

“And you haven’t?” I asked, looking at Henrik.

“He’s only been Alpha for a few years,” Kent added. “Sometimes it takes years before you even get your first vote.”

“But he deserves it more than some of those that are up on that wall,” Davina commented. “Honestly, some of them, I’m sure, purchased their way on that wall.”

“Each and every one of them made their way up there for good reason,” Henrik said, shaking his head at Davina. “Some just...lose their way near the end of their ruling.”

“Our last Alpha let this pack fall apart, and Henrik has been working to put all the pieces back together again,” Kyle said. “It’s a lot of work, and sometimes people don’t notice the changes, but they are there.”

I didn’t know what the pack looked like before, but it was stunning now. It was clear

that it was being taken care of. The meeting went on for a few more minutes before we headed out.

Henrik took me around town, showing me some things they had worked hard on. It surprised me just how much work he'd already done, only being an Alpha for such a short time.

"Why hasn't anyone nominated you to be on the wall in City Hall?" I asked as he drove us back home. "It seems to me you've earned it. You've done so much. You redid the river walk you guys have. You put all the new lamp posts up and redid the roads."

Henrik shrugged. "I just haven't."

I thought it seemed rude that he hadn't. He clearly loved his pack. I could see it from the way people waved at us and the way he spoke about everyone.

As we got home, I slipped my shoes off and stretched. Henrik then looked at me. "Would you like to go to the next meeting? We're going to be talking about the school and local shops. Should be a good meeting."

I headed for the hallway, and Henrik followed me. I looked at him. "Sure, was there any specific topic?"

He nodded, and his eyes sparkled. "I know the school is bringing up a new program they want to use in the school. It's to help get kids focused on the sciences and math fields."

This caught my interest. "Oh?"

He nodded and continued to talk. "Yeah. They said they have a hard time getting kids

into it, but they know there are kids who want to be. So, they want to start an after-school program that gets them on a career focused in that. So, the students would visit hospitals, clinics, and shadow people. We even reached out to some local shops if they had anything they would be willing to let kids shadow for.”

“That would actually be a really good thing. Being able to see what is out there would actually pique some kids' interest. What do you have so far?”

“We have a few nurses and a doctor willing to offer up one day a week. We have the police station offering up a desk and an officer twice a week. The meeting will actually help see who else is willing to help.”

I turned and I hadn't realized how close Henrik was standing or the fact that he followed me all the way into my bedroom. I felt a heat cover over me like a blanket, and swallowed.

I scrambled my mind for anything to say. My mind was suddenly hyper-aware of where we stood and how close he stood to me. My bed was just to the right of us, and it seemed to be beckoning us.

“Where did you even get this idea?”

Henrik looked at me and smiled. It was a soft smile. “The school brought it up to me, but I just thought of how I wished there were more people out there like you. That saw the world differently.”

I blushed and watched as his eyes looked down at my lips. I could see a glimmer in his eyes, and then they flicked past me. “Sorry, I didn't realize I followed you all the way in here. I'll let you get some rest.”

I suddenly felt a tug as he turned, stepped out of my room, and headed down the

hallway to the kitchen. My shoulders sank, and I frowned.

Why did I feel sad when he walked away, though? Wasn't that a good thing? Isn't that what I wanted? Space?

No. That's never what you wanted. You just wanted to be noticed, and he noticed you.

Chapter 8 - Henrik

I slammed my door shut and headed up towards the meeting building. I could hear Frank instantly as I stepped inside, finding him sitting in his usual spot with Jones. Frank had always been the most vocal of the group, but when Jay and I first got our positions, he'd been the first to give advice on how to handle difficult situations. He was the one who made you think he didn't have brains, but he was rather smart. Not a genius like Katie, but he knew what he was doing.

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Jones was still a mystery to us all. While he was the newest of us, he wasn't new anymore. We'd all had our positions for several years now and knew each other well enough. Jones was somehow a different nut altogether.

"Morning, guys," I said as I took a seat and leaned back in my chair. Frank looked at me, raising an eyebrow. "Morning. Did you see the others outside?"

"Aaron was on the phone in his car and I didn't see the others, but we still have time before any of them are actually late."

"I thought you'd be late, being as you're freshly married," Frank said with a wiggle of an eyebrow. "So, how is married life?"

I had told Jay everything that happened between Katie and me, but I didn't tell the guys. It wasn't that I didn't trust them, but more that I didn't feel Katie would like everyone to know that the marriage had started out as rocky as it had. I knew that Jay would understand, being that his was just as messy when they first got together.

"Things are fine," I said as I took my seat. "She's at home getting used to living there. I think she said she wanted to get some work done later. She has some catching up to do now that she's been away from work for a week."

"You think?" Jones asked, looking at me confused. "How do you not know?"

"Because Katie is a free woman, and if she decides to go back to work, she will, or maybe she changed her mind."

“What are we talking about in here?” Maddox and Jay both stepped into the space. Maddox had his hair slicked back, and he was wearing a nice suit, which confused me a little. None of us dressed up to be here, so why did Maddox? “Where the hell were you coming from?”

Maddox chuckled as he swung into his chair. “I had a date this morning and I wanted to look nice.”

Jay swung into his seat next to me, shaking his head. “And you guys didn’t have to witness him tongue wrestling the woman before he came in here.”

Maddox smirked as he looked at Jay. “Jealous? I can have any girl I want and you go home to the same woman.”

Jay laughed. “You enjoy yourself, Maddox, because I’m perfectly content with my wife. She pleases me every way she can. I don’t have to ask for head.”

“Jesus, please stop,” I said, waving a hand. “I don’t need to hear this.”

“Yeah, we were talking about Henrik getting laid, not you guys.” Frank quickly added, leaning forward. “So, how was she?”

I rolled my shoulders back. “You all know I don’t discuss my bedroom antics, nor will I ever.”

“Oh, come on, we all know you had sex. Just tell us how it was.”

“No,” I snapped, shaking my head. “And we aren’t here to talk about my love life.” I tapped my finger on the table. “So, how about we talk about why we are here?”

“Sorry!” Aaron burst into the room, looking winded. He panted at the door for a

moment before pulling himself up to his full height. “I had a problem with some guys in the pack, but it’s all covered now. Did I miss anything?”

“Just Henrik about to tell us the amount of sex he had now that he’s married,” Maddox said with a laugh.

Aaron swung into his seat, looking surprised. “Really? Henrik was giving details? Seems unlike him.”

“That’s because they are talking out of their asses,” I grumbled, shaking my head. “I wasn’t telling shit. And if we want to talk about this, why the hell are you still dating?” I looked at Maddox. “You do realize that Katie will pair us all up. It’s a waste to date. You can’t have a serious relationship with anyone.”

Maddox combed a hand through his hair. “Just because I’m going to get married doesn’t mean I need to take myself off the market just yet. And besides, maybe we will have an open marriage. You can’t honestly tell me that there is one person out there made to be mine.”

All eyes went to Jay, and Jay froze. He glanced at me before he shrugged. “I didn’t think it was possible, but Sam is perfect in every way for me. She’s caring, and even when I’m grumpy, she still loves me.”

“And the chances of us all having that are slim,” Frank added.

“You don’t know that,” I said.

“If you want to prove us wrong, tell us how your love life is going.” Jone barked up, always seeming to listen in but saying so little.

I sighed. “Guys, it’s still new. We’ve only been married for what, a week?”

“Plenty of time to tell how the marriage is going to go.”

I rubbed my eyes. “How the hell is it we are all Alphas, and suddenly, our lives surround us, discussing whether or not we are getting any?”

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“Because the Council made our lives that way.”

Maddox chuckled. “But in all seriousness, how is it going? I imagine Katie had difficulty adjusting, considering her lab is in Jay’s pack. That’s a bit of a drive to work.”

I nodded. “She’s adjusting. She’s not exactly thrilled that she is going to have to drive to work longer than a few minutes, but she’s handling things well.”

“Does she know who she’s going to pair up next?”

I didn’t know anything about her work, and now that I have thought about it, I should. I should ask her how things were going and if she was doing okay. I suddenly felt I hadn’t been doing a good enough job.

“Shall we get into the real meeting now that we are done drilling Henrik about his love life?” Jay asked, tapping his fingers on the table.

“Sure, take all the fun right out of this,” Aaron said with a snort.

We quickly dove into the different topics that we needed to address. Aaron had some issues with burglary being higher in his pack for the past few weeks. Frank explained his pack was still lacking enthusiasm about not finding more information about the dark presence that took over Sam. Jay expressed that his pack was just as concerned, and Sam was trying the best she could to look into it, but her visions were still limited.

“Has Katie found anything regarding that?” Frank asked, and I could see the vein on his forehead was throbbing, which told me he was getting a little tempered.

But my gaze went past him toward the tree line just on the horizon and the pale-skinned lady who stood out there. I knew Katie instantly, like a tug in my chest, that a rope was being pulled on. She stood wearing a black jacket and bright blue goggles. Even from this distance, she stood out.

Katie had always dressed oddly and had quirks, but I couldn’t help but admit that this was a step up from her usual weirdness. Did she have a nose plug? I leaned forward, slightly narrowing my gaze. But she turned her back on me.

“Hello? Earth to Henrik,” Frank waved his hand, and I pulled my gaze away.

“Sorry, what?”

Frank growled. “I asked if Katie learned anything!?”

Right. I was still in the meeting. Jesus. One look at Katie, and I suddenly had no idea where I was.

“Right, yes... hmm.... She’s been looking into it, but I haven’t heard if she got anything back yet.”

“Are you even listening?” Jones asked, raising an eyebrow at me. “You look like you're zoning out.”

“Actually, I just remembered I have something urgent. I uhh...need to make a few phone calls. Excuse me, guys.” I pulled myself up and headed for the door.

“What? Hey, wait, are you leaving?”

I didn't bother answering as I headed out the door and quickly rounded the building. I headed towards the tree line and scanned the area. I couldn't see Katie, but I could smell her and feel her presence. I continued deeper into the trees when I heard her.

"Oh my god! I can't believe I actually found it."

I rounded a large tree and found Katie hunched over. I walked closer and stepped onto a stick, and Katie jumped. She turned, holding a metal stick out. My eyes widened as I took her in. Her hair was pulled up into a messy bun. She was still wearing her blue lab goggles that sat snugly on her face. She had a clip on her nose and wore all black, including her shoes.

I couldn't help the laugh that burst free. "Oh my god, why are you dressed like that?"

Katie scowled at me. "You scared me! You shouldn't be jumping out on people like that. I could have hit you with this." She waved a metal rod.

"I'm sorry, but I wasn't trying."

Katie quickly pulled her goggles up and unplugged her nose. "What are you doing out here?"

I wiped at my eyes, waving a hand. "I was in a meeting when I saw you sneaking around. What are you wearing?"

She looked down at herself and then blushed. "I always wear this."

"Why do you have goggles on?"

"Because it's windy, and I don't want sand to get in my eyes."

“And the nose plug?”

She scrunched her nose up. “Because I was hunting for a few things, and some insects and fungi have a rather unpleasant odor.”

I pulled my laughter together and walked closer. “Okay, so why are you so excited?”

She pulled her hands up. “I found *Hericium Erinaceus*, and ginkgo biloba.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Which is?”

“Lion mane mushroom, and maidenhair tree pines.”

“Okay, so the next question is, why do you need those?”

“They are both great at brain health. I thought that if Sam had taken some of them, it would have helped her vision. Or at least keep her brain strong enough to keep whatever happened before from happening again.”

I was a little surprised. I knew that Katie was smart, but seeing her like this while she was in her element. It showed just how brilliant Katie really was.

“Did you find anything else?”

She nodded. “I found a bunch of stuff. I’ve been trying to think of ways to help the human body fight against viruses and found astragalus and sambucus, which are great for fighting against diseases. I think they would be good for anyone with the virus.”

My eyebrows went up. “Do you think that will help?”

“It’s worth a try,” Katie said, pulling her goggles off. I watched as she shoved her goggles into her bag and shuffled things around in her bag. I couldn’t help but stare, feeling amazed at her.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets. “Has anyone ever told you how amazing you are?”

She blushed and looked at me, confused. She stammered for words.

“You’re out here looking for ways to help the packs, and you don’t even realize how special that is. How much you care about everyone else around you. And I’m guessing people don’t tell you that.”

She chewed on her cheek. “No, not exactly. I’ve always been...the odd one out.”

“Well, the outfit doesn’t exactly scream red carpet.”

She rolled her eyes. “If you’re done mocking me, I have stuff to do.”

“I’m teasing,” I said as I walked closer. “And what else are you looking for?”

“Just samples to take back to the lab. I need some ginger root, turmeric, and sap.”

“Can I help you?”

She blinked and once more looked at me, stunned. “You...you want to help?”

I nodded. “Yeah, sounds like fun. As long as you don’t make me wear what you’re wearing.”

She threw her arm out and hit me in the stomach. It was a little tap, but enough to cause a spark to go up my entire body. She stood closer now, and I inhaled her scent. She smelled like the woods.

She looked up at me now with her arms crossed. “I could make you wear my goggles.”

I leaned closer. “You think so, do you?”

She nodded, holding her ground, and I loved it. I expected her to step away or shy away from me standing in her space, but she didn’t. Katie was standing her ground, and it was amazing.

Chapter 9 - Katie

I chewed on my cheek as I stared at Henrik. I could smell his cologne, and it was intoxicating. Being in close proximity to a man wasn’t something I did often, and normally I would back down, but when it came to Henrik, I didn’t feel the need to.

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I was tempted to make him wear the goggles just so I could get a laugh out of it, but I didn't. "I won't make you wear the goggles, but I will make you carry everything. Maybe put those muscles to work."

He laughed, flexing his arms. "Oh, so you noticed that I have muscles?"

I rolled my eyes as I smirked. "Over eighty percent of men have muscles, Henrik. You're just like everyone else."

"Ouch, you know how to injure a man's ego."

I smiled, turning my attention back to the woods. "If you're done talking, let's get back to what I was doing. I don't have all day."

He waved a hand, motioning for me to show the way. "So, what else are you looking for?"

"I need to find some lavender and peppermint. I know it's probably a little deeper into the woods. Both require a lot of sunlight, and it's pretty shady over here."

We started walking further into the forest, and I glanced at him. I watched as Henrik looked around, seeming to be in his element. Many questions formed in my head, and I knew it was because he was a shifter. I imagined it was different out here for them compared to humans.

"You seem to look at peace out here."

Henrik glanced at me with a soft smile and nodded his head. “My wolf loves the freedom. The smell of the trees and knowing we can run with no worry. Growing up, we spent a lot of time out here.”

“I always wondered what that was like.”

He tilted his head as he stopped walking. “What is being a shifter like? You’ve wondered about that?”

I nodded. “I mean, if you think about it scientifically. Your bones have to change, which is painful. Your muscles have to change, and your skin has to shift. They are tearing and ripping tissues, and your body does it effortlessly. And without pain. You guys are like gods.”

He chuckled. “Maybe don’t think about it scientifically.”

“That’s not possible,” I said with a shrug. “My mind never seems to stop thinking that way. I mean, when you think about it, you have to grow hair at speeds unseen.” I couldn’t help the giddiness that built up. “I would love to know if there is a way to create it. If we could, humans could easily decide they wanted to be shifters, and shifters could decide to be humans.”

Henrik raised an eyebrow at me. “You think that’s possible?”

I shrugged again. “It could be. You never know.”

“Would you want to be able to shift?” he asked.

I’d thought about it. Growing up, I thought that if I could, maybe people would think I was normal, but I never would be. Even as a scientist surrounded by people just as smart as I was, I was labeled weird.

“I thought about it. I grew up with more shifters than humans, so naturally, the idea is there. Isn’t it everyone's dream to be able to be something they’re not? It’s biological to want to be better.”

I glanced past him and noticed some lavender in the distance. “Oh, there it is!” I pointed, finding it was growing at the top of a large hill that was split down the middle. I scowled, seeing there wasn’t a place where I could get to it safely without possibly falling and breaking my neck. The rocks were all jagged, and one wrong move and I could be seriously injured.

I frowned. If I went around and tried climbing down, I might have been able to get to it. But that would be a hike up and a hike down, which would take even longer, and I was already losing daylight.

“Damn it,” I grumbled, and Henrik tilted his head. “You looking at the purple flower?”

I nodded. “Yeah, the lavender. It’s good for calming the mind, but there is no way I could get to it up there.”

“I can.”

I snorted. “You’re bigger than I am, Henrik. There is no way you can get in there to pick it up. I’ll just have to look for it somewhere else. I’m sure if we go a little deeper, they will have more.”

Henrik started to pull his shirt off, and I stared at him. “What are you doing?”

I just blinked, stunned, as he handed me his shirt. I took in his ripped muscles and the way his biceps bulged when he moved. He grabbed at his pants and raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you going to watch me strip down?”

I felt my face grow hot and quickly turned to the side. “No. But I don’t understand why you’re suddenly doing so.”

I could hear him chuckle. “You can watch if you want. You were just saying you wanted to see how we shifted.”

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It was one thing to watch a test subject, but it was entirely another to watch someone I knew shift. I wouldn't be able to think about it scientifically, but rather... sexually.

I looked up at the sky. "Why... why are you stripping?"

"Because I can reach that in my wolf form."

I felt hot suddenly and tried to think about anything else. I was working, after all, and I needed to keep myself focused. "The lighting is terrible out here anyway to watch you shift. I would miss it."

I heard no response, and when I looked over my shoulder, Henrik was no longer there. A light brown wolf stood where Henrik had been. He was a larger wolf with a large, fluffy tail. He had huge paws with nails that protrude at least an inch out. Any normal person would panic having a wolf so close to them.

I swallowed, feeling that heat was still coursing over me. I chewed on my lip and quickly told myself to get back to the task at hand. "Great...so... move carefully," I offered, turning to the hill. I slowly fanned myself, knowing that my entire face was hot.

Henrik moved, jumping forward onto the cliff. He wasn't joking when he had said he was agile before. He moved quickly, leaving no trace that he'd been anywhere. No rocks moved, no dust blew in the wind. There was hardly any sound every step he took.

I was stunned as he climbed higher, squeezing underneath a boulder and on top of

another. He grew closer to the flowers, and I stared in wonderment.

He softly picked the flower with his mouth and came down the hill just as quickly as he went up. I opened my hand, and he dropped the flowers into it. I smiled, staring at them. “You handled them with a lot of care. There are no dents or rips in them. I’m impressed.”

“Well, I figured you’d need them in full condition.”

I glanced over at him as I rolled my eyes. My body froze as I took in a naked Henrik. He was pulling his pants on, and I took in his entire naked backside. Henrik was just as ripped in his back as he was in the front, and that included his ass.

My face felt hot, and I looked away, fanning my face harder now. I blew out a deep breath.

Pull yourself together, Katie. It’s just a butt. You’ve seen a butt before. I’ve seen many butts.

But not Henrik’s perfectly formed ass.

Henrik walked closer as he yanked his shirt on. “You said you needed peppermint, right?”

I quickly nodded my head, trying to pull myself together. I felt I was failing miserably. “Yes, that is correct. Mint, I need mint.”

“Which direction?” he asked, waiting for me to point. My eyes, however, stayed on his hands as he stretched his fingers and rolled his neck.

Focus, Katie, Focus!

After hunting for the peppermint, I was ready to go back to the lab. I had expected Henrik to decide he had other things that needed his attention, but he came with. He seemed eager to come to my lab, saying he had never seen it before.

Henrik looked around, taking everything in. The laboratory had always felt like a second home to me, but I had no idea how he would take it in. Sam always said it was too white and that everyone was too quiet, which I explained everyone here was shy of outsiders. I figured Henrik would think the same.

He paused as he stopped next to the photos that Sam had hung up. He smiled. “Did my sister hang these?”

I set my bag down and glanced at the photos. They were all of Sam and I smiling at the camera. “Yeah, she said my lab was too white and clinic-like.”

He laughed. “Leave it to my sister to spruce up a laboratory.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle because he wasn’t wrong. I set everything out, and he turned to take a seat in a chair. “So, what are you going to do?”

“Well, I’m not going to be doing anything with this stuff, but I do have a couple of experiments that I need to run.”

I started to gather everything I needed, pouring powders together in a flask. Henrik watched each step I made, asking questions the entire time. I answered but found myself losing focus each step of the way.

“What are you going to do next?” he asked as I grabbed a Bunsen burner, twirling it in my hands.

“I’m going to heat it,” I said, grabbing a pair of tongs and the flask and holding it

over the fire.

“And what are you going to do with that substance?” he said as he pointed to the flask.

“I’m watching the reaction and will write it down.”

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We watched, and the mixture bubbled. “Is it supposed to do that?”

I nodded. “It’s what I hypothesized would happen.”

I set the flask down and scribbled the results onto my notebook. Henrik leaned over, a shadow falling over me. “You have nice handwriting.”

I could smell his aftershave, and I internally moaned at the scent. God damn, this was becoming almost painful.

I grabbed the flask, and heat radiated over my entire hand. “Shit!” I cursed quickly, letting go, and the flask slipped free, shattering on the ground.

He quickly grabbed my hand, pulling it up to his face. His eyes zoned in on my finger. “It’s fine,” I said quickly, shaking my head. “I knew I shouldn’t have grabbed it.” I knew not to, but having him so close clouded my mind.

Henrik started to blow on the finger, and a shiver ran down my entire spine. I quickly realized how close he was standing and how softly he held my hand. And Henrik opened his mouth slightly, pulling my finger towards his lips.

I inhaled slowly, and Henrik paused, my finger just pressed to his lips. I watched realization fill his expression, looking almost embarrassed as he looked back at me. “Sorry. It’s almost natural. You get a burn, and you suck on it.”

I swallowed. “Yeah....”

He slowly lowered my hand. “Why is that? When we get a burn, we have an urge to suck on it and think it makes us feel better? Does it go back to when we were younger?”

I blinked, finding I was staring at his mouth, and questions filled my head. What would it feel like for him to lick my finger? Would he suck on it softly? What else could his tongue do?

I quickly shook my head and snatched my hand back. “Yeah, it’s because it helps ease the pain. Uhhmm...what was I doing?”

Henrik took a step back. “I don’t really know.”

I nodded and ran a hand through my hair. “I ahh...should clean that up and get back to work. Don’t you have work to get to? I’m sure I took up enough of your time.” I scanned the room, trying to look anywhere but at Henrik.

“Yeah...I should probably get going.” I glanced at him, watching as he moved towards the door.

“I’ll see you at home?” he asked as he stood in the doorway. I gave him a nod and looked around for the broom, still refusing to look at him fully.

I heard the door shut, and I felt my shoulders sink. This was the right thing to do. Henrik and I were only married legally, but that didn’t mean he wanted to be married to me. It was out of obligation.

I closed my eyes, trying to count down from ten to calm my heartbeat. I could feel it was racing.

“You’re fine,” I sighed softly. “Everything is fine. Let’s get back to work.”

I took a deep breath and turned to grab the broom, but the room started to feel off. I would move the broom, but it was staying in the same place. I looked at my hands, feeling that they were working correctly. I suddenly felt dizzy and grabbed onto the table. The broom slipped from my fingers as I tried to steady myself. I pulled a hand up to my face, pinching at my eyes, trying to shake the feeling off. But I couldn't. I turned to look at the door and realized everything was black.

A shiver ran down my back as I felt cold. Like a draft had been let into the lab, but was I even in the lab still? It was like all the lights went out.

I turned, looking around, taking in slow breaths, trying to remain calm. Then it hit me. I wasn't alone, and I had nowhere to run.

Chapter 10 - Henrik

I rode the elevator down, wishing I had stayed. I found myself relaxed as I stood next to Katie. As I watched her work, I could see the way she focused and the way her eyes tracked everything she did. It was so different from her shy, quiet self. She was like another person, fully in her element.

The elevator doors opened, and I stepped off it, feeling a shiver run down my spine. I stiffened for a moment before I shook the feeling off. It was just my wolf wanting to stay close to Katie after the day we had. This was natural.

I started walking down the hallway, pushing the doors open, and stepped outside. The sun beat down on me as I walked to my car. I spotted other scientists heading into the building, not really knowing anyone.

Another shiver ran down my spine, and I shook my head. "Nothing is wrong. You're just sad because Katie asked you to leave the lab." And I understood why. She was trying to work, and I was there. I got it. It was how I felt when the guys were around

when I was working on paperwork. I knew I would make a mistake with eyes watching me.

I opened my car when I heard the sound of alarms starting to blare. I turned around and narrowed my eyes onto the laboratory. I stared at the doors, seeing red lights going off inside.

My body tensed up, and I sprinted towards the lab. As I got closer, I could hear people talking loudly.

“What’s going on?”

“Has something happened inside?”

“Was there an accident in one of the labs?”

I felt fear grab at me, thinking back to Sam and getting told what had happened to her, how she lost consciousness and became electric. Fear took over as I ran inside, the alarms blaring loudly.

I went to the elevator and pushed the button. The button didn't light up. So I pushed it again and again. I looked up at the lights and realized the elevator wasn't on. In an emergency, they didn't work.

I turned and scanned the area, looking for the stairs. I found the sign and ran down the hallway, pushing the doors open, and started up the stairs. I took them two at a time, feeling my heart quicken with each step.

Katie had to be okay. I just saw her a moment ago. This was likely because of someone else. I'm sure these things happened all the time. Everyone was doing different things. When I got to her lab, I was going to find that she was fine and she was going to question why I came back. But at least I would know that she was okay.

But that shiver crept down my back, and I couldn't shake it off this time. I pulled the door open and stepped onto the floor of her lab. I was panting for air, but forced myself to keep moving. I headed down the hallway, pushing her lab door open.

But I didn't find her standing at her desk. No, Katie lay on the ground unconscious, and my body went on high alert. “Katie!”

I ran to her and dropped to my knees next to her. My hands were shaking as I pulled her up slightly, finding her entire body had paled. She looked dead as I shook her. “Katie! Wake up! Katie! Katie”

Her arms were limp, and I bent over, pressing my ear to her chest.

God, please. She can’t be dead. I was just talking to her a few minutes ago.

I heard her heartbeat. It was faint, but it was there. She was alive.

I pulled Katie up and started out the door. I headed down the hallway and took the stairs. My lungs burned by the time I got us outside. My ears were ringing as I stepped outside, finding the front was now packed with people. Tons of scientists looked around, confused, and even police cars were parked outside.

“What happened? Who’s hurt? Did something go wrong?”

“Is everyone here?”

I held Katie close as I pulled my phone free. I felt that something was off. When I stepped into her lab, the space felt different from it had before, almost like there was a presence there.

I called Jay. The phone rang a few times before he answered. “This better be an emergency for you to be calling me in the middle of my day.”

“How did you know that Sam had been taken over by the dark presence?”

Jay went silent for a second, but I could hear movement. “What?” His tone dropped into concern.

I looked at Katie, taking in her pale face. “How did you know that Sam was possessed?”

“What’s going on?”

I moved through the crowd, holding the phone tighter against my ear. “I was at the lab with Katie, and she was working on an experiment, so I left. I was just getting to my car when the alarms went off, and she was on the ground when I got back. She’s pale and unconscious.”

“Shit, yeah that’s how it went for Sam.”

I frowned, having a feeling. But Sam had visions. Katie didn’t. Or at least I didn’t think she did. Katie would have said something if she had. Wouldn’t she?

But last time Sam was possessed, she was electric. Katie wasn’t. I was holding her right now, so this couldn’t be the same thing.

I hurried to my car and pulled the door open. I didn’t know where I was taking her, but somewhere. I needed to know she was okay. I could have her looked at by a doctor. I needed someone to let me know she was okay.

“I’m going to take her to the hospital. Can you inform the council of what’s going on? The lab is a mess. Everyone is outside trying to figure out what’s happening, but I won’t stand around and wait.”

I started the car up, knowing the hospital was only across town. I could get there within a few minutes.

I started pulling out and drove when Katie started to stir. I was at a stop when her eyes slowly opened, and panic filled her face.

“Katie?”

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She jerked and started to wave her hands like she was trying to break free from someone holding her. “Stop! Stop, Stop!” She started to cry, and I quickly reached out, grabbing her face, turning her gaze to me.

“Katie! Katie! It’s me. Look at me.” Her eyes landed on me, and her eyes softened slightly. Realizing sank into hereyes. “Breathe. In through your nose and out your mouth. Deep breaths.”

She took a slow breath in, and her shoulders sank slightly. She did this a couple more times before she leaned back in the seat. Confusion filled her face. “Wait, how did I get in a car? I was at the lab.”

“I carried you out,” I said as I turned back to the traffic, and we started down the road again. Katie looked outside and frowned. “Where are you going?”

“I’m taking you to the hospital to be checked out.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I don’t need a doctor.”

“I’m taking you.”

Katie glared at me. “I’m a doctor myself, Henrik. I’m fine. I can see. I can hear. My name is Katie Armstrong, and my birthday is November 23. I like the color purple, and I’m a microbiologist with a degree in physics, biochemistry, and biotechnology. Would you like me to recite my social security number as well?”

I frowned. “Katie, now is not the time to be a smartass! I was scared. I found you

unconscious on the ground at the lab. I want you checked over.”

“And I told you I’m fine....I just..” She fell silent for a moment before she spoke up again. “Everything went dark. I was getting ready to sweep up, and the world just disappeared.” She shook her head. “It was him. I know it was him.”

I turned back to traffic. “And I’m still having you checked.”

After taking her, they ran a few tests on Katie. I had worried she might have a concussion since there was a chance she had hit her head. But Katie checked out. Everything was fine besides her heart rate being a little high, but they said that was normal considering the circumstances.

“She’s okay. She didn’t hit her head when she went down, and her heart rate should get back to normal in an hour,” The doctor said, giving us a soft smile. “Make sure to rest up.”

“She’s totally fine?” I asked. “Nothing I should be concerned about?”

Katie sighed. “I told you I was fine.”

“And I was worried,” I explained. “If you found me the way I found you, trust me, you’d worry too.” Or maybe she wouldn’t. Maybe I cared about her more than she cared about me.

She bit her lower lip and frowned. “Sorry...”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, squeezing her hand.

We headed home, and I hung my jacket up. “Do you want me to cook dinner?”

Katie shook her head. “No, I’m really not that hungry.”

I nodded and watched her eyes scan the room. The house was quiet and dark, so I flicked on a couple of lights. “Better?”

She swallowed and nodded her head.

“I don’t mean to pry, but what happened?”

She glanced at me and rubbed her hands together. “I don’t know. I was starting to sweep, and the entire lab just...started to feel dark. Everything just felt different, and I got so dizzy, and before I knew it, the world just went black. But I was still awake. I felt so cold, and I couldn’t move. It was like I knew there was a dark presence, and I wanted to run but couldn’t.”

I didn’t know what I could say to make her feel better. I wanted to hug and hold her close, but I didn’t know if she wanted that.

“Do you want me to let you get some rest? The doctor did advise that.”

She shook her head, and I could see her hands start to shake. “I don’t want to be alone.” She looked at me with fear in her eyes. “Can you...stay with me? Just for a little bit. Until I feel ready to sleep.”

I nodded, walking closer to her. I reached out, and she stepped closer, wrapping her arms around me. She rested her forehead against my chest, and I could feel her entire body shake. I wrapped my arms around her and rested my chin on her head.

“I can do that,” I said softly, brushing my hand through her hair. “I can stay as long as you need me to.”

I carried Katie up to her room and helped her get into bed. I crawled in next to her and felt her relax against me.

“Do you need anything else?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m okay.”

I patted her head softly and sighed. Just then, I felt my phone vibrate. I glanced at it, seeing it was Derrick. He was likely calling for an update about what happened.

“Do you need to answer that?”

I shook my head. “I can call him back later.”

“But he’s part of the Council. I’m sure he would like to know what’s going on.”

I nodded. “He is, but he isn’t my top priority right now. You are.” I held her closer. “And if you need me to lay with you in a fully lit room, then that is what we will do.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

I kissed the top of her head. “Of course.”

I glanced at the TV that sat across her room. “Do you mind if we put something on?”

She shook her head, and I grabbed her remote, popping the TV on. I sank into the sheets, relaxing and planning to stay until Katie fell asleep, but before I knew it, I was drifting off myself.

I glanced across my lab, finding Henrik sitting at a smaller desk. His eyes were on his laptop as he typed quickly. His fingers moved fast, and his eyes tracked each movement he made.

My mind traveled back to the other morning and Henrik's phone call. It was only nine in the morning, and I was sitting at the island working on my coffee. I had finally gathered the courage to go back to work, but the council expressed their concern about me being alone.

Henrik came into the kitchen on the phone. “No, she doesn’t need a shit ton of people standing in the way of her at the lab. That’s not the solution.”

I glanced away from my coffee as Henrik stopped near the fridge. He ground his jaw together, and his nostrils flared. “No! I’m putting my foot down. I will be going, end of discussion.” He hung up, tossing his phone onto the counter.

I raised my eyebrows at him as he sighed heavily. “Who was that?”

“Derrick. He said that the Council wanted to have a group of security personnel to watch after you while you were at the lab, since you're a big asset and they can’t have anything happen to you. I argued that it wasn’t going to help. You already have a small enough lab, and if you put a bunch of people in it, you're going to lose focus on your work. He argued with me that your safety came first, which I understood, but so does all the work you do.”

I was a little surprised that he argued with them so easily. I agreed that I didn’t want a bunch of people in my lab, but Henrik couldn’t do it either. I would lose focus.

“But why did you say you would do it?”

“Because I’m going to.”

I shook my head. “Henrik, you have an entire pack to run. You can’t just sit and watch me at the lab. It’s a complete waste of your time.”

“No, it's not. I do a lot of work on my computer, and in any meetings, I can just be remote. This is for your safety, after all, Katie. Once this is handled, we can go back to what you want, but for now, this is what we are going to do.” He softened his gaze. “It’s just for now.”

I sighed, staring at Henrik as he shifted around in his chair. He had taken up a corner of the lab I hardly used, so it wasn’t like he was in the way. I hardly noticed he was there, minus his typing, or if he was on the phone.

I found myself glancing at him every once in a while, wondering if he was regretting everything. Any normal person would be considering how much he had to protect me now.

“Do you need anything?” I asked, setting my test tubes down.

Henrik shook his head and glanced up from his laptop. “Nope, I’m good right here.”

“Well, it’s about lunchtime, and I was thinking of running down to the cafeteria. Do you want to go with me?”

“Yeah, let me finish this email, and I’ll join you down there. Should only take me a few minutes.”

I pulled my goggles off and slipped out of the lab. I headed down the stairs until I was back on the first floor and headed to the cafeteria. It was as busy as I had expected. I made my way to the salad bar and started getting everything I always ate.

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I was a creature of habit. I enjoyed a salad for lunch with lettuce, tomatoes, onions, olives, croutons, and a splash of Ranch. I had a small glass of milk with an orange. It was a light lunch, but filling enough that I could still focus.

I sat down and started to pour the Ranch over my salad when I heard someone talking at the table next to me. It was a whisper, but I heard my name and stiffened.

“I still can’t believe that he’s been in Katie’s lab. What a waste.”

I swallowed, trying not to let it bother me. It wasn’t like I hadn’t heard people talking about me before. Anywhere I went, my name seemed to be a topic of discussion at some point. Most of it wasn’t anything I wanted to hear.

I mixed my salad up and started to peel my orange when a shadow covered the table. My body tensed up but relaxed as Henrik spoke. “Is that all you're going to eat?”

I looked over my shoulder at him, finding that he had a plate of chicken with some rice. He’d grabbed himself a water bottle and an apple.

“I eat this every day,” I said as I peeled my orange back, popping a piece into my mouth. “It’s light but filling enough that I don’t get sleepy afterwards. You, on the other hand, are going to be tired after eating all of that.”

“As long as you're eating enough,” he said as he sat down.

I gave him a soft smile, but could hear the whisper growing louder.

“Just look at him. He’s beautiful. Stunning, and he’s with Katie? How does that add up?”

“It was a forced marriage, after all. Maybe her math was on purpose so she could fool a man to be with her?”

“Poor man. Doesn’t even realize that he’s been fooled.”

I took a bite of my salad, but my appetite was gone. I chewed slowly, trying to force myself to continue eating.

“How is your stuff coming along? You seemed to be pretty eager earlier when you started your day.”

I glanced at Henrik. They were right, he was stunning, and he was stuck with me. I wanted to blame the algorithm. Because how could we be together? We didn’t have anything in common. At least nothing that mattered.

“It’s going fine.” I took another bite. “Have you thought about having someone take your place and getting out of my lab?”

He paused his fork and frowned. “I thought you were fine with me staying in your lab.”

I shrugged. “I never said that. I simply said okay. You said it was for a while.”

Henrik frowned. “Are you saying you don’t want me in your lab?”

“I would like my lab back,” I snapped. He could get back to his work, and maybe I wouldn’t feel like such a burden to him. I knew he likely had to readjust his schedule to be here every day. As much as he said this wasn’t a burden on him, I didn’t believe

it.

Henrik shifted in his chair. “Where is this coming from, Katie? You didn’t have a problem half an hour ago with me being there.”

I chewed on my lower lip and pushed my salad away. “I’ve got work to get done, and I don’t have time for this.”

I pulled myself up and started to head out of the cafeteria. I could hear him hot on my tail, but I didn’t bother looking back. I took the stairs and heard the door open behind me.

“Katie, stop running.”

“I’m not running,” I grumbled back marching up the stairs.

“Katie, could you please just stop and talk to me for a moment?”

I ignored him and continued to walk up the stairs. I pushed the door open, getting onto the second floor. I headed to my lab, and I pushed it open. It opened instantly, but Henrik followed. Henrik looked at me angrily. “Stop running!”

Anger boiled over and I curled my hands into fists. How could he not get it? “I’m not blind! And I’m not deaf! I know what people are saying!”

Henrik looked like I’d struck him and waved a hand at me. “I don’t understand. Did something happen?”

“Everyone is talking about how you deserve someone better. That I tricked you into being with me.”

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Henrik frowned. I felt my shoulders drop. “I’ve become a burden, and I know that. You think I like hearing people talk about how much better off you deserve to be! How you deserve someone better. And you acting like this doesn’t screw with your life only makes it worse.”

“You’re not a burden, Katie. And I don’t care what people say about us because there is nothing wrong with you.”

I snorted. “Oh, please. This entire situation is a burden.” I threw my hands up. “You never wanted to be with me. You’re only with me because you have to! And you’re only in the lab because I got possessed. None of this is your decision.”

Henrik stepped closer and I stepped back. His eyes hardened, and his voice dipped. “I have made every decision that has got me to this point, Katie.”

“Not because you wanted to!” I snapped back. “You were forced.”

Henrik stepped closer, and my ass pressed against the table. I had nowhere else to run. I swallowed as he invaded my space. His shadow fell over me and his face grew close to mine.

I swallowed, looking away, but Henrik grabbed my face, turning it to me. “You are my wife, Katie.”

“Not by choice!”

His face grew closer. His nose nearly brushing mine. “You are my wife,” he growled

and a shiver ran down my entire body. “It may have been rocky, but you are my wife, Katie.”

I wasn’t even angry at him, but I was angry about the entire situation. I was angry at how this was all going. Henrik grabbed my wrist, pulling me against his chest. And suddenly, his lips were pressed against mine.

All the anger melted, and suddenly, that was all I wanted. His lips were rough as he pressed me against the table, his hands releasing my wrist and landing on the back of my head.

I moaned softly as his teeth pulled at my lower lip. My breath hitched and a shiver ran down my back.

“You have no idea how beautiful you are. How amazing you are. If the others don’t see that, it’s their loss.”

Henrik leaned back, his hands tightening on my head. “I’m your husband.”

I swallowed as his lips grazed mine again. “Say it.”

I inhaled softly. “You’re my husband.”

“Good.” He pulled at my hand a little tighter. “Do you know what that means? It means your problems are mine. Your insecurities are for me to help with. Your fears, your dreams, and your hopes are mine. Just as mine are yours.”

I wanted to argue, but how could I argue when he looked at me with so much hope and care that I knew he was telling the truth?

Logic went out the window.

Chapter 12 - Henrik

I held Katie closer against my chest, with my other hand tightly holding her hair. Her breaths came in pants, and I watched her eyes fill with lust. She had a blush that skated over her cheeks, and her lips were a deep red from the harsh kiss.

“I don’t care what anyone says about us,” I quickly added. “They will never know everything and they don’t deserve to know everything. You are an amazing and bright person. You are beautiful and stunning. And I can assure you over half of those women downstairs can’t keep a man because they don’t know how to keep their mouths shut.”

Her face went a deeper shade of red. I pulled her lips back to mine and deepened them. I slid my tongue into her mouth, and Katie moaned louder. It echoed around us, and I felt her sink against me.

I hoisted her up, placing her onto the table. I stepped between her legs and felt my cock ache as I pressed against her. Her eyes widened slightly. “Are you...”

I smirked at her. “Yeah. Does that prove my point that you have an effect on me?”

Katie had invaded my mind all the time now. Being in the lab allowed me to be closer to her, and I loved it. I could watch her move around and listen to her. She might think I didn’t enjoy this, but I did. This gave me a good excuse to be near her and really get to know Katie.

She blushed, seeming at a loss for words. I slid my hand up her shirt, feeling her breath hitch as I grazed my fingers over her bra. I could feel the lace and smirked. I had always wondered what she wore underneath her clothes, and I was going to find out.

I slid my hands underneath her bra and cupped her breast. I rolled my fingers over her nipples, and Katie bit onto her lower lip. I wanted to tug on her lip so many times since it was a habit she had.

I pulled my hand down, tugging at the button on her pants. “Tell me, Katie, do you still want me to leave? Do you not want me around?”

Her mouth moved, but no words came out, and I knew I had her. She didn’t know what to say.

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I heard the button give and slid my hand further down. Katie was soaking wet, and her face was a deeper shade of red. I slid a finger into her as Katie tensed up.

“Wait, I uhh...” Katie’s hands pulled up, landing on my chest. “This is...I’ve never...” Katie fumbled over her words, and I slid my hand back, staring at her.

“Breathe,” I whispered, cupping her chin. “And try that again.”

She swallowed and looked into my eyes. “I’ve never done this.”

I blinked, and it hit me. Suddenly, it explained so much.

“Are you a virgin?” I asked.

Her face went red again, and she slowly nodded her head.

I looked down at her pants that were open and it hit. “You have never done other things?”

She shook her head. “Not like this.”

I felt hot, and my cock ached at her words. So, I was her first. She’d never had sex, and no other man had ever touched her the way I was getting to.

I slid my hand back, slowly circling my thumb over her clit. Katie moaned, and I kissed her softly. “You have no idea how hot that is, Katie. Knowing that I get to do this and be your first.”

I slid a finger into her and felt her mouth open against me. She gasped for air, but I deepened the kiss, devouring her. I slid a finger into her, feeling the way her walls tightened around it. I so badly wanted to sink into her, feeling her walls clasp around my cock in the same way.

“Can I slide another finger in?” I asked, biting her neck. “Or is one enough?”

She moaned slowly, nodding her head, and I slid another finger into her.

“Oh god,” she moaned, her fingers digging into my shoulders now. “Right there.”

I grabbed at her pants frantically, yanking them further down. I wanted to see everything, watch everything as I did it. Her pants hit the ground, and I pulled her legs wider apart, taking her in. She was soaking wet, dripping from my fingers onto the table. Her legs shook as I moved my fingers quicker, working my thumb over her clit.

“Fuck, Katie.” My cock ached painfully in my pants. I bent down, adjusting my pants.

I leaned closer, sliding my tongue over her folds. She tasted sweet, and her thighs quickly tightened around my ears.

I pulled her legs against my shoulders, forcing them apart. I flicked my fingers up, watching her come apart. Her walls clamped down hard around my fingers and she cried out.

I watched as she orgasmed, her legs tightening around my shoulders. But I kept moving my fingers, taking her orgasm to new heights.

“Oh god!” She cried out harder before her body finally fell limp. She started to pant,

and I leaned back, staring up at her. Her chest rose and fell quickly, her hands pulled up, tugging at her hair as she sat up slightly.

My cock ached painful in my pants, and I wanted to thrust so deep into her. I wanted to listen to her moaning my name, begging me to go harder. I wanted to take her hard but have her softly just as much. I wanted to be the first and only man that Katie ever had.

I stepped closer and leaned over her. I smirked at her. “Imagine what my cock can do.”

Her eyes widened slightly as she seemed to think about it. Her eyes flicked down to my jeans, and I could see the wonderment in her eyes.

And then there was a knock at the door.

“Katie? It’s Liv from downstairs. I had some questions about a problem. Would you have a spare moment to look at them?”

Katie’s eyes widened, and she quickly sat up fully, and her forehead smacked into my chin. “Shit!” I cursed, leaning back as I grabbed my face.

“Fuck! I’m sorry. Oh my god, are you okay?” Katie fumbled off the table, trying to pull her pants back on while trying to reach for me at the same time.

I held my chin, rubbing at it. The pain started to subside, and I looked back at her. Katie yanked on her pants, and I swallowed, suddenly irritated. I was so close to having her. Whoever was outside had no idea what they were interrupting.

“Who’s Liv?” I asked, unable to keep my irritation out of my tone.

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“She’s a scientist that I sometimes work with,” Katie buttoned her pants and started to run her hands through her hair. “She’s really nice. This should just take me a few minutes, and I’ll be back.”

I caught her before she could run and pulled her to me. “Does that mean you want to continue when you get back?” I couldn’t help but hope she smiled and nodded her head.

Katie gave me a sad frown. “Maybe not. We are at my work, after all.”

I felt my chest deflate as Katie moved to the door and pulled it open. A short woman who was probably barely five feet tall stood waiting. She gave us a smile, and it widened when she looked at Katie. You could see that she looked up to Katie.

“Did I interrupt anything?”

“No,” Katie shook her head, not showing any signs that she’d just orgasm a few moments ago. She’s pulled herself together pretty well, but I wasn’t sure I could. My cock was painful, so I sat down into a chair.

“Oh, good. I was in the middle of something and my math seems to be off, but I can’t see where I went wrong. Would you mind coming and looking over it for me? It should only take a few minutes.”

I scowl, growing more irritated.

“Yeah, if you want, you can show me up here?”

Liv's eyes sparkled. "Really? You're okay with that? Can I use your whiteboard?"
Liv walked into the room and Katie looked at me.

"This could be a while, so why don't you go get some things you need to get done? I'm sure you had other things you wanted to do today."

I glared at her. "I wanted to do you," I grumbled quietly, ensuring Liv didn't hear. "And I would be."

Katie's face went a deep shade of red, and she suddenly seemed unable to form words.

"Liv, do you have any other markers? These seemed to have dried out."

Katie looked over at Liv and then back at me. She gave me a pleading expression. "Please, Henrik? Don't be mad."

I knew that I was behaving childishly, but I couldn't help it. I had been so close, right there, and now I was losing my chance. Who knew when I would get it again.

"Fine," I said. "I will see you at home."

I left her office, and once outside, I knew I needed to cool my head. It wasn't fair of me to be angry when this was probably hard for Katie. She was a virgin, and we had been at her work. I understand where she was coming from.

I decided to call Sam, as it had been a few days since we last spoke. I took a seat on a bench and called her number. The phone only rang for a few moments before she answered. "Hey bro, long time since you called me."

I smiled. "How's the new mommy?"

“It’s pretty good. Jay just took the baby out for a stroll, so I was going to take a nap.”

“Do you want me to call you back later?” I leaned back against the bench, staring up at the sky.

“No. We haven’t spoken in a few days, and being that it’s only a little after lunch, I’m guessing you have a reason to be calling me.”

“Why do I have to have a reason to call you?”

“Because you call when you get home, not in the middle of the day unless you have a reason. You are very much a creature of habit and you only step out of that when you need something.”

“You’re making me sound bad.”

She laughed. “No, I’m simply saying I know you. So, what’s up? How is the marriage going between you two?”

I sighed, unable to deny it. “I’m having a hard time getting Katie to open up.”

I had been trying since she moved in, and I felt I had barely gotten to know her. I thought we would be getting along better than this. Upstairs was wonderful, but she also threw me out so quickly.

“You have to realize that Katie is a very shy person.”

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“I got that.”

“No, Henrik, I mean like extremely shy. It took her a long time to open up to me, but she’s told me little about her life or growing up. I imagine it’s not easy being a smart person and always being told you’re the odd one out. It just takes time.”

I understood that, but I wanted her to be able to trust me. I wanted us to be able to joke like we used to. We seemed closer before Sam was married to Jay than we were now.

“Have you ever tried doing things that Katie liked?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, maybe date? You guys were forced together, but that doesn’t mean your relationship was built in a day. If you want to get to know her, maybe you should take her on dates and try to get to know her. Try to understand her.”

I felt my shoulder sink, realizing I hadn’t done that. I had skipped right over all of the dating part. Just because we were married didn’t mean that Katie had to give me anything.

I sighed. “I feel like a shitty person.”

“Don’t. You’re a great guy, Henrik. You were both forced into this, and I’m sure it’s uneven terrain for both of you. You guys will figure it out. It takes time. Jay and I certainly had bumps. You just have to give it time.”

I nodded when an idea struck. “Thanks, Sam. I’ll talk to you later. Kiss the baby for me, and enjoy your nap.” I ended the call and headed back into the laboratory, straight up to Katie’s lab. Katie was looking at the whiteboard. She turned when I stepped in.

“Henrik? I thought you were going home.”

“I am, but I came back to ask you to have a date with me tonight.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “A date?”

I nodded. “Yeah, and I won’t leave until you agree.”

She sighed. “Henrik, I have a bunch of stuff I have to get done, and I don’t know when I’ll be getting off. Can we talk about this when I get home?”

“No.” I crossed my arms, fully prepared to wait hours if I had to. “And I can stay here the entire time.”

Katie scowled. “Fine, I’ll go. Now, if you could please go. Liv is going to be back. She’s just going to the bathroom.”

I smiled, pulling myself closer and pulling her towards me. “Great. I’ll see you when you get off.” I gave her a quick kiss before breaking free and leaving. A smile pulled on my lips, and I couldn’t help the eagerness that built up underneath.

Chapter 13 - Katie

I stared at Liv’s math on the whiteboard, but my mind was on Henrik. I kept thinking of how his fingers felt inside me and the way he held me while he did it. I couldn’t get over his kiss and how he looked so sad when he left.

“So, what do you think?” Liv asked, tapping the marker on her chin. “I keep staring at it, and it just doesn’t add up for me. I don’t know where I went wrong.”

I shook my head, reminding myself that I needed to focus. I was at work and needed to keep my head in the game.

“You put a minus in the third line and a double positive on the sixth line. “

Liv looked back at the whiteboard, and her eyes scanned it. I watched her shoulders drop. “You’re right. How did I miss that?”

“It happens,” I explain. It wasn’t the first time someone had brought a math problem to me, asking where they went wrong.

She turned to me. “You’re a genius, you know that.”

I gave her a smile, but my mind wandered to when Henrik said those exact words. Questions quickly filled my head. What was he planning for us to do on this date? Was I supposed to dress up? Did I even have anything to wear? And was he expecting something afterward? He seemed pretty disappointed when I said I didn’t want to go further.

I know we had a wonderful make-out session, and he made me come so quickly. I should be embarrassed, but I wasn’t. But was he expecting something to happen after the date? Was that why he was asking me to go out?

“You still there?” Liv waved the marker at me, and I quickly shook my head.

“Sorry. Just have a lot on my mind.”

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“What are you thinking about?” she asked as she swung into a chair next to me.

I looked at Liv. I wasn’t as close to her as I was with Sam, but I’d known Liv for a few years, and she was nice. She didn’t gossip. I felt she was someone I could confide in.

“Actually, Liv, are you in a relationship?”

Liv seemed surprised by the question but nodded her head. “I am. I’ve been dating a guy for almost two years now.”

“Do you remember being nervous about going on dates?”

She nodded. “Oh yeah, I was nervous. I actually threw up on our first date because I was so nervous. But he still stuck around. Why are you nervous?”

I shrugged. “Obviously, everyone knows that Henrik and I were forced into marriage, but no one really knows that we are still learning things about each other. I just...I get so nervous that I’m sure I’m going to screw it up.”

Liv gave me a soft smile. “That’s the risk of dating. And Henrik seems like a good guy. His pack speaks highly of him, and he seemed nice when he was here.”

I nodded because he was. Henrik cared about me and gave me space when I wanted it. He was sweet and did little things for me. He always had coffee ready for me in the morning, even when he didn’t drink it. He always asked how my day was when I got home and offered to give me space if I had a bad day. He did so many things to make

me feel comfortable. Maybe tonight wouldn't be any different.

I left the lab a little before four and arrived home. I was nervous and still worried about what was in store for the night. Henrik was coming down the stairs, and I froze, taking in his outfit. He had changed into a pair of jeans and a crisp white long-sleeve shirt. His hair was slightly curled, falling in nice waves. He gave me a smile as he got to the landing.

"You look nice," I said as I chewed on my lower lip. "What is the plan? Do I need to change?"

"What you're wearing is fine."

I looked at my black pants and the white blouse. I always made sure to dress appropriately for work. But if we were going somewhere fancy, I should dress up. But if he were wearing jeans, maybe it wouldn't be that fancy.

"I'm taking you out for dinner. There is a nice restaurant near a creek with a waterfall. I thought it would be a nice place, and afterward, we had a little walk to our second location for the date."

He opened the door and gave me a smile. "Ready?"

I nodded and took a deep breath.

We headed out to the car, and Henrik drove. Soft music broke the silence, and I looked outside the window, taking in the town. I had grown to really like Henrik's pack. The people I had met were nice and none of them made me feel uncomfortable. If anything, they were welcoming.

"We're here," Henrik said as he pulled up to a large restaurant. The building had

string lights and large windows. You could see an outside area with chairs and tables. People were already eating and chatting.

We headed inside, and Henrik made a reservation. The gal running the front smiled. “Let me go check to make sure it’s ready. It will be just a moment.”

Henrik nodded and turned to me. “It’s nice here, isn’t it?”

“It’s fancy,” I said, looking around. “I feel underdressed.”

Henrik stepped closer to me, placing a hand on the square of my back. “You look wonderful.”

I blushed, chewing on my cheek, feeling my body heat up. Whenever he touched me, I felt like I was on fire with need.

“Oh my god! Henrik!” A voice rang out loudly and we both turned, looking to find a tall, thin lady standing just behind us. She had long, thick red hair that curled perfectly around her. She had a stunning face. She had the perfect body weight and height to be a model.

She was wearing a long red dress with a slit that went up her left side. The slit stopped just a few inches from her hip. It was tight and had a plunging front, her breasts nearly falling out for display.

I instantly felt worse about my outfit. I tensed as she looked at Henrik with hunger in her eyes. “It is you! My goodness, long time no see.”

“Ashley, nice to see you.”

I swallowed, glancing at Henrik and back at her. Who was she? She clearly knew

Henrik enough to call him so happily.

“Oh, don’t be so modest! My god, you look as wonderful as ever. And you must be?” She glanced at me, and her eyes scanned me. She didn’t show what she was thinking on her face, but I knew she looked away too quickly for it to mean nothing.

“This is Katie, my wife.” Henrik pulled me closer to him, and I offered her a smile.

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“Oh, so you're the wife everyone has been talking about.”

I felt like I'd been slapped, but she said it in a manner that came off like she was being polite.

“And you are?” I asked, tilting my head. “I haven't heard about you.”

She chuckled, glancing at Henrik. “Well, he isn't the type to bring up past relationships.”

I frowned. So, she was an ex-girlfriend. Great. Of course, he would have dated her. She was stunning.

“So, what brings you here?” Henrik asked.

Ashley batted her eyelashes. “I have a date with John. He's the guy I started dating after we broke up.”

I chewed on my lower lip when the waitress came back. “Your table is ready if you want me to take you back.”

“I'm going to run to the bathroom if you want to go back and sit.” Henrik offered.

“No, I'll wait for you,” I said, giving him a smile. He kissed me on the cheek before he turned to the bathroom.

“So, Ashley...” I glanced at her and watched her watch Henrik as he walked away. I

could see the lust in her eyes before she brought them back to me. “What do you do for a living?”

Ashley raised an eyebrow at me. “I’m a therapist.”

I nodded and turned, waiting for Henrik to return, but she continued talking. “If you don’t mind me asking, is your marriage an open one?”

I turned around, stunned by the question. “I’m sorry, what?”

She shrugged. “I’m just wondering because I don’t see how it would be a closed one. I mean, let’s be honest. Everyone knows you guys were forced together, and it’s only a matter of time before he starts looking for someone better looking.”

I felt my jaw drop open and anger filled me. I curled my hands into tight fists. “Aren’t you in a relationship?”

She nodded. “I am, but Henrik is better. He’s an Alpha, after all.”

I ground my teeth together. I took a slow breath in and felt a hand land on my side. “You ready to eat?” Henrik asked in a soft tone.

Ashley gave Henrik a smile. “It was great seeing you, Henrik. You look good.” She walked past the waitress.

“Ready?” Henrik asked, looking at me, and his smile slipped. “Why do you look angry?”

“Can we please leave?” I asked, refusing to even look at him.

I felt his hand cover mine, and he gave it a squeeze. “Yeah, if that’s what you want.”

I nodded, needing to get out of there. Anger was boiling over, taking over all the other emotions. Henrik turned us, and we headed out the door. Once outside, I took a deep breath and let the cool air hit me.

“Did something happen?” he asked, looking at me confused.

I wanted to tell him what Ashley had said, but I didn’t know if he would believe me. So, I instead just decided to shake it off. “I just...don’t want to be in there. I got the feeling she misses you.”

His eyebrows went up. “Ashley? No, we had a mutual understanding.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry if this ruins your plans. I just didn’t want to be in the same room as her.”

Henrik gave me a smile. “I didn’t know you were the jealous type.”

“I’m not jealous. I’m just..” Was that the emotion I was feeling? I was feeling angry, but was I jealous, too?

Henrik pulled me close. “That’s okay. We can skip to the second part of the date, instead.”

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He turned up, taking us down a pathway. I could hear water moving as we walked past the waterfall. I took it in and smiled. We continued to follow the path for a while and headed deeper into the trees. “Where are we even going?”

“There is a meadow back here,” he said with a chuckle. “And oftentimes, people forget about it. No one will be around.”

We broke through the trees to a huge open meadow. The flowers and grass were in full bloom and quiet, minus a few crickets chirping in the distance. It was stunning, and my mouth hung open.

“But that’s not the best part.”

Henrik pointed to a small area that was already set up. There was a blanket with a flower bouquet next to it. As we got closer, Henrik pointed up, and I took in the stars. It was a full moon and the stars twinkled in the darkness. Everything together was just breathtaking.

“You planned all this?” I asked, surprised.

He nodded. “I did. I thought a night staring at the stars would be perfect.”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face. He handed me the flowers, smiling as he sat down. “It is beautiful out here.”

“Why don’t people know about it?” I felt that if people knew about it, more people would be here. Maybe that’s why no one tells others. It would always be packed with

people.

“I think people forget about this part because of the waterfall.”

I looked around, taking in the serenity. It was peaceful, and I felt my shoulders drop. Suddenly, Ashley was in the past.

“I feel I should apologize for what I said at the lab.”

I looked at him, confused. “What for?”

Henrik gave me a sad smile. “I shouldn’t have pushed you. It wasn’t appropriate of me.”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to apologize, Henrik. If I was that uncomfortable, I would have stopped you.”

“So, you were uncomfortable?”

I knitted my fingers together. “It was more not knowing...I’ve never really dated much, let alone got along with someone to the point where we got to that point.”

Henrik’s eyebrows went up. “Really?”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Why does that surprise you?”

“Because you're amazing, Katie. Any guy would be stupid not to realize that.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Every time he complimented me, I felt like I was flying. “Since we are on the topic, how many girlfriends have you had?”

Henrik leaned back, resting on his arms as he looked up at the sky. “Do you want the honest answer or the nice answer?”

“Both.”

He smirked. “I would tell a girl she’s the first one that’s made me feel unable to control myself, but the honest answer is about ten.”

I was shocked by his number. “Ten? You’ve been with ten women?”

He nodded. “They were all serious relationships. I’m not like the other guys who jumped around.”

“When did you start dating?”

“When I was sixteen.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’m sorry to tell you, but ten isn’t a very high number, Henrik.”

He looked at me. “You don’t think so?”

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I shook my head. "I've had people in the lab tell me they were in triple digits."

"So wait, you're telling me you haven't had any boyfriends?"

"No, I've had boyfriends, but nothing serious. I focused more on work. It was easier than trying to...well..you know."

"Speaking of work," Henrik leaned forward, resting his head on his hand. "Were you serious about what you recited to me about your degrees? That you're a microbiologist with a degree in physics, biochemistry, and biotechnology?"

I nodded. "I do."

"Jesus, and I thought you were a genius before, but this is on another level. You're brilliant. Katie, that's huge."

I blushed. "Well, I started college when I was thirteen, so I had plenty of time. No one was willing to hire me, so I just continued with school." I tilted my head at him. "Did you go to school?"

Henrik nodded. "I went to school with Jay until we graduated. Then, we both went to college. I mastered in business for leadership and finance."

"Did you need a degree for your position as Alpha? I always wondered about that."

"They want you to at least have some kind of background. You have help, but the more you know as an Alpha, the stronger your pack is."

I nodded. “Do all the other guys have degrees?”

He nodded. “Yeah, we all have something for business. I know Jay minored in something else, but I can’t remember what it was.”

“Did you always want to be an Alpha?”

Henrik was silent for a moment before he nodded. “I was always raised to be an Alpha, and I wanted change. I grew up watching Sam struggle, and I wanted to help. So, I worked hard to get to this point.”

I thought back to the guys and how I felt being in Henrik’s pack. It was different. There were more humans that I saw and even had high roles. It wasn’t that there weren’t humans in Jay’s pack, but it was clear where they preferred to be.

“Why don’t all the guys do that?”

“We each have our own issues and agenda. My main focus has always been giving humans a better place to stay, but the other guys have different views.”

I nodded at that and looked up at the sky. The stars twinkled, and I leaned back on the blanket and stared at them.

The silence was nice, and a shooting star fluttered across the sky. Henrik sighed softly.

I looked over at him and propped my head on his chest. “You do good work. I don’t know if people tell you that, but you do.”

He reached a hand up, twirling a strand of hair. “As do you. My work is nothing close to yours.”

I snorted. “Your work is just as important.”

He smiled. “Not as much as you are.”

I felt my heart skip a beat as he stared at me. I looked at his lips, aching for him. But I instead turned, resting my head onto his chest and stared up at the sky.

“How long can we stay out here?”

“As long as you’d like.”

I smiled, sinking into him. I wanted to stay there forever. I knew we couldn’t, but even an hour away from everything was enough.

As we got home, I couldn’t help but feel relaxed. The evening was wonderful with just us and no one else around.

Henrik grabbed my jacket, pulling it off as we got inside. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

I nodded. “I did. I had a wonderful time. Thank you.”

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He pulled me closer, and I stared into his eyes. Henrik cupped my face, and I felt like I was going to melt. He leaned closer and softly kissed me. I was nervous, but not as much as I was before. I felt more connected to Henrik and safe.

Chapter 14 - Henrik

I'm trying hard to keep myself together and not push her. After listening to what she said outside, I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable or that I was pushing her to have sex. I knew how hard it was to open up and accept someone that way, especially if she's never done it before.

I pulled Katie closer, resting my hands on her hips. Katie softly moaned, and we fumbled back. Her back hit the wall, and she softly gasped.

"God, you taste like heaven," I growled at her, tipping her chin up. I deepened the kiss, pressing her flat against the wall. Her hands reached up, and she grabbed my shirt in her fists.

I broke the kiss and rested my forehead against hers. She panted, and I inhaled her scent. "Fuck you have no idea what you do to me."

A small smile pulled at her lips. "I'm starting to get a clue."

I chuckled, tipping her chin up. I placed a soft kiss on her lips. "You set the pace here, Katie. If you want me to stop, we'll stop. I don't want you to feel like this is all I want. I want you to feel comfortable."

She chewed on her lower lip, and her eyes stared back at me. She swallowed slowly. “I want to. I mean, I don’t know what I’ll be doing, but I trust you.”

I couldn’t help the smile that broke from me. Hearing that she trusted me, that she was so willing, meant so much to me. I grabbed her legs and hoisted her up. She gasped as I pressed my front against her. My cock throbbed, and her head snapped down where my cock pressed against her pants.

“Say that again.”

Her eyes snapped up. “Say what again?”

I leaned closer, pressing my nose against hers. “That you trust me. Say it again.”

Her eyes softened, and her hands rested on my chest. “I trust you.”

I turned us, taking the hallway down to her bedroom. Katie held onto me as I carried her. Her breath was soft in my ear as we stepped into her room. It was dark as I placed her on the bed and stared at her.

I leaned down and kissed her deeply. Katie moaned, and her hands grabbed at my shirt, pulling at it. I moved her hands, holding them above her head. Her eyes widened slightly, and a blush covered her face.

“Say it again,” I begged.

The right side of her face curved up. “I trust you. How many times do you want me to say it?”

“As many as I wish.” I unbuttoned one of her shirt buttons, and her eyes snapped down to her shirt. I moved down, undoing the next. As her shirt fumbled open, I

stared at her lacy black bra. Her breasts sat perkily and I wanted so badly to see them. I pulled her bra up, and her breasts tumbled out.

Katie squirmed. “You’re staring.”

I leaned back on my heels, nodding. “I am. You always wear sweaters, so I didn’t realize how big your boobs were, Katie. My god, you are gifted.”

Her face went a darker shade of red.

I reached a hand down, cupping a breast, and a gasp slipped out of her. Her knees rubbed together as I flicked my thumb over her nipple. Katie’s skin was smooth, and her nipple hardened instantly on contact.

“Do you enjoy nipple play?” I teased, already knowing the answer since she was squirming.

“Everyone does, it’s an erogenous zone,” she said back.

I chuckled. “Are you going to stay logical during this entire thing?” I leaned forward, pressing her hands harder onto the mattress. “Because I’m pretty sure when you’re coming, your mind is going to short-circuit.”

I moved my thumb over her other nipple, watching her squirm some more. I moved from one breast to the other until both of her nipples were hard. I leaned forward and pressed a kiss on each one before running my tongue down her middle.

Katie squirmed, her hips buckling slightly.

I leaned back and scanned her room, and my eyes landed on her robe. I yanked her robe strap free and pulled it up. “Give me your hands.”

She pulled her hands up and I slowly tighter her hands together. I moved her hands back to the bed and tied the other end to the headboard.

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Once her hands were secure, I returned to her shirt. I undid the last button and threw her shirt open wider. I looked at her pants and popped the button.

Katie squirmed as I pulled them down. I threw them onto the ground and stared at Katie. She had on marching black lace underwear. I felt my cock jerk against my jeans, and I swallowed.

“Say it again.”

Katie's eyes looked at me with lust now. “I trust you.”

I reached a hand up, sliding under the fabric of the underwear. I found Katie soaking wet, her underwear as well. I slid a finger over her clit and Katie moaned loudly. Her hips bucked up, and I slid a finger into her.

I watched her chest rise and fall, making sure that every movement I made felt good for her. I wanted her to be able to think back to tonight and know that every part of it, every aspect, was enjoyable.

“I want you to tell me if anything feels off or if anything hurts.” I thrust another finger into her, working my fingers in and out in smooth motions. Katie softly panted, her teeth biting hard onto her lower lip.

Katie nodded her head. “That...that feels good.”

I yanked at her underwear, pulling them off. I kicked her legs wide, resting between them. I worked my thumb over her clit and thrust the two fingers in even strokes.

Katie's breath changed into moans. I felt her legs shake as her thighs tightened around me.

It egged me on, seeing her so close to coming apart. "Sink into it, Katie."

Katie's head fumbled back, and her walls tightened around my finger as she came hard. Her legs tightened against my legs as she pulsed.

I worked my fingers slowly out of her and watched her fall further into the mattress. I smiled at her. "Was that good?"

She nodded her head, her eyes sparkled with happiness.

I leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her lips. "Did that hurt at all?"

She shook her head. "No, that was actually really good. Just like in the lab."

I smiled, kissing her again. I pulled my hands down and unbuttoned my pants. My cock sprung up, and Katie's eyes widened as she stared at me. "Look who's staring now."

She swallowed. "I just...you're huge, Henrik."

"You know how to boost a man's ego," I said, stroking myself. Katie's eyes watched, and I could see her eyes shift from lust to hunger.

Her eyes snapped up to me. "I... I... you are...the average is maybe four or five inches, but you..."

It wasn't like I'd measured my cock, but I had been told by a few women that I was larger. No one ever said anything about it being a problem.

“Are you changing your mind?” I asked. If she had, I would respect it. It would take everything in me to leave the room, but I would.

She shook her head. “No, I’m just...I mean, logically I understand how this all works, but I can’t imagine how that would...fit.”

She looked embarrassed and I couldn’t ignore how cute it was. She looked adorable.

I stroked my cock, smirking at her. “It’ll fit. It might not feel good at first since you’ve never had sex, but once your body adjusts, you’ll feel just as good as you did a moment ago.”

Her eyes went down to my cock, and she bit onto her lower lip. I leaned forward, kissing her. Her mouth opened, and I slid my tongue in.

I hooked her legs up and slid my cock over her entrance. Katie moaned softly and I bit her lower lip. I slowly slid further in. Just enough for my tip to enter her. Katie’s legs shook in my arms.

I stuck my tongue further into her mouth, and Katie’s intertwined with mine. Her entire body shook, and I knew it was because she was nervous.

I inched further in, feeling her tighten around my cock.

Katie broke the kiss. “Ow.”

I stopped, watching pain fill her face. I slid out and moved a hand down to her clit. Katie’s face relaxed again.

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“Sorry,” I whispered, suddenly feeling bad. “Was that too quick?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. It just hurt a little.”

I pressed my forehead against hers, continuing to work her clit. Her legs shook so I slid my cock against her entrance again. I slowly slid in for an inch and slid out. I did this a few times, each time moving further into her. Katie’s body shook with each movement.

I inched all the way into her and Katie winced. Her walls were tight around me and Katie whimpered, her eyes squeezed shut.

I kissed her forehead, working my thumb over her clit. “Relax.” I said softly, “Otherwise it’s going to keep hurting.”

Katie slowly started to relax, and once I knew she was okay, I moved slowly. I kissed her softly, biting her lip.

“Does that feel good now?” I asked, moving in smooth, calm thrusts.

Katie nodded, her legs tight against my hips.

I moved deeper into her, filling her. Katie softly moaned and I found myself going faster. She felt like heaven, and I couldn't contain myself. I tightened my hold on her legs, thrusting quickly.

Katie moaned loudly. I watched her tug at the tie, and she was unable to free herself.

Her breast bounced with each thrust, and I quickly lost myself. I felt her tighten around me and she cried out, her body shaking uncomfortably. I thrust quicker, feeling my own release take over.

We both panted for air, and I held myself up, feeling her pulsing.

“Ow,” she said softly.

“Shit, did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. “It’s a good hurt.”

I leaned back and glanced down. Sure enough, we had gotten blood on the sheets.

“We should clean your sheets. I don’t want this to stain.”

I reached up, undoing her hands, pulling them, and gently rubbing my hands over the wrist. There are no marks.

I kissed her hands and pulled them to my chest. She gave me a soft smile, widening her fingers on my chest.

“Do you want to stay here?” She motioned around her room. “I’m going to.”

“Do you want me to stay here? I don’t want to impose on your space.”

Her fingers curled up slightly, tugging at my chest hair. “I want you to stay,” she said softly.

We both got comfortable, and I yanked the sheets over, pulling Katie close to me. She rested her head against my chest, and I felt her soft sigh. I kissed the top of her head. I

didn't know if I was going to sleep, but I fell asleep pretty quickly.

I dreamed of spending my days with Katie. I could see everything so perfectly, and it was wonderful. We had a future I wanted so desperately and then it all went dark.

I jerked awake and felt a coldness cover over the space. The hair on my neck raised, and I scanned the room. I knew there was no one here, but I felt like it.

I pulled myself out of the sheets and flicked Katie's bedside lamp on. I couldn't break the feeling, and my phone started to buzz. I grabbed it from the side table, seeing it was Sam. Sam would only call for good reasons.

I pulled it up and answered it. "Hello?"

"Henrik, good you answered!"

"Henrik, what's wrong?" Katie slowly opened her eyes as she rubbed them. She sat up slightly.

I swallowed. "Why are you calling?" My stomach plummeted, already knowing why.

"I have a vision and there is danger in your pack. You need to get on high alert."

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Katie sat up fully now, her eyes scanning around the space before looking back at me.

“Henrik, your pack is in danger,” Sam’s voice cracked, and I could only imagine what she saw.

I looked at Katie and swallowed slowly. Katie reached out, taking my hand, which I hadn’t realized I was shaking.

“What is it?” Katie whispered.

“Sam saw a vision...the packs in danger.”

Chapter 15 - Katie

I was nervous as we sat, waiting for the Council to talk with us. Henrik was pacing back and forth in front of me, and I sat in a chair. My leg was bouncing since I wasn’t able to stay calm. Since Henrik said those few little words, my mind has been a mess.

I’d be trying to think of any way to stop whatever Sam saw. I couldn’t think of how to protect everyone; I knew so little about magic. We didn’t even know who was doing this. How the hell were we supposed to stop them?

I looked at Henrik, watching him rub his face. I wanted to help, but I felt like there was nothing I could do. I could see this was weighing on him deeply.

“Henrik, why don’t you sit? You’ve been pacing for hours.”

He called the Council immediately, and we met with them a couple of hours later. It was still really early in the morning, and I hadn't had my coffee yet.

Henrik shook his head. "No, I just...I can't think of how to fix this."

I wanted to give him any answer possible, but I couldn't even think of an answer. How was he going to?

I ached to help him.

"Sweetie, please sit." I patted the chair next to me, and Henrik paused. I softened my eyes. "Please."

Henrik nodded and walked over, sitting down next to me. I took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "We will figure something out."

"I'm the Alpha," he said back softly. "I'm not supposed to let things like this happen."

I kept thinking of what he told me. Sam saw a vision of darkness taking over homes and people dying. She didn't know how many, but Henrik needed to raise the alarm and warn everyone that this darkness was becoming a bigger problem and that whoever was doing it was growing more powerful.

"Henrik, we will figure this out," I said, squeezing his hand. Henrik finally looked at me, his eyes freezing on me. He squeezed my hand back, nodding at me.

"Henrik, Katie. The Council is ready for you."

We both got up and headed down the hallway to the regular room where the Council did all their meetings. Fear grabbed me that the Council would cut my work for my

protection. But I knew that was the wrong idea. If they cut me off now, it was going to take years for someone else to get caught up; they were pretty much impeding our doom.

The Council sat in their usual chairs, and two chairs were waiting for Henrik and me to sit in. Henrik sat down, and I sat down next to him.

Ralph spoke up first. “Derrick was filling us in on your phone call with him.”

Derrick and Steve both looked a little more tired than all the rest, and I would say it’s because Henrik called them both right away.

“Sam’s visions have been very small snippets, but we did find that she was right. We already found a couple of homes that had been attacked and a few dead.. It seems this darkness is taking on different shapes, volumes, and densities.”

Henrik stiffened in his chair, and I chewed on my lower lip.

“What else did your sister see? Did she tell you where it was traveling? If it just disappeared? Is it coming back? How soon?”

I frowned. The Council always had so many questions, and if we had answers, we would give them to them. But we all knew that Sam’s visions weren’t that detailed. They were short and small snippets of the bigger issue.

Henrik shook his head. “Just what I told you. She saw darkness travel out of the woods and to a few homes and that it was going around. I have no idea what happened next. But I had my men already looking, and they aren’t finding any.”

“So, it’s likely gone already?” Olivia asked, narrowing her vulture eyes at us. “So, what you’re saying is we lost it?”

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“You all know that isn’t how this works,” I snapped, growing irritated. Henrik already felt bad enough about all of this, and how they were wording this wasn’t helping.

“You were all asleep just like we were. None of us had any warning that this was coming.”

They all fell silent, and Henrik placed a hand on my thigh. He gave me a soft expression before looking back at the Council.

“Katie, regarding you're research.”

I swallowed, fully prepared to give them detailed reasons why, if they cut me out, it was going to be the biggest mistake of their lives. That there was no one more qualified than I was. That it would take years for someone else to get caught up. That this was my baby, my pride and joy.

Weird how, just weeks ago, I was so willing to throw it all away in fear of being married, and now I stood here fighting to stay connected to it. I didn’t want to be pulled away now, not when so much was hanging on the line.

“We need you to start focusing more on it. Your projects for the women need to be set aside so you can focus on our main issue. We need to stop whoever this is.”

I stiffened. “Wait...you’re not going to cut me out?”

Jennisa looked at me, confused. “Why in god’s name would we do that?”

“You’re the most qualified for the job and you have gotten further than anyone else has in your position,” Ralph added. “If we pulled you, we would be signing the deaths of hundreds of people.”

“While your safety is a huge concern to us, we also know that you are the only person for the job,” Steve added. “Everyone is going to be more watchful about this.”

“Katie, your big project is to get your full attention.”

I felt my shoulders drop. It wasn’t because I didn’t enjoy my job, but the thought of breaking the news to all the girls that I wouldn’t be helping them get pregnant stirred my stomach.

“I’m confused. Isn’t that your big project?” Henrik asked, looking at me and the Council. “What else is there?”

“Katie has been handling several projects, including fixing the infertility issue, helping women become mothers, and many others. But she was signed on for a secret project that the packs aren’t aware of.”

“Why else would we hire a microbiologist.”

Henrik looked at me confused, and I felt a little bad that he didn’t know. It wasn’t like I could exactly speak about it and it wasn’t my main job since we started being together.

“And what about the women? You can’t just cut that. You have me pairing up all the Alphas. What will the women think?”

Olivia tapped her nails on the table. “What do you propose then?”

“Can I bring someone in on that? I have hundreds of couples that need help, and I know several colleagues who would be great for the role.”

“You know what you do is delicate work.”

“I’m not handing the project over, but it needs to continue. We have no idea on anything, and the women out there need this.”

“Fine,” Ralph waved a hand. “You may bring someone on, but they have to go through a screening process and sign an NDA before you can even show them anything.”

I nodded, feeling a little better about that.

“In the meantime, everyone is on high alert and we are going to have people taking shifts watching the woods. Until we get this figured out, this is our best option.” They all looked at me. “Katie, you need to start focusing because we depend on it now.”

I nodded.

Henrik and I got up heading out. But as soon as the doors shut and we were alone in the hallway, he yanked me back, pinning me against the wall. “How is it that there is a huge project you have, and I have no idea what it even is?”

I swallowed. “It’s kind of top secret.”

“I’m your husband,” he grumbled back. “I have done nothing but be honest with you.”

He had a point. I reached up, cupping his face. “Would you like me to show you? You have to promise not to freak out.”

“I won’t.”

I dropped my hands. “Alright then. We should go to the lab.”

Henrik drove us, but we stopped for coffee first. I clutched my cup tightly, inhaling the scent. I felt my shoulders relax, and my mind started to focus a little better. Exhaustion was seeping in, but I was trying to push it away.

We arrived at the lab, and I stared at the building for a moment. It had been a while since I went down to the basement. I had been so focused on helping the women that it landed on the back burner.

“You ready?”

I nodded as we got out of the car. We headed inside, and as Henrik headed for the elevator, I grabbed his arm. “That’s the wrong direction.”

He looked at me, confused. “Your lab is upstairs.”

I nodded. “Yeah, my second lab is.”

“Second lab?”

I nodded, turning him to the basement stairs. But you had to swipe a card to gain access. I swiped my card and pushed the door open. “I have two.”

“Why?”

We started down the stairs. “Because this one isn’t public. It’s top secret.”

“Who else comes down here?”

I glanced at him as I pushed another door open, and we stepped into a huge open space. “Top secret agents and soldiers. There are only a few other scientists who are allowed down here.”

Henrik stared at me like I had grown a third arm as I stopped in front of a door. “I’m not sure how the Council will feel about me showing you, but that’s a problem for another day.”

I swiped my card and pushed the door open. The lights flicked on as we stepped inside. This lab was white, just like the one upstairs, but there were no pictures. There was a large glass panel that blocked a small room off from the rest of us. The room was black.

Henrik instantly stared at the blackness and bared his teeth. I watched the hair on his neck rise as he swung his arm back, grabbing me. “What is that!” he hissed.

“We are safe; that is completely locked away.”

Henrik didn’t soften his hold on me. He pulled me tighter and scowled. “How is that even possible?”

“That is a sealed room.” I pointed to the glass’ corners. “It can’t get out. We built this lab to handle it.”

Henrik looked at me like I was crazy. “What do you...how?”

I pulled myself free. “It’s hard to explain, but we’re safe. It doesn’t really react to

anything besides when I walk in front of it. Do you want to see?"

"No, no, I don't," he snapped.

I reached out, placing my hands on his chest. "Henrik, I promise. We are safe. It can't get free."

Henrik swallowed and walked a little closer. I watched as his eyes scanned it. The mass of blackness hardly moved. Henrik's shoulders dropped slightly before he turned back to me. "You swear."

I nodded. "It's been down here for a few months already."

Henrik took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Because I couldn't tell anyone," I reached up, cupping his face. "But I'm glad you know now."

He sighed and looked at the black mass. "So what are you even doing down here with it?"

"We're testing to see how it reacts to things. So far, there is nothing besides when I'm near it. It sort of freaks out." I pointed towards my computer and moved over, turning it on.

“Do you need help?”

I looked at him, a little surprised. “Really? You’re not going to ask me to give this up.”

Henrik shook his head. “I would love to, but after listening to the Council go on about how you're the most qualified person to handle this, I couldn't. It would be selfish.”

I softly smile. “I hope you know that means a lot to me.”

He gave me one in return. “So, do you want to start?”

I shook my head. “I want to sleep. I’m exhausted. We can start tomorrow, and I’ll fill you in on everything.”

Henrik rested his forehead against mine. “Okay, then tomorrow.”

We went home and slept for hours. We both got up and arrived at the lab a little before eight the following morning. I showed Henrik everything that I had done and told him about the different experiments we’d done and how we’d gotten little response.

“Is it weightless?” Henrik asked as I set a flask onto the table filled with the black mass.

“Is it, yet it somehow weighs a ton at moments.” I frowned, glancing at him. “We had a young lady who told us it surrounded her room, and it felt like someone was

standing on her chest. It broke four of her ribs, and she had a punctured lung.”

Henriks eyes widened. “Jesus.”

I nodded, glancing at the flask. The mask swirled around like black water, and you could feel the energy emanating from the glass.

“It’s constantly changing its abilities.” I tilted the flask and stared at it. Henrik leaned on the table, raising an eyebrow. “Why does it react to you?”

“No idea,” I said. “But it does.”

We spent days together working hard to figure things out. Henrik and I mixed the mass with things, getting little results. We arrived at the lab early in the morning and left late into the night. Henrik came with me every day and was always willing to do whatever I asked. He helped clean and wrote all the notes down as I did the experiments.

“Should we break for lunch?” Henrik asked, setting the notepad down. I looked at him from the computer and then looked at the time. It was a little past noon now.

“Yeah, what should we have today?”

“I don’t know if I can eat cafeteria food again,” he added. “How about I run out and grab us something? And maybe another coffee?” He pointed to the mug that was set beside me.

As Henrik pulled on his jacket, his phone started to buzz. He pulled it out and frowned. “Dang it.”

“Who is it?”

“Kyle. I meant to call him when we got home last night, but I fell asleep. Shit, he wanted to have a meeting.”

“Why don’t you go then?”

He frowned. “I don’t want to leave you alone here....” He waved a hand towards the black mass. “With this.”

“I have other people down here who check on me. Besides, it’s been a while since you’ve seen the guys and caught up. You’re needed with them.”

“Are you sure? I can still bring you food?”

I shook my head. “I don’t mind the food upstairs, and you should head out. I’ll see you when I get home.”

He walked over, reaching a hand up, and cupped my face. He leaned forward, placing a kiss on my cheek.

I felt my face heat, aching to step closer to him. We had been working in close quarters for a while, and he was always so helpful. I found my mind wandering at times, thinking of the last time we had been this close.

I shook the thought away. “I’ll see you at home.”

Henrik left, and I went upstairs for lunch. I ate lunch and headed back down to the lab. After a few more hours, my brain ached. I glanced at the time, seeing it was a little after four and I should call it a day.

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I headed out and ran into a couple of the agents who were talking in the hallway.
“Afternoon, Katie. Are you heading home for the evening?”

I nodded. “I am.”

“Is Henrik not with you?”

I softly smiled. After a couple of days, everyone realized that Henrik had been coming with me, but no one made a fuss about it. If anything, they seemed to be a little relieved about it.

“Do you need someone to take you home?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I’m fine going home by myself. And besides, it’s a drive for the rest of you.”

“Are you sure? One of us can make sure you get home.”

I shook my head. “I’ll be okay. But thanks for the offer.”

I gave them a wave and made my way out. I parked a few blocks away from the lab, mostly so I could soak up some sun in the morning and in the afternoon. I took a deep breath and allowed the sun to shine on me.

I was just getting near my car when I heard a voice I knew.

“Jesus, so you honestly think you deserve this job? I mean, look at yourself. You

couldn't even dress for the role.”

I froze and looked towards the voice. I was Henrik's ex, Ashley, whom we ran into at the restaurant, standing with her arms crossed in front of someone. I wasn't entirely sure who it was until I squinted and realized it was Nina. I hadn't really gotten to know Nina well, but Sam talked about her all the time. She had pictures of her hanging in her house and from what I'd been told, Nina was a sweet girl. She was shy and had a hard time making friends.

She stood uncomfortable and pale. Her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail that fell over her shoulder. Her dark eyes looked confused and terrified. She stood like a statue, pale as a ghost.

“Honestly, look at yourself and look at me. Who do you think they are going to pick? A frail human or a stunning shifter? This job is as good as mine, so you might as well take your applicant back.”

I felt my body heat up with anger. I don't know what came over because I wasn't the type to step in. But I knew I couldn't just walk away when I knew how important she was to Sam. She was Sam's friend and therefore mine as well. She just didn't know it yet.

“I am just as qualified for the role as you are,” Nina said in a shaking voice. “And they will pick who's best.”

Ashley stepped closer to Nina, cornering her against the wall. “You know that's not true,” Ashley growled, reaching a hand up grabbing her shirt. “You're a pathetic human and you don't stand a chance against me.”

My hands curled into fists, and I was storming across the space towards them. I could feel the anger taking hold as I grabbed Ashley by her hair and yanked her back.

Ashley was stunned as she stumbled backwards, crashing into the ground.

Nina's eyes widened as she realized what had happened, and Ashley looked at me, disgusted. "Did you just yank my hair?"

"How about you pick on someone your own size for once?" I was utterly terrified, but was so angry at the same time. I was so tired of shifters thinking they were better than humans. So tired of people thinking they could just walk all over others.

"How dare you?" Ashley said, pulling herself up. "Do you even realize who I am!?"

"Oh, I'm aware of who you are. You're a two-faced person who thinks she can walk all over people."

Ashley's mouth hung open.

"And I'm getting really sick and tired of shifters walking over humans. You are not superior because you can shift. Humans are just as important as you are. We are just as smart, beautiful, and strong as you can be."

I didn't know what came over me, but I was fully prepared to win.

Chapter 16 - Henrik

I rubbed my eyes as I headed to my car, which I parked just a block away from where the guys wanted to meet. I had only a little sandwich before I saw them, which did little to calm the hunger. I was starving and exhausted at this point. I felt a headache starting to form, and I couldn't wait to get home and see Katie and get some sleep.

We had been spending so much time at the lab that we'd hardly been getting good sleep. We were either working or sleeping. That is what our life turned into.

I unlocked my car and hopped inside. I turned the car on and looked to the right, and paused. I spotted Katie standing across the street with Nina and Ashley. It was an odd pair of people to be together. Surely, I was seeing things wrong. I couldn't imagine a single circumstance in which those three would be together.

I rubbed my eyes and squinted at them. I scowled, seeing Katie looked like she was angry. She had her hands curled into tight fists and stood in front of Nina, who looked like a frozen statue.

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I hopped out of the car and hurried across the street. I quickly realized that it was a heated discussion. Something had to have happened because Nina looked mortified, and Katie looked ready to lose her cool.

“You know, I’m getting really tired of people pointing out the difference between humans and shifters. Humans are just as important as you are. We are just as smart, just as beautiful, and just as strong as you can be.”

I paused, taking her words in. I had no idea what had happened, but something must have gone down for Katie to be this angry. Either way, it was late, and we were out in public. The best thing to do was to calm the situation and get everyone on their way home.

I couldn’t help but feel proud of Katie. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I knew that Nina had been picked on a lot. Jay told me that Nina was a very shy person and often unable to stand up against people if something was wrong.

I often thought Katie was the same, but after being with her, I quickly realized that wasn’t entirely true. Katie was quiet, but she also knew her ground. She spoke her mind when it was needed. Of course, this didn’t apply to anything science-related. Katie couldn’t seem to keep that information inside.

I walked closer when Ashley’s eyes came up, and she spotted me first. “Henrik.”

Katie turned, and Nina glanced over her shoulder at me. They both looked stunned, and I stopped next to them, putting my hands in my pockets. “Afternoon, ladies. What’s going on here?”

Ashley huffed. "I was just talking to Nina when Katie came up and grabbed my hair and threw me to the ground."

"That's not what happened." Katie snapped angrily, her hands curling into fists. "That is not what happened, and you know it!"

Ashley looked hurt, shaking her head. "You misunderstood our conversation and took it out of context."

Katie crossed her arms, shaking her head. "Tell him the truth, Ashley. That you were bullying Nina."

Ashley gave another hurt expression, directing it at Katie. "Katie, that's not the full story. I'm sorry if you think something happened, but again, you misunderstood."

I stepped closer, frowning as I looked at Ashley. I wasn't sure entirely what happened, but I knew something went down. "Is that true, Ashley? Were you bullying Nina?"

Ashley shook her head as she looked at me. "No! I wasn't." She looked at Nina. "Tell them, Nina. I wasn't bullying you."

Nina looked utterly terrified, and Ashley huffed. "I wasn't bullying her, but I do apologize for this misunderstanding. Can we move past this?" She looked at Katie, offering a hand out. "Please? I do think we could get along."

"That's not an apology," Katie snapped back. "Actually, apologize."

I looked at Nina, seeing she was uncomfortable and glanced at Katie, wanting to put this to an end. We were out in public after all. "Katie, she apologized. Let's move past this."

Her anger snapped at me and her lips curled up. She looked at Nina. “Tell him what really happened.

“Katie, let’s not have a scene.” I stepped closer to her. “Please? It’s late.”

I glanced at Ashley. “We’ll leave. Have a good night, Ashley.” She batted her eyelashes at me and gave me a soft smile.

I hooked Katie’s arm, and Nina walked with us. As we got a little further away, Katie ripped her arm free. “I can’t believe you!” She growled at me.

I looked at her, a little surprised. “What did I do? I hadn’t done anything wrong. I pretty much sided with her. “Why were you even yelling at her?”

“Because she was being rude.” Katie snapped back. “She was picking on Nina! I know I didn’t misunderstand her.”

“Did you grab her hair?” I asked, crossing my arms.

Katie placed her hands on her hips. “Yeah, I did, and I would do it again, too.”

I glanced at Nina, who chewed on her lower lip. She looked uncomfortable before and now she looked ready to throw up. She spoke in a shaky tone. “Honestly, it was fine. I really don’t want to get into this. I honestly just want to go home.”

Katie scowled. “There was no reason she was speaking to you that way.”

I sighed. “Katie, let’s just put this aside. It’s late. Nina looks tired. I’m exhausted.”

Katie looked like I slapped her. “Are you serious right now?”

I looked at Nina, who looked ready to run. I could see she was looking around, trying to plan her escape, so I figured I should let her go. “I’m sorry for whatever happened just a few minutes ago. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to speak to my wife alone.”

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“That’s okay. You guys have a good night.” Nina turned, practically running away. I put a hand over my face and looked at Katie. She crossed her arms. “You’re an asshole.”

I frowned at her. “How am I an ass!?”

“Because you let her off easy! She didn’t even apologize. She was practically screaming at me now. “ You should have sided with me!”

“Stop yelling,” I growled at her. “I am always on your side and I did side with you. But let’s not make a scene.

“Of course, you’re just going to let her get away with it because Nina is a human.”

I sighed, running a hand over my face, pinching at my nose. I didn’t even know what we were yelling for? I didn’t even know what happened. “Katie, please. Let’s just go home. We can talk about it later.”

She shook her head at me. “No, I’m not going home with you. I’m not going home with someone who doesn’t understand the importance of humans and what they are going through.”

She hit a nerve. I inhaled slowly, trying not to snap at her. “Don’t,” I growled low. “I have spent my entire life making sure that humans had a home and a place to live comfortably. You don’t understand the balance that you need to keep something like that going. You have to set aside the simple fights for bigger ones.”

“And what about Nina?” She tilted her head. “Because you just failed her. You let some shifter walk all over here like she didn’t matter. And by that logic, you’ve failed tons of others because their fight isn’t big enough to have your attention.”

“That’s not...” I sighed. This was a lot of thinking for me. “Katie, please. Let’s go home. We can talk about this at home.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m not going home with you. I’m going to Jay’s and Sam’s house because they get it. They would never let someone fool them into protecting them when they were in the wrong.”

Katie stormed past me, and I frowned. How had we gotten here? Just a week or so ago, we were so close and together.

I rubbed my eyes and turned to head back to my car. I crossed the street and froze when I looked at the small bar. The open light blinked in the darkness, and I looked inside. It wasn’t busy, but it wasn’t empty either. I suddenly needed a hard drink.

I headed inside, and the music was loud rock and roll music. I headed to the bar and took a seat. I waved at the bartender. “A beer, please. And a burger and fries.”

The man nodded, and I pulled my phone out. I ached to call Katie instantly, but I didn’t. I should give her an hour to calm down, and then I could call her.

I set my phone down instead. A beer was placed down, and I took a long swig of it.

Someone cleared their throat, and I turned to find Ashley standing just behind me. She gave me a half wave. “I was just heading home when I noticed you were in here. I thought I should apologize. I didn’t mean to start anything between you and Katie.”

I sighed. It was one of the reasons I wanted Katie to stop yelling at me. People

shouldn't overhear the Alpha and his wife having an argument. If she wanted to scream at me, I would have no problem with her doing so in the privacy of our house.

"You don't need to apologize. I should be. We should have been yelling in public," I said.

She pointed to the stool next to her. "You okay if I join you? I hadn't eaten anything all day because I was nervous for my interview."

I waved a hand, not bothered if she sat next to me. She sat down and ordered herself a beer. She then turned to me. "So, how's married life?"

I snorted. "Well, it's harder than I expected." I took another sip of my drink. "How was your interview?"

Ashley shrugged. "It went well. Fingers crossed, I get it. I think I would do really well."

I glanced at her. "Were you being mean to Nina?" I was trying to piece together what happened. I didn't know what went down, but something had. Katie wasn't the type to lose her cool like she did.

Ashley shook her head, taking a sip of her beer. "No. Katie misunderstood what was happening. But it's fine. I understand it can be stressful being the wife of an Alpha."

I looked back at my drink. I glanced down at my wedding ring, thinking of Katie. I hated this feeling. I hated that she ran to someone else rather than speaking to me. Just a week ago, we were making love. For days, we had been spending hours together in the lab. How could we do that, but she couldn't tell me what had happened just a few minutes ago?

I thought of when we ran into Ashley at the restaurant and how quickly Katie wanted to leave. I just thought she was jealous because of how pretty Ashley was. You couldn't deny that Ashley was stunning, but we hadn't been together in years.

"I'm sorry about everything. I hate to see you look like this." Ashley reached out, placing her hand onto mine. I glanced at it for a moment before I pulled my hand free.

"I'll be fine," I said with a shrug.

"You shouldn't just be fine, Henrik. You have a very stressful job, and your wife should understand that."

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It wasn't that Katie didn't understand that. She needed to clear her head, and I knew she would talk to Sam. Sam would probably call me and chew my ass out. I knew I should have sided with her, but I didn't even know what we were arguing about.

"Marriage is hard sometimes," she said, tapping her fingers on the counter. "If you ever need anyone to talk to, I'll be here. I know we are exes, but I still think we ended this nicely where we could be friends."

"Thanks, but we're okay. We've been working a lot of hours, and both of us are just tired. We will be fine tomorrow." The bartender dropped off my burger and fries. I popped one into my mouth.

She gave me another smile. "That's good. She seems like she could be a lot of work."

I frowned, raising an eyebrow at her. "Well, isn't anyone a lot of work? Everyone has their flaws. No one is perfect."

She nodded, taking another sip of her beer. She waved a hand. "I mean, of course, everyone is work, but some are more than others and sometimes not worth it. Sometimes, you have to decide if you just need to cut ties and go your separate ways."

Was she saying that Katie wasn't worth the trouble? Had I heard her right? I stared at her, watching as she tapped her fingers, staring at me with soft eyes. Ashley always looked perfect, down to her fingernails. She always dressed up, even if I told her she didn't need to. Our relationship had been decent, but there was never a huge spark. Nothing like how I felt with Katie.

I looked away. “Katie is work, but she’s worth it. She is a kind and loving person. She understands that my position is a stressful one and she’s got the right to get frustrated at times. She has a stressful job herself.”

Ashley reached over, snagging a fry off my plate. She gave me a smile. “As long as you're up for the challenge.” She swirled her beer around. “I couldn’t do it. When we were together, I always put you first.”

Ashley had. Ashley had been an amazing girlfriend but she wasn’t right for me. I always felt that she tried, but I was never truly happy.

But Katie....my body and soul wanted her. Katie pushed me to be better, and she had her own career. It made me want to work hard, to be better for her.

I couldn’t help the smile that formed as I thought about her. “I love my wife, Ashley. And I don’t care if she’s a challenge.”

Ashley looked a little hurt, but she quickly fixed her face. She waved a hand. “Of course you do.” She placed her hands on the table. “But does she love you in the same manner? Would she protect you the way you protect her? Because from what I saw, it’s not the same.”

I ground my teeth together. Ashley knew nothing about our relationship. No one knew what happened behind closed doors but us.

And I didn’t like how Ashley was talking.

“I don’t know what happened before, but don’t take my warning lightly. I will always side with her. I may not have demanded anything out of you, but don’t think I’m blind to what happened. I know Nina, and I doubt she did anything to hurt you. Katie wouldn’t have lost her calm if it had been something simple.”

Ashley looked stunned and stumbled for words.

“If I catch you speaking the way you just spoke about my wife, I can assure you will see a side of me you didn’t know existed.”

“I did...” Ashley tried speaking, but I waved a hand.

“Don’t even try to take it back.” I pulled myself up, and Ashley’s lips formed a straight line. I could see the hurt in hereyes and maybe she never got over me. Maybe that was why she said what she said. Or maybe Katie was right and I didn’t know who she was at all.

I threw some money onto the table. “You can have my burger since I don’t want it.”

I turned and headed out. I didn’t know how I was going to fix things with Katie, but I knew that I would.

Chapter 17 - Katie

“Here’s your tea,” Sam said, handing me the mug and sat down next to me on the couch. I cupped it and scowled. I didn’t know what I was fully feeling, but emotions were blurring together, and I felt like I wanted to cry more. But I had cried the entire drive over and was angry that Henrik had accepted that half ass apology.

I just kept seeing Ashley’s eyes relax when she saw him. She knew he was there and used the moment to her advantage. I hated people like that, and I hated that it worked. Henrik had sided with me, but had he really? Had he understood even?

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

I looked at Sam, seeing the soft gaze she was giving me. I knew I could trust her with

so much.

“I found Nina in a bit of an altercation.”

She froze for a second, her lips pulling together. I could see she was instantly on alert, her defenses up. “Okay....and.”

I clutched the tea tighter and took a sip of it. It was peppermint, and I felt it fill my sinuses and relax me.

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“I was leaving the lab and spotted her with Ashley, one of Henrik’s exes.”

“Oh god, Ashley. What a two-faced bitch she was.” Sam shook her head. “She was good at it, too.”

This caught my attention. “What do you mean?”

Sam shook her head as she leaned back on the couch, sinking into the cushion. “She’s a terrible person and I don’t say that lightly. She clung to my brother, mostly because she wanted to be the wife of an Alpha. But humans.” Sam shook her head. “She treats them like they are lower than dirt. She was sweet to me because I was Henrik’s sister, but I knew she only did it because of him.”

“Why did they break up?”

She shrugged. “No idea. I think he got tired of having to constantly take care of her. She was always looking for attention. I was over the moon when they broke up.

I chewed on my lip. So, I wasn’t crazy about the way she was acting. She was nice to me in front of Henrik, but someone else entirely when he was gone.

“So, what happened with Nina?” Sam asked, tilting her head. “Was she a raging bitch to her?”

“I got there, and she was degrading her. They had both applied for the same job at the new therapist's office that opened up. Nina was heading back to her car when Ashley ran into her. She was telling her that she might as well take her application back

because Ashley was going to get the job because she was a shifter.”

Sam frowned, shaking her head. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Ashley always thought she was better than everyone else around her. She thought she was the best-looking. She always wore the best clothes.” Sam rolled her eyes. “So, what happened next?”

“I snapped.” I said, “She was two-faced at the restaurant.”

Sam shook her head. “Wait, backup, you ran into Ashley at the restaurant?”

I nodded. “Did I not tell you about that?”

Sam scowled at me. “If I knew about the restaurant, would I be asking about it?”

I rolled my eyes. “Henrik took us out for a nice dinner the other night, and she was there.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

“Everything was fine when Henrik was there, but she was rude when he left. She made me so uncomfortable that I asked Henrik if we could leave. She made me feel like she was trying to get with him again despite having a boyfriend. She asked if we had an open marriage.”

Sam looked stunned. “Wow. Are you serious!? Jesus, that’s fucking ballsy.”

I nodded. “Yeah, so when she was yelling at Nina, I just lost it. How could I just stand there and listen to her insulting humans like that? And you always tell me how Nina is just so sweet. She didn’t deserve to be yelled at like that.”

Sam frowned, “God, I should call her. I imagine she’s probably a mess right now.”
Sam sighed, “So, what happened next?”

I scowled, still angry about how it all went down. “Henrik showed up, and Ashley told her that I was just screaming at her and that I had misunderstood what had happened. She gave a half ass apology and your brother accepted it.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Okay, I think you lost me.

“How?”

Sam gave me a soft smile. “Your anger was at Ashley, so why are you mad at Henrik? Sounds like he came into this and wasn’t exactly given all the information he needed.”

“Because he accepted her half ass apology. She didn’t even mean it. He should have stood up for Nina and made sure she got the apology she deserved. Isn’t the point of the Alphas to help protect the people who need it?”

We fell silent for a moment, and I frowned. I thought back to it and realized maybe I jumped the gun in anger. I shouldn’t have screamed at Henrik. I ran my face. “I just wanted Nina to feel like we were on her side. I just...” I felt tears build up. “I remember what it feels like to have no one in your corner. And I didn’t want her to feel that.”

Katie reached out, patting her hand on my thigh. “I get that. I understand the need to protect, but I think you may have aimed your anger at Henrik a little on this one. He sided with you and you still got mad at him.”

I sighed and leaned back. “Now I feel bad. I pretty much screamed at him that he didn’t care about humans.”

Sam made a cringing expression. “Oh, I’m sure that struck a nerve with him.”

I frowned, hating how I had screamed at him. We had spent so much time together and instead of discussing what I was feeling, I screamed at him.

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I ran a hand over my face and sighed. “I feel bad now.”

“Well, why don’t you go find him then? Knowing my brother, he’s probably trying to get in contact with you.”

I handed Sam my tea and pulled myself up. “Thanks for listening. Tell Jay hi for me. Give the little one a kiss for me.” I grabbed my purse and pulled my shoes and my jacket back on. I headed outside and started to head home. I was driving by the lab to take the road back home when I noticed that Henrik’s vehicle was parked on the side of the road.

“Was he still here?” I said, looking confused. I pulled over and looked at the area where we had been fighting, but no one was there. So I got out of my car and headed towards his. I peered inside and noticed it was empty.

I turned around when my eyes landed on the bar and spotted him inside. But Henrik wasn’t alone. He was sitting at the bar, and Ashley sat next to him. My heart clenched seeing them.

She looked at him so softly and reached a hand out, patting his hand. My stomach twisted up, hating that she was touching him. Touching the man that I cared so deeply about. I felt tears build up, and I quickly wiped them away.

She reached over and took a fry off his plate and ate it. She batted her eyelashes, and as she moved, her breasts sat perky in her shirt that hung low.

I hated how good they looked together. She was the picture of what an Alpha’s wife

should look like. But instead, Henrik was stuck with me. He hadn't picked me. He was forced to be with me.

I looked away and took a deep breath. I turned and headed back to my car. I just wanted to leave. I didn't want to think about what would happen next. I heard plenty of stories about how cheating went and how it all went down.

Ashley would swoon him and maybe convince him to go to the bathroom with him. She was perfect in every manner, she probably knew sex like the back of her hand.

Images of them joined together filled my vision. Her perfect body conjoined with his. Him thrusting and her moaning loudly for him. She would whisper his name and claw her nails down his back.

I shook my head, trying to push the thoughts away.

I got to the car when I felt a shiver roll down my spine. I stiffened and glanced over my shoulder, but no one was around. The streets and the sidewalks were empty. I was alone, but my body wasn't reacting that way.

"Hello?" I looked around, feeling the hair on my body standing up. "Who's out there?"

Darkness crept around, and my eyes widened as I realized what it was. I took a few steps back and swallowed. Shit. Shit. Shit!

I took a few more steps back as the darkness grew closer. I stumbled and knew I had nowhere to run. My body locked up, reacted, and waited for the impact to hit me. But a shadow came from the other direction, and the darkness smacked into a body that stood in front of me.

Henrik stumbled as the darkness hit him hard. Henrik went down, and the darkness disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

“Henrik!” I reached for him, pulling his face towards me. Henrik was out cold and pale. Panic set in.

“Henrik, speak to me!” I shook him, feeling pure terror. “Henrik!” I bent down and rested my ear on his chest. I closed my eyes and prayed. I couldn’t lose him like this. I couldn’t let the last words towards him be how cruel they were.

I heard the beating of his heart and felt a little relieved. He was alive.

I searched for my phone and started to dial the police. I clung to Henrik, feeling tears build up. “You’re okay,” I whispered. “You’re okay. You’re going to be okay.”

“Nine one one, what is your emergency?”

I quickly spoke, trying to get all my words out. I wasn’t even sure if I was making the right sentences. Everything seemed to blur together. An ambulance arrived, and my entire body was shaking. Henrik was alive, but I didn’t know what was going on. I knew just how powerful the darkness was. I knew what damage it could do. And I couldn’t lose him. Not like this.

Chapter 18 - Henrik

I saw nothing but darkness and pain. Every time I pulled air in to breathe, the world seemed to hurt even more. And the darkness. It felt empty and dark. A feeling of hatred seemed to surround me, and I didn’t know where it came from. I knew that it wasn’t mine. I didn’t feel this strong emotion of anger, not like this.

But it all quickly dissolved into nothing. The darkness remained, but the anger and

hatred were gone. It was just me and my own mind.

I opened my eyes and stared at a white wall. For one moment, I thought we were in the laboratory because the space smelled the same. But I heard the beeping of machines near me and the voice of someone on an intercom in the distance. I knew this wasn't the lab but somewhere else.

I pulled my gaze away from the wall and took in the room. I was in a small room, lying on a bed. There was a TV in the corner that was on, playing the news, and a chair next to me. There was a large window that showed me darkness outside, so it was nighttime. I looked down and noticed I was attached to an IV, and the door to my room was slightly open.

I reached a hand up, rubbing it down my face. I winced as pain radiated over my entire chest and down. I coughed, which made it hurt even more. It was like someone had punched my stomach and taken the breath right out of me.

And suddenly I remembered what happened. I was leaving the bar when I spotted Katie walking towards her car, parked just a few spaces behind mine. I was hurrying to catch up to her, and I saw darkness come out of nowhere, hurrying to her. My body reacted instantly, running to her and jumping in front of her.

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“Katie,” I started to sit up, unsure of where she was or what had happened. But I knew I needed to see her. I needed to make sure that she was okay.

“Henrik, what are you doing!” Katie’s voice filled the room, and I saw her standing in the doorway. She had a mug in her hands, and she hurried into the room, setting the mug down. “Lay back down. You can’t be moving like this.”

I reached out, taking her hand, feeling my entire body shaking. The pain that I felt was something I never wanted to feel again, but if I hadn’t jumped, I don’t think Katie would be with us right now.

“Are you...” I suddenly felt my lungs ache for more air.

“Shh..” She reached out, placing a hand on my chest. “Lay back down. You have three broken ribs from the hit you just took. You’re going to heal up, but the doctor said it’s going to take a while. So, don’t sit up. I’m sure it hurts.”

I placed my hand over her and allowed her warmth to seep in. Katie was okay. She was alive. The darkness didn’t touch her.

“You promise you’re okay? You’re not just saying that because I’m the one laying in the hospital bed?”

She pulled the chair up and took a seat. She shook her head. “I’m fine. It left after you took that hit for me. You saved my life. I don’t think I would have even...” She didn’t finish the sentence, but we both knew what she was saying.

“How long have I been here?”

“A couple of hours.” She reached for her mug and took a sip of it. “The doctor said you’re going to heal slower than you expect. You should be up and walking by now, but he said you’re not healing quickly enough. I’m guessing it’s because of the magic.”

I pulled at my sheets and yanked my shirt up. My entire chest was black and blue. My eyes widened in shock as I stared at it. She reached a hand over mine. “But you are healing. That’s what matters.”

I didn’t like this. It was one thing to hit me, but entirely another to slow my healing ability. Just who was this person, and what was this blackness fully capable of? It hit me so hard that it knocked me out. I couldn’t imagine what else it could do. I didn’t want to imagine it.

“He said he wanted to watch you for another hour or so, and then we could go home, but you have to remain off your feet for a few days, maybe a week, depending on how you’re feeling.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do that. My job requires me to be up and about, Katie.”

“You don’t have a choice,” she said quickly, leaning back in her chair. “I’m a doctor and I know what can happen if you don’t. So I already told the guys you wouldn’t be working and they would have to handle everything.”

“Katie..”

“You are going to rest,” she said softer. “I’m going to make sure of it.”

She pulled the sheets back and gave me a soft smile. “Why don’t you rest for a few

more hours before we get home. They were working on getting you discharged.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. “I don’t want to fight.”

Katie gave me a soft smile. “I know. Just rest up.”

We were in the hospital for a few more hours before I was able to go home. Everything still hurt, and my lungs burned every time I sat up. I could see the hurt look in Katie’s eyes when we left and the entire drive home. She drove slowly and every time we hit a bump, she apologized.

Once home, she helped me up to bed. It was a sweet relief when I finally sank into my sheets. I hated the idea of being glued here, but the ride home was enough to tell me that I needed the rest. The blackness had clearly done its damage.

“Here,” Katie handed me a glass of water. “Take this medication and get some sleep. I’ll check on you in a few hours.”

I took the glass and patted the spot next to me. “I have space. Why don’t you join me?”

She shook her head. “I have to call your sister and let the lab know I won’t be in today. So, take your meds and get some sleep. I’ll be back in a little while to check on you.”

Before I could even argue with her, she turned and slipped out of my room. I sighed, taking the medication she gave me with a few gulps of water. I adjusted my pillow and sighed, staring at the ceiling. I didn’t want to sleep. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a little scared. I didn’t want to feel that pain again, feel that anger in such a raw form.

I don't know when I dozed off, but I had. I woke up to Katie checking my temperature. I opened my eyes to her, placing her hand on my forehead. Her eyes went to mine, and she gave me a nervous smile. "I don't mean to wake you. I was just checking your temperature and your bruises."

"It's fine," I said, reaching for her hand. But her hand was quicker, and she pulled it away. "You seem to be doing okay. I should let you keep resting."

"I'm rested, Katie." I groaned as I tried to sit up. "Will you sit with me?"

"Are you hungry?" she asked, taking a step away from me. "I made some chicken pasta. Let me grab you some."

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I sighed as she left the room. I ran a hand over my face, hating that she was avoiding me. Was she still mad about the fight? It was the only thing I could think would make her react this way.

Katie came back with a large bowl of chicken pasta. She set it on the nightstand and turned to leave, but I grabbed her arm, yanking her back. “Stop avoiding me.”

She looked at me, hurt. “I’m not avoiding you. I’m the one nursing you right now.”

“Katie, you’re also avoiding me touching you. I’m sorry about the fight, but I don’t want you to avoid me like this.”

She shook her head. “I’m...I’m not mad about the fight.”

“Then what? Why can’t you look at me?”

Her eyes snapped up from the bed, and I could see the hurt swimming in them. Tears built up, and her voice cracked. “This happened because of me. You’re full of bruises because the darkness was going for me. This is all my fault.”

I reached out, pulling her closer. “And I would do it again because I was protecting you. You’re my wife, and I never want anything to happen to you.”

She sniffled, rubbing at her eyes. “I know that, but that doesn’t mean that seeing you in this state doesn’t hurt. I didn’t know what to do. I was so scared that you were dead. I thought our last conversation was us screaming at each other.”

I pulled her hand up to my face. I kissed her knuckles and held her there. “I’m alive. I’m well. Sore, but well. I did it for you and I would do it again and again.”

She wiped at her eyes, and I cupped her face. “Talk to me. Please. Tell me what’s going on in your head.”

She took a seat at the edge of the bed. “I saw you with her. At the bar. You guys were eating, and you looked like you were meant to be together.”

My shoulder stiffened. I’m sure from her view, it probably looked like that. “Katie, I know you probably won’t believe me, but nothing happened. I actually told her off. I went there to calm down, and she showed up. After a few comments, I saw she wasn’t the sweet person that she always made me think she was.”

“Really?” She looked at me, shocked.

I nodded my head. “Yeah. I won’t tolerate anyone talking about you. And I should have sided with you earlier. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t know what was going on and I shouldn’t have been yelling. And I shouldn’t have said that you don’t care about humans. That was cruel to say.”

I pulled her hand up and kissed her knuckles again. “So, we’re okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah, we’re okay.”

I pulled her closer. “Good because I don’t want to ever feel that fear like I had. I was so scared that something was going to happen to you, and I know if I lost you, I would have gone nuts with how much I would have missed you.”

She rolled her eyes. "A little dramatic, I think."

"I'm serious."

She snorted. "I can tell."

I pulled her closer, and Katie stiffened as I stared deeper into her eyes. "I mean it. I don't ever want to lose you, Katie. You are the most important person to me."

I thought of the darkness and how empty it felt. I never wanted to feel that again. I reached a hand up and pulled her down, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. Katie was frozen at first before she softened and placed her hands on my chest.

"I was scared, too," she whispered as I ran my nose against hers. "And seeing you so bruised up. I don't ever want to see that again."

I kissed her again, tasting lemon. She smelt clean, and her hair was half damp. Katie softly moaned as I pulled her tighter against me.

I sat up slightly, and pain radiated through my entire body. I gasped through my teeth as everything stiffened.

"Shit," Katie mumbled, pushing me back onto the pillow. "You shouldn't sit up. You're still healing."

I frowned, waiting for her to crawl away from me and state that I needed more rest. But she moved, throwing her leg over my hip and straddling me. My eyebrows went up as she leaned back, resting right on my hips and dick.

"Is this better?" she asked in a sweet voice. Her fingers slid down my shirt, her nails leaving a trail as she went down. "Or should I move?"

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“Don’t move,” I growled, taking her in. Katie was in a nightgown, and it spilled over her hips, but her legs were bare. It could see her nipples underneath the thin fabric, and her curves looked good in the outfit. “If you move from that position, I’ll think you hate me.”

A smirk pulled at the corner of her lips, and she slowly slid her hips forward and backward carefully. The friction was soft, but my cock jerked.

“Is this better?” she purred.

I nodded my head. “Oh, much. So much better.”

Her eyes sparkled, and I placed my hands on her hips, but she pulled my hands back. She rested them on the sheets. “I’m in control tonight. And you don’t do a thing.”

I was a little surprised at this. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Yeah, let me take care of you.” She reached for my shorts. “In every way.”

Chapter 19 - Katie

I felt Henrik getting hard underneath me. My fingers trembled as I hooked his shorts, but I tried to shake it off. Sure, I was scared of doing this, considering this would be only the second time we were intimate and the first time I actually took charge. But I wanted to. I wanted to prove to Henrik that he mattered to me just as much as I mattered to him.

I'd been avoiding it. Trying to tell myself that he didn't really care about me that much. That he was only being nice to me because he had to. That he only ever married me because he was obligated to and that he slept with me because he wanted to have a child.

But Henrik threw himself in front of the darkness to protect me. He even told off Ashley because he wasn't going to allow anyone to talk down to me. If this wasn't someone who cared about me, I didn't know what it looked like.

"You're shaking," Henrik said softly. "If you're not up for..."

"I'm nervous, but that doesn't mean I can't do this," I said as I swallowed. I instead grabbed his shirt and pulled it up slightly. I took in Henrik's chiseled abs and the bruises that were spotted across his chest. They had gotten better. They were more yellow than they were blue and green now. But he was still healing, and I'm sure his internal damage was going to take another day before he was feeling good enough to get out of bed.

I ran my fingers over his abs, and his stomach tightened. He inhaled softly, and his hands grabbed my hips. I raised an eyebrow at him. "What did I say about touching me?"

"Just let me hold onto your hips," he said through ground teeth. "It's that, or I buck up."

I smirked and rolled my hips softly, feeling his fingers dig into my skin. "Fuck, Katie. That feels so good."

I couldn't help but feel a little empowered by how this soft movement seemed to break him apart. I leaned forward, resting my hands on his chest, and slowly ground onto him. I felt his cock hard against me, and his breath came in slow pants. His teeth

ground together, and he threw his head back onto his pillow.

“Don’t stop,” he growled.

I pulled my hands down and tugged on the string of his shorts. I slid them down slightly, enough where his dick sprung up. My eyes stared at his shape, taking in how long and thick he was. I felt myself swallow suddenly, remembering how it felt to have him inside me. He had hurt, but Henrik had been so slow and caring about it that it was only a moment before it felt so good.

“Jesus, Katie. I’m gonna bust from the way you’re staring at my dick.”

I looked up at him, and Henrik looked at me with pure lust now. His nostrils flared, and he watched me. He had an animalistic look in his eyes, and I felt a shiver roll down my spine.

I reached a hand up, softly stroking him. I watched Henrik inhale sharply, and I frowned. “Does that hurt?”

He shook his head. “No, the opposite. Just tighten your grip a little.”

I did just that. I pulled my hand up and licked it before bringing it back to his cock. My hand moved smoothly, and I felt every crevice and dip in his dick. I felt the veins and the way his cock pulsed as I moved my hand. Henrik’s thighs tightened and I rubbed my thumb over his tip.

“Fuck,” he growled and I felt his fingers tighten on my hips. I knew he might even leave bruises, but somehow, I felt strong. I was hardly doing anything, and he was losing control.

“Does it really feel that good?” I asked, tightening my hold a little, roughly stroking

him a few times before I softened my hand again.

“If I was feeling better, I would be bending you over and fucking you right now,” he growled through clenched teeth. “It is taking everything in me not to sit up.”

I smiled, unable to help it. I tightened my hold on his cock, stroking a little rougher. “Would you now?”

Henrik nodded, his teeth grinding together. “Fuck, Katie. Please, sweetie. Let me have you.”

I reached up and pulled my nightgown off, tossing it onto the ground. Henrik’s eyes widened as he stared at me. I had felt a little self-conscious the first time we did this, but I enjoyed having his eyes on me this time. He stared at my breasts before he looked me in the eyes.

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I moved up slightly, taking his cock and pulled it towards my entrance. I slowly sank down, letting myself adjust to each inch of him as I did. Henrik's fingers remained on my hips, and once I was seated, I slowly rocked my hips.

Henrik grunted and reached a hand up, pulling at my arm. I bent down as he pulled me into a rough kiss. His tongue slid over mine in a dance. I moaned softly, feeling that build start in my stomach.

I felt one of his hands move from my hip, sliding down. Two fingers rolled over my clit, and I moaned louder.

"You're fucking soaking wet," he growled at me. "You have no idea how fucking amazing you feel right now. Watching you grind on me like this."

I pressed my forehead against his. "I thought I told you I was in control."

"You are. I'm just making sure you get the attention you need." He smirked, proud of himself.

My toes curled as he flicked his fingers, moving them over my clit exactly how I needed. I leaned back slightly and started to move in quicker motions. I felt the tighten build up, just moments away from being released.

"God damn it," Henrik growled louder now, and I felt him starting to buck up into me. It only took a few thrusts before I came apart. My orgasm took hold, and I raked my nails down his chest.

Henrik grunted loudly, his fingers piercing through the skin on my hips while his hand on my clit rode my orgasm higher. I pulsed, feeling like all my problems didn't matter. Everything that had clouded my mind moments ago was miles away.

I didn't know how long it was, but I fumbled forward, panting. Sweat slicked my skin, and Henrik panted heavily beneath me.

"That was..." He wrapped his arms around me, kissing my head.

"That was probably stupid when you are injured."

"Stupid but amazing," he chuckled, pulling my face up. He stared into my eyes and chuckled. "Worth it."

I smiled back at him, feeling like I was on cloud nine. I had been telling myself over and over for weeks now that Henrik was only being nice when that wasn't true. I saw something in his eyes, but wasn't entirely sure what it was.

"Are you hurt at all?" I asked as I pulled myself up, looking him over. "I hope I didn't press on you too hard."

Henrik shook his head. "No, I'm okay. If anything, I think that helped me relax a little more."

I headed into Henrik's bathroom to clean myself up. His bathroom looked the same as the one attached to my bathroom. After I was clean, I went back into his room. "I should let you rest up."

"Don't leave," he said, giving me a scowl. "I've rested plenty. Just sit and talk with me. I've spent hours resting, and I'm over it."

My eyebrows went up as I walked back, sitting on the other side of the bed. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want you to leave.”

I couldn’t help the blush that went over my face. I chewed on my cheek, trying to think of something, when an idea hit me.

I walked over to Henrik’s TV and grabbed the remote. “How about we watch some movies instead? Spend the whole day in bed. We can order food in and turn the lights off.”

“You want to do that?”

I nodded. “I don’t have the luxury of doing so often, so when given a chance, I take it. That’s if you’re okay with spending your day that way. If not, we can always find something else to do instead.”

He chuckled. “I think that’s a lot better than just sleeping all day.”

“Okay. I’ll go make some popcorn, and you can pick out a movie.”

“What do you want to watch?”

“I watch anything. Surprise me,” I said as I slipped out of the room and headed down the hallway towards the kitchen. I hurried back with the popcorn, and Henrik and I cuddled close.

We ended up watching four movies. A scary movie to begin with, where a woman loses her mind slowly when she moves into a new house and ends up murdering her family. The second movie was a romance in which the man moves across the world

for war, and the woman thinks he has died, but he returns and marries her. The third movie was humorous. It was two best friends trying to juggle all the problems in life and having each other's backs.

As I was putting the last movie in and crawling back onto the bed, Henrik looked at me. “Can you tell me why you got so worked up when I found you with Nina and Ashley?”

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I paused for a moment when I rubbed my fingers together. "Because I understood what it feels like. Being a human and having people always thinking less of you."

Henrik frowned. "Do you still feel that? Even after being married?"

Things had changed when I was married, and it wasn't like it was always like that. But I could remember times when no one stood up for me. When I had no one in my corner when I was being told I wasn't enough.

"Yeah."

Henrik smiled. "I hope you're aware that I will always be in your corner." He reached a hand up, rubbing a thumb over my cheek. "I don't want you to feel that like."

I felt my stomach jump in a good way. I softly smiled. "I'm gathering that." I leaned closed to him, resting my head on his shoulder. I knew that we still had a long way to go, but at least I knew that I could trust Henrik. We had come a long way and if I was being honest, Henrik had always been on my side.

The movie played and Henrik twirled my hair. Every once in a while, he would ask a question and I found myself sinking against him. It was nice. Spending this time together was peaceful in a busy life we seemed to have

"Since you seem to be so full of questions, why don't you tell me something I don't know?" I glanced at Henrik and found he was asleep. His face was relaxed as his chest rose and fell smoothly. He looked peaceful, which calmed me. I set the empty bowl aside and moved the sheets to slip out of the bed when his arms tightened

around me, holding me closer.

“Don’t go,” he mumbled as he shifted on his pillow. “You’re warm and comforting.”

I didn’t fight him on that. I remained curled up in his arms. He was warm and made me feel safe. I didn’t fight the sleep that crept up on me.

For the next couple of days, I remained at home to help Henrik heal. He stayed in bed for the first day, his bruises mostly gone, but I knew it was still his ribs that needed to heal. Bones took the longest to heal, and with his ability slowed, it would take longer than normal.

The next couple of days, Henrik moved around the house. He relaxed in the living room, reading over reports while I cooked. He spent some time outside to get some fresh air and took in the nice weather.

“Henrik, how do you like your burgers?” I asked as I leaned outside the screen door.

Henrik looked away from the sun and towards me. He was wearing no shirt with shorts. His bruises were mostly gone, but I could see he stiffened when he turned too quickly. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m going to cook. You have a grill.” I pointed towards the grill that sat just a few feet from him.

His eyebrows went up. “You know how to use a grill.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” I asked, as I leaned on the door frame.

He smirked. “You know you’re full of surprises. What else don’t I know about you?”

I snorted and grabbed the burgers, bringing them outside. Henrik turned in his seat. “No, really. What else about you do I not know?”

I set the burgers down and turned to him. “Well, what do you want to know?”

“We were paired up because we have things in common, so what do we have in common? Surely we have a handful of things in common because of that.”

I turned the grill on and leaned against the railing of the deck. “Believe it or not, but I never read the full report of how we were paired. I just read our names.”

“Okay, so then tell me something you're interested in. If you were on a date, what are some things you'd bring up.”

I had to think about it for a moment. I didn't like to tell too much on a date because some of my hobbies scared people. “I like to fish. I used to fish when I was younger. I was pretty good at it.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “I also know French, Spanish, and Portuguese.”

His jaw dropped. “What!? Holy shit, Katie. Are you serious?”

I nodded. “I'm not great at them. I started to learn one and then got a little bored and moved on to another. I told you I spent a lot of time in school, so I was constantly looking for something to do.”

“But you can speak to them? Like fluently?”

I nodded. “I can. I can hold a conversation.”

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“And I thought my knowing German was going to be a big surprise.”

“Wait, you know German?” I couldn’t help the shock that filled my face.

He nodded. “Yeah, my great-grandpa spoke it. So, I learned it. I’m pretty good at it.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

He snorted. “No, it’s nothing compared to you right now. What else?”

I opened the grill and started to set the burgers on it. “Uhhh... I know how to sew. I took some classes on how to do photography. Oh, I know how to play the flute.”

“Do you really?”

I nodded and turned back to Henrik. “I do. I haven’t touched it in a few years, but I do.”

He smirked. “I know how to play piano.”

I looked at him, shocked. “Really? I always wanted to learn, but my fingers aren’t big enough to hit the keys.”

“Yeah, my mom had Sam and me learn when we were younger. We both stuck with it. I don’t know if she still plays, but I can.”

“I’m a little jealous now. I always wanted to learn, but that was the one thing I

couldn't seem to get."

He chuckled softly. "I didn't think we would have things in common."

"You'll be surprised," I said softly. "A lot of people have things in common but would never think of it."

"Kluges Mädchen."

My eyes widened as the two words rolled over his tongue. I couldn't help but be fascinated by how they came out. I walked close and leaned onto his chair. "What does that mean?"

"Smart girl," he said with a smirk.

I blushed. "You speak well. Homem inteligente."

"What does that mean?"

"Smart man."

"What language was it?"

"Portuguese."

He hooked my arm, pulling me into a kiss, and I couldn't help but giggle. It felt so easy to be with him.

I finished making the burgers, and we ate outside. After eating, we relaxed and got ready for bed. I found myself always returning to his bedroom rather than my own. Henrik always pulled me close to him at night, and I always found myself eager for it.

Chapter 20 - Henrik

I glanced across the room and saw Katie taking a deep sip of her coffee and yanking on her jacket. It was raining outside, so I grabbed an umbrella from the closet and walked over to her. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

I handed her the umbrella, and she smiled as she took it. “No, you have a meeting with the guys, so you need to go to that. Besides, I have Roxanne, who is stopping in and helping me today, so I won’t be alone.”

Ever since the blow-up with Ashley, it seemed word had traveled fast that I wouldn’t stand for anyone saying anything about Katie. People had been more helpful with her and kinder at the lab.

She walked closer and leaned up, placing her hands on my chest. “I will be just fine without you. I’ll be home this evening, and we can have dinner.”

Our relationship had seemed to shift slightly since the attack. We had both opened up to each other and were spending more time together. We were finding hobbies to do together when we were home. We often found ourselves reading before bed.

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“The meeting won't take me all day. I can stop in this afternoon. We could go grab something for lunch.”

Katie shook her head. “No, you do what you need to do. You don't have to worry about coming down to the lab.”

She leaned up and placed a kiss on my cheek before she slipped out. “I'll see you when I get home.”

I heard the door open and shut. The house fell silent, and I sighed. I glanced at the time, seeing that the meeting with Kyle and Kent was in an hour. I decided I might as well head over.

I arrived at City Hall and went into our normal meeting room. I took a seat and glanced at my phone when Kent walked in.

“Someone's early.”

I glanced up, raising an eyebrow at Kent. Half soaked from the rain outside, he shook his head, spraying water all over.

“Hey, watch where you're shaking.” I leaned back, not wanting to get more wet than I already was. “And I'm early because Katie went to work, and I have nothing better to do.”

Kent took a seat. “Is someone missing his wife?”

I rolled my eyes. While I was, I wasn't going to say those words. I'd never hear the end of it.

"No."

"You're such a shitty liar." He said as he pulled his jacket off, throwing it over another chair. "You are a love-struck puppy."

I sighed, knowing I couldn't deny my feelings. I knew that I loved Katie, but I didn't know if it was right to say that. We were getting along, and I didn't want to scare her away.

"Do you know where Kyle is?" I asked, wanting to change the subject.

"He should be coming. I spotted him in the parking lot. Though he was lip-locked with his girlfriend, so."

Just then, Kyle strolled into the room. His eyes instantly went to Kent, and he scowled. "Did you have to bang on the window?"

Kent smirked. "I wanted to make sure you were aware you were still in public, and anyone could look into your window and see what you and your girl were doing."

Kyle rolled his eyes, taking a seat next to me. "Jesus, we were kissing. It wasn't like she was giving me a blow job."

Kent shrugged. "Just wanted to make sure."

"I think you did it because you were jealous." Kyle quickly grumbled back and sighed. "Can you find him someone so he can quit ruining my life?"

I laughed and suddenly found I had missed this. I had been spending so much time with Katie that I hadn't been able to really see the guys or talk with them.

"So, how are things between you two?" Kyle asked. "Are things better?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we've been getting along and spending lots of time together. But I wish I could do something to make her trust me more. Make her feel more at home."

"What do you mean?" Kent asked. "Isn't she comfortable there?"

"Yeah, but Katie's never decorated or made it her own. She's hardly home as it is. Even the bedroom she was using only has a few photos of her and Sam."

"Why don't you redecorate it then?" Kyle asked. "You have the spare time."

He wasn't wrong on that. I leaned back and tried to think of what I could do. When I bought my house, I hadn't really used half of it. There were two empty bedrooms on the other side of the house that I never really used. One was an office that I may have used twice when I was sick and didn't want to travel out of the house. The other room I had been using for storage.

Maybe I could do something with them. I always told myself I would, but I never did. And I had a huge open basement that I never touched. Suddenly, a few ideas formed in my head.

We started the meeting and went over the different topics the guys had concerns about. There had been people worried about the darkness and wanted some more information on how to protect themselves. I told the guys I would start a letter to be put out, to hopefully help calm the nerves. The meeting was only an hour long before I was heading home.

I was stopped at a red light when I noticed a sign on a lawn. Someone was selling a piano. An idea sparked. I quickly turned, taking a right, pulling over.

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Hours later, Katie came home. I was in the back room when I heard the front door open and shut. I headed down the hallway and found her staring at the piano in the entryway. She looked at me. “What’s this doing here?”

“I bought it today.”

Her mouth hung open slightly. “But why?”

I shrugged. “Well, I figured I should have one since I know how to play, and you said you wanted to learn. I can't teach you.”

She looked shocked as she walked over to it, placing her fingers down on a few keys. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, before you say anything, how about you come down and let me show you the back rooms.”

Katie walked towards me, and I took her down the hallway to the left back room. Katie’s eyes widened as pieces of wood were all over the place. “What am I looking at?”

“I’m putting bookshelves in. I’m making you an office.”

Her eyes snapped to me. “What? Why?”

“Because this is your home, too, and you should have a space to call your own.”

She looked around the space. “You’re making me an office?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I was trying to put some bookshelves together, but the directions aren’t great, so it might take me a few days. I also called a contractor to get some stuff done in the basement.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to make you a lab down there. I thought of redoing my office, but I figured the basement would have more space, and we could also soundproof it. So, you wouldn’t have to always travel to the lab.”

“Henrik, you don’t have to do all of that.”

“I do,” I said, correcting her. “Because this is just as much your house as it is mine. I want you to feel comfortable here. And if you aren’t home to make these changes, I will.”

“That’s so sweet,” she said as she stepped closer, wrapping her arms around me.

“This is so nice.”

I pulled her closer. “I’m glad you like it. It’s going to take a few weeks before it’s all done, but hopefully you feel more at home here then.”

Katie looked around the space. “This is the nicest anyone has ever done for me.” She turned back, leaned on her tiptoes, and kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you.”

I pulled her back and gave her a kiss on the lips, letting her sink into it. I held her tightly against me, feeling her nails dig into my shoulder. She leaned back, breaking the kiss. She waved a hand over her face and blushed. “Wow, you know how to catch a girl off guard.”

I chuckled. “Good. That was the plan.”

She leaned back slightly. “As much fun as this is, I’m starving. What are we doing for dinner?”

“How does pizza and a movie sound?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Sounds amazing.”

We had dinner with a movie and were in bed a couple of hours later.

The next couple of days, Katie went to work, and I worked in the office. The bookshelves took two days, and I got her a big desk and put it near the window. I added curtains to the room and a large blue rug. The room was a deep purple color that she picked out with gold curtains. The room was filled with different shades of colors, which gave an energetic vibe.

I was putting a lamp together when I heard the front door. I glanced at my watch, seeing it was only eleven.

I left the room and headed towards the front. “Katie?”

“In the kitchen,” she called.

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I headed into the kitchen and found her looking through the cabinet. “What are you doing? Did you leave the lab early today? Did something happen?”

She looked over at me, and I could see she was paler than before. She looked like she’d been through the wringer.

“I don’t feel great. I have a headache, and my stomach has been twisted up all morning. I threw up and decided I should probably go home.”

I walked over to her and pulled a hand up, placing it on her forehead. Katie was hot to the touch.

“Maybe you should go see a doctor.”

She shook her head, looking back into the cabinet. “No, I just need some sleep.”

“Katie, you don’t look good. And I know there is a lot of stuff going around with the weather changing like this.”

She shut the cabinet and glanced at me. “Sweetie. I have a degree. I know it’s probably just a stomach bug. I’m going to go take a nap.”

I frowned. “You have a degree in science, not a medical degree. They aren’t the same.”

She scuffed and turned down the hallway. “Potato potahto, same thing.”

I watched her head down the hallway to the bedroom and decided to pause the projects. I didn't want to make any extra noise, so I grabbed a book and went into the living room. I worked on some paperwork and started making dinner when Katie came back down the hallway. She paused and leaned against the wall, looking worse than she had before.

She placed a hand over her stomach and started to wobble. I rushed over to her, quickly catching her before she could fall. "Katie, sweetie, you're not well. We need to take you in."

She nodded. "Okay."

I hoisted her up and hurried her out to the car. I drove us to the hospital, where we were quickly taken to a room. Katie lay on the bed and rubbed at her stomach. A nurse took some of Katie's blood and left, leaving us alone.

"You okay?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I feel the need to vomit, but I have nothing in my system. And I'm dizzy."

"Have you had water today?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't keep it down."

So, she was probably dehydrated as well. The door opened and a doctor stepped in. "Evening, I'm Doctor Luis. Seems that you're experiencing some illness?"

We both nodded. "She probably has a stomach bug."

Luis nodded. "It's going around. But we are worried about how pale and dizzy you're

feeling. The nurse said it was pretty hard to prick you, so you're dehydrated, and coupled with your inability to keep anything down, we're going to start you on an IV and get you some fluids. I'll be back with the blood work, but you just need to get comfortable and let that IV sink in for now."

We thanked the doctor, and I looked back at Katie. "I'm sorry you're feeling so crappy."

She gave me a weak smile. "I'll be fine. I'm sure it's just a bug. The girls in the lab next to me all had it."

"How sweet of them to share," I said as I reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Maybe you should ask them to share other things."

Katie laughed. "Well, at least they share with me now."

I laughed, placing a kiss on her hands. "Is that IV helping?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

We sat there for a while before the doctor came back. He gave us both a bright smile. "Well, good news is it's not a bug."

"That's the good news?" Katie said. "What is it then?"

"You're pregnant."

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My eyes widened, and Katie looked stunned. “What?”

“Yeah, you’re probably a month along now. I’m going to prescribe you a medication to take when your nausea is this bad. But it should hopefully subside in the next couple of weeks.”

I sat stunned, doing the math. She had to have gotten pregnant from the first time we had sex.

I couldn’t help but feel excited because this was what we aimed for. We wanted this, but Katie looked like she wasn’t excited about the news. If anything, she looked defeated.

I frowned, realizing that I had never known what she wanted most in life. Had Katie even wanted to be a mother to begin with? Had she just gone along with this because she was forced to rather than because she wanted to?

The fact that I didn’t know the answer made this moment hurt. We should have been jumping up and down with joy, but my stomach twisted up violently.

Chapter 21 - Katie

I sat stunned. Pregnant? I was pregnant? I mean, of course, that could have happened if we weren't using protection when we were having sex, but I didn’t think it would have been this easy.

It was logical, but I hadn’t anticipated it. I was around women who were constantly

struggling to conceive, so I hadn't thought that it would be easy for Henrik and me. We were paired up because of that.

This changed so much. Being pregnant meant I needed to be more careful with my body. I couldn't spend endless hours at the lab, and I needed to eat fuller meals. I would get tired more easily, so I would need to take breaks at work. And this tiredness would likely stay.

I glanced at Henrik, who looked numb. I thought he would have been bouncing with joy, but he wasn't. I didn't understand. Wasn't this what he wanted? Wasn't this the entire point of us being together? I thought he would at least look a little excited about this.

We were in a good place, and sure, a baby on top of everything we were juggling was pretty big, but it was good news. Wasn't this good news?

"We're going to finish your IV and let you head home. Get lots of rest and try and eat when you can. But if you're feeling like this again, come in and we will get you another IV. You're still early in the pregnancy, so you need to be careful and get your nutrients."

"Thank you," Henrik said, giving the doctor a smile. But I could see it was forced and it didn't sit well in my stomach.

The doctor slipped out of the room, and I stared at the IV, wondering how much longer we would be stuck in here.

"Well, that changes things," Henrik said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

I swallowed, "Such as?"

Before he could answer, his phone rang. He glanced down and I noticed that it was Kyle, which meant it was likely something important.

“You should take that,” I said, pointing at his phone.

He glanced at it and then back at me, seeming to be torn between the two. But he grabbed his phone. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

“I’ll be here,” I said, waving at the IV that I was attached to. “Don’t have far to go.”

Henrik kissed my forehead before he slipped into the hall and I felt a tug in my stomach. I placed my hands on my stomach and closed my eyes. I felt tears build up.

I wanted to know why he looked so disappointed. A million questions formed in my head, and I was so afraid to ask them. Was I the only one who felt this pain? Was I the only one who thought this relationship had grown and that we were stronger than before? Was I crazy?

It was about half an hour before Henrik came in, but the doctor was unhooking me. “She’s good to go home,” he said as Henrik slipped back into the room.

“She’s okay?” he asked as the nurse bandaged my arm up.

“Yeah. She’s a strong woman.”

Henrik gave a gentle smile that didn’t reach his eyes. It twisted my heart up and I bit hard onto my cheek. We left the hospital, and the drive home was quiet. I stared out the window, afraid to ask him what he was feeling. So I went with an easier question.

“What did Kyle need?”

Henrik glanced at me before he frowned. “There was another attack and Kyle said it was a mother. She died. No one even knew it happened.”

My heart twisted up in another way. Maybe that was why Henrik looked so sad. Because this darkness and this person controlling it were a bigger issue. Throwing a baby into the mix was just asking for disaster. How were we supposed to juggle everything? A baby required a lot of attention. We would be up late with the baby. We would lose sleep. I wouldn’t be able to focus at work.

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“Do you still want to have dinner tonight at the new restaurant?” I asked, glancing at him for a moment. Henrik’s lips pressed together, and I felt my heart sink even further.

“I think it’s best we stay home tonight. The doctor said you should rest. I need to head out for a little bit and then I’ll be back.” He offered me a tight smile. “We can always go to the restaurant another night. Maybe when you’re feeling a little better.”

I couldn’t look at him because I felt that he was pulling away from me. I fought back tears as he pulled up in the house. I headed inside and to my bedroom as he left. But as I crawled into bed, I knew laying around wasn’t going to help. My mind would be a mess, and I needed to do something.

I changed into something warmer and headed to the lab. I decided maybe a little work would help calm my mind, or at least enough, so I didn’t have a hundred questions going over and over in my head. It always helped me in the past, so I didn’t see why it wouldn’t help me now.

I headed to the lab and noticed no one was in the basement. The area was utterly quiet, which was strange because there was usually at least one person around. Actually, there were always several people. I had never come to work down here without finding some guys lounging around.

“Hello?” I looked around, not finding anyone, as I headed down to my lab. The other labs were quiet, and even the hallways were silent. I scanned my badge, and the door to my lab opened. The lights flicked on, and my body came to a halt.

The glass was shattered all over the floor. My lab table was flipped over, and my eyes flew to the secured glass where I kept the darkness contained. The area sat empty, with glass shattered in front of it.

“Oh no...” My stomach dipped down low as I quickly scanned the lab, and my eyes found it waiting. It stood just across the lab in a large, dark cloud, and I stepped back. I needed to alert someone, but there was no one around. Had it already traveled and hurt the others? But why did it wait rather than just leave?

Before I could even think, the darkness slammed into me, I screamed, but the air was quickly yanked right out of my lungs, and I felt so dizzy. I stumbled backward, slamming into the wall. My hands reached for the wall, trying to hold onto anything to hold me up, but I found nothing.

I gasped for air, reaching for the alarm button, but couldn't. But as quickly as it all hit me, the darkness disappeared, breaking free from my lab, and it went into the hall. I could breathe, but the dizziness stayed.

I saw everything in twos, and I laid down flat on my back. I felt like the world was spinning, and I closed my eyes trying to breathe slowly. I thought of Henrik's words. Breathe in slowly. Slowly take a breath in and let it out.

I didn't know how long I lay there, but I knew this was an emergency. The darkness had gotten free. I had to let everyone know that it had escaped.

But it hadn't hurt me. I had expected to be injured, but I wasn't, besides the dizziness that hit me. I could breathe while it hurt, but it was like someone had pushed me down and taken my breath away, rather than someone actually hurting me. This was nothing compared to what happened to Henrik. Henrik took days to heal.

But why? Why had it only knocked me down and winded me, yet it almost killed

Henrik? Did it kill several other people?

I rolled over and turned on my stomach. I slowly sat up and stared outside my area into the hallway. There was still no one around and it didn't sit right with me. Something was going on.

I pushed myself up slowly and leaned onto the wall. I looked around my lab, trying to piece it together. The darkness never had a problem with me. It always just went erratic when I was near, but that was it. It only ever hurt people who were around me.

I stepped out of the lab and into the hallway. "Is anyone here?" I yelled, my voice echoing.

I moved, walking over to the lab that was across from mine. I leaned against the door and peered into the room. It was dark, but I could see someone lying on the ground. My eyes widened, and I started to pound on the door. But I didn't have access to this room.

I turned, "Is anyone down here!?"

I hurried back to my lab, taking in the pieces. I needed to piece this together. I needed to understand. I tried to rake my head around what was happening and what the darkness wanted.

My eyes widened as I realized it wasn't me it had a problem with. It was everyone else, including Henrik.

Chapter 22 - Henrik

I was setting up the flowers in the vase, trying to make sure they looked right. I glanced at the beautiful dinner I had brought in instead of us going out. As much as I

wanted to take her out for a fancy dinner, Katie needed rest more than anything. I wanted her to still have a nice dinner even if she didn't have the stomach to keep much of it down.

I wanted tonight to be special, and I wanted to tell Katie how I felt. That I loved her and that I didn't want to live without her. I wanted this to all be real, and I wanted us to be a happy family now that she was pregnant. That, even if the start was messy, I wanted all of it.

We had come a long way, and I wanted Katie to know I was on her side. This pregnancy changed a lot, but it didn't change how I felt about her.

I had set up flowers and put the food out. I had the candles lit and had some soft music to play while we had dinner. I was just about to get her to the bedroom when my phone vibrated. I glanced at it, seeing that it was Katie. I frowned, confused. Why was she calling me when she was lying down in the bedroom? Was she not in her room?

I answered the phone. "Katie? Where are you? I didn't realize you weren't even home."

Noise filled the phone as if someone was gasping and unable to form words. I pulled my phone back and stared at it for a second before I pulled the phone back to my ear.

"Katie?"

"I...I.I..." I could hear that she was hyperventilating and unable to form a word, and every part of my body locked up. I knew she was in danger or something had happened.

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“Katie, take a deep breath in. In through your nose and out through your mouth.”

“I..”

“Katie, do what I say.” I moved towards the front door and grabbed my keys. “Breathe slowly. Calm down and tell me what’s wrong. Where are you even? I didn’t even realize you weren’t home.”

“I I...I went to the lab.”

I scowled. She was supposed to stay home and relax, so why did she go to the lab?

“Okay, what’s going on? Did something happen?”

“I came to the lab, and no one was around. I thought it was odd...”

That was concerning, considering how many labs they had in the basement, and she told me they always had at least a pair of people down there in case of an emergency. The hair on my body rose, and I opened the door and stepped outside.

“There is no one there?”

“No, I found them....the darkness got out. It...it got free from the container I had it in.”

I froze. Hadn’t she said that wasn’t possible? Didn’t she say that wasn’t going to happen? “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know. I..I just...I went into my lab, and it came at me.”

My eyes widened, and the word settled deep in my gut. “Are you hurt!? Did it hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m not hurt. But I found a few people down here, and they were all unconscious. I had to call the police and the Council because the darkness is on the loose.”

We knew that. She only had a small part of it in her lab, while the rest came and went wherever it seemed to want to go. We knew that it was controlled by a person, so it could be anywhere. So many questions formed.

She started to cry again. “I thought they were all dead. I came down here and I thought everyone had died. I thought I killed them all.”

“Breathe, Katie.” I tried to soften my words imagining she was freaking out. I’m sure she was terrified and had no one around her to lean on. I would have panicked, too if I ran across a bunch of people unconscious.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” I said, hurrying down the steps. “Just breathe until I get there. I’m sure everything is going to be okay.”

“No! That’s why I’m calling! I think it’s coming for you. You need to stay inside and keep an eye out.”

I paused as she said those words. I didn’t understand why she would think that. It didn’t make any sense. But then again, hardly any of this made sense to me.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Henrik, I mean it. I think that it’s coming for you. You need to stay inside. Please. I don’t want you getting hurt again. You’re just starting to get back on your feet.”

“I’m not going to hide,” I grumbled as I unlocked my car. I turned the key, but suddenly everything disappeared.

“Katie?” I said her name, but heard nothing in response. I panicked and realized I wasn’t near my car. I was surrounded by darkness. There was nothing around me.

“Katie!” I screamed her name, but the words didn’t come out. It was like I was locked somewhere far away from my body.

I did a circle, looking around, finding nothing but darkness. Not a hint of light to run towards. I swallowed, feeling panic starting to set in. I could feel my heart racing, and I waved my hands around trying to feel for something that wasn’t even there.

And then I felt anger surrounding me. Anger and hatred. I felt it grab at my skin, pulling at my clothes. It was like someone was sinking their claws into my skin, and pure pain erupted around my entire body.

“They had this coming.”

“They did this.”

“All this suffering.”

“It’s their fault.”

I kept turning, trying to pull myself free, confused as to who was talking. I knew this anger wasn’t mine. While I had been frustrated with Katie, I didn’t feel this. This was something that built up over the years. It was what you felt when you had no other emotion to turn to, or you’d gone through all of them. The feeling you get when something bad has happened.

I wanted out. I didn’t want to feel this. I didn’t even want to be near this feeling. But it was all around me. It was pulling at me, screaming in my ear and around my head.

“They did this! They will all pay.”

It was like someone was screaming in my head, and I covered my ears. I squeezed my eyes shut, just wanting it to stop.

“Stop!” I felt like my head was going to explode. “Stop, stop, stop!”

The only thing I could think about was Katie. My sweet, loving Katie. I hoped she was safe and that the baby was alright. I never wanted anything to happen to either of them. I wanted them to both live long lives, long and happy lives.

Katie was so strong and independent. If I were stuck here forever, I knew she would be okay. She might hurt for a while, a pain sort of like this, but she would move on. She would keep her head up. She would raise our child to be like her. Strong and independent.

I wanted that. I wanted a healthy, happy baby more than anything. A child who lived in little pain.

I could see it. I could see them running around the house, talking about science. I could see a little girl walking after her, asking Katie for answers to equations. She'd have her hair in pigtails. She could wear a little white lab coat and spout numbers like they made sense. She would teach her how to play the flute and how to speak French. I could see her being the sweetest kid, never judging people.

And Katie. She'd be so happy. She might have lost me, but she had a beautiful piece of something we made. She had our child. She'd squeeze them tightly every morning and kiss them goodnight each evening.

I could see her with a boy cheering on the side of the soccer field. She'd scream for him to run and to kick the ball. She'd already taught him the best moves and the way to get a goalie with math. He'd kick the puck into the goalie and everyone would cheer, but she would cheer the loudest.

But he'd run to her. He'd yell that he made it. That he scored. She'd hug him so tightly and tell him she loved him. Our child would cover them both in mud, but she was okay with that. In the end, she had him. She may not have me, but she had our child.

I could picture a life where she would be happy. No matter what, she wouldn't be alone. That mattered more than anything. That mattered more than my being free. She is finally happy. Finally, having someone to love.

“Henrik.”

I could almost hear her. I was sure of it. Maybe it was a new taunt of the darkness. Perhaps instead of pain, I would have to think I could hear her calling my name, and

she wasn't. It was just a trick.

"Henrik, please."

Why did she sound so scared? She sounded like she was afraid. It wasn't what I pictured.

"Henrik, please. Come back to me."

My body stiffened. Was she with me? I thought she was at the lab.

"Someone, do something!" I could hear her starting to cry. I felt her hands on my chest. I wanted so badly to grab them. I wanted to hold her but I couldn't move. I was stuck.

I hadn't told her how much I loved her. She had changed my life so much that I never wanted to go back. I never told her my feelings.

Her voice dipped. "Henrik, please. Come back to me. You can't leave me. Not like this! I can't do this without you."

Suddenly, the darkness crept back and I realized that I was still standing in front of my car. Katie stood just a few feet away, looking at me with pain in her eyes. My eyes went past her towards Sam, who stood just behind her. Her eyes were trained, and I realized she must be using her magic.

"Henrik!" Katie yelled, pushing past a barrack and running towards me. She threw her arms around, falling into a sobbing mess. "You're okay! I thought I lost you. Don't ever do that again!"

I was confused. How much time had passed? How long had I been standing here?

She leaned back, reaching her hand up and cupped my face. Her eyes searched mine, looking in pain. “Are you okay? Where are you hurt? Does your chest hurt? Your lungs? Talk to me, Henrik.”

I stared into her eyes, trying to search for the right words. There were so many that I wanted to pick. That I loved her. That I never wanted to lose her. That she was the best thing that ever happened to me.

But before I could say anything, darkness engulfed both of them, but instead of it being pitch black, it was a bright white that made him wince in pain. I clung to Katie, holding onto her tightly to protect her. I didn’t know what was going to happen, but I was sure as well making sure that she was okay if anything happened between us.

Chapter 23 - Katie

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Henrik's arms tightened around me, and I felt safe. I thought I had lost him. The darkness had engulfed him, and I was so scared that he was going to die. We saw what it could do, and I didn't want to lose him. I couldn't lose him.

But it wasn't darkness this time. It was a bright light, almost like a tail light blaring at us. I winced at it, trying to cover my eyes.

And suddenly, there was a man in front of us on his knees. I could feel anger and hatred seeping out of him. A smaller body was lying in front of him, around the size of a child. The man's shoulders shook like he was crying, and I couldn't see much of whoever was standing in front of him.

I tightened my hold on Henrik, wondering if he was seeing what I was seeing. It was almost like we were watching someone's memory playing out. The bright light remained, but it was dimmed.

I tilted my head, watching the man hardly move now. The emotion that came off him almost made me sick. It was so strong. It was like someone had punched me in the gut with these emotions.

"Who are you?" I asked, wanting to know who he was. Was he the man who was doing all of this? And if so, what had happened to make him feel this emotion? Who was he kneeling in front of? How long ago had all of this happened?

I pulled at Henrik's arms, but his hold on me only tightened. "I'm not letting go," he said softly.

I looked at him, and his eyes were trained on me. Did he not see the man? Did he not feel the emotions?

I looked back at the figure, trying to put it all together. But I didn't know much. I didn't know anything about the man besides that he was clearly angry. My guess was it had something to do with the child in front of him.

My stomach dipped. Was the child dead? I hadn't seen any movement from the child.

"Henrik," I glanced at him, placing my hand on my stomach. A swarm of emotions filled me. I hoped to never feel whatever this man was feeling.

Henrik held me tighter, and I looked back at the man. I watched him bend down, placing his head on the child's chest. My heart twisted up violently as I saw red.

As quickly as the light hit us, it disappeared just as quickly. One moment, I was staring at the man, trying to piece it together, and the next, I was staring at our house. I took a soft breath in and looked at Henrik. He was looking at the house as well before his eyes came back to me.

"You...saw?" I asked softly. Please tell me he saw everything as well.

He nodded his head, his arms around tightened. "Yeah. I saw."

So, we both saw this figure. It wasn't just me.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"No idea. I don't recall anything like that."

"Oh my god!" Sam ran up, wrapping her arms around Henrik and me. "You guys are

alive! Are either of you hurt?" Sam leaned back, grabbed my face, and looked me over. She then moved over to Henrik, doing the same thing. "Are you guys sure you're okay? Are either of you having a hard time breathing? Do you need anything?"

Henrik nodded at Sam. "We're okay. We're both fine."

Sam took a breath before she punched Henrik in the shoulder. Anger filled her face. "You asshole! Do you have any idea how worried I was! I thought I had lost you! When you are told to stay inside, you stay inside!"

Everything had happened so quickly. I discovered the injured guys in the lab. Calling Sam in a panic and telling her how the line with Henrik just ended. The pit bottomed out in my gut when it happened. I knew something had happened. I could feel it.

I drove like a madwoman across town trying to get to him. I was so scared I had lost him, and I couldn't. I had so much I still wanted to tell him and the baby. We still had so much life together to live.

I had arrived at the house and found that the darkness had surrounded Henrik and most of his vehicle. Sam and Jay arrived soon after me. He walked over, reaching an arm up, and gripped his shoulder.

"Don't scare me like that ever again," Jay said, shaking his head. "I don't think I have ever seen your sister so terrified in her life, and I don't want to again."

Henrik gave him a smile in return.

Police cars were blocking most of the street, and there was an ambulance to check Henrik over and make sure he was okay. The Council quickly demanded everyone's attention, wanting all the alphas to come to them to discuss the matter. We ended up having to head over to the Council's building.

I stood next to Henrik, my fingers tightly wrapped around his as we stood with the rest of the Alphas, including Sam, sitting in a chair, looking exhausted.

“We need you to think about this,” Ralph said, shaking his head. “It’s fresh in your mind. What happened at the lab?”

My mind felt like it was a mess and no matter how hard I wanted to, I couldn’t get through it all. Everything happened so fast that I wasn’t even sure what fully happened. One minute I was walking into the lab, and the next I was frantically trying to find someone. I found a couple of guys unconscious. I was making phone calls and everything was blurry.

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I called Henrik, crying and panicking and the line ended with him. I called Sam, and she answered all the other calls for me while I drove over to the house. I found him and the car surrounded by darkness. I knew Henrik was in it because I could see the outline of him.

“I arrived at the lab, and it was already out of its container. It must have left the room because I found some of the guys unconscious.”

Questions loomed in my head now. I had left so quickly afterward that I wasn’t even aware if they were all doing okay.

“They are doing just fine,” Jennisa said, giving me a soft expression. Maybe she could see that I was worried about them.

I was a little relieved to find that. I had gotten to know them all so well, and every one of the guys who worked in the basement had been nice to me. I would have felt utterly terrible if something had happened to them.

“All packs need to be on high alert, not that Katie’s lab has lost its ability to test it.”

“Not that I don’t think this is an urgent matter, but my wife needs rest,” Jay waved a hand towards Sam, who looked seconds away from falling asleep. I was sure she probably used a lot of energy using her magic earlier.

“We need to discuss this matter while it’s fresh,” Ralph said, straightening his back.

“It will still be fresh in the morning,” Aaron said with his arms crossed. “We are all

able to stay in town and talk about this in the morning.”

All the Alphas seemed to agree on this. I looked at Henrik, who looked just as tired as I felt.

Somehow, the Council agreed, and we all started to head out. But Frank spoke loudly in the hallway. “Hold you four. We aren’t done talking.”

Jay, Sam, Henrik, and I all paused. We turned, and the other four had their arms crossed and looked irritated. “While we agree that being reprimanded right now isn’t a good idea, do you want to share with us why none of us knew that you had some part of this darkness underground?”

I chewed on my cheek and Henrik frowned. “I just learned about it a few weeks ago.”

“Doesn’t make that better,” Aaron grumbled, his eyes narrowing. “I thought we were all friends here, and don’t friends share information like that? Important information that other packs should be aware of? And when you found out, why didn’t you share it with us?”

“Do we really want to get into it right now?” Jay asked, holding Sam up at this point.

“Don’t get me started on you, Jay,” Frank growled. “You guys have been keeping information that should have been known through the group. How do you think we all felt hearing that Katie had some outbreak in her labs and it was attacking Henrik? All news to us. But yet you knew what was going on!”

I knew that the guys were all close, mostly because I thought they were forced to be given their statues, but looking at them, I could see they were genuine. They were all worried about Henrik and angry that we didn’t tell them what was going on.

“I’m sorry,” I offered. “Everything happened so quickly. I called Sam because she was the only person I knew that I could turn to.”

Frank crossed his arms. “While you may not know us that well, you are married to Henrik, which means you need to turn to us.”

“Really? You couldn’t have said that in a nicer tone?” Sam snapped instantly, grumbling at Frank. “She did what she thought was important. You can’t get mad that she didn’t make five other phone calls in an emergency.”

Aaron waved his hands. “Our point is, you guys didn’t include us in any of this. You kept secrets, and we didn’t hear about this from you guys like we should have. We heard about it from the Council.”

We all fell quiet. I knitted my fingers together, unsure of what to say.

“Do you have any idea how worried we were?” Frank asked. “I know we were all forced into these positions, but I’d like to think we’ve grown to be friends who trust each other.”

“I got a speeding ticket,” Maddox added. “Because we were told you might be dead. That’s what we were told. Dead, Henrik. Not hurt. Dead.”

I could see they were all frustrated, but it came from a soft heart. Even as they yelled, I could see the love in their eyes.

“We’re sorry,” Henrik said. “And I mean it.”

All four of the guys seemed to relax a little at his words.

Jay sighed. “Not that I don’t love the connection that’s going on here, but I need to

get my wife home.” Jay turned to Sam, hoisting her up. “I’ll see you all in the morning. You can yell at us more than.”

The other four walked closer, and Frank placed a hand on my head. “You call us all next time.” His words came out grumpy, but his hand was soft on my head before he pulled it back, and they all walked by.

Henrik smirked. “I think they like you.”

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I elbowed him. “That’s not funny. They don’t like me.”

“I was being serious.” He pulled me closer to him, kissing me on the forehead. “And they do. They get like that when they are scared.”

We headed out to the car and drove home. It was dark out, and I was tired. I hadn’t realized I was working off the last of my energy at this point.

Henrik pulled into the house, and we headed inside. But Henrik hooked my arm, pulling me to him as soon as we were inside. He reached up, cupping my face, and just stared at me. I could see the worry in his eyes, the utter fear from before.

I placed my hands on his chest, feeling so much bubbling to the surface.

“I love you,” he said, breaking the silence. “And I have loved you for a while. I don’t want to keep acting like this isn’t real because it is. Everything about this is real.”

My eyes widened.

“I don’t ever want to lose you and I was so scared I was going to. I was terrified that I would never get to watch you grow old and watch our child grow up.”

I felt tears bloom. “I love you too.”

He seemed relieved and his expression seemed to melt. “You do?”

I nodded. “But I thought you were going to leave me because you got what you

needed. You needed a child, and I'm pregnant. I saw you with Ashley and..."

He shook his head. "She means nothing to me, Katie. Nothing. You are my everything. I don't want anyone else but you."

I looked past him toward the kitchen, where I spotted a huge bouquet of flowers and a fancy feast. I tilted my head, breaking his hold on my face, and stepped towards the kitchen. The closer I got, the more I noticed.

There was soft music playing and chocolate candy laid out. The lights were dimmed, giving the space a romantic feel. My eyes dropped on a little box that sat near the flowers.

"I was going to have this conversation over dinner, but it's all ruined."

My eyes were glued to the box, and he noticed. He reached for it and popped the lid open. My eyes widened at a ring.

"I have a ring," I said, confused.

He nodded. "You do, but I wanted to switch it out. That ring was forced while I'm asking you this time. Do you want to stay with me?"

Tears broke free as I stared at the teardrop diamond. It was stunning and beautiful. Not that the ring that was on my finger wasn't, but it was just a ring. I had been told to wear it while this... this was something I wanted. I was picking Henrik this time.

I nodded, and he took my hand, took the ring off, and replaced it with the other. I stared at it, unable to control the giggle that broke free. He wanted me.

He walked into my space and reached up, cupping my face. "I love you so much." He

kissed me softly, and I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him closer.

I didn't think this would ever be possible. Finding someone who made me feel safe and wanted me like this. I thought it only existed in fantasy.

Henrik hoisted me up and set me onto the counter. I tightened my hold on his chest, and he held me so close. I inhaled his scent, letting it wrap around me.

He leaned back. "Do you remember Sam's baby shower party?"

I scowled. "Why do you have to ruin a nice moment?"

He smirked and shook his head. "I'm not trying to ruin it. Do you remember that day?"

I nodded. "Oh, I remember that day. You rejected me. You could have been nicer about it."

His eyes looked at me with so much pain. "Do you think I wanted to?"

I suddenly didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

He sighed softly. "Katie, I had a crush on you long before that day. But I had no choice but to reject you. I couldn't stand the idea of being with you, and months later, you haven't paired me up with another person."

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I thought back to that day. I had been so hurt and angry that I hadn't even thought of that. I just thought he didn't like me.

“But...why didn't you just say that? Why would you act like I was the worst person possible, and you hated me?”

He shrugged. “Because I feared you would have been okay with that. That you would have said you could have stepped aside when you needed to, but I never wanted that. I never wanted you to be hurt. I don't date people knowing there is no serious future with them.”

He pressed his forehead against mine. “So believe me when I say you are the only person that I want and the only person I will ever want. And I am so glad your computer spit our names out together.”

I couldn't help but blush. “Well, you're welcome.”

He chuckled. “Now, let's go to bed. It's like two in the morning, and we have a meeting with the Council at eight.”

I wanted to groan at that, but I didn't. I instead hopped off the counter and went with Henrik to his room. We curled up closely under the sheets like we had so many times before, but tonight my heart felt different. It felt whole.

Chapter 24 - Henrik

“How long are they going to make us wait?” Frank asked as he stood a few feet away

from us, tapping his foot with his arms crossed.

“Maybe take a seat,” Jay said as he leaned back, wrapping his arm around Sam’s chair. Sam leaned into him, looking tired still.

“How can you be so patient? What happened to you? You would have been the first person to storm in there.” Frank asked, waving a hand at Jay.

“I got married and have a child,” Jay said. “And you are acting way more childish than our daughter is.”

Jones snorted in his chair, and Frank snapped his head at him. Aaron waved a hand. “Alright, let’s not argue. Frank, you’re crabby because you didn’t get enough sleep. Let’s not take it out on everyone.”

“I’m crabby because I have an entire pack to worry about and instead, I’m stuck here.”

“We all have packs to worry about,” Maddox said back. “You aren’t the only one.”

Frank crossed his arms. “Correction, I have the largest pack, and my drive is the farthest.”

“You have a beta that is watching over it.”

Frank snorted. “My beta is a dumbass.”

I was confused by this. Didn’t Frank trust his people the way that Jay and Henrik trusted his? “Wait, didn’t you pick him?”

Everyone froze for a moment before Frank shook his head and looked at me. “Not

entirely.”

“It’s his brother,” Henrik said softly. “And they don’t agree on a lot.”

I glanced at Henrik. “I don’t understand.”

“Frank and his brother were both raised to be Alphas but they knew only one would get the position. Their father handed it down.”

Before I could say anything, the doors in front of us opened and we could see that the Council was waiting inside. Everyone started in and I looked at Henrik. He gave me a gentle squeeze, placing a kiss on my forehead. We had no idea what was coming, but at least I knew Henrik was on my side.

We each took a seat in a chair, as the Council waited. I could see they looked uncomfortable as we settled. Tensions were high, and everyone wanted answers. Some questions were going to remain unanswered.

“They looked unhappy,” I whispered to Henrik.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen them happy,” Henrik whispered back. He squeezed my hand, not letting go.

“Who would like to continue to conversation we had yesterday?” Jenissa asked, tapping her fingers on the table. Her eyes landed on me and I knew they wanted me to speak.

“I made my phone calls and hurried over to find Henrik surrounded by the darkness.”

“And yet he is unscathed. How is it he is fine, yet we have dead bodies from others it touched.”

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Logically, I didn't have an answer to that. Henrik should be dead. If it killed others, I didn't see why he was okay. But I couldn't think logically about this.

"Because it's controlled by a person, and I don't think the person even knows what they want. The darkness changes its weight and volume constantly. When it attacked me, it made me feel sick, but it left physical marks on Henrik."

Ralph's lips pressed together. "That gives more questions than answers."

"You're just joining where we are all sitting," Frank grumbled.

I looked at Henrik and wondered if we should bring up the memory we saw. I could still see it. It would forever be ingrained in my mind, including the body in front of the man.

"Did you see the man?" I asked Henrik, keeping my voice in a whisper.

Henrik looked at me, his eyes were soft as he nodded his head. His fingers tightened around mine. "Yes."

I swallowed. "And the child?"

His lips tightened.

"Where do we even go from here?" Jones asked, waving a hand. "We can't keep sitting here twiddling our thumbs around. We all have people getting injured, people dying. What are we doing?"

We knew that a man was doing this, but we had no idea why. But that anger, the anger and the vision.

“I think it’s a man grieving.”

Everyone looked at Henrik and me. I chewed on my cheek when Derrick gave me a head nod.

“We all know that someone is doing this, and we know it’s a man from Sam’s visions. She said she heard him.”

Sam nodded in agreement.

“Why do you think he’s grieving?” Steve asked, tapping his fingers. He glanced at Derrick, who seemed relaxed. Had Henrik told him?

“We saw a vision of a man leaning over a small person about the size of a child. The child wasn’t moving.”

“Wow, look, you know even more than we do,” Frank snapped, throwing his hands up. “Why does it not surprise me that you guys held that information to yourselves?”

“Enough,” Ralph snapped, his voice echoing around the room. “We are all on the same team here.”

“We are? Because it sure doesn’t feel like it.”

Henrik sighed. “Frank, we aren’t keeping information from you. We are sharing it all now. We didn’t keep information from anyone.”

“You didn’t bring that up yesterday.”

“Because it was late, and everyone was yelling!” Henrik growled at him. “And if you don’t lower your damn tone I’m going to reach over Aaron and smack it out of you.”

“You wanna go?” Frank asked, pulling himself out of his chair. “I will gladly go right now.”

“Would you two knock it off? This is a serious issue.” Aaron snapped. “Frank, sit the fuck back down.”

“Oh, I’m taking this seriously. It’s these guys that can’t seem to get how serious this is.”

“Are you kidding me!?” Jay snapped, fury filling his face. “We are all fucking aware of how serious this is! You’re the one getting all hot-headed because you didn’t know something you were prudent to.”

“Of course you would say that because you probably already knew! Your wife fucking sees everything.”

Jay swung up now. “Say that again, Frank. I’ll beat the shit out of you right now.”

“Enough!” I yelled, which caused all of them to tense up. “That’s enough! Jesus Christ! You are all acting like fucking children! You’re Alpha’s. Act like it.”

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They all fell silent and I got up. “I was under oath not to tell anyone about my lab. Just as you are all under oath for the Council. Not everyone is going to know everything, which is why you guys have meetings.” I glanced at Frank. “This is not an attack. None of the others is keeping information. So, please. Can we stop yelling and try to figure out what we are going to do?”

Frank grabbed his chair and sat back down. He huffed as he did this, but he at least stopped yelling. Jay sat down next, Sam reaching out and placing a hand on his chest. I turned to the Council. “As I was saying, it’s a man and we are sure he lost a child.”

“There are a lot of people who have lost children,” Ralph said. “Not everyone takes up arms because of it.”

“Was there something in the past, something that happened that seemed unfair? Because I felt anger. And not just a little, but unbelievable anger like they had been ripped off. Someone had done something, and I’m guessing it’s to do with the child.”

“And with how calculated everything is, he’s been planning this for a while. So, god knows how long ago this happened.”

The Council looked at each other and I wasn’t sure what they were thinking.

“We will need to look into this.”

“And what are we supposed to do in the meantime?” Maddox asked.

“Continue what you were doing. Keep patrolling and notify us of any changes.”

That didn't seem to be the answer that anyone wanted. Frank swung out of his chair and stormed out. A line of curse words followed him. Maddox and Aaron followed with. Jones got out of his chair, slowly shaking his head. "Aren't you supposed to be guiding us? Why do I feel you are the ones not giving us all the information we need now?"

I looked at the Council, which didn't answer him. A shiver ran down my spine. I knew that the Council knew more than we did. They were all Alphas before, so they understood that secrets had to remain secret, but even in a crisis? If there is something they know, shouldn't they be telling us?

Jones stormed out, and the Council looked at the rest of us. "Katie, you will continue your research. Sam, you will inform us of any more visions you get."

I looked at Sam, who glanced at me. The air suddenly felt different and the hairs on my arms raised. Did they know who was doing all of this?

"Come on," Henrik pulled me out of my chair, and we all slipped into the hall. The rest of the guys were waiting when Maddox spoke up first.

"Does anyone have a feeling they are hiding something from us?"

Aaron nodded. "Did they say anything to you guys?"

Sam and I shook our heads. "No, but something seems off."

If they knew, why weren't they telling? Or did they suspect? But even so, they should say something unless they were trying to cover something up.

"We have a meeting in two days," Henrik said. "We can talk then." He pulled me close and turned us down the hallway. As we left, I felt off.

“Do you think the Council knows more than what they are letting on?”

Henrik tightened his hold on me. “I’m hoping not, but you never know.” He kissed the top of my head. “But let’s not worry about that right now. I just want to enjoy this time together instead of worrying. Who knows what the future holds.”

I leaned against him, understanding his point. We should enjoy happiness when we get it. With everything going on, we should take a moment and enjoy our time together. We had overcome a huge milestone to get where we were. I almost lost Henrik several times. We needed a moment that was just for us.

As we got home, I was weary of what the future held. I was happy that I had Henrik. I was happy that we had talked about our problems and were in a good place. But not knowing was putting me on edge. How could I feel okay when I was pregnant and it was biological to want to protect my child.

“So, what do we want to do now?” I asked as Henrik shut the door. He walked closer to me, hooking my arm, and yanked me back. He pressed his forehead against mine. “I just want to be with you.”

My eyes widened slightly as his hands slipped up underneath my shirt. “Oh?”

“Let’s put everything aside for now,” he said, his breath brushing against my skin. “Because I very much need to be naked with you.”

I couldn’t help but smile, feeling the same. Henrik hoisted me up and turned us down to his bedroom. Really, at this point, it was ours. I didn’t go to my room anyway.

In his room, he took us straight to the bed. I felt my head hit a pillow, and Henrik’s lips pressed against mine. I tugged at his shirt, hearing it rip. Henrik pulled at my clothes and tossed them aside.

I raked my hand down his chest, feeling his heartbeat quicken. I stared at him, wanting to remember every inch of his body. His eyes stared into mine, and I realized he was doing the same to me.

“I love you,” he said softly, his thumb tracing my lip. “And I have loved you for so long.”

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I felt tears well up at his honesty. “I love you too.”

Henrik kissed me softly and we both yanked at my pants. I needed them off, and I needed him in me. He flipped us, pulling me on top. His hands rested on my hips as he slowly slid up into me. I braced myself on his shoulders, taking every inch of him.

We were both panting as I stared into his eyes. His gold, loving eyes.

I felt his hand reach down, sliding a finger over my clit. I inhaled sharply as he bucked up, filling me. The motion was exactly what I wanted. I slowly shifted my hips, grinding with each thrust Henrik gave.

I rode him and Henrik’s fingers were tight on my hips. I came hard, moaning his name as he filled me. I fumbled forward, resting on his chest. Henrik’s arms wrapped around me as he kissed my forehead.

“Can you promise me something?”

“If it’s something I can give,” he said, stroking my hair.

I thought of the man and the anger that hit me. “Don’t ever let an emotion consume you like that.”

Henrik’s hand paused on my hair, and I looked at him. I could see worry fill his eyes as he stared at me. I sat up and frowned. “If anything were to ever happen to me or the baby, don’t become empty. Don’t turn into someone else.” I placed his hand on my stomach. “Please.”

His hand was soft on my stomach, his thumb grazing my belly button.

“Will you promise the same?” he asked softly. “If I were to die and you lost our child?”

I knew it would be hard, but it was better than this. I would never want to turn into someone who hurts other people. Someone who wasn’t me. I nodded.

“Okay, I promise.” He pulled his hand up, cupping my face. “But I never plan on losing you.”

Chapter 25 - Katie

I stare at the whiteboard Natalia has written on, but my mind isn’t there. The two squiggly lines look like two people fucking. They don’t really, but my hormonal ass is taking everything as a sign to go home and jump my husband.

“Are you listening?” Natalia asked as she tilted her head, crossing her arms at me. “Or is this too much? I can always ask someone else to look at this.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m listening. You just need to subtract at the bottom.” I waved a hand toward her bottom equation. Natalia turned, and I sighed, relieved.

It was one thing for me to feel this, but another to let anyone else know just how much my mind is fighting with my body. I didn’t think hormones were this strong until now.

“You caught that quickly.”

I shrugged as she turned back to me. I took a step back and sat down in my chair. I placed my hand on my stomach, which was protruding. I was about five months

along now and I felt like a fat cow. I still had a few months left and I was questioning how women did this.

Natalia's eyes went to my stomach before bringing them back up to my head. "How are you feeling? I imagine you're tired a lot."

I laughed. "Like if I bend over, you're going to have to help get me off the ground. That's how I feel."

Natalia smirked. "I imagine so. Are you guys getting excited? This baby will be here before you even know it."

We were excited. We had a few months to figure things out. Henrik had finished putting a lab into the basement for meso I wouldn't have to travel to work as much. I planned to work from home for a while, especially when the baby was little. We even changed a room upstairs into a nursery.

We decided to decorate the nursery in a woodland animal theme. Henrik even found someone to paint little animals on the wall. The room was bright and colorful, and I grew eager to see our baby in that space.

We redid our bedroom, turning it into a space both of us enjoyed. We finished turning my office into a space we could both use functionally. We agreed to share it until we could finish the basement with more rooms.

I never saw myself as someone who wanted a lot of kids, but I couldn't see my life without them. I saw how close Sam and him were, and I wanted our child to have that. To have someone to lean on. Henrik and I both agreed we wanted more than one.

"So the house is all ready now? You guys must be so happy."

I nodded. “Yeah, pretty much. We have everything we are going to need.”

“Well, that’s good.” Natalia turned back to the whiteboard. “Now, back to this.”

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Another twenty minutes went by helping Natalia before she left. I found myself tapping my fingers on the table, staring at my computer. I knew I needed to get some work done because my days were slim. I would be taking maternity leave before I knew it and wouldn't work for a while.

Sam explained that when the baby came, my mind wasn't even going to be able to think about work. I would be so focused on the child that work just sort of fell out of my head. I hadn't believed her at first because I knew myself, but I had already found myself slipping at times. I would space out for minutes and suddenly forget what I was doing.

I chewed on my cheek and glanced at my phone. I grabbed it, seeing that Henrik wasn't out of his meeting yet. I knew I couldn't interrupt that. Since the big attack, the guys have been having more meetings and letting each other know about anything new that has happened. There had been a few incidents, but nothing huge. They had been sporadic and I hadn't been able to find a pattern when they happened. We would go weeks of silence before the darkness would appear and disappear again. Then it would appear in a week and then nothing for a month.

It was driving me crazy being unable to figure things out. It didn't help that pregnancy brain was a real thing and it was hitting me hard..

I glanced across my lab, taking in a few of the new pictures that were hung up now. One of them was Henrik and me for my baby shower. He smiled happily at me, and it stirred my insides.

Lord, I wanted him. I just had him last night. During dinner and after. He pretty much

fucked me to sleep. I wanted him this morning, but he was already out of the house, so I had to get to work.

I bit hard, and I could taste blood in my mouth.

“Fuck,” I pulled my hand up to my lip, finding it was bleeding.

“God damn it.” I grabbed a napkin and dabbed my lip. I sighed and decided to call Henrik. The phone rang a few times before he answered.

“Morning, sweetie.” His voice came out like melted caramel and I internally groaned.

My insides churned, and a warmth spread down my entire body. I physically melted at his words. “Hey...”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working? Why are you calling? Did something happen?”

I pulled the napkin back and tossed it into the trash. “Nothing happened. I’m taking a break. How was your meeting?”

“It was fine. Nothing new, which is good news, but it’s not at the same time. We’re keeping our eyes open, trying to find if there is something we are missing. I have the guys looking into finding out who this guy is and what we can learn about this child. I’ve been trying to read what I can, but I’m not finding much about it. Which you would think we could have found something by now.

I frowned, knowing what he meant. I knew it was frustrating him as much as it was bothering me. We were trying so hard to find answers and we weren’t getting anywhere.

“Well, nothing is still good news,” I said as I turned, staring at the board. I pulled up

a marker and started to doodle. “Are you going home?”

“I was planning on stopping at a few places to get some things. I figured I should get things done while I’m out since we won’t be able to do that when the baby comes.”

I tilted my head at the doodle I had made, not realizing I was drawing two people kissing. I quickly started to erase it.

“Katie? Are you listening?”

“Huh?” I blinked and frowned. “What?”

I heard him sigh. “Not that I don’t believe you’re taking a break, but what are you doing? You’ve signed three times already and I can imagine you’re chewing on my lip.”

I paused and set my marker down. I sighed. “Fine, my mind is a mess, and it’s your fault.”

He snorted. “What did I do?”

“You fucked me dumb last night.”

Henrik started to laugh. “If I remember correctly, it was you who said to strip down. You were the one begging for it.”

I felt my face grow hot, and I swallowed. “It’s natural.”

Henrik continued to chuckle. “I know it’s natural. It’s your hormones, so why don’t you tell me why you called instead of saying you’re taking a break?”

I bite my cheek, looking across the lab. It was a little after two. “I am taking a break. I needed to let my mind settle. We just finished a hard equation.”

“Was it a hard equation because you were thinking about having my tongue between your thighs?”

My face felt hot, and I wanted to deny that thought, but I couldn't. I knew what he was able to do to me, and my body reacted. I felt the heat spread and I crossed my legs. “I am a scientist and I don't let those thoughts come to work. I know how to separate my personal life from my work.”

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Henrik laughed. “You’re so full of it. Or have you forgotten about several times we’ve done it in your lab? Or the time I ate you out like a five-course meal?”

I swallowed suddenly, at a loss for words. I tapped my fingers on the table. “Sounds to me like you are the one who needs attention.”

“Oh, don’t kid yourself, love. I will always need attention, but I wasn’t the one who called today. You called me because you were horny. Admit it.”

“I did not,” I said, my face growing hotter. “And I’m not horny.”

Henrik chuckled. “You are. And as much as I’d love to continue this conversation, I have to go.”

I frowned. “Already?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you when I get home.” The line ended, and I sat staring at my whiteboard. I frowned, suddenly frustrated. If I had just told him, Henrik would have come to me. But I didn’t want to be this person. A person who couldn’t focus at work.

I knew that it was the hormones, but I should be able to fight them. I should be able to focus on work when at work and let my mind wander when I am at home.

I got up and stretched, hoping that it would help, but it didn’t. I still felt frustrated, and the more I moved, the more my body ached.

I cleaned the whiteboard and deep-cleaned my desk when the door to my lab opened. I glanced over my shoulder, and Henrik stood there looking as good as I could remember. My eyes raked over him, taking in every inch of him. He looked good, sporting a pair of jeans and a plain blue shirt. His hair was cut shorter, and he was growing a beard.

I bit into my cheek and held back an internal moan. Henrique smirked. “You know you're staring at me like I'm a snack.”

I swallowed. “Did you just come here to mock me?”

He chuckled, letting the lab door shut behind him as he walked closer. I backed against the lab table as he crowded my way and vision. “Of course not. I came here to take care of you.”

He placed his hands on the table, caging me against the table. My breath hitched at his closeness, and I swallowed. He moved quickly, pressing his lips against mine in a rough kiss. I couldn't hold back the moan that ripped through my throat. It was an ache I didn't realize had grown so much. They want to take over everything.

His lips were quickly sliding mine open, and I could taste peppermint.

The kiss ended as fast as it began. He took a step back and I scowled at him as he grabbed my hand. “Wait, why did you pull away?”

“Because we are leaving. You're not going to get any work done while you're here.”

I waved a hand. “It's in the middle of the day, Henrik. I can't just leave.”

Henrik paused as he gave me a look. “Were you actually going to get anything done?”

I chewed on my lower lip, knowing I couldn't argue. I had hardly gotten anything done to begin with.

"Come on," Henrik pulled on my arm, pulling me close. He hooked his arm around me and kissed my forehead. "The faster you move and the faster I can fuck you. Don't you want that toe-curling explosion?"

I swallowed, suddenly eager to leave.

We left and Henrik drove. His hand rested on my knee as he drove, and a smile was plastered on his face. I raised an eyebrow at him. "Why are you smirking like that?"

He glanced at me when he stopped at a red light. "Because I never thought I would be here."

"What do you mean?"

"Married to you. Married with a child on the way." His smirk grew. "Married to someone that was so horny she couldn't work."

I hit him. "I'm not that horny!"

"Oh really? How wet are you?" he asked, his finger skated higher on my leg. I squeezed my thighs together.

I stammered, and he started to laugh. "My point stands."

I rubbed my legs together, unable to deny that I was soaking for him. Even if it was hormones, I wanted Henrik. He had a power over me that I didn't know how to control.

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“I love you,” Henrik said softly. “And you have no idea how much I enjoy teasing you.”

I glared at him, but a smile pulled at my lips. “I love you too. Even if you're a smartass.”

Henrik took a turn, and I looked at the view, confused. This wasn't the way home. “Where are you going?”

“Somewhere.”

He traveled down a road and pulled into an alleyway. I looked at him as Henrik unbuckled, leaning over towards me. His lips pressed against mine roughly as I felt my chair back up.

“Did you really think I was going to make you wait until we got home? It's a long drive from the lab,” he chirped. “And you are not a very patient person.”

My eyes widened as his hands traveled to my pants. I yanked at them with him, and Henrik started to laugh. “Did you miss me that badly?”

“Stop making fun of me,” I grumbled. “I can't help this.”

He chuckled. “I'm not making fun of you. I'm just loving how much you want me. It's nice.”

Henrik's fingers slid my pants down, and I felt my entire body heat up. Henrik's lips

were softer as his fingers slid into me, filling me just how I wanted. But I wanted more. I needed more.

I whimpered, and Henrik's lips traveled down my neck. "You are so hot. You're soaking wet, as I expected."

I gasped as he sped his fingers up, and I moaned. His fingers were hitting me at the perfect angle. His teeth scattered across my neck, sending shock waves down my spine.

I looked around. "Henrik, we are in the car. What if someone sees us?"

"Then we should be quick, or would you like me to stop?"

"If you stop..." I couldn't even finish the sentence before he unbuckled his pants and was pulling his dick out. My mouth watered at the sight of him, and I grew giddy knowing what was coming.

He slid into me, and my back hit the chair, which he reclined. He braced his hands on the top of the chair. I dug my nails into his skin, needing him closed. I wanted his skin pressed against mine.

His cock filled me, and I moaned loudly. It echoed around us, but Henrik didn't stop. He thrust into me in slow, harsh jerks. His angle was perfect, driving me close to an orgasm.

"Oh god," I whimpered. "Don't stop. Right there."

I felt his thumb rubbing against my clit and I gasped. I felt Henrik bite hard onto my neck, and a new sensation filled me as he sped up, thrusting into me roughly. I felt my nails dig into his back, and Henrik hooked my left leg, hoisting it up. He changed the angle, hitting me deeper.

An orgasm hit me hard and fast. I cried out as my body fell apart. Henrik thrust a couple more times before he came himself.

Henrik's forehead pressed against mine as he tried to catch his breath. "God, you are fucking perfect."

I reached a hand up and cupped his face. I smiled as I stared into his eyes. I had wished for a child who had a matching set. I wished our child had everything from him. I wanted it to have his eyes and his dirty blond hair. I wanted them to have his personality and perseverance.

"I wish our child looks like you."

He chuckled. "Really? Because I hope it looks exactly like you. I hope it gets your brilliance. I hope it gets your dark green eyes and your dark brown hair. I hope it looks like a mini you."

I blushed. "You know, I was hoping it would look like you."

"Well, we know this kid is going to have amazing parents either way."

I laughed, hearing it echo around us. "You think so?"

Henrik nodded. "Oh yeah, the best parents possible. Parents who are going to raise it right. Parents who plan to be around. Parents who will love it so much."

I felt Henrik's hand land on my stomach. "Parents who overcame a lot."

I placed my hand over his. "We did, didn't we?" I looked down at my stomach, eager to finally have this baby. It was a part I never thought I wanted, and I suddenly couldn't imagine life without it.
