



# Shattered Soulmates

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Beta Miles Reid and Marissa Hunt have endured a stormy relationship for over a decade. Marissa, known for her dramatic and restless nature, frequently leaves Miles for months at a time, only to return when she wants. Her unreliability destabilizes their relationship, leaving Miles hurt, confused and insecure. Recently, 22-year-old schoolteacher Paisley Woods joins the pack, and Miles discovers she is his fated mate. Given Miles's past relationship trauma, Paisley agrees to wait a year before their bonding ceremony. However, Marissa returns the evening before the ceremony, believing Miles's hesitation means he still belongs to her. Marissa's presence reignites old feelings between them. Miles finds himself slipping back into familiar patterns with her and cheats on Paisley. Conflicted by his affections for both females, Miles must face the repercussions of past mistakes and the reality of whether he can hold on to a love that was never truly his, or save the one that may never be again.

As everyone grapples with the fallout, Marissa continues to create chaos while Paisley delves into the heartbreak of broken trust as she seeks a path forward.

**Total Pages (Source):** 58

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

Prologue

Beta Miles

Wind Howl Pack—One Year Ago

"How are you holding up, Beta?" Alpha Rex Stone asks as I slip into his office.

I let out a breath that feels like jagged glass.

"Marissa took off again last night. Packed her bags and left. Said she's going to the city to start a new life." I pause, running a hand through my hair.

"I love her, Alpha. I know she's not my fated mate, but my heart's a wreck. She leaves, comes back, and repeats the cycle relentlessly. I can't take it anymore."

Alpha eyes me with compassion.

"I haven't found my fated mate yet, Beta, but I can understand what you're going through just by watching. That female has you turned inside out."

"Yes, she does. We've been together for ten years now." I let out a sigh. "I'm 33, and Marissa's 28. We're not kids anymore, and I don't believe we'll find our destined mates. We haven't so far. Why can't she commit? I don't get why she's so restless."

"Do you think she's gone for good this time?"

"I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine." I grunt. "Anyway, I've got a job to do. Why'd you want to see me, Alpha?"

"A new member is joining the pack today." He taps the air above his desk, and a hologram flickers to life, displaying a series of pages. "Paisley Woods. She's 22 and will be teaching at the school this year." After flipping through the screens, he meets my gaze. "She'll be on the singles floor. I need you to help her settle in when she arrives."

"Got it, Alpha."

"Good." He rises from behind the desk as the sound of a car approaching reaches us. Looking out the window, he points. "I believe that's her now." We watch as a small blue subcompact turns up the lane toward the pack house.

I get up and let out a weary sigh. "I'll take care of her." After leaving Alpha's office, I head downstairs to the main living area of the pack house. The sweet scent of wildflowers and honey hits me as I open the front door. Where's that coming from?

I glance at the car that just pulled up. Time seems to stand still as I'm mesmerized by the beautiful, curvy female stepping out. Her presence and scent are overwhelming. Her long blonde hair floats around her as the wind rushes through it. She has me spellbound as she struggles to pull her suitcases from the trunk. An urge to help rises within me, but my feet won't move.

As our eyes lock, we whisper simultaneously, "Mate," confirming our bond. The air sizzles with a heady mix of surprise, promise, and exhilaration as we both suddenly realize the depth of our connection.

As I stand here, silently drinking in this new bond, my thoughts are all over the place, and I'm not sure what comes next. Part of me is still caught up in the messy

relationship with Marissa that just ended. Her hot-and-cold games. The way she never truly cared about my feelings. That chapter needs to close. This feels right. Steady. Like the rollercoaster of emotional pain might stop here.

Despite the insecurities left behind by Marissa, something primordial stirs within me. Looking into this female's eyes, I see more than just the future. I feel something older than time itself, pulling at my depths. Our bond is powerful and profound, like it's always been there, waiting. It draws me inward like nothing else ever has.

There's a soul-deep yearning inside me, like a long-lost part of my essence has finally found its way back home. It's the beginning of something real, and I want to embrace it fully.

Smiling, I approach my mate and fold her in my arms, her head resting on my chest. I welcome this hopeful new beginning and this ancient connection drawing us together. As the scent of wildflowers and honey lingers in the air, I know that whatever lies ahead, our lives are about to change.

## Chapter 1 – Betrayal

### Paisley

#### The Present

#### Day Before the Bonding Ceremony

Miles and I are snuggled up on the couch. I don't know how I got so lucky. He's so good to me, treats me like I'm a treasure. My eyes sting as tears well up.

"Hey, what's this about?" Miles gently tilts my chin up. "Why are you crying? If this is about the bachelor party, I promise nothing will happen tonight. I want no one but

you."

He smiles and leans in, pressing the sweetest kiss on my lips. "I won't go if it upsets you."

"No, it's not that, Miles." I blink, trying to breathe through the emotions that assail me. I love you beyond words. Sometimes, it feels almost too good to be true, like a fairytale. It's almost scary how much happiness you've brought into my life."

## Page 2

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"Aw, baby." He pulls me into his lap. "I love you. I'm so glad I finally found you. You hung the moon and stars, my little mate." His voice husky and soft, the warmth and security of his words sinking deep into my chest, easing that little niggle of worry. Marissa. I immediately push her from my thoughts.

Miles cradles my face between his hands, leans in, and brushes his lips across mine, taking my breath away with its aching tenderness. Slow and sweet, he deepens the kiss, and it feels like time itself pauses to let us take pleasure in this moment. We spend the rest of the afternoon entwined in each other, further solidifying our promises with our lovemaking.

My heart overflows; the past year with Miles has felt like a dream. He's incredibly kind and thoughtful, always taking such good care of me. He's a wonderful partner, and I feel truly blessed.

When we met a year ago, it was magical. Instantly drawn to each other, we've barely spent a day apart since. A powerful bond snapped into place the moment we laid eyes on each other, only deepening with time. It's as if we're one, with no clear boundary between where he begins and I end—just a seamless, otherworldly flow of energy and love coursing through us.

Since the pull between us was so magnetic, Miles and I immediately went before the Alpha, signed the paperwork to be married, and have lived together ever since. Still, because of his past, I agreed to delay it for one year before following through with the bonding ceremony and exchanging claiming marks.

I wasn't fully convinced about waiting, as I felt it left the door open for her to return.

Miles swore it didn't, but I wasn't so sure. Ancestral lore passed down through the generations warned that removing a binding mark is dangerous, and he claimed he didn't want me bound to him until we were sure. I didn't want to hesitate, but I acquiesced.

A part of me wonders if that is just an excuse. Sealing the bond with the mate mark would only make our relationship more resilient and keep it safe from Marissa. But was she the one I really had to worry about? Or was it Miles?

He shared his past with me. He'd been with his ex for ten years, and they'd known each other for many years before that. But from the very beginning, she never treated him well. He was always an afterthought that she left whenever she was bored.

Over time, I got the full picture from the pack. I learned she'd disappear for months, off chasing one fling after another, whether at home or elsewhere in the Kingdom. Then, she'd come back with soft eyes and tender apologies. It was as if she had some power over Miles, and her very presence could erase the nights she'd disappeared and the truths no one spoke out loud.

She'd crook her finger, and he'd trot right back to her like a good little dog. Well, wolf, technically. Not that it made him any less obedient. Ironically, Miles wasn't fooled or stupid; her games didn't blind him. He just settled for whatever crumbs she tossed him, daring to believe that maybe, just maybe, he'd be enough for her this time. Miles loved her unconditionally.

Miles deserves so much more than that. I'll take him, baggage and all.

Over the past year, our relationship has been great. I've settled into working with my students while also taking courses and making progress on my dissertation to earn a degree that'll allow me to teach at the college level. There's potential for me to lead a few online sessions for Sparksburg University this fall. I've always excelled in my

studies, and graduated from high school at sixteen. Thanks to my eidetic memory, I have vivid and accurate recall, especially when it comes to visual details. Learning has always come naturally to me.

That said, I've never been great in social situations. But I've been training to become a Beta's mate, picking up on those societal niceties and little things I used to overlook. I've come a long way. At least now I can speak my mind without worrying about how I'm perceived in public.

Our pack house layout is mostly identical to that of the other packs. Our apartment is on the third floor, which includes the Alpha and Beta quarters, offices, and visitors' suites. The second floor holds the singles quarters and a few small family suites. The main floor is where we gather and is comprised of the living room, kitchen, and dining hall.

The basement houses the prison cells, security offices, and medical bay. Unfortunately, we don't have a licensed doctor right now, just a few medical assistants. Wolves are generally healthy, but if someone requires serious care, we have a chopper ready to fly them to the nearest hospital in Sparksburg.

Suddenly, the sound of banging at the door breaks through our cloud of desire.

"Come on, Paisley, send Miles out! It's time for his bachelor party," one of his friends yells through the locked door. I blush furiously, the heat of embarrassment mingling with the raw passion still licking at my skin.

Miles kisses me gently, in an attempt to rein in our heat. "I'm sorry, little mate. I promise you'll have so much fun at your bachelorette party that you won't even miss me. Then I'll see you tomorrow night, and we'll be bonded forever." His smile reaches his eyes. I've never felt so cherished.



"Tomorrow night," I whisper. "I already miss you." My heart aches at the thought of spending the night apart, not curled against his massive body.

The relentless banging continues. "We know you're in there, Miles. You can't hide from us."

Miles kisses me one last time, sighing heavily before gently setting me off his lap. He slips on his boots and stands, giving me a soft smile. "I love you, little mate."

"I love you, Miles."

"All right! All right! I'm coming!" He yells at the door as another round of banging begins. Tromping over, he opens the door, and six males come crashing to the floor.

"Looks like you started without me," he says with a laugh.

They scramble to their feet, grab Miles by his arms, and drag him out the door. He throws me one last smile and mouths, Tomorrow, love, just before the door clicks shut behind them.

My bachelorette celebration is far more sedate. Neither Miles nor I want a big event, but wolves are social beings and will use any excuse to party. Some of my girlfriends have decorated the main room, and we plan on having good food and an even better time together.

The theme for the evening is "spa night," and the girls really went all out. The room is bathed in the soft glow of candlelight from the numerous candles around it. The scent of lavender drifts through the air. Everyone has been given a cozy robe and matching slippers to wear with their pajamas. Male licensed beauty experts pamper us with facials, mani-pedis, and massages.

As we move between the comfort stations set up around the room, a charcuterie spread featuring meats, cheeses, crackers, and fresh fruit is laid out.

Adjacent to that is a mocktail and wine-tasting bar, where sparkling drinks are served in elegant glasses. Relaxing music plays in the background, while most of the single ladies flirt with the chiseled, shirtless male attendants. I roll my eyes. I don't know whose idea the hunky helpers were, but at least they're not strippers. It's the perfect mix of relaxation and fun.

Miles

## Page 3

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### Bachelor Party

I'm sitting at a supernatural bar with my buddies, feeling no pain. I really shouldn't have let them talk me into this. No good ever comes from getting intoxicated. Human liquor doesn't affect wolves; our metabolism is too fast, and it burns off too quickly. But here they serve alcohol laced with special additives that are strong enough to get a wolf drunk. For a while, anyway.

We're all gathered around the table, a drink in everyone's hand. The night's going fine. They're swapping stories about our old high jinks with females, but my mind drifts to Paisley and what she might be up to. My wolf hums with pleasure at the thought of her. He's curled up in the corner of my mind, nearly passed out from the drinks I've indulged in.

I pull myself back to the present just in time to hear Roger bring up Marissa.

"...then Marissa walks in, and Mr. Cool here turns into a puddle and tucks his tail between his legs."

A roar erupts around the table as Roger slaps it with his hand, howling loudly. The laughter is infectious.

"Never saw Miles back down so fast," he teases, wiping his eyes and trying to catch his breath.

A cloud of melancholy settles over me at the mention of Marissa. I remember the day he's talking about. She always had that effect on me; I melted at the mere touch of

her.

Not a day has gone by that I don't miss her. She was part of my life for over ten years, always so strong and loving when she was around. If she could've settled down, she would've made me a good mate.

Nyko, my wolf, weakly raises his head at my words and growls. "Marissa couldn't settle down with us because she never loved us. If she had, she wouldn't have mistreated us. You shouldn't even be thinking about her. We have a loving mate waiting at home. Let's go to her."

"You're right, Nyko. I love our little mate. She's a treasure." Nyko nods, then collapses in a heap, out cold.

I drain my glass and stand, rocking unsteadily on my feet. "Think I'm heading home, dudes. I've had enough and I'm missing my girl."

"You can't go home yet, Miles," Roger slurs. "You don't get to see Miss Priss until your bonding ceremony tomorrow night anyway." He laughs, wiggling his eyebrows. "Besides, I got a little bachelor party gift coming for you." He leers suggestively and chuckles. The others just look confused.

I'm angry at the insulting name he calls Paisley. She's not prissy, just shy and soft-spoken. I open my mouth to call him out, but then I sense her voice. Marissa!

"Miles," she says, breathy and coaxing, the same voice she always uses to get her way. That soft, "I'm sorry, please forgive me" tone, the one that never fails to break down my defenses, makes my heart ache. I can't look at her, but feel her hands slide under my shirt and run up my back. Her magical touch sends electric currents dancing across my bare skin. I surrender to the moment.

Paisley

### Bachelorette Party

The evening has flown by, and we're all having a great time, when I start to feel a wave of nausea. I walk over to the drink bar and pour myself an iced ginger ale. Moving to a nearby chair, I lean back, sipping the soda, and taking deep breaths.

As the nausea rises, my friend Syn glances over at me and touches my arm. "Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm fine. I must've eaten something that didn't agree with me," I groan, pressing a hand to my stomach.

She reaches up and feels my forehead. "Geez, you're clammy, but no fever. Should I get Rach?"

Our resident medical tech, Rach, is with us at the party.

"No," I choke out, shaking my head. "Oh goddess."

I jump up and bolt to the bathroom, barely making it before I throw up.

Miles

### Bachelor Party

"Miles. Why won't you look at me?" Marissa huskily whispers in my ear.

Even though her hot breath on my skin sends chills down my spine, that question fills me with outrage. I stumble drunkenly, struggling to pull away from her touch.

"Why won't I look at you?" I sneer. "You ran out on me a year ago. What are you doing here now?" I turn, stare into her jewel green eyes, and am lost again. That old familiar yearning twists in my stomach, and I lose my breath. It's always been her, my first love, just out of reach, like a star in the sky. The one thing I could never hold on to.

"I'm baaaack." She smiles broadly, flipping her long blonde hair over her shoulder, and throwing her arms out like she's making a grand entrance. "And, I'm not going anywhere ever again."

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She's never said that before. Does she mean it? Can I trust her this time?

She steps closer, twines her fingers in my hair, and pulls my lips to hers. It feels like coming home. I missed this. I've missed her. That deep, familiar longing rises inside me.

"We have a sweet little faithful mate waiting on us at home," Nyko grumbles groggily.

I try to pull away from Marissa's kiss. What am I doing?

Marissa feels the rumble in my chest and tightens her hold, keeping me close. She giggles. "I've missed you, too, baby."

I finally break free. "I'm going home."

"I'll walk you out." Marissa pouts and immediately clutches my arm, hanging off me.

Not wanting to make a scene, I reluctantly let her come along, her hips swaying as she sashays out the door, a victorious smile playing across her unforgettable face. Goddess, help me, I still want her.

I'm torn—caught between the hurricane that is Marissa, the passionate ruins of what was, and the lighthouse that is Paisley, my cherished, steady, and safe love who holds the promise of what could be.

The boys are hooting as we head to the door. Roger, loudest of them all, shouts, "I

knew it! Go, Miles!" and makes a vulgar gesture with his hips, which I ignore. But Alpha isn't celebrating. He's looking on with a stern, disapproving glare. I turn away, burning with shame and denial.

Once outside, I take a deep breath of the cool night air, trying to clear my head. Marissa is still pressed against me. I feel so confused. "Marissa, I found my mate."

She begins walking up the street, pulling me along with her. "I know. Roger told me. Miles, we've been together for over ten years."

"Together?" I scoff. "I haven't seen you in a year since you walked out on me. Where do you get off on this? Wait... when did you find out about my mate?"

"I ran into Roger at a bar last night, and he told me."

"So, you were fine until you found out someone else wanted me. Is that it?"

"I've never been fine, Miles. I've been a fool. I love you." She opens the front door to the motel next to the bar. "My whole life, it's always been you. I was just scared." She leads me down the hall, stops at a room, and pulls out a keycard. Unlocking the door, she steps inside and tugs me, but I resist.

"Now, I'm scared of something more than commitment," she whispers, wrapping her arms around me. She slides closer, pressing her lips to the curve of my neck where a mate mark would go. "I'm not losing you, Miles. I... I love you," her voice falters, swallowing a gulp before she softly repeats, "I love you."

I grab her by the upper arms and set her away from me, her words only deepening my confusion. How do you stay away for a year if you love someone? But she looks so sincere. "When did you come to this epiphany, Marissa?" I snap.



“Miles.” She pushes out her bottom lip in a pout, knowing exactly how sexy it looks to me. But this time, she keeps her distance.

“Marissa, I can’t do this back and forth anymore. I’m done. I’ve been done. I have a mate now.”

"Don't you think you owe it to me to have a private discussion? I need closure."

"I don't owe you anything, Marissa. You walked a year ago."

"We had a ten-year relationship. Can I please get some closure?" she begs, her lush lips mere inches from mine.

Marissa has always been an expert manipulator. She knows exactly how to tempt me. The combination of her soft voice, pleading eyes, and that pout is deliberate. Everything about her is carefully orchestrated to disarm me.

I give in, and like a predator, she pounces the moment she senses it. I surrender to her completely, body and soul.

She yanks me into the room, and I go willingly; there’s no resistance left in me. I already know there won’t be any talking. We’ve played this out too many times. She shoves me back onto the bed, and I let her, my body already responding to her touch. Crawling on top of me, our lips crash together, pulling me back into her world where I’ve longed to be.

Biting and nipping, a popular country musician starts crooning in the background. I'm not sure if it's in my head or bleeding through the thin motel room walls, but the sharp twang of the steel guitar riffs edges my desperation. I feel like he does. I want her, need her, and always have. But now more than ever. The music echoes the urgency pulsing through me. No romance, just the raw craving to feel her again.

As we kiss hungrily, a single tear slips from my eye, disappearing into the pillow. My chest tightens for a moment, and a sickening feeling churns in my gut. That tear isn't for Marissa; it's for Paisley, the love I should've protected and fought for. But in the next breath, it's gone, and so are all thoughts of her, erased from my mind and conscience by the mere taste of Marissa.

We're back where we belong. I flip her over and sink into her, needing her so badly it hurts.

Paisley

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

### Bachelorette Party

Hot pulses of fire throb through my abdomen as I vomit again. Hands thread into my hair as Syn gathers it, securing it with a tie.

"Are you pregnant, babydoll?" she coos, running her hand up and down my back.

I spit and lean back against the wall, sliding down. The pain is excruciating. Tears stream unabated down my face as heat engulfs me, and a fine sheen of sweat clings to my skin. "I don't think so," I pant, leaning forward and pressing my head to the cold tile floor. "I think I'm dying." The agony intensifies, like flames consuming me.

I ride the waves of pain for about thirty minutes, alternating between writhing on the floor and dry heaving in the toilet. A cold, wet towel is pressed to my face, giving me a modicum of relief. Someone offers me a couple of pain capsules, but they're useless; I can't swallow them. I've never felt anything like this in my life.

Syn calls out to the living room. "Hey, Rach. Can you come here?" Rachel is the medical assistant and our closest thing to a doctor.

She appears at the bathroom door. "Paisley, are you okay?"

"No!" I croak.

"Are you pregnant?" she asks.

"I don't think so," I manage to gasp, thrashing on the floor in pain. My limbs tremble

uncontrollably.

"I'm going to go to the med bay and get a pregnancy test, along with some pain meds. If you're pregnant, it could be a tubal pregnancy, and we may need to fly you out."

"She tried to take a couple of pain capsules, but she couldn't swallow them. I doubt she could have kept them down," Syn volunteers.

"I'll get an injectable pain med. That should help," Rachel assures her. "And something for nausea."

The queasiness is finally easing, but I'm still weak and trembling. Rachel reenters the room and sits down beside me.

"I have a couple of medications here," she explains, holding up the two syringes in her hand. "One will settle your stomach, and the other is for the pain. The combination should knock you out for a couple of hours."

"Okay," I agree weakly. "Thank you."

She takes an alcohol swab to my thigh. After cleansing the area, she administers the injections, one after another. Swiping again with the alcohol, she says, "There, that will help alleviate your symptoms."

I nod, nearly comatose by this point, so worn out by my ordeal. Thankfully, the fire has subsided, along with the debilitating pain. I'm not sure why, since the medicine hasn't had time to take effect yet.

"I need you to take this pregnancy test before you pass out," Rachel orders. She and Syn help me back up, steadying me as I shakily provide the urine. It takes all my strength to keep myself upright.

After I pee on the stick, I place it on the sink. My shirt rides up, as they steady me while I pull my underwear and shorts back on. "Holy goddess, Paisley!" Syn shouts. "What have you done to your stomach? Did you fall?" We freeze as Syn lifts my shirt, revealing my entire torso, covered in black welts. Everything clicks into place. My stomach sinks with a different sensation. Betrayal. I recognize these symptoms now.

I attended a teacher's continuing education seminar about a month ago in Stone Mountain City. During the week-long conference, we were inundated with information. With my eidetic memory, I can vividly recall Dr. Skye Roberts' PowerPoint presentation. As the foremost authority on Cheating Mate Syndrome (CMS), she explained it to us, showing stats, photographs, case studies, and symptoms. Reflecting on it, I realize I'm experiencing the same exact signs. Miles is cheating on me at his bachelor party. My heart shatters. I can't believe this!

"Well, you're not pregnant, thank the goddess." Rachel's voice snaps me back to reality, echoing in the stillness of the bathroom.

Standing there before the toilet, my friends holding me up, my stomach begins to roil again. Red-hot flames shoot through my veins, unrelenting. Fire snakes up my body. Oh goddess, no! Once would be a mistake. But a repeat? That's no mistake.

Dr. Roberts said that with every incident of cheating, the innocent mate endures another assault, and their body deteriorates.

How? How could he do this to me? To us? He said he loves me.

Everyone warned me about him.

Every.

Single.

Person.

But did I listen? No!

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

I believed every—

Lying.

Deceitful.

Word!

I trusted him!

"Paisley, don't jump to conclusions. We don't know where Miles is or what he's doing." Juneau, my wolf, chimes in.

"Don't give me that BS, Juneau! We both know exactly what he did. What he's doing!" She throws her head back and howls in pain. She was always the one to defend him, always the first to forgive any slight.

As the pain continues to claw at me, I suddenly remember Dr. Roberts giving all the seminar attendees a twelve-pill sample pack of medication to treat CMS, just in case we ever experienced symptoms.

I drop to my knees in front of the toilet, retching violently. When the nausea finally subsides enough for me to speak, I gasp, "Guys, there's a blister pack called Amra in my nightstand drawer. Someone, please, run and get it quickly. I think taking it will help me."

Syn darts out and quickly returns with the silver foil pack. She snaps two pills out and

hands them to me, along with a bottle of water. I swallow them quickly, struggling not to throw up as the pain worsens, fire breathing down my throat. As the burning sensation licks at my stomach, I instinctively reach for my shirt, pulling it up.

Glancing down, I see open lesions forming on the bruising, with blood leaking from them. Rachel gasps, her eyes widening in horror as we both watch the damage spread rapidly across my skin.

Everything I learned at the seminar suddenly makes alarming sense, and I realize just how dire my situation has become. "I know what's wrong," I sob. I need a chopper to Stone Mountain City. I have to see Dr. Roberts. I don't have much time."

Rachel gives me a panicked look. Then her lips form a thin line, and her brows crease in anger. She nods, then leaves the room. A moment later, she returns, holding her radio com. "Chopper One Team, Chopper One Team. This is Home Base. Do you copy?"

"Go ahead, Home Base," the reply is staticky and muffled.

"We have an urgent transport to Stone Mountain City for Dr. Roberts. Copy?"

"Copy! ETA 5 minutes. What's the patient's condition?"

"Paisley Reid, Beta's mate. Um...bleeding lesions on her stomach that are worsening, nausea and vomiting, weakness, and sporadic mild tremors. Classic symptoms of the recently identified Cheating Mate Syndrome."

"That son of a..." The radio cuts out, then crackles back on. "Goddess! We're on our way. Chopper One Team Out." As he speaks, we hear the whir of blades in the background. Those guys must sleep on the chopper.



The pain blessedly begins to fade, but just as soon as it eases, the nausea sets in, and the cycle starts all over again. "Goddess, I'm going to die right here!" I cry as the pain tears through me. Tears stream down my face. Blood now runs down my legs, pooling on the floor. I'm weakening. "Rachel," I whisper, my voice barely audible. "I don't want anyone to know what's happened or where I've gone. This is so humiliating. Please seal my medical records. No one, not even my husband, can know."

Ironically, the party in the main room has never slowed. It seems to be getting louder. The only people who know something is wrong are me, Rachel, Syn, and whoever is on the chopper team. "In case I can't, please tell the chopper team, too." I plead as my body gives out and the blackness closes in.

"She's seizing!" I hear Rachel shriek, her voice muffled as though speaking through water. Convulsions rack my body, twisting me from the inside out.

Male voices join the cacophony as Chopper One Team arrives. I feel a pinprick on my neck as they administer a sedative. Tears still course down my temples, and my heart aches like never before.

At this moment...

I'm bereft...

Soulless...

...adrift in misery and pain.

My body stills as a euphoric feeling of numbness cocoons me, and the fire finally abates. My unseeing eyes refuse to close as I'm bundled up and carried to the chopper.

## Chapter 2 –Medical Intervention

Greyson North

Chopper One Team Lead

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

We've been in the air for a while now, with about 45 minutes left before we reach the hospital. I called ahead as soon as we took off so they could notify Dr. Roberts.

This has to be Cheating Mate Syndrome.

That would mean that Beta Miles cheated on Paisley during his bachelor party. I'm still trying to process it. I know he's got trust issues. His ex, Marissa, knocked him around like a pinball for years. But he's been with Paisley for over a year now. She's nothing like Marissa. She didn't deserve this. She's really bad off.

All medical personnel, including our small team at Wind Howl Pack, recently attended a meeting to educate us about Cheating Mate Syndrome (CMS). This disorder occurs when a mate cheats, and the severity depends on the type and frequency of the cheating. He must be partying hard tonight for her to be in this condition.

During the seminar, we learned that wolf shifters' bodies sync on every level when they meet their other half or true mate. They essentially become one, with their bodies, minds, and souls merging. They can speak to each other, sense each other, find each other, and feel the emotions of the other through the bond, unless blocked.

If you took a DNA sample before and after mating, you would see vast differences even down to the cellular level. I'm no expert on all this, and it's complicated, but from what I understand, the changes occur at the first meeting of true mates. The connection deepens after physical intimacy. The final sealing of the union is the bonding ceremony where mates exchange claiming marks, typically at the curve of the neck. It's similar to exchanging wedding rings, but more permanent and much

harder to remove.

Once these steps are completed, the consequences are dire if one of the mates cheats.

"We're fifteen minutes out, Greyson," my pilot informs me. "Dr. Roberts is requesting a status update on the patient."

"Dr. Roberts," I say as I key up on the radio. "This is Greyson North, Chopper One Team Lead. Over."

"Go ahead, Chopper One, this is Dr. Roberts," her tinny voice echoes.

"Patient requested sealed records and total anonymity," I explain before continuing.

"I understand, North," her voice crackles through the headset. "Proceed."

"Unresponsive 23-year-old female, presenting with symptoms of advanced CMS, onset tonight. Deep lesions with significant blood loss. Prior symptoms include nausea, vomiting, weakness, and convulsions. Negative stick pregnancy test. Currently catatonic. Blood pressure 50/37. Respirations shallow, pulse thready and weak. Ox Sat is 81%. Over."

"North, get her in here as soon as you possibly can. You have a probable fatality on your hands. Over," she booms.

"10-4," I respond.

"Do you have any blood on board?"

"Negative. We had a few units, but we've already gone through them. The pack medical assistant advised that she took a double dose of Amra when they realized

what she was dealing with."

"Thank the goddess for that small miracle. ETA?"

"We've landed. Be inside in two minutes. Over."

Dr. Skye Roberts

Stone Mountain City Hospital

I toss the comm to Ryder and sprint down the hallway, shouting, "Is the team ready in the ER?"

Ryder charges behind me. He moves fast for a big guy. "Yes, Doc. Operating Room Ten is prepped and ready."

"Let's get her straight in, then hook everything up. This one's going to be close."

I enter the ER just as she's wheeled through the ambulance bay doors. She doesn't look good. Her pallor is gray, her lips are blue, as are her fingernails.

My team immediately takes the gurney from the EMTs. "Thanks, guys," I call as we tear down the corridor at full speed.

Once we're in the OR, my crew gets to work. They know the drill; unfortunately, this routine happens multiple times a week. With different faces but the same procedures, we get plenty of opportunities to sharpen our skills.

Shifters are naturally social and sensual, lovers of touch. However, their human side can be weak and prone to seeking physical gratification from anyone, with no regard for emotional connections or mate bonds. The wolf side, in contrast, is typically loyal

to a fault.

I've had my fill of watching this destroy lives. I'm not here to police lifestyles. On this subject, my hard lines are consent and honesty. Do whatever you want, as long as it doesn't harm anyone else. If stepping outside your mate bond for physical connection is part of your arrangement and your mate is truly on board, we can medically intervene to make it a safer, painless practice that doesn't cost lives. Alternatively, you can renounce your mate bonds, cohabitate however you wish, or part ways entirely.

If you truly love your mate but feel the urge to cheat anyway, the most compassionate thing you can do is be truthful and give them the freedom to move on. Don't subject them to the pain that a cheating spouse causes. It's a pain that never goes away; I know that intimately.

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The fallout from infidelity is just as devastating for shifters as it is for humans. It harms individuals, mates, families, and the entire circle of relationships. It wounds not only spouses but also children, in-laws, friends, the wolf within, and even the affair partners. This betrayal diminishes dignity and leaves those who indulge in it devoid of honor. You live a selfish lie, with no honest connection to anyone.

For nearly three years, I've been fighting to eradicate Cheating Mate Syndrome. My petitions to the Stone Mountain Kingdom's Elders Council to officially recognize CMS and RMS as forms of abuse have made little progress. Swaying antiquated mindsets has proven nearly impossible.

Creating change in Wolfdom is painfully slow, thanks to those who turn a blind eye. Since the Elders Council refuses to acknowledge the problem or pass laws to protect victims, I wield the only weapons I have against this plague: saving lives and ceaseless, unapologetic education.

As a result, my biggest challenges in eliminating CMS are ignorance and apathy. Most aren't aware or simply don't care that it's triggered by an unfaithful mate, and discussing it is too taboo. The victim often suffers in silence, either unsure of what's happening to them or too ashamed to speak up, blaming themselves.

The physical effects on the body are severe and often incomprehensible. Symptoms typically begin with nausea, vomiting, dizziness, headaches, and sensations of burning or flames throughout the body. Sharp abdominal pain follows, along with bruising and bloody lesions across the torso and chest. If left untreated, it will progress to convulsions, catatonia, coma, and eventually death.

The episodes are usually brief, typically lasting only as long as the tryst. Unfortunately, they occur every time. The more regular or closely spaced the sexual encounters, the greater the damage inflicted on the victim. Symptoms appear within minutes to hours in severe cases. In others, they build over weeks and months, depending on the frequency and duration of entanglements.

Just ten years ago, CMS was unnamed and unknown, and most victims didn't survive. The same was true for RMS. Today, death from either condition is avoidable. The key, once again, is awareness, something I can't stress enough.

I also opened a non-profit shelter, supported by the hospital, the city, and generous donations from my uncle. It provides refuge for victims of all forms of abuse, including CMS, RMS, elder abuse, mate abuse, pup abuse, and more. While the shelter houses 99% females and pups, there are also a few males.

Even with our advanced treatments, we still lose one patient out of a hundred. The odds are better now than they used to be, but I don't want to lose even one to something so preventable. This poor female... she might be that one.

Until CMS and RMS are formally recognized as abuse, I'll continue doing what I do best. As the top specialist in this field, I'll spend my days and nights tirelessly healing victims and saving lives.

After scrubbing in, I touch the patient's forehead before putting on my gloves. A brief glimpse of her older and alive, her eyes open, brushes against my inner sight, and I smile. "Okay, guys, she's going to make it. But we have to work for it."

I have a gift. Sometimes, when I make skin-to-skin contact, I can see the future. This little lady has potential, but it will be hard-won for all of us, so I call for vitals and jump right in.



The team initiates another blood transfusion and attaches an IV with our miracle drug, Amra (named after the alchemist who developed it, Dr. Amaris). It negates the effects of cheating on the mate's body and eases the symptoms of Rejected Mate Syndrome (RMS).

Luckily, this female had access to Amra, probably because we've been handing out samples like candy. Given her condition, it likely saved her life. I'm just glad someone recognized the signs and acted quickly.

The moment the first drops of blood enter her system, I see the transition begin. Shifter physiology is built for survival and works faster than a human's. Within seconds, her oxygen saturation rises to 84%. Her pulse, still thready, stabilizes slightly. The bluish tint to her lips fades, and a healthier pink flushes her cheeks, as her chest rises with deeper, more regular breaths.

Unfortunately, she's still actively losing blood. Thick, dark fluid seeps through the pressure dressings they've applied to her torso. The IV influx is holding her, buying a little time, but without surgical intervention, it won't be enough to save her. She's still hemorrhaging.

"Vitals are improving slightly," Ryder remarks quickly. "BP is 65/46. Pulse is weak but improving." She's nowhere near stable, but her body is responding positively. We have to move fast and be thorough. We can't make mistakes on this one; everything counts.

"Get ready for suturing," I instruct. Prep another unit of O+ and keep it coming. Continue monitoring for any further blood loss. Start the antibiotics."

Though shifters are mostly immune to infections, the body remains vulnerable at its weakest, so there's a remote possibility. To give my patients the best chance, I introduce antibiotics or preventative measures rather than waiting until something

develops. With human plagues like HIV/AIDS, COVID-19, Ebola, and others, increasing in frequency and deadliness, it's always wise to stay ahead of disease. Better safe than sorry when repairing a CMS-ravaged body.

We work fast, but the damage is significant, so the process is slow. I begin suturing the deep internal wounds, trying to stop the loss of blood before it overwhelms her. Each passing moment is critical.

Once those are addressed, I'll focus on the surface damage. If all goes well, her wolf healing will kick in soon.

Six hours and several bags of blood later, I sigh. "Well, guys, that's all we can do. The rest of the fight is up to her."

As I walk out of the OR, I call back. "Finish it up, Grimes," while tossing my bloody gloves into the red, biohazard-lined trash can.

Her skin tone is still ashen, though improved. The grayness gives way to a healthier hue, and her lips bloom with the faintest hint of pink.

"Will do, Doc."

"Ryder. Please make sure that admitting knows we have another "Jane Doe" status on our hands." That's the code word we use to seal the records of abuse patients. In the shape she came in, she'll likely be in a coma for a while. We know who she is and intend to keep her mate away. But our hands are tied until she wakes up and tells us how she wants to proceed. We can't transfer her to our shelter for convalescence in this condition. We need consent.

"Will do, Doc," Ryder replies.

"And Ryder, let Ralph or whoever's on duty in security know as well." I yawn. "Send her to the ICU after recovery. I'm going to nap in my on-call room. I want to be here if she needs me. Have the team stick around, too. We need to keep a close eye on this one. I have a feeling she's not out of the woods yet."

"Can do, Doc. Get some rest."

I'm certainly glad my team was on standby. A few hours later, Paisley crashed, so I had to double the Amra dosage and re-enter her abdomen. Her mate really did a number on her. Thankfully, her wolf healing finally kicked in, and she began to improve after the second procedure. Once she stabilized, I sent my team home to get some much-needed rest.

### Chapter 3 – FAFO

Miles

The Next Morning

The Day of the Bonding Ceremony

In the early morning hours of dawn, after several rounds of passion with Marissa, the motel room is quiet except for her soft breathing. She lies across my chest, her hair splayed softly around her like a halo. I caress her gently, but a raw pang of guilt strikes me deep.

Paisley. Soft, sweet Paisley.

It hits me in this moment that I love two very different females at the same time. Paisley is soft, vulnerable, caring, generous, and so much more. She makes me feel like she needs my protection. Marissa is passionate and full of life's gusto. When she wants something, she goes for it, needing no protection at all. She's vibrant, independent, and all-encompassing.

I sigh. Being with Marissa while mated to Paisley is wrong. I'm so confused. I can't go through with the bonding ceremony right now. I need to clear my thoughts and figure out what I want and where to go from here. And Paisley deserves to hear this from me.

I ease myself out from under Marissa, careful not to wake her, and slip out of bed. I

grab my clothes and sneak into the bathroom. Once dressed, I leave the motel room and head to the pack house. I dread this conversation. Guilt gnaws at me, but not enough to stop me before I fully grasp the magnitude of the consequences.

Maybe Paisley can forgive me for this indiscretion. But at this point, I'm not entirely sure if I still want to mate with her now that Marissa's finally back. I need time to process this and then make a choice.

If I choose Paisley, I'll have to cut off Marissa, and my feelings for her run deep. She's the air in my lungs, the blood in my veins. A large part of my heart that had ceased to function now beats out of my chest, and I feel whole again.

But choosing Marissa means utter devastation because I'll be losing my soulmate, my port in the storm, my sunshine, and my only chance at true happiness.

What do I do?

It takes about an hour to get back home to the pack house, and it's eerily quiet. The remains of Paisley's bachelorette party are scattered about. Ripped streamers hang from the ceiling, and garbage, cans, and bottles litter the tables. As the Beta female, it seems odd that she'd leave the pack house in such a mess. I quietly ascend the stairs to the third floor, where she and I reside.

Opening the door, I see nothing out of place in our living room and kitchen area. Paisley keeps the place immaculate. When I open the bedroom door, the bed is undisturbed. Her side table drawer lies beside the bed with its contents strewn across the floor. Weird. I pick up the mess and put the drawer back.

Her clothes are in the closet. I check the bathroom, but it's empty. Her scent lingers faintly in the air. But she's nowhere to be found.

She must be in a snit because I didn't come home last night. I think haughtily.

I head into the hallway and over to Alpha's office. I knock and hear a muffled growl. "Come in, Miles." As wolf shifters, our senses are enhanced so we're able to determine who is nearby, mostly by scent, even if we can't see them.

I plop down in the chair and meet Alpha's stern gaze with a sigh. He doesn't say a word. His unflinching glare seems to take my measure and find me lacking.

"I... I'm calling off the bonding ceremony."

"You already did."

My eyes snap up to him. I nod. "Fair assessment."

"Do you have anything else you want to say to me?"

"I want to tell Paisley myself. She deserves a face-to-face conversation." I admit.

Alpha nods. "I think she already knows, but I agree that a talk with her is warranted when you see her again. She is worthy of that and more."

He eyes me disdainfully. "Like faithfulness. Don't seek her out. Let her come to you."

I lower my eyes. "Someone already told her?" I ask, my voice tinged with shame.

"Anything else you want to say?" he repeats, ignoring me and my pathetic pity party.

Alpha Blake

Meeting with Beta Miles Continued

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"Anything else you want to say?" I ask again. Disgust roils through my gut as I look at this male, whom I no longer consider a friend. Not after what he did to Paisley.

Beta Miles shakes his head and lowers it. "No."

"Then it's my turn. I want you to know I've never been more ashamed to call you my Beta." I grit out. "Your choices of late have made me doubt your ability to make sound decisions under pressure."

"That's unfair. This is about my personal life, not my professional life," Miles protests angrily.

"And you know how serious it is to damage a mate bond!" I yell. "Our world suffers from population decline, and you—you actually found your true mate, your soul-bond connection. That union is the only real chance at a family. But you throw Paisley away, knowing full well that chosen mates like Marissa seldom conceive! If she doesn't run off again like she always does!" I jab viciously.

Miles sputters, his face flushing red.

"You don't know how lucky you are!" I reiterate. "How my heart longs for a mate, while you all but destroy yours!"

"What do you mean... destroy?"

I shake my head. As the Alpha here, I'm aware of everything that goes on, even closed-record emergencies. But that's not my story to tell, so I tune out his question.

"I discussed the matter with the Alpha Commander this morning. We've agreed to place you on a ninety-day probation period. At the end of that time, I'll assess whether you can continue as my Beta."

"You've got to be kidding me, Stone! You know me. We've been friends for years." Miles snarls. "I'm a good Beta!"

"The Alpha Commander is sending a candidate to co-beta with you during the ninety days," I say, ignoring him. "After that, you'll either share the role, or he'll replace you. His name is Knight Pierce, and he'll be here tomorrow."

"W-what?" he stares at me in astonishment. "Un-flipping-believable!"

"Alpha Commander would come by himself, but he has his hands full in the city," I growl. "Now gather your composure. I have more important things than your blasted love life to take care of."

He straightens up in the chair, clenches his jaw, and pulls himself together, but it's clear he's barely holding his smoldering rage beneath the surface.

And, unfortunately for him, I'm not done yet.

"We had a medical emergency last night that I won't discuss further. The patient requested sealed records and anonymity. I can tell you they were airlifted to a major hospital and nearly died from their injuries. I'll be checking their condition on the way to the scheduled tech conference in Stone Mountain City on Monday. You do recall that, I assume?"

"Yes, Alpha."

"I don't know how long I'll be gone, but I expect you and Beta Pierce to work



together seamlessly in my absence. Understood?" I order.

"You can count on me."

"I'll leave once Beta Pierce arrives."

"Understood."

There's a tentative knock at the door. Greyson North sticks his head around the corner. He's our Chopper One Lead as well as our Lead Enforcer. "Alpha, we have a... visitor here to see you and Beta Miles."

He looks at my Beta like he could kill him. I bet he feels that way, too. It's understandable. North worked with Paisley last night as she clung to life, being flown out to Stone Mountain City Hospital. Her records are sealed, but as the Alpha, I'm informed of everything that involves this pack.

North leans back as Marissa trots into the room, acting like she owns the place. She's gorgeous, tall, and willowy on the surface, but her attitude reeks of gloating and smugness. There's an ugly, mean-girl vibe about her that Miles seems blind to.

I grind my teeth so hard I could spit sand.

She flounces up, wraps her arms around Miles, and slides into his lap like she belongs there.

And—

It.

Sets.

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Me.

Off!

"Come in here, North." He slams the door and steps forward. His aggression isn't aimed at me but at the idiots cluttering my office. That only fuels my anger as I seethe beneath the surface.

"Marissa, you'd do well to remember conduct yourself properly in my office and not act like a streetwalker, " I roar.

Her shock is immediate; she stands, mouth agape. I'm sick to death of her games. Manipulative and callous, Marissa isn't the only one responsible for the harm done to Paisley, a loyal pack member. Miles shares that blame, and it's time they both learn a lesson.

"Your actions last night were egregious. In case you're not aware, mate bond interference is illegal in this territory. You've committed a crime."

Her mouth drops open, flapping like a fish out of water.

"North," I continue. "Take Marissa into custody and charge her with mate bond violation. Get her in a cell. Now!"

"Yes, sir!" North beams as he seizes Marissa by her arms from behind and snaps handcuffs on her. Grinning, he pushes her out the door.

Miles jumps up, protesting. "Wait! W-what?"

I jab him hard in the chest, my anger simmering just beneath the surface. "Your ninety days started five minutes ago. Professional or personal? It's time to decide what's most important! Yes, you have the freedom to choose who you want to be with, but that female doesn't have the right to interfere with a mate bond. From what I saw, she approached you. She coerced you. You're not innocent by any stretch of the imagination, but what she did is against our laws designed to protect mate bonds. So, we'll let Alpha Commander take it up. Choose now!"

He sits back down, pulling at his hair as he drops his head.

"Just try me, Miles." I sneer eagerly. "Frig Around and Find Out."

## Chapter 4 – Educating the Masses

Alpha Stone

I'm sitting at my desk, going through the pack financials, when I hear a knock.

"Come in."

I scent Beta Miles and an unfamiliar wolf. Must be our new Beta.

"Alpha." Miles is all business. "Beta Pierce has arrived."

He steps aside as Beta Pierce enters. I rise and offer my hand.

"Welcome. May I call you Beta Knight?"

"Of course, Alpha."

"Good to have you on board. Come in and sit down."

Miles starts to leave.

"No, please join us, Beta Miles." I motion to the chairs in front of my desk. They both sit.

"Our first official meeting." I say, "We have a lot to cover."

"First, I'll be leaving after this brief introduction." I shove the ledgers in my drawer, lock it, and pocket the keys.

"Beta Miles, is the prisoner ready for transport?"

I know this is a sore spot for him, but he'll have to deal with me calling Marissa that. I'm headed to Stone Mountain City, and she's coming with me to answer for her crimes.

"Yes, Alpha." He says through gritted teeth.

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I shoot him a warning look, and his demeanor shifts. He's not getting away with that BS. What they did to Paisley was inexcusable, and before this is over, he'll understand that completely.

Rach, our medical assistant, is working with Dr. Roberts to prepare and present a workshop on Cheating Mate Syndrome. On Friday, after I return, the entire pack will attend. However, I have instructed her to omit the information about the medication that helps alleviate the symptoms. Cheating mates don't deserve that kind of relief. Call me a dictator if you want. These wolves need to learn to cherish mate bonds, or our entire species will go extinct.

"Good," I reply. "And Enforcer North is ready to go?"

"Yes, Alpha," he answers, his tone stoic.

I nod. "Okay. I plan to stop by and visit the injured pack member as I head to Stone Mountain City this morning. The tech conference is tomorrow. If no unforeseen issues arise, I should be back by Tuesday. In the meantime, I want you two to work closely together to run this pack."

"Will do, Alpha." They respond almost in unison.

After the meeting wraps up, I grab my overnight bag and head for the helipad. We have three choppers, so taking one won't interfere with any potential medical emergencies. Our prisoner is secured in the back with an enforcer. I take the front seat next to North.

Even though the helicopter is too loud for conversation, Marissa keeps trying to get my attention. She's still wearing that little red dress she wore to bait Miles, along with her black stilettos. However, I notice with sick satisfaction that it looks a bit wrinkled and stained this morning. Miles isn't innocent in all this. He will get his comeuppance if it's the last thing I do.

"Alpha!" Marissa shrieks. North shoots her an angry look, while I turn and glare. She speaks again, but I can't hear her over the roar of the engine; I can only see her lips move. "Alpha," she mouths. "Please," she begs.

As Alpha, I can mind-link anyone in my pack, but she's been gone for a year, so I don't even try. I just shake my head and turn to look out the windshield.

When we finally reach the hospital, North lands the helicopter and cuts the engine. As I start to disembark, Marissa begins again. "Alpha, please, don't do this to me."

"Marissa!" I barely leash my anger. I don't like to Alpha-command my wolves to obey me, but I will her if she doesn't stop. You brought this on yourself.

"No! You know what, I want you to see what you and Miles did to his mate. A lovely and kind person."

"Gentlemen, will you escort the prisoner?"

North nods, smiling in grim satisfaction.

"What do you mean, what we did to her? I've never even met the female, let alone touched her," Marissa protests, her brows pinched in confusion. She's always so self-absorbed. It's never about anyone else with her.

We enter the hospital as onlookers gawk. Marissa, wrists cuffed behind her back,

struggles as she's half-dragged down the hospital corridor.

Today, she learns.

We reach the med-surg floor, and I greet the nurses. "Good morning. Is Dr. Roberts in?"

One of them lifts her head and stands. "I'm Dr. Roberts. Most call me Dr. Skye." Her smile is warm. "How can I help you?"

"Dr. Skye." I shake her hand. "I'm Alpha Stone from Wind Howl Pack."

Her smile falters, eyes clouding with recognition. "I see. You're our new Jane Doe's Alpha," she murmurs, gaze shifting to my companions, pausing as she takes in the defiant, restrained Marissa.

"Yes. While I want to check on my pack member, I was hoping you had a moment to give us a brief overview of CMS," I say, tilting my head and grinning. The malice I feel toward Marissa is unmistakable. "You see, Ms. Marissa Hunt here has been arrested for mated bond interference and is on her way to the capital to face punishment." I pause to gesture toward Marissa.

"She enjoys playing games with people's lives. Last night, she enticed her former lover into a motel room during his bachelor party. He disregarded his mate and went willingly."

First, confusion followed by understanding flits across Dr. Skye's face, as she narrows her eyes at Marissa.

"So, what you're saying is that this female is one of the reasons I had to get up in the middle of the night to come to the hospital? To save a wolf from dying with Cheating

Mate Syndrome?"

Marissa gasps. "Dying? What's wrong with you freaks? I never touched Miles' intended mate."

"I just want Marissa to see firsthand what tampering with a bond does to the innocent third party, the cheater's true mate. I think it'll leave a more lasting impression than anything I could say," I add, ignoring Marissa's outburst.

Dr. Skye nods, her voice steady as she glares at Marissa. "I agree. I admire you for holding your pack members accountable and making them face the consequences of their actions. I wish more leaders would follow your example. I actually have a short presentation on CMS prepared for medical staff and trainees. It's somewhat graphic and contains anonymized patient and cadaver photos, as well as video footage, including surgical procedures."

"Perfect," I say, stepping up. Let Marissa see what real-life suffering looks like."



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"Follow me, Alpha, gentlemen." She just eyes Marissa without acknowledging her.

We enter a conference room. "Have a seat facing the screen."

"Dr. Skye." I pull her to the side. "I don't want her or her lover to know about Amra just yet. It's complicated, but trust me. Leave that part out."

"You're the Alpha."

Over the next twenty minutes, Marissa, the enforcers, and I are shown every sad, destructive aspect of CMS. The photos depict ravaged bodies and highlight the gruesome toll of a betrayed bond. And because Paisley's condition was so dire when she arrived, actual footage from her complicated surgery was added at the end of the presentation.

By the end of it, Marissa is in tears. "I had no idea. I'm so sorry," She sobs. At least it seems she really does have a heart, maybe.

"Well, now, let's go meet Jane Doe." Dr. Skye grimaces. "So, you can see precisely what cheating with her mate did to her.

"I don't want to." Marissa struggles to break free from North's grasp. "I'm so s-sorry. Please don't make me."

"I had to deal with it last night, Marissa, while she was dying on the chopper. I didn't know if she would make it," North growls. "At least she's stable now and not bleeding from wounds in her stomach while I gave her bag after bag of blood."

"Marissa," I order, pushing out my Alpha aura. "You will stop struggling and come with us to see your and Miles' handiwork. And you will not tell a soul what you are about to see."

Her struggles immediately cease, but you can tell by her face that her inner wolf is fighting against my dominance.

"You know, for some, this might be a good way to deliver a wake-up call," Dr. Skye muses. "But believe it or not, there was a cheating male who brought his pregnant spouse to the ER. Their pup succumbed to the injuries while the mom nearly did too. Even after everything he saw his mate go through, and after losing their pup, he went right out the next day and cheated with his mistress again. His mate was still lying in the hospital bed, deathly sick."

"I know this for a fact because I was brought in just before her, suffering from CMS. Luckily, my pup survived, and my mate refrained from sex until I was able to get on Amra and take care of the problem."

I'm shocked by her revelation, but it makes perfect sense. She's so passionate about the health of her patients with CMS. She's the foremost authority on the subject. It's rumored she's publishing a paper and working on a book about Cheating Mate Syndrome and Rejected Mate Syndrome. RMS symptoms are mostly the same as CMS, and Amra treats both conditions.

She shakes her head. "What you're doing here is great, Alpha! I never thought to prosecute the outside party for mate bond tampering, but you're right. This may be just the impetus to change laws. Thank you, Alpha."

She pauses, voice firm. "Next stop, criminalize the cheater, too." Yes, people have choices, but if they just dissolve the bond, it begins the healing process for the victim and lessens the impact.

"I've been petitioning Stone Mountain's Elder's Council to recognize CMS as abuse for months. It's been near impossible. While wolves are faithful to their mates, their human counterparts are often carnal and prone to cheating. But infidelity damages people, relationships, mates, and families, and I've had my fill of it. Still, to each their own. If that's what they want and their mate is agreeable, we can medically intervene to make it a pain-free and safer practice. Or, you can renounce your mate bonds and live however you wish, or go your separate ways.

Just 10 years ago, CMS was unnamed and unknown, and the victims often died. Today, it's preventable and even curable. The key is education. Until it's recognized as abuse, and since I'm the top surgeon treating it, my days are spent healing the victims. Good wolves shouldn't die for this unjust reason. It has to stop."

She leads us into Jane Doe's room. Paisley's small, pale shape looks so tiny on the bed. I approach and caress her hair; her face is so swollen and bruised, she's unrecognizable. Tubes and wires are everywhere: a catheter, an IV, a heart monitor, a blood pressure cuff, probes, needles, and a bank of machines breathing for her while they chirp and beep.

Dr. Skye lifts the hem of Paisley's gown, revealing her bare abdomen, covered in stitches and welts. "These need to stay exposed to air to prevent infection," she explains. There's not a single part of her body without a mark, a cut, or some medical device keeping her alive.

"Her wolf healing is slow to respond due to her extensive injuries. We hope it kicks in soon. She's in a coma, but it's not medically induced. It could be weeks, even months, before she regains consciousness. We just don't know."

"All that pleasure you had last night, Marissa, did this!" North spits, the words coming from out of nowhere.

My other enforcer stumbles into the bathroom and immediately retches. We hear him losing his breakfast behind the door.

Marissa sobs pitifully

"Marissa," I say calmly. "I want you to understand that your decisions have consequences. Instead of jerking Miles around for ten years, you should've settled down, mated, and stopped running away before you lost what you had. You could've been chosen mates a long time ago. Then his true mate wouldn't have been dragged into your games. She would've been paired with someone else and spared this pain.

"Do you see these physical wounds?"

She cries, "Yesss!"

"These aren't so different from the psychological wounds you've inflicted on Miles, until he reached the point where he emotionally and physically destroyed someone who didn't deserve it," I hiss. "He may not have known about CMS, and you may not have either. But now you do. I hope you move forward with this new knowledge and stop hurting others.

"To respect Miles' true mate's wishes, you're not to speak of her injuries, nor her being in the hospital, to anyone, especially not Miles. Understand?" I ask, my tone infused with my Alpha power.

"Uh-huh," she snuffles.

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I hope she's changed as a person after this.

I turn to Dr. Skye, "Thank you for saving her, Dr. Skye. Let me know if you or she needs anything from me."

"Thank you, Alpha. Here are some pamphlets to take back to your Beta and your pack."

I nod as we leave.

### Chapter 5 – Headquarters Attack

#### Alpha Stone

We arrive at Stone Mountain City Headquarters later that afternoon. North and the enforcer with him escort Marissa to the prison cells in the basement. I head to the hotel next door to get settled in.

Since we're staying in a suite, I hear North and my other enforcer return a while later.

"Alpha?" North calls.

"In the office," I reply.

Because we meet regularly with the Alpha Commander, many of the suites have offices and conference rooms. I'm currently working on the pack financials again when my enforcers walk in.

"We got Marissa processed: fingerprints, DNA, and a medical check. She's good to go," North reports.

"If you don't mind my saying this," he continues, "I'm furious at Miles. What I witnessed last night was horrific."

"Have a seat, North." I motion to the side chair. "I'm not making excuses for Miles, because I think he made a lousy decision with Marissa. But no one talks about Cheating Mate Syndrome. It's pushed under the rug, and its victims are disregarded."

I lean back in my chair, stretch, and yawn. "This Friday, Rachel is going to conduct a workshop on CMS so that we can be better informed. The seminar will be identical to the one Dr. Skye showed us. Miles needs to be taught a lesson, too."

"That's a good idea. I like it." North nods. "She suffered horribly."

"We're all in agreement then."

"Yes, Alpha."

The next morning turns out to be more of a cluster than I realized it would be.

I'm walking down the hallway at headquarters toward the conference room with a couple of other Alphas. As we enter the door, my senses are clouded. Before me stands the most beautiful female I've ever seen, with long silver hair and sparkling eyes. Goddess, I have to look away from her before I embarrass myself. As I turn away, I notice another male in the room.

"Ah, you must be Charlie." I shake his hand. "I'm Alpha Rex Stone of the Wind Howl Pack."

I turn to this beautiful creature, and before I can shut my mouth, I blurt, "And this cute little thing must be your assistant." I can't stop myself as I eye her up and down. She's dressed in a grey business suit, with a skirt short enough to make my mouth dry. Like an alphahole, I want to take her home with me. But I only continue to make things worse.

"Why don't you be a good girl and go get us some coffee?" I tell her. Goddess, did I really just say that out loud? I turn back to the male in the room to hide my embarrassment.

"So, tell me about your business, Silver Wolf Development or some such." I try to change the subject and cover my cringeworthy remarks. I fail miserably, and it only gets more uncomfortable.

I notice the other male is staring at the female in the room with a look of abject horror. I glance back at her warily. The room is still, as if no one is breathing. Three more alphas walk in as she goes off in a deadly quiet voice.

"Alpha Stone," She grits out. "I'm Charlie Marks, owner of SilverShe-Wolf Tech Development." She points to the other male. "Roland is my assistant and will handle all your needs. I would recommend you not call him a good boy or a cute little thing as we're in a business environment, and those terms are not only very offensive, but sexist."

My mouth drops open as I rub my hand over my face. I'm mortified.

"Be thankful I'm a reasonable female," she continues, "or I'd rip your head off right now." She flashes a scary smile.

"Furthermore, don't you dare call me or any other female a 'good girl' again! Do you think your tiny brain can understand that?" She smirks at my obvious discomfort at

her dressing me down. "It's belittling!"

I'm at a loss for words. My mouth opens and closes, like a fish out of water, gasping for air.



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She then turns to her assistant. "Roland, can you please get the Alphas settled and see to their refreshments?"

As the Alphas take their seats, Roland takes our orders and leaves. Charlie sits and begins organizing her documents. I have to remedy this situation. I don't want to be on this gorgeous female's naughty list. Or, do I? I shake my head to clear it and approach her.

She rightly ignores me.

"I—I. Charlie, Ms. Marks," I stutter as she whips around to glare at me. "I apologize. I just assumed—uh. Right. Anyway, I hope you'll accept my apologies. I'm not normally a bumbling idiot." I push my hair off my face, and she shoots me a doubtful look.

"Honestly, I was floored when I walked in and saw you here. You're a gorgeous woman and..."

She interrupts me. "Alpha Stone, you're not endearing yourself to me at this moment. You're continuing to stick your foot in your mouth," she asserts, as she turns away with a look of disgust.

This isn't going very well. I hear the other Alpha snickering under their breath.

"Uh." I cough, "Let's start over." I reach and grasp her hand in mine. Surprisingly, she doesn't immediately pull back or, worse, slap me now that I'm in close range. "Ms. Marks, I'm Alpha Stone from the Wind Howl Pack," I repeat in a low voice. "I look

forward to learning about your security innovations and collaborating with you." I smile and tilt my head, looking up at her with my best look of contrition. "Can we be friends?" I flash her my most charming smile.

She rolls her eyes as she withdraws her hand. "Fine!" She stabs her finger in my chest, but jerks it back quickly and warns. "But you better behave yourself!"

"Yes, ma'am." I smile in relief and sit. It's only then that I realize she's wearing a wedding band. Lucky male.

We all take our seats with Charlie at the head of the table. "Gentlemen, as I mentioned before, I'm Charlie Marks, owner of Silver She-Wolf Tech Development." She points to her left. "We'll go around the table and introduce ourselves before we begin."

"I'm Alpha Commander Beck Kasen with Stone Mountain City." The Alpha to her left nods. He turns to his left to the next Alpha.

"Alpha Noble Wright of the Still Waters Pack."

"Alpha Jon Mills of the Lonely Pines Pack."

"Alpha Rowan Reems of the Bloody Paws Pack."

"Alpha Rich Simpkins of the Lazy Moon Pack."

"And everyone knows who I am by now," I say sheepishly. Everyone in the room chuckles. "Alpha Rex Stone of the Wind Howl Pack."

"We have four other Alphas that will need to be briefed on this as well, but they're currently dealing with another criminal matter and won't be here today," Alpha

Commander Beck Kason informs us. "Alpha Lange Quinn, Alpha Blake Collins, Alpha Devon Wright, and Alpha Jenson Black. They are excused. We will proceed."

Charlie then stands and opens her mouth to begin speaking, but she's interrupted by the door slamming open, and in storms Alpha Jenson. "It's true!" He exclaims. "Charlie!" He chokes out, reaching.

"Jenson?" she whispers.

"Charlie!"

"What's going on here?" I demand.

"That's my wife." Alpha Jenson points to Charlie.

"Ex-wife," she corrects. Then it all falls into place. This is Alpha Jenson's runaway mate.

He eyes Charlie up and down, and utters the most stupid thing he could at this moment. "Wow. You sure work fast. You must've been pregnant when you left. Who's the father?"

"What?" She pales as she exclaims. I watch as anger morphs her lovely face as she extends her claws toward Jenson.

A loud, explosive shock wave tears through the air. The building shakes and leans slightly. A massive dust cloud engulfs the room. The ceiling begins to cave in on us as alarms blare, and I'm crushed under the weight. I try to claw my way out, but the air is thick with particles, and I can't breathe. I feel a trickle of blood on my forehead as I succumb to the darkness of oblivion.

## Chapter 6 – Closure

### Alpha Stone

I hear voices drifting around me, too weak and too tired to open my eyes. I'm just comfortable and warm. I never get to sleep in, and it feels so good. I just wish the buzzing in my head would stop. I sink back into unconsciousness.

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Sometime later, I feel a tug. An anchor pulling me back to life. That persistent ringing in my ears is driving me crazy. I hear disjointed voices around me.

"Alpha Stone. Can you hear me?"

A single voice rises above the cacophony in my mind.

Slowly blinking, I open my eyes and make out silhouettes in the dim room.

"Ah, there you are, Alpha. Welcome back," greets a melodic voice.

I attempt to focus on the source of the voice and see a female in a white coat. A doctor. "I'm in the hospital?" I croak.

"Your deductive reasoning is working fine." She smiles. "You are." She lifts a cup of water to my mouth. I greedily drink the tepid water through the straw. "Slow down, Alpha. I don't want your progress to be halted due to vomiting. You have a nasty concussion and have been in a coma for three days."

As though in slow motion, I raise my hand to my forehead and feel the bandage wrapped there. "So that explains the buzzing."

"You have a buzzing in your head?" She grasps my eyelid and flashes a penlight in each eye. "Hmmm. I think you will be okay. Hopefully, your wolf healing will kick in soon and you'll be good as new."

She stands up and slips the light into her pocket. "We did an MRI, and there doesn't

appear to be any residual damage. Give it a few days, and you should be released soon, if your wolf healing kicks in. So, give your wolf some encouragement."

I try to focus on the doc's face. Blinking, it comes into focus.

"Dr. Skye?"

She nods.

"How's Paisley?"

"She's great. All healed, except for a slight limp. Hopefully, that will get better with physical therapy. She was sent home this morning," she adds. "I think she said she had some cleanup and closure to take care of. She'll be fine; she's a strong female. And, I've found that when someone goes through CMS, it makes them even more resilient."

"Good. Paisley is one of the best people I know." I realize I have overextended myself, and I settle back on the pillow. It's only a few seconds before I drift back into the nothingness of sleep.

Paisley

Enforcer North and I just arrived back at the pack house. They gave me the choice to move out of the Beta Suite and either take another suite in the pack house or move to a cabin on my own. I chose the cabin. They assigned me one close to the school, so it's still near the pack house, but it offers more privacy and lets me avoid Miles. All my belongings have already been moved to my cabin, so I don't have to go back to the pack house.

But before I settle in, there's one thing I need to take care of: I need to reject Miles so

I can get closure.

North and I exit the car. He comes to my side and supports me as I stumble weakly toward the pack house. The drive has worn me out, but I have to get this over with, so my wolf and I can finally rest.

As we walk inside, North stays close, holding me so my limp is less noticeable. I appreciate the help because even medicated with Amra, I can feel the pull of the mate bond, and I know Miles is here.

Then, as if on cue, Miles appears at the bottom of the stairway and storms toward us before we even clear the door. He glares at North, clearly angry that I'm in his arms, and has the nerve to growl at him.

North looks ready to pounce, but I hold up my hand in Miles' face. "Stop!" I warn. The entire room goes still. "Take the aggression down a notch. You have no right!"

"Where have you been?" he growls, glaring at me and North. "No one would tell me where you were."

"We need to talk."

"Yes, we do," he agrees. "Let's go up to my office."

He reaches for my hand, but I dodge his touch. I glance at North. "Will you accompany us?"

"What?" Miles' eyes snap back to North, holding me.

"North is going with us," I snarl.

"Fine." He storms up to the third floor to the Beta office.



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When we enter, another wolf is behind the desk, working on the computer. He sees me and stands.

He's the most handsome wolf I've ever seen. Long, brown hair, crystal-green eyes, tall and muscular. If I had to guess, I'd say early thirties. No mate mark and no wedding ring.

Yum! I purse my lips. Wow, this medicine really works. I usually couldn't look at another wolf, let alone drool over one.

Miles startles. "I forgot you were working here. Uh. Let me introduce you to my mate, Paisley." He clears his throat. "Paisley, this is Beta Knight."

I give Miles the side-eye at his announcement that I'm his mate. I glance at the new Beta and smile.

"Nice to meet you, Paisley." He encloses my hand in his and returns the smile.

"You as well, Beta Knight." I look at Miles curiously, wondering why we have another Beta.

"I'll leave you two alone," Beta Knight offers.

For some odd reason, I don't want him to leave. "Just a moment, Beta Knight, please?" I ask.

He nods.

"Miles," I begin. "Have you ever heard of CMS?"

"No." He hesitates.

"Thought not." I nod. "Okay, give me a minute." I turn my attention back to Beta Knight. "Where are you from?"

"Stone Mountain City," he replies, glancing between Miles and me. "The Alpha Commander sent me here. I was one of his Betas. As you can imagine, it takes a lot to run the city."

"Oh, yes. I imagine it does. Do you know about CMS?"

"Yes. I worked closely with Dr. Skye to relocate some of the victims." He eyes me warily.

"Do you have a mate?" I ask. "I apologize for quizzing you so much. I do have a reason, if you'll humor me a moment."

"No problem," he chuckles. "I met my mate about a year ago. She strung me along for a few months and then ghosted me. I don't know where she is now. But the short answer is no, I don't have a mate."

While Knight is speaking, Miles watches me with barely contained wariness.

I turn to North. "Can you and Beta Knight please wait outside the door? Once Miles and I have a private conversation, I need you two to assist me in explaining CMS to him."

"Oh. Okay," North agrees as he and Beta Knight step outside.

Once the room is empty, I sit behind the desk and motion for Miles to take a seat in one of the side chairs. He does.

"Explain." I simply say.

He shifts in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. "What do you want me to say?"

"Listen, don't play dumb. Tell me what's in your heart and your mind. Spill."

At least he has the decency to look ashamed. "Paisley, to be truthful with you, I'm confused."

"Go on," I prod.

"You know my history with Marissa, and that we were together for ten years."

"On and off," I remind him. "You told me you were together during the times she was around."

He nods. "Anyway, she showed up at my bachelor party, and I was intoxicated. She said she wanted to talk to get closure."

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"So, a year of being gone wasn't enough closure for her?"

"I guess it was a game she played."

"Was?Are you sure you're using the correct verb here? Wouldn'tisbe a more apt one—It is a game she plays?"

"As I was saying," he continues, "Marissa promises she isn't leaving again. And, I just got caught up in my feelings. I'm sorry if I hurt you, but like I said, I'm confused. She wants to be a couple again. There's a part of me that she owns. On the other hand, I love you, Paisley, you're my mate. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I just don't know how to reconcile this. I need time to work through it and decide what I want. I need space, but then I don't want to be away from you. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does. You're selfish," I say flatly. "You want your cake and eat it too." That saying never made sense to me.Of course, you want to eat your cake!"You want me, and you want her."

"I just need to think."

"Well, the best part of it all is that you don't need to think about it. I understand. No confusion. I want to make this easy on you." I flash my most charming smile at him.

A look of relief passes over his face.

"So, just sit right there and let's give you an education in CMS. Beta Knight? North?"

I call out, and they immediately file into the office.

"Miles," I begin, "there's a condition called Cheating Mate Syndrome, or CMS." His shocked expression is brief. "When mates find each other, they experience a biological sync, especially if they've been intimate. The other night at my bachelor party, I began exhibiting symptoms."

I pull the brochure about CMS out of my pocket and pass it to him. "Nausea, vomiting, and excruciating pain are the first symptoms. It felt like someone was stabbing me repeatedly with a white-hot poker. If you read carefully, you'll note that the pain increases as your mate's tryst continues and lasts as long as the act."

I stand and walk to the front of the desk. Miles' face turns pale; he looks like he's going to be sick. I move the trash can in front of him with my foot. "Just in case you need it. I, myself, vomited for hours that night, until I finally slipped into a coma from the severity of my injuries."

I grin. "Oh, I forgot to mention the injuries. Since you and Marissa decided to have multiple hook-ups that night, my condition became dire. North, don't you have some photos you took for my medical file?"

"Yes, and there's also the surgical footage that's now part of the training videos. Give me a minute to pull that up." He glares at Miles.

While he's logging in on his phone, I continue. "First, I developed black bruises, like someone was punching me repeatedly. Oh—and the burning was excruciating, like fire licking through my veins." I squeeze my eyes shut tightly and lean my head back, remembering the pain. "But since you two just kept going, my bruises turned into weeping sores, then bleeding wounds."

"Here they are!" North holds out his phone to Miles, who takes one look at the photo,

pushes the phone away, and bends to vomit into the garbage can. I turn my head aside. I've seen enough of my own bodily fluids to last a lifetime, let alone anyone else's. I press a hand to my stomach as my eyes water.

Once Miles' retching stops, North thrusts the phone at him.

"Watch the video, Miles. You owe her that."

Miles looks at me guiltily, wipes his mouth with his sleeve, and reluctantly takes the phone. He staggers back, his face contorted with pain as he watches the footage of my surgery.

North gets up in his face. "We had to give her every ounce of blood we had on the chopper, and she still barely made it to the ER alive. She coded during surgery. But thankfully, we have a surgeon who specializes in CMS. She was able to save her. I hope a night of passion with Marissa was worth all that Paisley went through because of you. I know it wasn't. There's no comparison between them.

Next time you're faced with choosing between your mate and Marissa, for goddess' sake, reject your mate first."

Miles shoves the phone back at North, his eyes red, but he remains speechless. Seething, North punches him. Miles is sent flying out of the chair and hits the back wall, blood gushing from his face. He says nothing, but tears stream freely down his cheeks.

"I never meant to hurt you, Paisley," he says, his voice raw and guttural as he swallows. "I'm sorry."

I sigh. Watching this play out has lost its appeal. Miles might be a cheater, but I'm not a sadist, and I do still love him. You can't just turn off love after a year of

wonderful memories.

"North, stop," I say quietly.

He growls, pacing the room and pulling his hair.

"Go, North. Get us some cold bottled water, please."

North nods and leaves.

Knight looks at me, shell-shocked.

Miles leans against the wall, tilting his head and holding his nose.

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"Miles, I want you to feel what it's like to be on the receiving end of pain caused by a cheating mate." I step toward Knight. "May I?"

His eyes widen as he looks at Miles.

"Two things," I say. "One, he deserves it. Two, I think North is halfway in love with me, and I don't want to encourage that by using him to demonstrate."

He nods.

I wrap my arms around Knight's neck and plant my lips on his. I want Miles to get as much of a lesson as I can give, with clothes on. As I initiate the kiss, Knight groans and pulls me closer, pressing me against the door frame. Licking, biting and sucking my tongue should send a fire through me, but all I feel is a pleasant warmth from his attention. Sadly, my body still aches for the touch of my mate, and tears prick my eyes.

I pull back and stare into Knight's beautiful crystal-green eyes, drawing in a deep breath. He's visibly affected, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his breathing short and uneven. His gaze lingers on me for a moment, until I finally turn away.

I shift my attention to Miles, who is lying on the floor, screaming and thrashing. As the kiss ends, he gradually stills, breathing heavily, trying to recover, while Knight gently releases me from his embrace.

I help him into the chair as Knight leaves to find a first aid kit.



"Miles, can you imagine what I suffered through while you and Marissa spent the night together? If a kiss causes that much agony?"

His eyes shine with misery as he looks at me.

"Paisley, I'm so sorry. I would never have knowingly done that to you. I do love you. I'm so confused, but I'd rather have died than make you hurt like that. I'm so sorry."

My heart aches as I look at the wolf I've loved for the past year, my soulmate. The one I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with.

All the faith and trust I'd placed in him lie in ashes. Every time I rely on a male, they betray me.

My dad hurt me by leaving my mom and me when I was just a pup. He walked away without looking back. I never saw him again. That kind of abandonment teaches you hard lessons. You learn early that you can't rely on males to protect you or keep you safe. I'd blindly placed my heart in Miles' care, and suddenly, a gut punch hits from nowhere, reopening wounds and bringing fresh pain. You can't trust males.

"I'm glad to hear that, Miles. I don't even wish this on you. I don't want to torture you any longer. I just want you to be aware of the consequences of your actions. Once you form a bond, even a partial one, like we have, it needs to be respected and cherished. We were going to be bonded for eternity the next day, and I know you didn't even think twice about me."

"I did think about you, Paisley." He gasps.

"Shhhhh." I place my finger against his lips lightly. "I don't want to know how pitifully little you thought about me, Miles. Besides, it obviously wasn't enough to stop you. If you ever find another mate, don't put her through this, okay?"

"What do you mean, another mate?" Recognition dawns. "No, please, Paisley. I thought you understood. Just give me a little time to work through this. Please wait for me."

"No, Miles. I waited a year, and this is how it turned out." I cry.

Taking a deep breath, I compose myself for the final nail.

"I, Paisley Woods, reject you, Miles Reid, as my mate, for now and forever."

Miles seems to deflate as he gasps, "No!" He begins to shake, sobbing.

Knight walks in as I turn from Miles. There's an odd pull between us, a tether I'm sure he feels, too. He and I are frozen in time, bound together in that moment. But I'm too mentally exhausted to deal with anything more right now.

"Knight, please help Miles get cleaned up and make sure he doesn't need medical care. I'd appreciate it."

I race out of the room and nearly crash into North.

He drops the bottled water he's carrying and clutches my arms to keep me from falling. He lifts his hands to my face and wipes the tears with his thumbs. "You okay, Paisley?"

"I will be." My breath hitches as I struggle to breathe normally. "I just need to shower and sleep." He nods as he releases me. "Please help Knight deal with Miles. I left him in a bad way."

"Sure, Paisley."

“Thanks, North.”

I limp down the stairs and out the door. Everyone in the living room, thankfully, just watches me go and doesn't make a move to stop me.

### Chapter 7 – New Beginnings

Marissa

I woke up this morning to the sound of my cell phone ringing. They had confiscated my old one when I was arrested at the pack house. I managed to visit the nearest kiosk store and buy a new device. During the brief time I was incarcerated, I contacted my attorney. He's an on-again, off-again lover of mine. It's him.

I slip out from underneath a sleeping Remington. Wrapping a sheet around myself, I gather my clothes from the floor and walk into the ensuite bathroom. "Hello?" I whisper.

Hey, Love. How are you this morning?" Bradley's sexy voice vibrates over the line.

"Bradley," I purr. "Do you have an update for me?" Sitting on the bathtub lip, I stretch and yawn.

"I do," he drawls. "I saw on the news that you escaped."

Technically, I was broken out. The place had been blown apart, Bradley, and I wasn't about to hang around. It was too dangerous.

"Yeah, okay," he scoffs at my flimsy alibi. "Anyway, I spoke to the prosecutor's office, and they don't want to deal with your case. They said it might set a precedent." He snickers. "Reading between the lines, too many in power here in the city don't want their little playhouses messed up. Technically, tampering with a mate bond is

illegal. However, you simply had consensual sex with a mated male. They dropped your case."

"You're freaking kidding me?" I laugh. "That's great news!"

"The only thing you have to do is turn yourself in at headquarters," he advised. "I can meet you there so that you can be processed out."

"Bradley, you're the best," I coo. "What then?"

Then we find a room and have a bite to eat at the motel next door," he promises.

Bradley, you're a naughty boy," I taunt. "Sounds like fun. I will see you in about an hour."

"Make it 30 minutes. I'm anxious to see you again," he says thirstily into the phone, his voice tinged with lust.

I take a quick shower and get dressed. As I walk out of the bathroom, Remington is now awake. "Where are you going?" he leers at me, pulling the sheet back to invite me back into bed.

Remington is another pleasant diversion, but I need to deal with this matter and pay my attorney's fees. I giggle to myself. Getting back to Miles before he slips out of my control again is also a priority.

Oooh, babe. I'd love to, but I just found out that my case has been dropped. So, I need to go to headquarters to get processed out.

"That's great news," Remington presses. "We're heading out to the country estate later this afternoon. You can join us then."

"I got your number. I'll let you know how it goes." I pick up my cell phone to see that the Uber I called for is almost here. "See you later." I kiss his cheek. He swipes at me, but I dodge. "Later." I tease.

Miles

I feel like a creeper. Ever since Paisley returned, I can't seem to get her out of my mind. About a week has passed, and she's back to work teaching. Alpha Stone moved her from my place to a secluded cabin in the woods. When not on duty, the mountainside overlooking her cabin becomes my refuge.

Watching her come home and prepare dinner, or clean her cabin, then sitting to grade papers or work on lesson plans, just like during the past year we lived together. Right before I leave for perimeter checks with the enforcers, I see her curl up alone in bed, her shoulders shaking with sobs. I know she cries for me, her mate.

I miss her touch, her skin, her kisses, her warm body. I need to be near her. But I broke her heart and trust in the worst way. I can't even defend myself. Despite what I did to her and my guilt, I love Marissa too. I always have. I don't know how to break my connection with Marissa. I worry I might do it again if she gets out and comes back for me.

As Paisley lies down and turns off the light, I stalk closer to her cabin. Just feet from her open window, I stop and lean against an old oak tree. The need to be near her overpowers me. I inhale deeply, taking in her sweet scent of wildflowers and honey, now tinged with the salt of her tears. She softly sobs into her pillow. She does this every night. I'm powerless to ease her pain. I told Alpha I'd wait for her to come to me, but I don't think that will happen. Sighing, I straighten and head out to relieve Knight.

Knight

I think Paisley is my second chance mate, and I'm hers. As soon as she spoke the words releasing her bond from Miles, I felt it in my chest. I've never heard of that happening before. I admit, when she kissed me, before breaking her mate bond, I felt a tug towards her. Not as strong as a mate bond pull, but a warmth, a longing. Then, when she broke her bond with Miles and I walked into that room afterward, a tethering to her formed, similar to the feeling of a mate bond snapping into place, and I felt a connection to her. I don't know what it means, but I could tell she felt it, too.

I knew she had a tough week with Miles' drama, so I didn't press her for anything. She's overwhelmed, so I need to let her settle and process everything.

Paisley keeps to herself, doing her job and mainly staying in her cabin. She only shows up occasionally at the pack house for meals. Fortunately, Miles has left her alone for the most part, on the surface, but he's stalking her, and I have to admit, I guess I am too. I complete my shifts, and then Miles takes over. It's after I go to her cabin, drawn there by the pull to protect and keep her safe.

As I approach, I hear her wrenching sobs, and they cut through me. The enticing smell of wildflowers and honey wraps around me, almost too much to bear. I want to comfort her, fold her in my arms, and make all the hurt go away as only a mate can do.

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Her bond with Miles may be broken, but when you love someone, it doesn't just end. If she lets me, I'll do everything I can to heal her heart.

On the first night, after our kiss, I started watching over her. That's when I saw Miles walking away from her cabin. I can smell when he's been prowling around, and the scent is fresh every night. I always spray myself with a scent neutralizer, so I don't trigger his territorial instincts or frighten Paisley. All I can do is be patient, and I will be for her.

Paisley, a gentle and childlike she-wolf, is loved by everyone in the pack for her kindness and sweetness. Miles and Marissa have earned the pack's disgust because of how they mistreat Paisley, although they still have some support from a few drama-loving wolves.

I curl up under Paisley's open window to get as close to her as possible. I know that being near your mate is comforting. I want to be able to do that for her. Within a few minutes of my being there, her crying ceases, and she falls asleep.

That's when I rise and look into her window. Her soft blonde hair is spread across the pillows. A moonbeam shines directly on her beautiful face. I ache to caress her tear-streaked cheek and press a tender kiss on her sweet lips. As I take in her lovely face, I notice her eyes are open, and she's gazing at me.

"Knight?"

"I'm sorry, Paisley. I-I didn't mean to scare you."



“You didn't. I can sense when you're here,” she says softly. “It feels good when you're around.”

I place my hands on the window screen. “I'm glad, Paisley. It makes me happy to be close to you as well. I just didn't want to overwhelm you or cause you any pain or discomfort.”

“Will you hold me?” she pleads.

I nod quickly, feeling blessed that this tender-hearted female might be my mate. Without hesitation, I remove the screen from her window and climb through. After replacing the screen, I turn to Paisley and gather her onto my chest. Are these feelings I have when I hold her a sign of the mate bond? My heart warms as she curves into me, resting her head on my chest, making these adorable little sounds. She wraps her arms around my torso. Within minutes, I hear her soft snores.

Peppering her head with gentle kisses, I close my eyes and hum in contentment, knowing that at least tonight, I can soothe her pain. I want to make sure she's always safe and happy.

In the stillness, as I lie next to her, I gently brush her hair away from her face, my heart overflowing. I whisper comforting words to her sleeping form, promising never to leave her side, through thick or thin. Knowing that I can bring her this kind of contentment and peace fills me with joy.

## Chapter 8 – Of Mate Marks

Miles

I just left my nightly vigil at Paisley's cabin and am on my way to relieve Knight at the main gate. As I approach, I see Knight speaking to a female shifter. When they

hear me, she turns and smiles. It's Marissa. I'm stunned; she's a fugitive. Knight watches my approach warily. Coming to stand with them, I address Knight.

"I've got this," I say. He nods, handing over his clipboard and radio. I hear him spit a slur at me, then stalk off into the night.

"Marissa," I begin. "What are you doing here?"

I drop the clipboard as Marissa jumps into my arms, wrapping her long legs around my waist.

"Baby," she moans. "I missed you."

"What are you doing here?" I repeat when she finally breaks the kiss.

"Well, it turns out I didn't commit a crime after all." She smiles, winding her fingers through my hair. "I came here as soon as I was released."

"I've seen all the news reports, Marissa. You broke out." I gently push her off me. She steps back, steadying herself.

"Technically, I was broken out," she purrs. "But I turned myself in and was released."

She reaches into her bag, pulls out a file folder full of documents, and hands it to me. She's telling the truth. All charges have been dropped, and she has been freed.

Miles," she continues. "I would've never left you this time. Please, believe me. I still want to make a go of it."

She smiles at me prettily.

I could never deny her anything she asked of me. That has always been my weakness. “Marissa, I’m on probation here because of what we did. This has been my life’s work, being Beta here. It’s my home and I can’t leave.”

“I know, baby,” she slinks up to me and wraps her arms around my neck with one arm, while rubbing my chest with her other hand. “I’m sorry for everything, but believe me, I’m a changed she-wolf.”

“If we do this, you can’t leave again,” I warn. “My job and reputation are both on the line. You’ll need to settle in and take on the role of a leader here. Since there is no Luna, being the Beta female is a huge responsibility. You’ll become a wife and later a mother. Are you up to it? Are you through running off? The games end here.”

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She looks at me solemnly and bobs her head. "I promise. Cross my heart." She makes an X on her chest.

What I fail to see in that moment are her fingers crossed behind her back. It's a devious little gesture that signals the fucking games will never end. She's conniving and manipulative, and I'm drowning in ignorant bliss.

"Yeah?" I smile brightly at her. "You're ready to settle down with me?"

"Yes," she giggles.

"You're sure?"

"Uh-huh," she confirms.

I grab her by the waist and swing her around, shouting, "Let's go talk to Alpha."

She nods, smiling.

I mind-link Alpha, and luckily, he's still in his office, even this late. After calling in an elite enforcer to take over my duties, we head to his office.

Before I can even knock, Alpha Stone's voice thunders through the door, "Come in, Miles." Marissa and I enter and take seats in the armchairs in front of his desk. Thankfully, Marissa conducts herself with dignity and sits in the chair instead of on my lap like she did last time we were here.

She's a cool character with a strong Alpha presence and doesn't usually show fear. However, she's trembling slightly, probably because of the oppressive, angry aura Alpha Stone is projecting.

"Miles tells me you've been exonerated."

"I—," Marissa begins, but he cuts her off.

"Shut it! I'm talking," Alpha growls.

Marissa immediately snaps her mouth shut.

I hand him the file with her paperwork. He opens it without looking, his stern glare burning into me. For a long moment, he pins me coldly with his eyes before finally looking down. After scanning the documents, he slams the file shut angrily.

Miles also tells me that you want to petition to rejoin the pack," he continues. "Is that correct, Marissa?"

She swallows, and a bead of sweat forms above her lip. "Yes," she barely squeaks.

Alpha Stone growls, "Please tell me why I'd allow such a thing?"

"I—," Marissa tries to speak again, but when it's clear she can't, I answer for her.

Alpha. As you can see, Marissa has been cleared, and all charges have been dropped.

Alpha Stone rubs his face and sighs deeply.

"She'd like to become a member of the pack and declares she's staying this time." I look at Marissa questioningly.

"That's right," she agrees. "I want to settle down here at home with Miles." She tries to plaster a smile on her face but fails.

"I—," Alpha begins to speak, but I cut him off.

"Please, Alpha Stone, with all due respect, let me finish," I plead. He waves his hand, signaling me to continue. "I haven't fully discussed this part with Marissa beforehand, but I want to do so now with you as witness." I look at Marissa, who appears confused.

"Marissa, before you came back this last time, I'd found my true mate." A glimmer of jealousy flashes in her eyes.

"She and I had a beautiful relationship and were together for a year before you returned and destroyed me again." Her anger is palpable now, but I have to know if she means it this time, so I press on. "You say you never want to leave me again. Right?"

"Yes," she says through gritted teeth, eyes flashing.

"Paisley and I committed to each other," I continue as Marissa flinches. "We had a date set for our wedding, and the night before it was to happen, you reappeared in my life and helped me blow it all up. I was happy. I loved her... love her," my voice breaks.

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Her nervousness turns to anger as she snarls and jumps from her seat, growling.

I pull her back to her seat. "What do you expect, Marissa? You've played games with my emotions for years. Now I'm torn. But thanks to what you and I have done, I no longer have my true mate. I probably don't even stand a chance with her anymore." I lower my head. At this point, I don't care about the consequences; I need to speak my truth.

Sighing, I face a livid Marissa and continue. "I love you, Marissa, and I've loved you my entire life with all my heart and soul. Your inconsistent behaviors have kept me on edge—leaving and then coming back..."

She has the decency to look slightly guilty at that moment, but remains silent. She has no grounds to defend herself; there's no justification for her actions.

"The only way I'll take you back is if you commit to me," I demand. "We'll have our bonding ceremony tomorrow evening, and we'll mate and claim each other. You'll not only wear my wedding ring, but you will bear my mate mark."

"Miles, you know how I feel about that. It's just a representation, a piece of paper, a ring; all symbols that mean nothing," she protests.

"Symbols that I require if we are to go any further in this relationship. Everything that Paisley was willing to take and give me from the moment I met her, but because of the mind-screw you put me through, I hesitated. Maybe for the best, seeing how I ended up devastating her."

"Oh, poor, perfect Paisley," she spits. "I'm sick to death of hearing her name, Miles." She stands and walks toward the door.

"Before you leave, Marissa, know that there's no coming back this time. These are my conditions, take them or not." I meet her eyes. "If you accept them, I promise to focus on us and put all this behind us, never to mention Paisley again. But in return, you have to be a faithful, present wife, a co-leader to this pack, and eventually, a mother."

Marissa pauses, as if weighing her choices. "I do love you, Miles. I know I'm restless. But you're my home." She approaches and wraps her arms around my waist. "I agree to your terms, and I promise." She smiles at me, her eyes shining too brightly. "I promise," she repeats in a whisper, leaning in to kiss me.

I desperately want to believe her. It feels off, contrived, but I ignore the nagging in my gut and let myself fall for her promises. I bury my unease and cling to hope.

Yet again, unknown to me, her fingers are hidden from view and crossed behind her back.

Alpha Stone coughs, interrupting the kiss. "Miles, you know I believe in free will in this pack. For that reason, I'll allow your bonding with Marissa, but with two conditions. First, you both stay away from Paisley. Second, if Marissa leaves again, as she's done in the past, she'll be exiled and permanently banned from this pack. I don't need troublemakers. Understood?"

"Yes, Alpha," I agree and look to Marissa for confirmation.

"I-I agree," Marissa stammers, as if unsure of her answer.

Alright, the bonding ceremony is tonight. You can opt to mate and mark either before



or after. We'll manage the pack admission beforehand.

"Thanks, Alpha." I dip my head as Marissa precedes me out the door.

"And, Miles?"

"Yes, Alpha?" I turn back to him.

"I meant what I said. Leave Paisley alone. Stop stalking her. Your stench is suffocating the area around her cabin." Alpha Blake's voice drops, low and warning.

I lower my head. "Yes, sir."

Marissa stiffens beside me, her features carved in cold fury.

Paisley

It feels like my life is endless rounds of torment. On my way to school this morning, I'm waylaid by Marissa. It seems she's back, and she wants to make sure I know.

"Paisley, right?" I nod in response. "I'm Marissa."

"I know who you are," I say calmly.

"Of course, you do," she smirks. "I want you to stay away from Miles. He and I are getting married this evening. We have already mated." She tilts her head to the side and pulls her hair back from her neck. My wolf, Juneau, mourns for the loss of her mate, and my heart aches as I wonder why I was never good enough for Miles. She's wearing his claim, something he denied me, his true mate. That should have been the first red flag.

At least I can find some comfort in the fact that I won't have to worry about CMS anymore. He has claimed Marissa, and she's claimed him. Even though I rejected Miles, there's always pain, dulled by the Amra I take. Those feelings should go away completely now, and I won't need the medication.

I take in Marissa's appearance. Physically, Marissa and I are opposites. I'm petite and curvy, standing around 5'1", with brown eyes and long blonde hair, while Marissa is willowy and tall at about 5'9". She, too, is blonde but with green eyes. She's undeniably beautiful on the outside, but there's a putrid undertone of creosote lingering in her scent, as if her soul is tainted.

"Do you understand me?" she hisses. "Miles. Is. Mine." She jabs a finger into my chest to punctuate each word.

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"Miles became yours the night he cheated on me, Marissa." I scoff. "I don't want a male who can be taken so easily. And, I don't take second place to anyone. You're welcome to him." I eye her up and down with disgust. "Don't mistake me for a desperate female panting after a mated male!" I toss the barb, and she catches it.

"Oh!"

I sense Miles walking up behind us. Marissa quickly seizes my hand, orchestrating a movement to make it look as though I pushed her. She falls to the ground with a scream. "Miles, help me. She pushed me! I was just trying to be nice and invite her to the wedding." Crocodile tears begin streaming down her cheeks.

Miles rushes to Marissa's side, reaching down to help her up. "Paisley! I can't believe you would actually attack another person," he berates me. "Don't you dare touch her again."

Tears prick my eyes. I've lived with Miles for the past year. He knows me. He knows I'd never harm anyone. My heart aches; my wolf howls inside, devastated that her once-true mate would treat her so callously.

Ignoring him, I know I have to get out of here before I completely break down.

"I didn't—I..." I choke out.

I straighten and face Marissa.

"You've made your point. But unlike you, I don't keep playing with people's lives,

nor do I compete for affection. Game, set, and match. You win... by default." I smile.

Marissa stutters in mock innocence. "Wha—?"

Miles stares at me, his face clouded with pure confusion, as he holds Marissa next to him protectively. I notice a fleeting glimpse of suspicion in his eyes as he glances at Marissa. He shakes his head as if to clear his mind. Steeling myself, I turn and walk away, holding my head high.

"I'm done," I vow, so that no one can make any mistake about my meaning.

## Chapter 9 –Mean Girls

### Paisley

It appears that Marissa has made it her life's goal to be the bane of my existence. Almost every time I step outside my cabin, one of her mean girlfriends goes out of their way to taunt or torture me. Females who had previously been friends of mine are now siding with Marissa. I say siding with Marissa, but I'm not even competing with her. She thinks she has won the gold, but in my opinion, it's fool's gold, and I want no part of it. Sure, my heart still aches, and my pride hangs in tatters, but I don't desire any male in my life right now. Maybe never. And especially not Miles. I have lost all faith and respect that I had in him. And, I don't trust anyone.

I gather up my school bag with the homework I graded last night, along with my cell phone and a filled water bottle. Closing the door behind me, I lock it. I turn to take the short walk to the school and run into a couple of females blocking my path. These two are members of Marissa's mean girls club.

"Morning, girls." I try for the civil approach. "Out for a walk?"

“Marissa wanted us to stop by and check on you.” Valerie sneers at me. “We need to make sure you aren’t encroaching on her territory by sniffing around Miles.”

“I have no interest in Miles, whatsoever.” I truthfully bark as I attempt to go around them.

Hannah steps into my path, her hand whips out, slapping my face. “Liar!”

I stagger back and fall to the ground, throwing my hands out to catch myself. Pressing my palm to my burning cheek to cool the sting, I cast an accusing look at these former friends. “What is with you guys? I have done nothing to either of you or Marissa.” I struggle to stand.

“That’s not what Marissa says!” Hannah snarls in my face. “She told us how you’re throwing yourself at Miles and other mated males in the pack, and you’re sneaking out at night to meet them. We’re not going to let you be a homewrecker, skank!”

“If that’s what she’s saying, she’s lying.” I retort angrily. “If you will recall, Marissa took my fated mate from me, not the other way around! If I were having affairs with mated males, their mates would be having symptoms of Cheating Mate Syndrome. Is Marissa vomiting almost non-stop? Does she have lesions or scars on her stomach?” I yank my shirt up and show them the scars on my torso. Hannah jumps back and gasps. “Does she?” I scream. “No! These are the scars from Miles cheating on me with Marissa! So, leave me alone!” I snatch up my dropped items and shoulder check Hannah as I charge by her.

Marissa is a piece of work. She appears to be one of those females who thrives on drama. I have seen it before in others, always lying and causing contention so she can sit back and enjoy the show. If you ask me, she needs medication. I know we shifters aren’t supposed to be susceptible to human diseases, but mental health is a real problem, and Marissa is living proof of that.

I almost laugh when I think that Miles gave up his fated mate bond with me to be with her. I loved him and was a loyal mate who never betrayed him, unlike Marissa. If all the rumors are true about her past, she cheated on him repeatedly when they were together. They've only been legally mated for a month. I wonder how long it'll be before she resumes her cheating ways.

As I enter the schoolhouse, I keep my head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone. I drop my things at my desk, then walk to the teacher's lounge to use the private bathroom. In the mirror, my eyes are red from crying, and an angry handprint stands out on my cheek. Washing the dirt and blood from my palms, I splash cold water on my face and pat it dry.

Next, I dampen a few paper towels to create a compress for soothing my eyes and burning cheek. Back in the break room, I add some ice and press it gently against my skin.

The principal, Ms. Jenkins, walks in. "Paisley, what is wrong? The other teachers told me you were crying and covered in dirt."

I remove the compress, looking down, and sure enough, my clothes are filthy.

"Your face, Paisley. Did someone hit you?"

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“It’s fine. I’m fine,” I protest.

“No, you’re not.” She grabs my arm, exposing my palm. “Your hands are bleeding. What happened? You need to go to the clinic for treatment.”

“No. No. It’s just scratches. See, they’re already healing.”

“Paisley, Jenna Roberts says she saw Marissa’s friend, Hannah, slap you. You need to make a report. Rumors are that they harass you every day,” Ms. Jenkins says softly. “Please don’t let them get away with it.”

“Ms. Jenkins, it doesn’t help,” I cry. “Marissa is manipulative. She made it look like I pushed her down in front of Miles the other day, and he actually believed her. We lived together for a year, and Miles knows me. He should’ve known I would never have done that. But he chose to believe her over me. I’m not sure what I can do, except give them a wide berth and hope she eventually tires of being jealous of me.”

"Oh, Paisley." She shakes her head sorrowfully and exits the teacher's lounge, while I go to my classroom to get to work.

Marissa

Miles and I are getting ready for a pack party in the main room. I’m looking forward to having some fun. I think terrorizing Paisley is my favorite pastime right now. I have to keep myself busy with something to spice up my life, as I have had to settle down with just one male. B-o-r-i-n-g!

I slip into a red halter dress and add a pair of kitten heels. I know I look spicy, as several of the guys in the pack have enjoyed seeing me in this dress before. I just need to be careful now because Miles and I are actually mates. I've seen firsthand what Cheating Mate Syndrome does to the body, and even though I'm not the one suffering the pain, I don't want to get caught. I have a sweet setup here as the Beta's mate.

"Are you ready to go down to the party?" Miles asks as he wraps his arms around my waist. He's dressed in a pair of distressed jeans and a white T-shirt that highlights his tall, muscular build.

"I'm ready when you are," I purr softly to my handsome mate. I do love Miles, and I always have, but I enjoy having fun just a bit more.

Miles takes me by the hand as we head downstairs. Let the games begin, Paisley. I chuckle to myself, having spent the week planning little surprises for her. From my spot on the stairs, I immediately check the room to see where everyone is. Over in the corner, talking to a group of older women, is the lovely Paisley. Across the room, at the bar, is my girl squad, and they already have their eyes on her. I giggle as I watch them, heads together, plotting. I started rumors that now Paisley is single, she's out to trap one of their guys, and that really got them fired up.

Glancing around the room, I see a few of my paramours eyeing me. I offer a few sly smiles, but I remind myself I have to be careful. Perhaps I need to see Rachel, the med tech, about getting a prescription for Amra to slip into Miles' diet so that I can sneak around. Amra is the drug they developed to ease symptoms of Cheating Mate Syndrome.

The great room is filled with laughter and babble as the shifters mingle. The breakfast bar and nearby tables are filled with platters of various foods and desserts, as well as a fully-stocked bar.



While the party has just begun, I can't wait another minute to pull off my mean-girl pranks.

I watch as Valerie approaches Paisley and pulls her toward the drink bar to unfold our plan.

I can hardly keep a straight face as I watch Paisley take a sip of the spiked cocktail Hannah concocted behind the bar. The expression on Paisley's face is priceless. She loves it and drinks it down. It'll only take a few seconds for the drug to hit her. I laugh as the rest plays out.

At the bar, on a top shelf, is a large container filled with red fruit punch, cleverly placed at the edge so it'll be easy to tip over. As Paisley staggers from the barstool, grasping her head, Hannah gives the shelf a nudge with her hip. The container tips, and red liquid washes over Paisley.

Paisley

"Paisley, Hannah, and I want to apologize for our behavior on the trail the other day. Come with me to the bar, Hannah has made one of her special mocktails for you."

I'm not an idiot, I know something is up, I just don't know what. Marissa is standing on the stairs, watching over the party as if she were the queen. Miles is already on the main floor socializing and left her there. Her stare settles on us, her face set in a smirk.

Hannah gives me a pretty pink drink.

"No alcohol, right?" I ask as I sniff the drink.

"Cross my heart," Hannah promises with a too-bright smile.

I hesitantly take a sip. “Oh, that tastes great.” Maybe they are being sincere. So, I smile and relax. “Yum. What’s this made from?” I toss the drink back and down it in a couple of swallows.

Hannah looks at Valerie with her eyes bugging out. “Just some juices.” She gestures to the stock behind the bar.

“Ooh.” I begin to feel a bit dizzy and grab the bar. The shelf above the bar starts to wobble, and a container on top pitches over. Red liquid pours down like a waterfall, drenching me as I scream in surprise.

There’s stunned silence all around me, then an eruption of laughter from the guests. I tried to stifle my tears as I look around in horror, wiping the liquid from my face. “You two are unbelievable!” I cry.

Knight approaches me with a handful of napkins, trying to dry me off. The awkward silence breaks with howls coming from the stairs where Marissa and her cronies are doubled over. I glance up at Knight, then burst into tears and race out of the party.

Chapter 10 –Cheating Mate

Marissa

Last night's party was the best we've ever had, thanks to the entertainment portion of the evening, and I'm just getting warmed up. I'm sure it will be talked about for years to come. I was told that Knight had to actually carry her home last night because she was so dizzy she couldn't walk. That means both those goody-two-shoes were drenched in fruit punch last night. I laugh at the thought.

I slip out of bed, leaving Miles still sleeping. After a quick shower, I dress in shorts and a tube top. I head out the door to the med clinic. Walking through the clinic corridor, I run into Rachel, the med tech. "Marissa." She nods. "Do you need to see me?" She eyes me warily.

"Yes." I smile.

"Go on into room #3 and I will follow with my hologram cart," Rachel replies.

I sit on the exam table and glance around at the various charts on the walls. Several run-of-the-mill announcements about the different body parts of the wolf systems. Front and center, there is a Cheating Mate Syndrome symptoms chart. They're really pushing that hard. It's like an entire movement in the shifter world right now. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of it based on what I saw at Stone Mountain. But it should be easy to pull the wool over Rachel's eyes.

"So, how can I help you?" Rachel enters the room, pushing a cart with her holographic screen connected.

“Everything we talk about here is confidential, correct?” I ask.

“Yes, of course. However, we’re not as strict as humans. All medical records are accessible to medical professionals at every facility across the territory, since electronic files are stored in a centralized database. This consolidation of records enables us to diagnose and treat illnesses or conditions more quickly and efficiently. We cross-reference health trends to ensure correct diagnosis. And, our health records are also accessible to the Alphas and the Alpha Commander,” she explains.

I squirm uncomfortably. I need to approach this carefully. If I’m going to lie, I have to be good at it. I usually am. “Please be as discreet as possible, but Miles is cheating on me with Paisley.”

“Honestly, that wouldn’t surprise me, if you hadn’t said ‘with Paisley’. In that, I think you’re mistaken.” Rachel states coolly. “Paisley isn’t the cheating type, and besides, she’s done with Miles.”

Why does everyone defend Paisley? This really bugs me! You’d think she was a darn saint! I seethe, as my claws try to come out.

“I know he is, I caught them!”

“How did you catch them?” She looks skeptical.

“I walked in on them in our apartment one morning,” I lie. “I went to town to run some errands and discovered I left my purse. So, I went back and there they were.”

“What day?”

“Huh?”

“What day did you find them in the bed together?” Rachel insists.

“Oh, it was last Monday.”

“What time?”

“What difference does the time make?” I fume.

“Answer the question, Marissa.”

“I don’t know. Ten o’clock?” I say. Lying has always come easily to me, but Rachel is the grand inquisitor. She doesn’t give it up.

“So, you’re telling me, she skipped work on Monday morning?”

“Huh?”

“You expect me to believe that they both skipped work Monday morning, and it’s not all over the rumor mill? And, how am I just now hearing this? I’m sure you threw a fit for all to hear.”

“I—I—maybe it was lunchtime. We’re quibbling over semantics,” I huff, waving my hand in the air.

“Fine,” Rachel acquiesces. “Is there anything else that supports your claim?”

“Oh, yeah!” Symptoms! Shoot! She means symptoms. “Vomiting, nausea, you know the normal symptoms associated with CMS.” I point at the poster on the wall.

She notes the chart, then looks back at me with narrowed eyes.

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“You’re telling me you were experiencing nausea and vomiting on your way to run errands, but you only turned back because you forgot your purse, not because you were experiencing CMS symptoms?” she asks suspiciously.

“I don’t believe you. What’s your angle here, Marissa? I treated Paisley when she was going through Cheating Mate Syndrome, and there’s no way she could’ve driven. She could barely pull herself away from the toilet. She was immediately rushed into surgery because she had bleeding wounds.

“If what you’re saying is true, show me your stomach. I want to see the scars.”

I grab my shirt and hold it down, arms wrapped around myself.

“No. I don’t know why you won’t believe me, but I’m done with your attitude.”

“Get used to it, Marissa. I don’t know what you are playing at, but I don’t fool easily, and I’m not dumb enough to fall for your schemes.” Rachel warns, pointing a finger at my face.

“Paisley has suffered enough at your hands, and it needs to stop. Don’t think for a moment I don’t know you were behind that cruel prank on her Saturday night at the pack party. I’ll put a stop to you if it’s the last thing I do.”

She walks to the door, dragging her cart behind her. “Miles used to be a good guy until you twisted his mind. Straighten up and be a good mate to him, Marissa. Don’t you think it’s time, after everything you’ve put him through? Although after what he did to Paisley, he pretty much deserves what’s coming for him.” She storms out,

slamming the door behind her.

“Well! That didn’t work out as planned.”

I peek out the door to find the corridor empty. I begin to walk away when I spot a cardboard box marked in bold black letters: Amra, conveniently sitting on the nurse’s station counter.

When I pick it up, I see it’s labeled Medical Clinic, Wind Howl Pack, Attn: Rachel. The sender is A Healing Hand, the alchemist who manufactures Amra in Sparksburg.

I slip the rattling box into my bag, looking around to make sure I’m not seen. I hurriedly sneak out with my prize.

Looks like I’m finally going to have some fun tonight.

I giggle.

Once I’m back in our apartment, I lock the bathroom door behind me. Then, open the box and take a look inside. I realize there’s enough Amra in the box to last one person for months. Biting my lip, I mull over whether I should take out a couple of bottles and then return the remaining, but no, they’ll notice that someone has tampered with the seal.

I sit on the floor in front of the sink and take out an old, empty makeup bag. After taking a couple of capsules out of one bottle, I transfer the remaining bottles to the bag and put them in the back under my sink. I throw a towel over it and close the cabinet doors with a satisfied pat.

Putting the extra capsules in my nightstand drawer, I keep a couple and bounce off downstairs. It’s still early in the day. If I can get Miles to take these soon, it’ll

probably mask any symptoms he might have tonight.

Going to the kitchen fridge, I pour Miles and me each a glass of orange juice. By now, he should be finished with his morning workout and ready for something cold to drink. I open the capsules and empty the powder into his glass. Using a teaspoon to stir it, I take the glasses to the pack gym.

“Hey, babe,” I call out to Miles, who’s covered in sweat and breathing heavily, standing next to Knight. It appears that he and Knight have been sparring. “Would you like some juice, Miles?” I offer the glass. He takes it and gulps it down greedily.

“Thanks! That hit the spot. That was very thoughtful of you.” He pulls me to him, and I give him a hungry kiss. I’m so excited about the prospect of going out tonight, now that he has taken his anti-CheatingMate Syndrome remedy for the day. I giggle with glee. I’m almost giddy.

Not interested in my glass of orange juice any longer, I offer it to Knight, who accepts it readily. All men can be led so easily and are absolute suckers. I could’ve spiked both their drinks with poison, and they’d be dead right now. Trusting fools.

“Miles, the girls and I are going to be doing a spa night tonight, if that is alright with you. Maybe you and the boys can have a poker night at the pack house or something.” I plot.

“That sounds like a great idea.” He agrees. “What do you think, Knight? Poker with the boys later?”

Knight nods. “Yeah. Could be fun.”

“It’s a date.” I sing-song as I turn and leave the gym. I have some plucking, shaving, and maintenance tasks to deal with. Tonight, Momma is going hunting for fresh



meat! My smile is permanently fixed, and my motor is humming.

## Chapter 11 – Caught by the All-Seeing Eye in the Sky

Miles

We hadn't been playing cards for an hour when the migraine began. Nausea and vomiting soon follow the pounding in my head.

“Guys,” I moan from the bathroom. “I think I need to take a rain check.” I spit and wipe my mouth, then flush the toilet. “Might be a stomach bug setting in.”

The guys start clearing up the spread we had laid out. “Let me take you down to med bay to get checked. They can give you something for nausea, too.” Knight offers.

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“Yeah. Sounds good.” I croak, hoarse from the non-stop projectile vomiting.

As we begin the descent down the stairs, Veronica comes in, nearly carrying a comatose Hannah. “What’s wrong with Hannah?” Knight asks.

“I don’t know. She and I were having a girls’ movie night; she suddenly got sick and started vomiting everywhere.” Veronica looked panicked. “It was non-stop. Next thing I know, she’s out cold.”

Knight pointed to her shirt. “Where’s the blood coming from?”

Veronica looks down at Hannah’s shirt, and we notice a blossoming red stain. “What the h—! Knight, help!”

Knight, still holding me up with one arm, grabs Hannah with his other arm and orders, “Go get help, Veronica, now!” Veronica takes off running down the corridor to the med bay.

Knight struggles to pull both Hannah and me down the hall. He’s solid muscles, but I’m a big guy, so he struggles a bit, but manages.

Veronica races back to us with Rachel and an orderly, Billy, in tow. Each of them is pushing a wheelchair.

“Veronica, I thought you all were having a spa night with Marissa,” I state. “Where is Marissa?”

“Oh.” She startles, looking like she’d been caught out. “She went out to get us some drinks. She should be back any minute. What’s going on with you?”

“Same. Vomiting, nausea. It all started with a migraine, though.”

I guess I should catch up to Hannah, "She gestures toward the wheelchair carrying Hannah racing away from us."

Rachel comes around the corner as Knight wheels me closer. “Oh. Knight. How bad is Miles?”

“He’s finally stopped vomiting.”

“Are there lesions on his body?" she asks quickly.

I lift his shirt and am shocked by the welts covering his torso. “Y-yes!”

Okay, Hannah is in worse shape than him. Put him in #2 while I stabilize Hannah and prepare her for transport.

“Transport?” Knight asks.

Yes, she is in the final stages of Cheating Mate Syndrome. I hope we can get her to the main hospital in time.

She races to the emergency bay, and I hear her yelling instructions to her team, who are already working on Hannah. Enforcer North speeds past the open doorway and enters the emergency bay. About 15minutes later, North and several other medical team members are rushing a gurney containing Hannah back toward the helipad.

A ragged Rachel walks into the room a few minutes later and looks at me. “Miles, I

pretty much know what's wrong with you as well."

I peer into her eyes. "I don't want to hear any crap about Cheating Mate Syndrome, Rachel. Just because Hannah shows signs of it doesn't mean that's what's wrong with me."

"You need to open your eyes, Miles." Rachel huffs impatiently.

"No! Marissa has never cheated on me. She's flighty sometimes and just takes off. But she promised not to do that this time, and she hasn't," I bellow. "This is just a migraine!"

"Lie back on the table, Miles. Let me examine you." She exhales sharply.

"I'm fine. Just give me something for a migraine." I growl.

Around that time, Alpha Stone walks into the exam room. "Lie back on the table, Miles. Doc needs to examine you." His voice dripping with Alpha command, compelling me to obey.

Rachel approaches me and peels back my shirt, exposing my stomach for them all to see. My entire torso is covered in painful, raised, red welts. "Miles, are you taking the drug Amra?"

"That's the medication that treats Cheating Mate Syndrome, right?" she nods. "No! I'm not. I told you Marissa is NOT cheating on me."

"This is quite intriguing, Miles, because it seems you've received some Amra, but not enough to fully suppress the symptoms." Rachel traces a distinctly angry-looking mark with her gloved finger. "See, this one is almost at the lesion stage. I've been investigating this condition tirelessly since Pais... since our first patient."

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“How are you studying it?” Alpha inquiries.

“Our medical database,” she tells him. “It’s extensive. All medical records, doctor notes, nursing notes, films, videos, and photos are uploaded there. My doctoral degree is nearly complete, and I’m on the verge of becoming a full-fledged doctor, with a minor in CMS. I’m dedicated to saving victims of the condition,” Rachel announces.

“Do you have a photo depicting this?” Alpha Stone points to my stomach.

“Sure.” She lifts her cell, taps a few keys, and hands the phone to Alpha Stone.

“Goddess, they’re identical. Even to my untrained eye, I can see it.” He shoves the phone in my face.

“I’ve had enough of this,” I spit out, trying to sit up to leave.

“Stay,” Alpha Stone orders again. “Rachel, is Miles safe to leave in his condition?”

It’d probably be better if I could give him an extra dose of Amra, but first, I want a blood and urine sample to check for any traces of Amra in his system. It won’t take long, just a few minutes once I load the samples into the machines.

“Do it.”

“Alpha, this is insulting to both Marissa and me.” I insist.

“Miles, there’s something you don’t know that Rachel spoke with me about earlier. Since it involves you, I’d like to discuss this with you now. After you give the samples.” He nods to Rachel, who takes out a syringe and draws a tube of blood. Then she hands me a urine collection cup. The Alpha has ordered me, so I comply.

About 30 minutes later, everyone rejoins me in the exam room, which I wasn’t allowed to leave, much like a prisoner.

“Well?” Alpha asks, looking at Rachel.

“The tests confirm that Miles has the equivalent of one dose of Amra in his system. However, due to his large size, he probably should’ve had double that. It was enough to save his life, though.”

“Now, Miles,” Alpha eyes me. “We need to update you on what Marissa has been doing. Today, she came in to see Rachel, claiming that you’re cheating with Paisley.”

“What the –?” I hiss.

Rachel wasn’t sure what she was up to but didn’t trust it. So, she sent Marissa away without Amra. However, as Marissa left the med clinic, a delivery of Amra was dropped off at the nurse’s station, which Marissa took.

“What proof do you have that she stole anything?” I roar. As if he were ready for the question, he takes out his cell, which already has a video cued up. I watch in horror as I recognize Marissa slipping a box labeled “Amra” into her bag and leaving the med bay. Of course, there are security cameras everywhere. Not only am I married to a liar and a thief, but I’m also apparently married to an idiot liar and thief.

I exhale a deep, exhausted breath. “I see. But that doesn’t prove that she slipped anything in my drink. Maybe she really thinks Paisley and I are cheating and just

wants to be prepared. Maybe she felt desperate.”

Alpha sighs as he pulls up another video feed and forcefully shoves it in my face.

“I thought you might not believe it unless you saw it.” I watch again in horror as Marissa pours two glasses of orange juice from the main kitchen fridge and empties a couple of capsules into one of them. At this point, I’d have to believe it was Amra.

A realization hits me about what Alpha is leading up to. She wanted to go out and cheat on me tonight.

“You know where she is now, don’t you?” I ask Alpha Stone.

He sighs deeply and nods. “She’s been at the local bar all night, Miles. Picked up two shifters and went to the motel next door. They’ve been in there for a couple of hours now.”

I nod, blinking as my eyes start to burn with unshed tears. Goddess, I love Marissa, but she has never truly loved me—at least not enough to be loyal like Paisley. I shake my head. No point going there now. That’s a burned bridge. Ppppft! It’s an obliterated bridge. Why couldn’t Marissa have just left me alone to heal and move on? I was happy... but I was tempted.

“Who are the shifters?” I ask.

“One is from another pack, but the other is Seth Hill, Hannah’s husband,” Alpha states.

“Makes sense now. How’s Hannah?”

“It doesn’t look good,” Rachel offers.

Irony. Hannah and Veronica both made excuses for her so she could cheat, and who does she cheat with? Hannah's husband. That's a double dose of karma if I've ever seen it. She took out both me and Hannah in one shot.



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I lean my head back and pinch my nose. "So, what are we looking at, Alpha? What are the consequences?"

What do you want, Miles? The only law she has broken is stealing. With restitution, she'd probably spend a couple of months on Prisoner Island and then get probation for a first offense, along with some community service. But what do you want, Miles? Her biggest disloyalty is against you.

"If I could interject," Rachel says, hesitating. "Miles, if you're willing to live with Marissa's... uh... indiscretions, you can choose to take Amra daily until she decides to be monogamous. Or, you can break the mate bond and live together while Marissa has her boyfriends or lovers. As long as there isn't a mate bond between chosen mates, you don't need Amra. It's only required when there's an actual mate bond or in the case of fated mates, whether they're bonded or not."

"Thanks, Rachel. Right now, I just want answers," I insist. "I'll wait for her at my apartment. After we talk, Alpha, you can lock her up for theft. I'm done."

"Okay, Miles. I'm sorry it didn't work out for you," Alpha sighs. "We just have to live with the consequences of our choices."

Rachel hands me another dose of Amra along with a bottle of water. I swallow the pill. "That should help the welts disappear and take care of the nausea."

I nod. "Thanks, Doc."

She smiles faintly. "If you need anything else, just let me know."

The first thing I do when I get to my apartment is search for the pills. In that video, the box she took would contain quite a lot. I first found a few odd pills in her nightstand drawer. Sure enough, the word Amra is printed on the side. Then, I dig around and find an old makeup bag in the back of her sink filled with bottles of medication. Jackpot!

While I'm digging, I find a couple of bottles labeled "Scent-Off Lotion," with the manufacturer listed as "A Helping Hand." That's how she has kept me from scenting other males on her. We use this here, at the pack, for covert operations when we don't want other shifters to know we are nearby. Our border patrol guards often use scent-off for that exact reason. I never considered using it to cheat. If Marissa used her con-artist skills for good, we could solve all the world's problems.

I run my fingers through my hair and settle on the edge of the bed, waiting for her to come back. I hope her night of fun was truly worth it, for her sake. Because if she really cares about me, which I'm starting to doubt, she's lost me forever. I'm tired of this endless cycle of uncertainty and heartbreak. I'm honestly considering quitting my job and taking some time off to find clarity and peace.

## Chapter 12 –Hair of the Dog

Miles

It's well after 4:00 am before Marissa stumbles into our apartment. Her clothes are askew and crumpled, while her hair is disheveled as though she just crawled out of bed. Her makeup is smeared down her face, and she reeks of other males. She must still be drunk if she didn't even use her "Scent-Off" to hide it.

I can't help but compare Marissa and Paisley. I know this is unfair of me, but what in all of this is fair? The entire time Paisley and I were together, she was right here in this apartment with me in the evenings. She never went out for girls' nights, which I

wouldn't have cared about, but she was utterly devoted to me. Paisley was the epitome of a loyal mate, while Marissa was the antithesis.

I rise from the chair and turn on the light. Marissa gasps, shielding her eyes with her hands as she squints against the sudden brightness. "What the heck, Miles!" she slurs, her words thick with intoxication. She sways slightly to the left before catching herself on the couch to avoid falling.

"That must've been one heck of a movie night with your girlfriends."

The look she gives me is one of pure confusion until she remembers her lie. "Oh, yeah, we really enjoyed it," she giggles, covering her mouth with the hand that's not clutching the couch.

"Marissa, I have been an utter fool," I sigh, rubbing my face dejectedly.

Her glassy eyes stare at me blankly.

"I just want answers. Do you think that you could show a little—I don't know—loyalty to me for once in your life? Take pity on me, Marissa, and be honest with me. After all, I risked my position as Beta to be with you."

She slides down to sit on the couch, fumbling around to keep from falling to the floor. "What are you talking about, Miles?"

"Do me the favor of not patronizing me, please," I beg quietly. "I know what you've done."

She actually gulps as her eyes slide from mine to the floor. I shiver at the sliminess, looking at her makes me feel sick right now.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Miles. I know it’s late, but we all kind of fell asleep while watching the movie.”

“Don’t lie and don’t play innocent with me,” I growl. “Your good friend Hannah and I both ended up in the medical bay last night. I was lucky. I had a dose of Amra in my system that saved my life, but Hannah isn’t so fortunate.

Last report, she’s in critical condition, and they don’t know if she’s going to make it. Apparently, she has been silently suffering from CMS for months. Her mate is a serial cheater, and obviously, so are you. I just didn’t realize it before because we didn’t share a bond.”

She stares at me mutely, but I can see her guilt in her eyes, maybe not because of me, but more likely because of Hannah. I don’t think she thought that far ahead. Hannah and her mate have only been together a year.

“Is Seth one of your regular partners?” I ask. “Be honest with me; you owe me that much, considering how you were involved in splitting Paisley and me apart. She was my true mate, and you contributed to that separation.

“Up yours, Miles!” she spits, wobbling in her seat. “I’m sick to death of hearing about Saint Paisley! Do you think being your partner is easy? Yeah, the chemistry is fantastic, but you are so—so grown up!” she accuses. “You don’t know how to let loose and have a good time.”

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Marissa, we're in our thirties, and I'm the Beta in this pack. I have responsibilities, and so do you. As my mate, you're a leader here. Every member of this pack is under your care. Your actions tonight, with Seth Hill, resulted in pack members getting seriously injured.

She sputtered, unable to get her words out properly. 'I—no, that's not true—' She fumbles, her face turning red with shame.

"I made the mistake of thinking with my heart instead of my head when I bonded with you," I groan.

"Based solely on an illusion."

Marissa's eyes go wide with surprise. "Miles—" she gasps drunkenly. "You—you don't mean that."

"You don't have leadership abilities, and I knew that," I continue without pause. "I just hoped that after being gone for a year—no, after ten years—you might have matured and were truly ready to settle down. I thought you could be a Beta's wife, but I was wrong. Paisley would've made a good Beta's wife, but you're not even in her league."

Marissa leaps to her feet and confronts me with a fierce intensity that catches me off guard. Her claws slash across my face as she screams, "Take it back, Miles. You jerk!" Her nails gouge into my cheek with a fiery sting.

I grab her wrists to stop her assault, but she keeps thrashing, trying to reach me.

“Don’t make things worse on yourself by attacking me, Marissa.” I seethe. “You are already in trouble for stealing drugs from the clinic and spiking my drink.”

She lurches back in shock and then stops. “How do you know that?” She’d fall if I weren’t still holding her wrists.

“Marissa, there are cameras everywhere on these premises. You can’t be that ignorant.”

Her eyes widen again. “Oh, no!” She keeps struggling, but I wrap my arms around her, pinning her arms to her sides. Her breathing becomes shallow as she slumps forward and falls onto the floor in a heap. In her drunken state, she’s passed out. With a sigh, I lift her and gently place her on the bed. It looks like answers will have to wait until tomorrow since she’s out cold.

I leave the apartment and head to my office. There's a lot of paperwork to prepare for Marissa’s ejection from the pack and for facing charges related to the theft. We now know that although mate bond tampering is illegal, it isn’t a crime to have consensual sex with someone else’s mate, so no charges will be filed for cheating. I sit down at my desk and begin the process.

There’ll be no sleep for me tonight. It's ironic that the phrase “Hindsight is 20/20” actually holds true. Just a month or so ago, I was confused about my future and who I wanted to spend my life with: Marissa or Paisley. And now, I see that there was never really a choice. Marissa could never compare to Paisley. I’m not sure how I even chose her over Paisley to begin with.

Now that my mind is clear, so is my heart. After I found Paisley, Marissa is a pale comparison. I think I just wanted what I couldn’t have. Now isn’t that a quandary, because here I am again, wanting what I can’t have—or can I? Is it possible to get Paisley’s forgiveness? I'm not sure, but I'm going to make it my life’s goal to try.

Time passes quickly as I reflect once again on the possibilities of a life with Paisley. I remember how we used to cuddle and watch movies together after coming home from work. Paisley would sit and grade papers until I scooped her up onto my lap. Her soft, curvy body nestled against me. How could I think I could do better than perfection? I inhale and imagine her sweet wildflower and honey scent. Memories of the past yearplay on a loop through my mind, first tempting me, then torturing me. Goddess! What have I thrown away?

I sit here, lost in my thoughts, as a knock sounds on the door. "Come in."

Alpha, followed by Enforcer North, walks inside. "You ready for this, Miles?" They're here to arrest Marissa, of course.

I nod dejectedly.

"Let's go," Alpha says as he gestures toward the door.

I stand and follow them out. As we walk to my apartment door, I'm numb. Seeing Marissa's true character feels like the remedy for my obsession with her, finally. I'm freed from the illusion and see past the facade. I've been cured by the hair of the dog; a good dose of Marissa has ended my infatuation with her once and for all.

I open the apartment door and look around, seeing no sign of Marissa. She must still be asleep. I head to the bedroom and pause at the doorway. The bed is empty, the sheets still rumpled from where she'd been. I check the bathroom, but it's empty too. Then, I hurry to the closet only to find that Marissa's clothes are gone.

"She's done a runner," I shout, kicking myself for giving her a heads up about being in trouble for the stolen drugs, but I thought she was so intoxicated that she'd be out for hours.

“I’ll mind-link the front gate,” Alpha hisses, his gaze flickering as he performs the task. “She left through the front gate an hour ago.” He barks, snapping back into focus.

“She’s long gone,” I state. “North, issue an APB and send the trackers after her.”

“Will do,” he replies as he exits the bedroom.

I go into the living room and slump onto the couch feeling dejected. “I should have seen this coming,” I murmur.

Alpha sits beside me. “Yeah. I hate this for you, Miles, but I had hoped with Paisley you could have gotten past your preoccupation with Marissa.”

“She reappeared so suddenly, it disrupted everything settled in my life,” I lament.

This probably isn’t the last time, Miles, but you no longer have your blinders on. You need to prepare yourself mentally so that when you are finally settled again—and you will be—she won’t have any power over you.

“Yeah,” I simply say, but my thoughts are chaotic as I wonder if I can settle down again. Has the door to Paisley’s heart really closed to me?



### Chapter 13 –Landing on Her Feet

Marissa

Driving down the highway with a horrible headache isn't a good idea. I decided to stop at the rest area and go inside for a meal and some pain reliever. As I slide into the booth, a waitress places a menu on the table in front of me. "Hey! I'm Trish. What do you want to drink?"

"Just bring me a glass of water, please," I answer, glancing at the menu. "And, the breakfast special."

She takes the menu. "Ok, honey. Be right back."

Having been in contact with Remington, I plan to go to his place and hunker down until I can get in touch with Bradley, my attorney. I know there must be something he can do to reduce my charges and get me out of trouble. In the meantime, I need a place to stay, and I always land on my feet.

A couple of months ago, when headquarters was attacked, Remington Reems and his goons broke me and some other females out of jail, where I was held for tampering with mate bonds. This was around the time Miles and I first got back together, after I took him from Paisley. I snarl to myself. Paisley! Paisley! Paisley! I mock in my head, channeling Jan Brady's repeated cries of "Marcia! Marcia! Marcia!" I sympathize with Jan at this moment because I'm utterly fed up with Paisley.

The waitress brings me a glass of water and sets it on the table. I lift the glass to take

a drink and see our pack tracker with a few other enforcers entering the diner. I immediately dive under the table, thankful that I had the forethought to cover myself in “Scent-Off” when I got out of the car to come inside.

The waitress looks at me with curiosity, then turns back to the newcomers. She walks over to them, and I hear her speaking loudly. “Hello, darlings. Can I seat you?” I peek around the booth and watch as she guides them to the far side of the room and out of my sight. I take a few deep breaths, knowing they’re looking for me. As I frantically search for a way out, someone sits at the booth above me.

Huddled under the table, my heart races as I see it’s a biker who slides into the booth. His scuffed blackboots and ripped jeans barely contain a pair of muscular legs. My eyes scan appreciatively up to a muscular chest covered by a white t-shirt and a leather vest. The vest, or “cut,” is lined with images of howling wolves and a large patch that reads “Talons & Claws Motorcycle Club,” marking him as part of an infamous gang.

As he settles in, I panic, I tap his leg and hiss, “Hey! This is my booth!”

The biker looks down at me with a heavy glare. “Trish sent me,” he says quietly. “I’m here to help you.”

He rises from the booth, his muscular frame and the Talons & Claws cut blocking me from view. As he moves, he nearly carries me with him, pressing me close against his chest through the crowded diner out the back door.

Once outside, he stops next to a motorcycle. It isn’t running yet, but the sight of it excites me. He turns and bluntly says, “I need an ol’ lady.”

I eye his magnificent body and handsome face, noting the crew-cut black hair and green eyes; I smile appreciatively. The exhilaration and his dominating presence

make me eager. I press against him, clearly wanting to be his ol' lady. He nods as he mounts the bike and starts the engine.

He holds his hand out to me and grunts, "Car keys." I pull them out of my pocket and hand them to him. He tosses them to a shifter standing in the shadows. "Get her car to the pack house."

"Will do, boss." The shifter murmurs and fades back into the shadows.

He gestures for me to climb on. I quickly jump onto the seat, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist. As the bike speeds off, the wind rushing through my hair, I hang onto him, feeling the adrenaline rush I crave.

See, I always land on my feet. My laughter echoes on the wind

Paisley

Having brushed my teeth and changed into my pajamas, I crawl into bed and pull the sheet up. This is the worst time of the day, when everything settles down and gets quiet. It's when I miss Miles the most. After I tucked away the papers I had graded and Miles would come back from his shift perimeter checking, we would crawl into bed and curl up around each other. The nights that I thought he and I had forever.

Before my nightly crying jag begins, I hear a tapping at the window. I have a tiny cabin now and my bed sits right up against the wall under the window. In confusion, I pull back the curtain and am surprised to see Miles' face staring back at me. "Can I talk to you for a moment, Paisley?" He asks, his voice muffled by the glass.

I unlock the latch and slide the window back. "What do you want, Miles?" I snap. My heart is aching to pull him to me for just a little while to ease the pain. But I know from experience that I can't trust Miles. He's an unfaithful cheater.

“I just want to talk, Paisley.” His eyes plead, but they don’t fool me. I know what Miles’ charm does to me, and I’m not up for another ride going nowhere on his merry-go-round.

“I don’t think we have anything to talk about, Miles. We have said it all.”

“I disagree. I think you know how I feel about you, and I have been confused. I want the opportunity to share my side of the story, and to have another chance with you.” His hands reach for me through the window, but I recoil.

“Miles, you’re delusional if you think I’d trust you with my heart again,” I cry, tears beginning to drip down my cheeks. This sick emptiness in my heart and stomach begs to be filled by his touch. I hate to do this in front of him. I want nothing to do with him, but my body craves him. “It’s time for you to leave,” I spit out, slamming the window shut and locking it again.

He persists, tapping on the window. “Please, Paisley. I’m so sorry for hurting you. I know it’s unforgivable, but I ache for us.”

Overcome by the effect of Miles’ words and the feelings he evokes, I roll over on my stomach and sob hysterically into my pillow.

I reach over and grab my cell phone from the side table, connecting it to my speaker, and I begin playing music as loud as possible. I live pretty far from other shifters, and even though we have superior hearing, I don’t think the sound disturbs anyone.

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I don't know how long Miles hangs around after I begin to blast music, but I can no longer hear him or the tapping, and I'm soon overcome with exhaustion. Too tired to care, I hear the front door unlock, and then I'm pulled into a pair of strong arms.

Without opening my eyes, I feel fingers caressing my hair and a soft voice shushing me. Boneless from the comforting touch, I drift off into a deep, dreamless sleep despite the noise.

Miles

Paisley closes the window in my face, and I watch her turn over, crying into the pillow. My heart breaks at the sight of what I've done to her. I don't consider myself a good male anymore, but I want to stop the pain she's enduring. I ache to crawl into bed beside her like I used to before I lost that privilege. I want to hold her close and make sure no one and nothing ever hurts her again. To feel the softness of her body against me, my lips pressed to her skin. Goddess!

"Please, Paisley. I'm so sorry for hurting you. I know it's unforgivable, but I ache for us." I beg

In my begging to be let in to talk to her, I begin pacing back and forth beside the house. Suddenly, I'm slammed to the side by a big, hulking form.

"What the—"

Crunch! A fist crashes into my nose, and stars explode behind my eyes as my head smashes against a tree.

I leap up and see Knight glaring at me, his face alight with rage. Before I can fully steady myself, he lunges forward, aiming his fist at my face once again. I barely dodge, the air whooshing past.

I pivot and attempt an uppercut to knock him off-balance, but he easily sidesteps. We circle each other, panting heavily, both of us trying to catch our breath before the next attack.

Knight's next move is a powerful swing, but I manage to block it with my forearms crossed. The force of the impact jars me, but I grit my teeth and land a quick left hook. He groans in pain, but continues to advance.

Our movements become a blur as we match punch for punch. I feel the bite of his hits, but I refuse to slow down. With a sharp intake of breath, he delivers a solid punch to my side, making me stagger to the ground.

"Leave her alone, Miles!" Knight hisses at me. "She's devastated. Can't you hear her crying?"

"I want to make it up to her." I spit out a mouthful of blood, attempting to sit up. "I want to make it better."

"Do you realize how messed up that statement is, Miles?" He wipes the blood from his face with his shirt. "You can't unbreak her heart. What's done is done." He walks over to the outdoor spigot, turns it on, washes his face and hands, then dries them on his shirt. Throwing the shirt across his bare shoulder, he points to me. "Let her heal."

"I want to help her heal." I get to my feet, staggering.

"Only because Marissa dumped your sorry behind," he spits. "I don't know why you didn't see that Paisley is the better person. I wasn't here a day before I realized it."

Marissa's filth in heels."

I can't defend that description of her. Sadly, I can't even be angry with Knight as what he says rings true.

"Go home, Miles." Knight seethes. "Don't come around here again. Alpha already warned you to stop stalking Paisley months ago. I was hoping you wouldn't make me go behind your back and tell him what you're doing. You need to talk to Alpha before you lose your position here."

Angry at Knight's interference, I punch the tree behind me.

"Mature, tool! Now go home before you draw Paisley's attention. Thank the goddess she's got that music blaring and can't hear us."

Like the immature tool I'm accused of being, I give the tree one more solid punch and storm off.

Knight

I watch Miles as he stomps out of sight, and I peek through the window at Paisley. Her back is still to the window, and her shoulders are still shaking with her sobs. I touch the window, wanting desperately to comfort her as I have done frequently over the past few weeks.

I make my way around her cabin and retrieve the extra door key from under the mat. Not wanting to scare her, I tiptoe to her bedroom. Her cries are becoming softer as she's tiring. I pull my shoes off and gently climb onto the bed, drawing her into my arms. She immediately curls into me, clutching at my arms like a drowning soul. Her tears instantly soak my shirt, and I gently caress her curls, reassuring her softly.

In moments, her cries cease, and her breathing deepens. I lay down beside her and pull her up onto my torso, the deep connection tethering us together. She sighs as I place soft little kisses across her face. Her body gets limp as she finally succumbs to the peace of sleep.

## Chapter 14 –Karma Is No Lady

Miles

I wake up with a pounding headache. Rolling over on my back, I reach for the nightstand and grab the glass of water I put there last night. Sitting up, I take deep draughts and drink the water in three gulps. Placing the glass back on the nightstand, I lean back on the pillow. Stretching my arms behind my head, I settle back, trying to wake up.

What a mess I've made of my life. Loving Marissa is an exercise in futility. To quote Einstein—The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I laugh to myself. Another lost cause is hoping Paisley would ever give me a second chance.



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Marissa and I had never hurt anyone else this badly in our crazy, mixed-up relationship before, but now Paisley has become an innocent victim of circumstances. She's suffering not because of a wrong choice she made, but through no fault of her own.

From the perspective of hindsight, I contemplate my feelings for the two females, Paisley and Marissa. On the one hand, there is Marissa. I have loved her my entire life. It's not just her physical attributes, but she's also fun-loving and charismatic. She's intoxicating, my wild wolf. She's like a whirlwind whenever she returns—exciting and impossible to resist. And when she disappears, it cuts deep. I know she enjoys physical contact, but she fears commitment and pushes me away, running, leaving me devastated.

Each time she leaves, I wait for her, praying she comes back to me, hoping things will be different. But now I realize that she's simply selfish and puts herself first. I'm just her backup plan. When she runs away, it's to find something—or someone else.

Since I marked her as my mate, I can't ignore the truth about what happens when we're apart. The emotional and physical wounds of our relationship manifest themselves on my body—this condition, called CMS, tells me everything I need to know. The pain is excruciating when she's with someone else, even with the aid of Amra.

Then there's sweet, innocent Paisley, who walked into my life a year ago. It has been the best year of my life. Paisley's kindness and love are a balm to my aching heart. When she's with me, there's no one else ever. I can see no one else. However, I turned Paisley's life into a nightmare by succumbing to my useless feelings for

Marissa. I shouldn't have allowed Marissa to influence me.

I stand, metaphorically weighing the qualities of the two females in my mind's eye, much like the blindfolded Lady Justice. Marissa is exhilarating and breathtaking, an icy brace of excitement. Marissa reminds me of the thrilling Freefall Tower at a carnival. A ride you jump onto, holding tightly in anticipation of the drop. When it comes, it's a rush, your stomach lurching as you descend, and the experience is nothing short of perfection, yet too fleeting. You want to reach out and grab her to you, but she's gone in an instant, on to the next thrill. Once the ride ends, you find yourself gasping for breath, heart racing, yet left with a sense of hollow emptiness.

In contrast, Paisley embodies all that is good. She's like a gentle breeze on a summer day, calm and comforting, always ready with a soft kiss or caress. While Marissa brings excitement, Paisley feels like coming home, and her presence reassures you that she'll be there when you wake up in the mornings. Like a warm bath, she's soothing and enfolds you in her kindness and love. With Paisley, there's no feeling like you're reaching for something that's always out of your grasp; instead, you enjoy each moment, knowing her love and support create a safe space of warmth and stability.

How could I have been so careless with my Paisley's heart? Why hadn't I prepared for Marissa's inevitable return? I had to know intrinsically that Marissa would come back and cause chaos in my life, so why didn't I fortify my defenses against her? Based on our history, I should've prepared myself for what would happen after the brief moments of passion she offered.

Let's be brutally honest: nothing is redeeming about Marissa's character. If I've learned anything, it's that. If I had stopped to see past the heat of the shallow physical rush and looked ahead to this moment in time—when I've lost Paisley—I would have known that nothing Marissa had to offer could ever compare to the precious eternity I lost with Paisley. I traded love for lust. A treasure for a handful of ashes. Because

Marissa never truly gave me her heart. And the taste of those truths is bitter on my tongue.

Leaning back on my pillow, alone, in the pre-dawn light of another day, my stomach roils with the weight of my thoughts. Renewed waves of nausea begin to transform into sharp, burning pain that causes me to sit up in bed and double over. Goddess! Not again! I'm already on a steady diet of Amra and can't keep up with the pain. I have to find a solution to this mate bond with Marissa before CMS kills me.

I leave the bed, grab the Amra tablets and the empty glass from the nightstand, and head to the ensuite to fill the glass with water. Before I can reach the bathroom, the pain overwhelms me, and I stumble to the floor, shattering the glass. I raise my hand, and blood streams down my arm. At the same time, the excruciating pain in my abdomen worsens, and lesions begin to appear on my bare chest and stomach. I know I'm just seconds away from a medical emergency, even with the high dosage of Amra in my system.

Desperate, I quickly pop a couple of tablets into my mouth and swallow them dry. After removing the larger shards of glass from my hand, I tear the pillowcase from my pillow to wrap my hand and apply pressure to stop the bleeding. Lying back on the floor, I wait as the symptoms of CMS slowly fade in intensity.

As my pain subsides and my breathing slows, I laugh at the irony. Every day since Marissa left, I've experienced debilitating symptoms of CMS despite high doses of Amra. I glance down at the multiple scars on my stomach from the healed lesions. The doctor told me that I hold the record in the territory for the most severe case of CMS. Not only am I a fool, but it appears I'm the biggest one.

Marissa

I've slipped into my own personal heaven. When I hopped onto the back of that

motorcycle with Sledge, I had no idea what I was getting into. A girl can only dream about the males I've since been introduced to at the Talon's & Claws MC clubhouse. Sledge is a dream, with his muscular body covered in tattoos. But it didn't take long before another brother, who interested me even more than Sledge, caught my eye, Drágon, the Prez.

Drágon is a dragon shifter, a rarity in the club and the only one I've ever met. Dragons are scarce because they were hunted heavily in the past and are now nearly extinct. Drágon's big, bulky frame stands at least 6'7", with broad shoulders. The markings on his torso and arms feature tribal symbols and artistic designs that resemble scales of a dragon. At least, I think they're tattoos. These scales shimmer with hints of jade and gold, catching the light and creating a three-dimensional effect.

His deep amber eyes, which flicker to a fiery red when the dragon is present, are slightly elongated, giving him a subtle cat-eye look. His long brown hair has a metallic copper sheen in the sunlight, making it appear almost aflame. Drágon is male perfection, and he will be mine.

Until that time, I'm enjoying myself, sampling what the brotherhood has to offer. Right now, I'm curled up with Snake in his bed, cooling down. His road name reflects his psyche, as it usually does, rather than his physique. I giggle at my play on words.

"What's so funny, Joyride?" he whispers against my neck.

I jerk back and eye him warily. "What's with Joyride?" I snap.

He laughs aloud as he gets out of bed and pulls on his jeans and T-shirt. "Get dressed, Joyride," he says. "We brothers have a surprise for you."

I roll over and put on my minidress and sandals. "Why are you acting so strange,

Snake?”

He just looks at me mysteriously and smiles. Taking my hand, he jerks his head toward the door, “Come on, Joyride.”

We walk downstairs to a lively party, where everyone seems to be having a good time. Sledge sits on a couch with a club girl on his lap, looking cozy. A pang of jealousy shoots through me. I can’t really complain, but I’m territorial despite my wandering libido. He notices me and stands up while the club girl falls to the floor unceremoniously. The music stops, and the room falls silent, with all eyes on Sledge.

“Ah, my ol’ lady is free.” He smiles and approaches me, taking my hand from Snake. “We haven’t made things official yet.” He turns to the bar and shouts, “Prospect, bring me the cut.”

I smile down at the club girl on the floor who dares to smirk at me. Turning my eyes to Sledge, I wrap my arms around his neck. He steps back, takes my wrists in his massive hands, and eases my arms back down to my sides.

A prospect approaches with a black vest draped over his arm and a strip of fabric in his hand. Sledge takes it and ties it over my eyes securely.

“Hold your arms out, Joyride,” he coaxes.

“Why am I being called Joyride?” I demand, my hands on my hips, despite the blindfold covering my eyes.

“Patience, Joyride. All will make perfect sense in just a few minutes,” he soothes. “Now, raise your arms.”

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I obey, raising my arms slightly. I feel him slip something over my shoulders. Then, taking me carefully by my arms, he guides me a few steps to the side. When he pulls off the cloth covering my eyes, I'm standing in front of the mirrored wall that extends the length of the bar.

Reflected in the glass, I see the entire club watching me. Most of the ol' ladies look horrified and uncomfortable, while the club girls snicker. The brothers just appear smug. Only Drágon stands apart, detached and unreadable.

"How do you like it, Joyride?" Sledge asks.

My eyes find his reflection in the mirror. He's trying not to laugh.

Confused by the reactions, I take a closer look at the buttery-soft leather vest draped over my shoulders. Over the left breast, my road name is stitched in clean letters: Joyride. Smiling, he turns me slightly to see the back of the vest in the mirror. It's covered with the same club patch as the others: a gang of wolves with skull faces riding motorcycles.

It's beautiful and would thrill me, except for the words that encircle the patch:

Property of the brotherhood.

Not Property of Sledge.

Tears come to my eyes as I realize exactly what they mean by Joyride. I cover my mouth in outrage and narrow my eyes at Sledge accusingly.

“Ah, come on, Joyride,” Sledge grins. “You can’t be angry. It suits you perfectly.” He looks around the room. “How many brothers have enjoyed Joyride here?” he asks as several brothers raise their hands. He looks down at me. “You can’t expect to be my ol’ lady when you behave like a club girl, now, can you?”

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come—I have no defense. What he says is true, but I didn’t expect the brothers to mock me openly.

“Don’t look so shocked, Joyride. In this club, we don’t shame; we embrace reality,” he states almost detachedly. “We talk openly, and we know everyone’s business. But in this club, ol’ ladies are monogamous, as are the brothers who have ol’ ladies. They’re true to each other until such a time as they decide to move on, or not. Shared females are club girls, and the brothers who share the club girls are not monogamous. Nothing’s really changed; we can still have fun.”

“Welcome to the club,” Drágon interrupts. “Since you’re a club girl, here are the rules.”

He drones on about never approaching a brother, saying I’m supposed to wait for them to come to me. Pffft! A girl’s got needs, too! Then I hear something about personal cleanliness and health check-ups. He tells me that my status here is voluntary and that I can leave at any time.

But what stops me cold is when he says I’m on the chore rotation chart, expected to help keep all clubhouse areas clean and assist with cooking and serving meals.

“What?!” I finally emerge from my shock. “I’m not a maid or cook!”

Drágon pins me down with just a look. “Joyride, in this club, no one rides for free, and sex isn’t a form of payment. You must pull your own weight or find yourself out on the streets. In exchange, we’ll provide you with food and a bedroom. You’re in the

chore rotation; do I make myself clear?”

“Yes,” I grit out. I’m too angry to do anything more, knowing that if I don’t keep my mouth shut, my meal ticket and the roof over my head will disappear.

He nods sharply, his jaw tenses as curls of steam hiss from the corners of his mouth.

## Chapter 15–Tangled Hearts

### Paisley

Since Marissa’s disappearance several months ago, my life has become much easier. I no longer have her or her cronies breathing down my neck, and torturing me. Her mean girls’ club has fallen apart since her former best friend, Hannah’s, brush with CMS. After that, Hannah kicked her husband, Seth, to the curb and is no longer speaking to him. She’s also on a steady diet of Amra.

Speaking of Amra, I have an appointment at the medical clinic for a checkup. Since the drug is still new, doctors closely monitor anyone who uses it, and they don’t yet know all of its side effects. While the drug helps keep us patients alive and pain-free, researchers have not yet determined its long-term ramifications.

I open my cabin door to leave and find Miles standing on the threshold. “M–miles! What are you doing here?” I stammer.

He thrusts a bouquet of flowers at me. “These are for you.”

I step back, holding up my hands. “Whoa! Miles. I don’t know why you think I’d want flowers from you.”

“I just want to apologize,” he pleads.



“Apology not accepted. What kind of desperate idiot do you take me for?” I slam the door in his face and go to the back door. The walk will be a little longer, but I can at least try to avoid Miles, who continues to knock at the front. I cut through the forest behind my cabin and circle through a walking trail when Miles catches up with me. Of course, being a shifter, he wouldn’t have difficulty tracking me.

“Miles, I don’t want to talk to you,” I huff out in exasperation. “Why are you insisting on following me?”

“Marissa—I mean Paisley...”

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I stop dead on the trail and face Miles. I glare at him for a full minute before I take a deep breath and turn to walk on.

He starts to follow. "Paisley—"

Not hesitating, I continue to stomp away from him, raising my hand to indicate I don't want to hear any more out of his mouth. I'm proud I haven't caved to my wolf's urging to flip him the finger. I guess my inner wolf is a little sassier lately.

"I didn't mean to call you by her name," he pleads. "I just want to say that I'm sorry and make things up to you."

I stop again and turn to him; a look of irritation crosses my face as I shake my head. "What do you imagine will happen after you apologize and make it up to me?" I raise my hands making air quotes. "Let alone how are you going to even make things up to me? You can't unsleep with her?"

"Well, I hope that we can—that you will—I hope for a chance to prove my feelings for you." He steps closer, his breath shaky, and then he gasps, "I—I love you."

I lower my head, a deep sadness settling over me at his raw confession. "You love me—until Marissa comes back. That's your track record." I pull up my top, exposing the scars on my stomach to illustrate my point, and look at him with steady eyes. "I can't survive your brand of love."

He stands there staring at my torso with a pained look as he raises his shirt to expose lacerations and bruises on himself. "I'm so sorry for what I put you through and for

what I threw away.”

I drop my shirt back down and turn away swiftly. Miles realizing the consequences of his mistakes doesn't evoke sympathy or satisfaction; it simply makes me nauseous. I speedwalk down the trail, trying to get away from Miles and to the clinic as quickly as possible. Miles grabs my arm and spins me around, wrapping his arms around me to keep me from falling.

“Please, Paisley,” he begs. “Hear me out.”

I don't want to come across as heartless; I genuinely feel sorry for him, but I can't risk my heart again. I jerk away, wrapping my arms around myself, and I glower. “Say what you have to say, and let me get on with my life, Miles!”

“Just give me a chance—just one more chance, Paisley, to prove to you that I can be faithful to you—that I love you.”

I throw my arms up in surrender--I give up. I don't know what delusions Miles has, but something is wrong. “Miles,” I say softly. “I think you really need to seek counseling. Marissa has played with your emotions for so long that you no longer know which way is up.”

“For the first time in a long time, Paisley, I feel like I'm actually thinking clearly,” he says. “This CMS,” he gestures toward his stomach, “has really been a wake-up call.”

“Then answer me this,” I reply, my voice steady. “After we'd been together for a year as fated mates, why was it so easy for you to turn your back on our relationship and without hesitation bond with Marissa?”

“I don't know,” he blurts out immediately, his voice almost desperate.

“Why give Marissa what you promised to me?” I continue, my voice rising, “She’s treated you like a toy—a plaything? She drops you when tired of you and picks you up again if someone else shows interest.”

“I don’t know,” he says frantically.

“What assurances do I have that you won’t do the very same thing again should Marissa return for you?” I ask, my words sharp.

“I…” he falters, the truth sinking in. I watch him finally realize he can’t promise me any future because of Marissa, even if he refuses to accept it.

I spin around and resume walking toward the medical clinic. “Miles, your hesitation is the answer,” I say, not bothering to look back. “And that’s exactly why I could never even consider letting you back into my heart.”

I walk into the pack house and head downstairs to the medical clinic. The medical assistant, Dr. Rach, greets me warmly. “Hi, Paisley. Just head on into Exam Room 1. I’ll be right behind you.”

I get settled on the end of the examination table and look around the small room. It’s nearly pristine, as shifters aren’t susceptible to many illnesses; therefore, the charts on the wall are about Cheating Mate Syndrome or immediate first aid for silver or wolfsbane poisoning. There’s even one that describes and illustrates the shifting process down to a genetic level, published by the Stone Mountain Genetic Research Institute.

Dr. Rach opens the door and pushes her holographic device cart into the room. “So, Paisley, how have you been?”

I sigh deeply. “Physically, I feel tired and run down. All I want to do is sleep.”

“What about emotionally?” she pries.

“I’m a wreck emotionally.” I confide. “Between everything that happened with the CMS, Marissa and her cronies harassing me, and now Miles will not leave me alone.”

“What is Miles doing?”

“He sneaks around the cabin often when off-duty and not otherwise occupied. And he has gotten braver, to the point that he’s now trying to talk to me. Just as I was about to leave for my appointment here today, he knocked on my door. He followed me when I snuck out the back way through the woods.”

“Really?”

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“Yes. I don’t know what to do about it.” I lean over and put my head in my hands.

“What does he want?”

“He’s going on about making the cheating up to me and proving he can be a better male or some such!” I grit out. “I think he needs counseling because I can’t help him. I will not put my heart back on the line and wait for Marissa to snatch him up again.”

“Do you still have feelings for him?”

“No—well, not like you might be thinking. I feel an overwhelming sorrow for the loss of my mate. When he sneaks around my cabin, and I can feel his presence, my soul grieves for what we had and lost. It hurts to know that he threw our relationship away for nothing—because now, Marissa is gone again, and all he’s left doing is stalking me. Had he not cheated with Marissa and then mated her, we would still be together. Instead, he’s here, lurking around my cabin, unable to move on, and I’m left with this heartache.

“I also feel sorry for him because Marissa has totally messed up his mind. I feel angry and spiteful that he has the nerve to try to talk to me again, like I’m so desperate for affection, I’d even consider it!”

“I know Knight has some feelings for you,” Dr. Rach suggests. “How is that progressing?”

“Knight says he believes he’s my second-chance mate.” I huff. “I think that may be my fault because I used Knight to illustrate to Miles the pains of CMS. When I was

first released from the hospital after Miles cheated, I kissed Knight. It was a passionate kiss—one that definitely got Miles’ attention as he writhed in pain—but it gave Knight false hope. For that, I feel guilty. Especially since I still turn to Knight for comfort.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure if it’s the Amra or something else, but I don’t have feelings for anyone. I don’t care about anything most of the time,” I confess. “I’ll admit, Knight comes to my cabin almost every night after Miles leaves. I’m usually a mess—crying, overwhelmed by Miles’ skulking around—and Knight comes inside, climbs into my bed, and holds me until the sobs stop and I finally fall asleep. He’s always gone by morning, but the comfort he gives helps me sleep. Still, there’s no real mate bond between us. I don’t feel any connection like that with him. It could be anybody,” I whisper sadly.

“Some studies are coming out that Amra may be stifling new mate bond connections as well as old ones.” Dr. Rach advises. “Since Miles has officially mated with Marissa, your bond should be gone. However, the fact that Miles’ presence still distresses you suggests that there are some vestiges of the bond left. I want to keep you on Amra for a while longer. Perhaps we’ll look at reducing the dosage when I assess you next month.”

“Okay.”

“In the meantime, I want you to see a counselor.” Dr. Rach takes out a sticky-note pad. “I want you to call Dr. Bishop. He has a home office on the edge of the territory where he sees his patients. I think you’re clinically depressed, possibly with complications of PTSD as a result of the CMS. Dr. Bishop can help diagnose and treat those conditions as well.” She tears the top sheet from the pad and hands it to me.

“Sounds good, Dr. Rach,” I respond. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing,” she replies. Is there anything else you want to discuss while you’re here?”

“I don’t think so. Thanks again for your help.”

## Chapter 16 – Date with A Dragoness

\*\*\*Trigger Warning -- Drug References\*\*\*

Marissa

Males are so easy to manipulate. I love the influence I have at the MC, especially when I can use my wiles to get into the heads of the brothers. I’ve always relied on my looks to get what I want, but here, I can coerce these powerful males into giving me exactly what I need. Right now, all I need is revenge on Paisley.

Sure, other females have come between me and males before, but Paisley has crossed a line by interfering with my relationship with Miles. He’s off-limits to any female, especially one who thinks she can take him from me permanently. Even with things the way they ended with Miles this last time, I know it’s never really over. He. Is. Mine.

Ironically, these tough brothers, who pride themselves on protecting the vulnerable, are also the perfect pawns in my plan. I’ve whispered my schemes into the ears of several of them. I’ve learned how to speak their language and use it to my advantage.

Any day now, I expect my plan to come to fruition, and I can almost taste the satisfaction. Sure, it’s all lies, but if it gets rid of Paisley, I don’t care to stretch the truth a little.



Lynsey

I'm a rarity in motorcycle clubs for two reasons: First, I'm part of the "brotherhood," even though I'm a female. Second, I'm Drágon's sister, which means I'm a dragon shifter, too.

They call me and my ol' man, Que, the "relocation specialists." Let me explain. The club operates several successful, legitimate businesses under Talons & Claws MC Corporation to fund our vigilante justice operations, which have enabled us to become wealthy. Some of the club ventures include The Inked Beast Tattoo Parlor, Savage Auto Repair, Howler's Grill, The Thirsty Claw & Fang Bar, The Night Lair Dance Club, Wolfstone Construction, Crescent Moon Cakery, Lunar Real Estate Group, Guardian Protectors & Defense Security, Primal Pack Digital Information Technologies, and Crimson Flame Wealth Group, to name a few.

Several club members are also successful business people in their own right. For example, by day, Que and I own and manage Crimson Flame Wealth Group, where we oversee stock portfolios for the club and its members, as well as for external clients. Additionally, I serve as the club treasurer.

By night, however, our focus shifts to a very different business—moving unsavory individuals. The club brothers identify dangerous characters, such as drug lords, drug dealers, and human traffickers. They bring these individuals into what they call a 'stress test' in the "Lie Detector Lounge"—a room located in the basement of the club.

The lounge is soundproofed and equipped with reinforced chains and manacles, designed to restrain and torture these unsavory elements into revealing vital information that will help dismantle these rings. If the individuals are lucky enough to survive the "elimination process", Que and I step in to manage their relocation to the wilds of Prisoner Island, warning them of the consequences if they return to their

previous occupations.

No one ever returns from Prisoner Island, and we may bring shovels with us during transport for “persuasion” purposes.

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Those who don't survive the "elimination process" become fish food.

I've been called in today for a meeting with the acting Prez, Snake. Drágon and the vice president are currently on assignment at another motorcycle club and are not expected back for a couple of days. Snake, being the Sergeant at Arms, is third in line and is continuing our work in the meantime.

I pull up to the clubhouse and slide off my Harley. Taking off my helmet, I shake out my long, fiery auburn tresses and turn to the carrier on the back of my bike, where Nathan is strapped. Nathan is my adorable, reddish-brown Dachshund with a warm, rusty hue, reminiscent of cinnamon or mahogany. His smooth fur and long body contrast with his short, stubby legs. Before I unstrap him, I remove his motorcycle goggles and helmet and place them inside the carrier. Sitting him on the ground, he wags his tail and circles me excitedly.

As we walk inside the clubhouse, everyone begins to call his name. He's a charming, loving boy and quite popular with the ladies. He rushes over to his favorite ol' lady, Melitta. She's an older lady who's married to one of the enforcers, Bulldozer. He runs heavy equipment with the construction company.

Nathan jumps up on Melitta's lap and settles in, content to lie there and be spoiled as she pulls out a bag of dog treats.

"Snake said you were on your way, Lynsey, so I rounded up some dog treats for Nathan," she laughs. "Just tell me Que's not behind you because he doesn't like me feeding him too many treats."

“Que’s back at the office, working,” I put her mind at ease. “Is Snake in?”

Melitta nods and points to the back where the club offices are located. “Yep.”

“Thanks, Melitta,” I utter. “Nathan, you be good for Mel.” He wags his tail in answer as I walk to the back office and knock before entering. You have to be careful around here that you don’t barge in on anybody.

Snake is sitting at his desk, tapping on his old laptop. “Hey, Lynsey.”

“Hey, Snake. What’s up?”

“I got a special assignment for you and Que,” he states. “An extraction. We’ve got a drug dealer working as an elementary school teacher in one of the packs, supplying drugs and alcohol to high schoolers. We need to take her in and uncover the supply chain.”

“Where’s the dossier?” He hands me a file folder that I quickly flip through. “Have you checked these photos for authenticity?”

“Yeah, Byte looked everything over and said they looked credible.” Byte is our resident tech guru and owner of Primal Pack Digital Information Technologies. If it’s accessible online, Byte can find it. If you need a system hacked or something photoshopped or forged, Byte is the one to call on. “He said if it isn’t the real thing, it’s as good or better than what he could do.”

I nod. Byte’s word is good enough for me—he’s the expert. I scoff as I go over the photos again; they’re pretty incriminating. They show a young female exchanging a small baggie of white powder for cash. Not just one photo, but several, all involving teens.

“So, I’m assuming you want us to go pick up this female?” I snap the last word. Nothing makes me angrier than someone targeting our young like this. One of the reasons Drágon and I started this club was to stop the exploitation of the vulnerable. We had a younger sister who was taken by traffickers, and by the time we found her, she’d been mentally broken. Since then, we’ve dedicated our lives to caring for her and protecting those who are defenseless.

“Simple removal,” he says. “Bring her to the clubhouse basement, and the brothers will handle information gathering to shut down her operation. Since she seems to be a low-level player, it’ll probably just be a rough interrogation and then a relocation.”

“We’ll get right on that, Snake,” I growl. I take out my cell and text Que on my way out.

“Nathan, let’s go!” I call as I stride from Snake’s office toward my bike. “See you later, girls.” Nathan jumps from Mel’s lap and follows me as fast as his little stubby legs will allow. I suit Nathan up in his headgear and secure him in the carrier. Then, mounting my bike, I secure the chinstrap of my helmet and head toward Que, who I know is now loading up the “cage”—that’s what we call our cars—so we can pick up this miscreant and bring her to justice.

Byte has already punched into the surveillance camera feeds at the Wind Howl Pack and is currently tracking the suspect, Paisley Woods. Most of the packs now have all their pack members’ records and medical files digitized, so it’s incredibly easy to access her information. By infiltrating the pack database, we discovered that Paisley meets with a mental health therapist, Dr. Robert Bishop. Her next appointment is conveniently scheduled with him later this afternoon, and Dr. Bishop’s office is located on the boundaries of the pack property. It’ll be a simple operation for us.

As we head north along the Can-Am Supernatural Highway, we’ll turn west, passing between the Bloody Paws Pack and Little Silver Creek Pack lands. After crossing the

canal, we'll reach the Wind Howl Pack. Throughout the journey, Byte will have us under surveillance, shutting down the internet and cameras to prevent us from being tracked as we pass. Thanks to his expertise, we've successfully completed numerous covert missions, and we're grateful for the safety his skills provide.

The end goal here is to return safely with Ms. Paisley Woods so that she can pay for her misdeeds—courtesy of me.

## Chapter 17 – Don't Play Me for a Fool

Lynsey

Never underestimate me. My core beliefs are built on three foundational principles: perception, clarity, and justice. One of the things you should know about rare female dragon shifters is that we're gifted. Not all gifts are equal or the same among us. I'm gifted with an innate ability to read people and situations accurately and with crystal clarity. I can quickly discern what's true and what's not. I have a strong drive to ensure that justice is served, regardless of the circumstances. And let's not forget my fierce temper when I discover injustices or realize I've been played, like right now.

That's where I'm usually underestimated.

I pull up to the clubhouse in our cage. "Que, bring our guest inside. I need to find Snake."

He eyes me warily. Not a word has been spoken between us, but we never need words anyway. He knows me—he can sense the dragon beneath the surface and her overwhelming desire to burn down the world. "Okay, honey." He touches my arm gently.

As he helps an unmolested, frightened Paisley from the car and guides her inside, I

storm into the common room. “Snake!” I thunder. The entire room stills with shock.  
“Where is Snake?”

Snake steps from the crowd, a menacing expression on his face. “What’s this about?”  
He demands.

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I'm so enraged, I don't even have the forethought to take this conversation to the privacy of his office. "Who supplied you with the intel of my latest assignment?" I demand.

Snake looks around the room, uncertainty crossing his face briefly before he masks it. "Are you questioning me?" He asks belligerently.

"Yessss!" I snarl. "You know my abilities, Snake. It's why I am a vital part of this organization. Picking up the latest target was so easy, I felt like I was kicking a kitten! I've never felt more innocence rolling off a shifter as I did from Paisley Woods."

I watch as he glances toward the new club girl, Joyride. "What's going on here, Snake? Joyride?" I approach her and catch my reflection in the mirror. Steam rises from my nostrils, and my usually brown eyes flicker with the red glow of my dragon's inner ire. My jade-tinted scales ripple in and out along my neck and arms, shifting in a fluid, pulsing rhythm.

"What's going on, Joyride?" I repeat, flames licking up my jaw as I close the distance between us.

"Her name isn't Joyride!" Paisley croaks. "That's Marissa. She stole my true mate from me!"

Joyride, forgetting me in her anger, yells at Paisley, "He was mine first!"

"You dumped him and stayed gone for a year, until the night before our wedding!" Paisley, regaining her voice, shrieks and begins to cry.



I take a step back, allowing the drama to unfold. As Snake starts to move toward the two females, I raise my hand, signaling him to hold off.

“Well, we all saw who ended up married to him, and it wasn’t you.” Joyride crows, gaining her confidence as she steps up to Paisley.

Paisley glares at Joyride. “You might have taken him, but he never left the pack to look for you when you disappeared again. He’s been too busy stalking me and begging me to take him back. Gifts, flowers, little notes. He’s regretting letting me go, and he misses me, not you.”

Joyride stiffens, her eyes narrowing in rage, then hurls herself at Paisley, slamming her to the ground.

Paisley rolls over, straddling Joyride, grabs a fistful of her hair, and slams her head against the floor.

She punctuates each word with a brutal strike to drive the message home.

“I.” Smash.

“Don’t.” Crack.

“Want.” Rip.

“That cheater!” Punch.

Sitting astride Joyride’s midsection, Paisley continues to destroy her as she punctuates each word with an action. "I will never reconcile with that dirty cheater! You can have him!" Paisley shouts. Everyone stands around, stupefied, watching the two females go at it. Paisley rises and gives Joyride one last kick in the ribs.

Joyride pulls herself up, spitting blood and groaning. As Paisley begins to turn and walk away, Joyride launches herself at her back. Fed up, I snatch Joyride mid-jump by her hair and yank her back. As she spins to swing at me, I punch her square in the nose and let go, blood spurting. She hits the floor with a very satisfying thud, similar to a mic drop.

“Annnd, she’s out!” Melitta calls out, a grin spreading across her face. “Didn’t like her anyway. Especially after that little performance,” she mutters, shaking her head.

I take in the bloody mess that is Joyride. She’s lying in a heap, with patchy bald spots where Paisley gave her a new hairstyle. And are those teeth on the floor? I look at Paisley, who only seems slightly injured—yet she’s crying. Good for her. She’s scrappy.

“Someone take Joyride to Doc, and clean up the blood and hair off the floor,” Snake orders.

After one last look at the carnage, I turn my attention to Snake. “Did Joyride provide that intel?”

“Yes,” he admits.

“Did you vet the information or just take your shiny new plaything’s word for it?” I hissed. “You do remember her deception when she first came here, and Slade was kind enough to overlook it and let her stay as a club girl?” I kick Joyride’s prone form. “That was the first mistake, allowing a dishonest female to stay.”

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating, Lynsey!” Snake snarls menacingly at me.

Que, never the one to allow anyone to disrespect me, warns, “Snake...” And that is all he has to do. Everyone knows he’s called Que for a reason: he’s quiet, quick, and

will quash you without qualms.

Snake immediately pulls back. “I consulted with Byte about the photos, but I didn’t do anything further.”

“So, you involved the club in Joyride’s personal vendetta against another female—a flipping catfight,” I growl. “And from what we’ve just witnessed, she’s clearly the instigator.”

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Snake turns away, unable to look me in the eye. "After Joyride's been treated by Doc, put her in one of the cells," he directs. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

"What about Paisley?"

He quickly shoots a glance at Paisley. "Have Doc check her out and lock her in an empty bedroom suite for now. Make sure she's comfortable. I've some investigating to do." He looks over his shoulder darkly at Joyride. "We'll question Joyride when she regains consciousness."

A couple of the brothers grab Joyride up under her arms and drag her to the medical clinic while a couple of the club girls approach with cleaning supplies and bleach.

"Send a meal up to Paisley's room and stock a mini-fridge with water and snacks for her," I suggest, glancing at Paisley, who is still crying. "One of you ol' ladies got some clothes she can change into after she takes a shower?"

"I'll get her some clothes and towels," Melitta offers. "I'll make sure she's okay."

"Thanks, Melitta," I say. "See that Doc checks Paisley's injuries."

"Will do, Lynsey," Bulldozer replies as he and another brother take Paisley to a room.

"I need to get some air before I burn this place down." I walk outside, and Que follows quietly beside me. Taking my hand, we do a few circles around the lake until my temper wanes, and I can breathe cool air again.

We stop on the far shore, and Que pulls me in, his hand roughly grabbing the back of my head as he kisses me. “There’s my good girl,” he murmurs, his voice low. “For a second, I thought I was going to have to put you over my knee and spank you.”

I raise an eyebrow, feeling the heat rise again. “Who says you still don’t have to?”

## Chapter 18 – Wind Howl Pack

### Alpha Stone

I pace outside the ICU, where Beta Miles is kept alive by machines. Even the continuous IV drip of Amra isn’t easing his CMS symptoms as effectively as it once did. They continue stitching him up, but his body isn’t able to recover fast enough. Each time he heals to the point where he can leave the ICU, another episode hits, and he’s right back in surgery. It’s an endless cycle.

Marissa is well aware of the damage CMS causes. We didn’t hold anything back when Dr. Skye showed her the photographs and videos. But she’s heartless.

Miles isn’t blameless either. He had to know Marissa wasn’t being celibate when she disappeared for months. But when she returned and beckoned him, he was foolish enough to take her back without much hesitation and jump into bed with her again. The betrayal set his fate in motion as he later sealed the bond to Marissa through a claiming bite, disregarding Paisley’s pain.

Now he’s paying the brutal price for trusting Marissa and breaking Paisley’s heart.

I left Beta Knight in charge of the pack to check on Miles, who’s in bad shape. Continuing to pace, I see Dr. Skye approaching.

‘Alpha Stone,’ she begins, ‘Come with me, please.’

Dr. Skye, the surgeon treating Miles at Stone Mountain City Hospital, is the foremost authority on CMS, having more experience with it than any other surgeon.

“Sure,” I reply following her into a small room where we sit down at a table.

“Listen,” she hesitates, making me uneasy. I can tell this conversation is going to be hard. “Miles is the most serious case of CMS I’ve ever treated in a living person. It’s a miracle he’s still alive with everything he’s going through. It’s a testament to his strength. But...he doesn’t have much more to give. After every surgery, he loses a little more ground.”

“I could wring Marissa’s neck!” I roar, pounding my fist on the table.

“Marissa? Is that his mate?”

“Yes. She ran off a couple of months ago and hasn’t returned,” I spit. “I have enforcers looking for her, but she’s crawled into some hole and hasn’t come out yet.”

“I see,” she sighs. “I’ve heard the story and know what Beta Miles did to his fated mate, and I usually don’t feel ill will toward my patients, but this is Karma at its finest—he’s been suffering for months now, hasn’t he?”

“Yes. Even though our healer has been increasing his dose of Amra, nothing seems to be helping. His pain is off the charts.”

"His mate is cheating repeatedly." Dr. Skye quips. "When he's conscious, his pain can't be controlled well at all," she adds. "And, his condition is precarious, and I'm becoming desperate. There is an alternative that we need to consider."

“There is a she-wolf who actually cut her mate mark off with a spell that worked, effectively removing the bond. Let's pursue that route quickly. At the rate of

deterioration, Miles doesn't have much time left.”

I agree with Dr. Skye's assessment, and she proceeds to fill me in on Luna Charlie's bond-breaking ritual when she and Alpha Jenson split up. We all knew that they had divorced, but I wasn't aware of the extent of Jenson's indiscretions or the things Charlie had gone through to cut ties. By the time we left that room, we had a plan in place and had made all the arrangements with Charlie herself to assist with the spell.

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"You know, I suffered from CMS, too," Dr. Skye confides. "Ironically, I treated my ex-mate here at the hospital for a week after the headquarters attack."

"How did that turn out for you?"

"I'm afraid we're still dealing with it," she laughs. "I don't know how much I should burden you with my scrape with CMS, but it's why I studied it and became a surgeon. I know first-hand the pain, but my ex-fated never had to deal with those consequences, and I'm very bitter about that. Does that make me a bad person?"

"Goddess, No!"

"He deserted us."

"Us?"

"Yeah, turns out I was carrying his pup," she shakes her head, tears forming. "Even after so long, it still hurts. But Amra helps." She wipes the tears from her cheeks. "Sorry. That's why I say we're still dealing with it. He now knows about his son, and I have to endure him in my life because of it. I can't rest until the threat of Cheating Mate Syndrome is eliminated. It hurts the innocent. It should hurt the cheaters."

"I--I'm sorry for your pain."

"Anyway, don't mind me," she grins and waves her hand through the air in dismissal. "Let's save Miles' life and get things back to normal. How is his ex-true mate doing?"



"I think she's okay, physically, because Marissa and Miles have the mate bond," I reply. "But I know she suffers mentally because my other Beta, Knight, reports to me that she cries every night. How will the mate bond removal affect her?"

"I don't know, Alpha, we're in uncharted waters here," she taps her chin. "It would be a good idea to warn her and admit her to the hospital for observation before, during, and after the procedure so I can ensure her well-being."

"Good idea. I'll get Beta Knight to get in touch with her and bring her here whenever you're ready to proceed."

Lynsey

"What were you thinking, Snake?" I snap. "You definitely weren't thinking with your brain!" I smack him on the back of the head. Yeah, I know he's a tough biker, but as a female in a male-dominated biker world, you have to be tougher, or you'll get eaten alive.

Snake jumps to his feet, fists drawn.

"Don't even think about it, Snake," Que breathes out in warning. "After I get through, Drágon will finish you."

"I can speak for myself, Que darling."

Que backs off, his hands lifted in surrender.

"What were you thinking, Snake?" I repeat. "To send us out to pick up an innocent based on the word of Joyride, who had already proven herself to be false, by agreeing to be Slade's ol' lady and then proceeding to act like a club girl. You know how Slade wears his heart on his sleeve."

Snake remains stubbornly mute.

“Have you even questioned Joyride?”

“No, but I’m about to go question the prisoner.”

“I don’t think so, Snake. Joyride is the prisoner. Paisley is an innocent. How do you think Drágon is going to react when he hears what a screw-up you’ve been?”

“Dragoness,” he calls me by my road name, “this disrespect ends now. Here’s how it’s going to go!” He sticks his finger in my face. “Paisley is going to be interrogated whether you like it or not. We got intel that she’s involved in providing drugs to kids, and until I find out differently, she doesn’t get a pass.”

He's pacing back and forth, ranting, periodically jabbing his finger in my face.

“If, and I mean if, Paisley is innocent, I’ll look at Joyride’s credibility. But not before. And, I’m releasing Joyride to my custody because I plan on making her my ol’ lady and taking control of her.”

His movements grow jerky and frantic as Que and I watch him prance around like we’re following a tennis match.

“You can’t stop me. Understand? I’m the one left in charge.” He gets up in my face again, jabbing his offending finger at me.

And.

I.

Snatch it!

Que

Often, people mistake my protective energy for Lynsey. Don't get me wrong, I'd fight a pack of wolves, a flight of dragons, and the entire motorcycle club to protect her. The fact is, she doesn't need me to fight her battles.

Case in point, I'm currently witnessing the funniest thing I have ever seen and damn if I don't have any popcorn. Picture this: a six-foot beefy biker on his knees, literally crying while a fiery red-headed female is bending his finger backward, her foot planted firmly between his legs. Lynsey is tall, with a solid and strong build and sculpted muscles; she exudes the confidence you would call big dong energy if she were male. She's in beast mode!

Her voice is steely quiet when she speaks. "Snake let's get one thing straight between us. Never, and I mean NEVER, put your finger in my face again. I can support you as temporary president in Drágon's absence, and I can show you respect in that position and as a brother. "However, when you're thinking with your tool instead of the good of the club, I'll put you in your place, fast."

Snake is sniveling, and honestly, it's kind of sad to watch. But better him than me. That's what I always say.

"Goddess, Dragoness, you broke my finger," he shouts.

Lynsey steps back, releases his hand, and removes her foot from his family jewels.

He cups his broken hand to his chest while his other cradles his balls, shooting dirty looks at her as he gets up off his knees and sits behind the desk.

“You’re a shifter. You’ll heal quickly,” Lynsey goads. “Are you ready to discuss this reasonably?”

Snake pops his fingers back in place with a grimace.

“Paisley is an innocent,” Lynsey reiterates. “We watched what went down between her and Joyride. Joyride is jealous of her and has a vendetta. Worse, she lied to you, Snake, and to the club. A mistake like this could tarnish our reputation. The Alpha Commander leaves us alone because we target the drugs and criminals that come into our world from the borders. Do you think he’ll tolerate us for long if we victimize law-abiding shifters because of a jealous club girl?”

Snake rubs his face with his good hand. “Dragoness, I’ve caught feelings for her.”

“She’s charismatic when it comes to males. But from what we witnessed earlier, and from Joyride’s reputation here, you aren’t the first, and that’s not a good idea, Snake. Let’s talk to Paisley and get the story from her side.”

Snake agrees, and Que leaves to bring Paisley to the office. Once she’s seated, she looks around at us with a look of fear.

“Paisley, Joyride has accused you of grievous crimes. She says you have been providing drugs to teenagers,” Lynsey tells her.

“I would never. I’m a teacher,” Paisley says, her face paling. “I wouldn’t hurt a child. Are you calling Marissa ‘Joyride’?”

“Yes. That is the name the brothers gave her—her road name.”

Paisley begins to laugh hysterically. With tears rolling down her face, she gasps for breath between fits of laughter. “That’s so fitting,” she finally manages. “The brothers pegged her.”

Lynsey shoots Snake a pointed look as he growls, not seeming happy about Paisley’s words.

“Why don’t you tell us your side of the story, Paisley,” Lynsey encourages. “Tell us about Marissa.”

Paisley nods and begins to tell us about her true mate, Beta Miles from the Wind Howl Pack. As she weaves her tale over the next hour, we get a better picture of Joyride's treachery. We learn about how Marissa seduced Miles, Paisley's ex-mate, the night before their wedding, and eventually, Miles chose Marissa by mating and bonding with her.

I could see her pain as she recounted her fight and recovery from CMS, and now Miles is suffering from it severely, especially since he had bonded with Marissa, and because of her infidelities, Miles might be dying.

By the time she finally finished, Snake looked a bit guilty. This shifter MC might be filled with tough characters and sometimes the dregs of society, but beneath the tough exterior, we actually don’t want to hurt guiltless people. While Miles is not exactly an innocent, he’s no criminal, and Joyride’s blatant disregard for Miles’ and Paisley's pain is galling.

“Snake, are you ready to question Joyride now?” Lynsey asks.

He nods his head, and they exit the room. Snake turns around and addresses Paisley. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about this. If you could hang around for a few days, we’ll get everything worked out and return you home.”

Paisley's big, doe brown eyes fill with tears as she nods her head. "Thank you," she whispers.

"Que, can you get a guard set up for Paisley? She needs to be protected, and we need to ensure she doesn't try to run off until Drágon returns. Since we picked her up, we need his approval to release her."

"I can do that, Snake," I reply. "I'm sorry about Joyride."

He waves it off, but I can see the pain of betrayal in his eyes.

"Are you hungry, Paisley?"

“Starved,” she murmurs.

“Let’s go get you something to eat.”

### Chapter 19–Unmasking the Lies

\*\*\*TW - Drug use reference\*\*\*

Lynsey

I’m looking forward to the interrogation of Joyride, especially after hearing Paisley relate her story. Joyride is a self-centered piece of work that has been getting away with too much for too long. I usually don’t participate in the day-to-day workings of the club, but they called me in to kidnap Paisley, so I’m now involved in righting this injustice done to her. Since Snake, and let’s face it, most of the club, are enamored with Joyride—I’ll take care of this personally.

To prevent everyone from rioting, especially Snake, I had to concede to questioning her here in the office, rather than in the basement. I wanted to wait for Drágon to return and assist me, since everyone’s acting stupid, but he hasn’t returned yet, and it’s been over a week since her arrest. So, Que, Snake, and I are in the office with Joyride.

I sit her down on a ladder-back armchair in the middle of the room. We typically use these chairs when we need to restrain someone; it just makes it easier. Even though she’s a mouthy she-devil and I’ve had enough of her, she’s not yet tied to the chair.

“I demand to be let go,” she shrieks, standing up in my face menacingly.

“Ho-ride,” I growl. “You need to back down before I stomp you on the floor.”

“You hear that, Snake?” she frantically asks, her eyes wide. “She’s threatening me. Are you going to let her get away with that?”

Snake studies Joyride silently with a confused expression.

“Snake!” She jumps up and tugs his shirt. He sits her back down on the chair, firmly. Taking out a couple of zip ties, he fastens her wrists to the arms, all without saying a word. Quite frankly, I’m surprised. Of course, Joyride fights him every step of the way, but she’s no match for Snake’s strength, and he easily subdues her.

“What are you doing, Snake?” Joyride screams, struggling to pull her arms free. He removes his belt, wraps it around her mid-section, and fastens it behind the chair, pinning her in place.

“Why are you doing this, Snake?” Her eyes plead with him as her movement becomes more restricted.

“What’s going on, Joyride?” Snake asks quietly, crouching in front of her with a confused look. “Something feels wrong.” He shakes his head.

Her eyes widen, and a fearful expression flickers across her face. “Snake,” she says calmly. “I need my medication. I’ve been without it for a week, and it’s in my room.”

“What medication? I’ve never seen you take any medication.”

“Well... it’s a tea—a calming blend I drink every day. I haven’t had any all week.”



A sense of distrust crawls up my spine. She's hiding something. "What kind of medication is it, Joyride?" I press. "What's it for?"

"Anxiety," she spits out.

"No," I reply.

"What do you mean, no?" she shouts, desperate.

"You're not being truthful."

"Snake, please," she begs, turning to him and blatantly ignoring me.

He shakes his head. "No. If Dragoness says you're being dishonest about something, we go no further until you spill it."

Joyride's eyes dart between Snake and me, frantic as if she's searching for any sign of mercy. Her hands twist against the zip ties, cutting into her wrists, but she doesn't seem to notice. Her gaze locks on Snake, pleading and desperate. "I-I need my tea," she breathes. "Please," she whispers, the words barely escaping. Her eyes keep shifting between us, growing more frantic with each second, her yearning for the drink obvious.

I glance at Snake pointedly. It appears as if Joyride is coming down from some drug and needs her next fix. "Where's this tea, exactly?"

"In my room," she sighs desperately. "On my bedside table in an unlabeled jar. Thank you," she breathes out jerkily, almost soothed.

"Do we have permission to go into your room?"

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“Yes, yes, anything,” she dismisses. “Just get my tea.”

I walk out into the hall where guards are stationed. “Two of you go search Joyride’s room for anything suspicious. There is a jar of tea on her bedside table. Bring that to me immediately and bring Sawbones back with you. Tell him to bring his medical bag and drugtest kit. Let me know if you find anything unusual there.” They nod as I turn back to the office.

The air inside feels different now, thick with tension. The calming, intoxicating atmosphere is entirely gone. Snake’s gaze is locked on Joyride, full of hostility. The softness is gone from his eyes, replaced by raw anger.

The atmosphere in the office feels different now, heavy with tension. The calm, almost seductive vibe that used to surround Joyride is gone. Snake’s glare is fixed on her, full of hostility. The softness in his eyes is gone, replaced by pure anger. I realize he’s no longer under her spell—he sees her for what she really is, and the truth is clear: she’s been using magic to make herself more attractive. The tea she has been without for a week is her potion.

A prospect comes back with a jar containing a black viscous substance. I remove the lid and am hit by an overpowering stench of black magic and death. I hurriedly replace the lid. “What is that, Joyride?”

“None of your business!” She screeches. “Give it to me now!” She resumes her struggle to free herself from the chair, becoming more frantic and hysterical when I sit the jar on the desk in front of her.

"Did you need me Lady D?" Sawbones asks as he comes into the room carrying his medical bag. His nurse, Gina, follows behind.

"We found this while searching Joyride's room," I say, nodding toward the jar on the desk. "Her desperate behavior toward it makes me think it's some type of drug. It definitely has a black magic feel to it. Can you run tests on it and on Joyride to see what we're dealing with?"

"Yes," he states as he takes out various items and sets them on the desk.

"You're not taking any blood from me!" Joyride screams. Snake tightens the belt around Joyride's torso and clamps his meaty hands down on her to hold her still.

Within minutes, Sawbones has a couple of vials of blood and the "tea" tucked into his bag. "It'll only take a couple of minutes, and I'll have an answer for you. But I can tell you right now, just from scent, you're right. My heightened sense of smell is sharp enough to pick up on the black magic contained in this." He gestures toward his bag.

As Sawbones and his nurse leave, I follow them out into the hallway. I stop at the door, arms crossed, watching those who have gathered to support Joyride. Some of the brothers, with a few prospects, stand off to the side, along with a couple of club girls and ol' ladies, all quiet now, their loyalties shifting with the lifting of the spell.

"Dang, Dragoness," Shade mutters, his voice thick with regret. "She played us. All of us."

Gearhead shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot, his expression pensive. "Let her woman's wiles blind me. Should've realized it sooner."

Bulldozer scowls, anger written across his face. "Thought she was one of us. What an

idiot I've been."

Beside him, Melitta, his ol' lady, remarks, "I told you that you should always listen to Lynsey, you old fool."

I look each of them in the eye—Shade, Gearhead, Bulldozer, Razor, and the others—my gaze steady, unflinching.

"I've known most of you for years, and I deserve for you to have faith in me," I say coldly. "But we now suspect that she used black magic to make herself more attractive and you all more biddable."

Razor steps forward, guilt and remorse shining in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Dragoness. We should've listened."

I glare at him for a few moments more. "Words won't fix this—just make sure you don't fall for any more of her lies or trickery."

Shade finally looks up, his voice sincere. "We should have trusted your instincts. You've never led us wrong, Dragoness. You were right. Always."

The brothers nod, their heads dipped low, as they begin to disperse. The few prospects follow suit, shame written all over their faces. The club girls and the ol' ladies stay quiet, but I can feel their eyes on me. I watch everyone leave, and a quiet sense of rightful vindication settles in.

I walk back into the office to continue the investigation so we can decide what to do with Joyride next. Drágon has the final say on all punishments, and if I were a betting woman—and I am—I'd say she's headed for Prisoner Island for an extended stay. Drágon doesn't suffer fools lightly.

With my knack for sniffing out lies, it's clear that Joyride is at least a skilled liar. She keeps denying any wrongdoing and claims that Paisley is the one supplying drugs to kids in her pack. So, like something out of the Jerry Springer show, we decide the best way to handle this is to bring everyone involved together for a meeting here on the club grounds. Once Drágon returns, we'll contact the Alpha of the Wind Howl Pack.

Alpha Stone

"What do you mean Paisley is missing?" I ask Knight as we talk over the phone for our weekly pack meeting.

"Just that, Alpha," he states. "She's been gone a week, and we've searched for her everywhere. She's disappeared into the wind, just like Marissa did."

"I assume you have an elite tracker team out looking for her?"

"The first thing I did was deploy them," he says. "She had an appointment with Dr. Bishop last week, but he says she never showed up for it. She hasn't been to work all week and never called in. Her scent has gone cold everywhere."

"Any leads? Does anyone know if she's visiting family in another pack or where she might be?"

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“No one I’ve spoken to knows anything,” Knight answers.

“They’re about to magically and surgically remove Miles’ mate mark,” I warn. “We need to find her, and fast. We don’t know what that could do to her. It might not affect her, but from everything I’ve seen between them—the lingering effects of their bond, her sadness, and his obsession with her, even after he bonded with Marissa—this is like nothing I’ve ever witnessed. If something goes wrong, it could hurt her. And if it does, she’ll need medical intervention again, from someone who knows what they’re doing.” I swallow, my voice tight.

“I’ve got all available units on it, Alpha,” Knight grits out hopelessly. “She’s my number one priority.”

“Keep me updated on your progress.”

“Will do.”

After we end the call, I pace the hallway in front of Miles’ room. The surgical team comes out pulling his gurney. The doctor follows behind.

“Wait,” I plead, reaching out to grab the doctor’s arm. “You can’t do this yet, we can’t locate his fated mate.”

“He can’t wait,” the doctor informs me. “You need to either allow me to proceed and take that risk, or we let him die. If they’re still connected in some fashion, it’ll affect her anyway. Nothing changes that outcome. However, with surgery, we’ll save him.”

My hand drops to my side in defeat. I nod. “Proceed.”

## Chapter 20–Dueling Bonds

As Miles is prepped for surgery, his heart beats a staccato rhythm:

Thump, thump, thump.

The surgical technician drapes his body in sterile paper sheets, then swabs the skin around his mate mark with alcohol.

The anesthesiologist lowers the mask over Miles’ face, the hiss of oxygen filling the room. With practiced ease, he inserts a syringe into the IV port and administers the sedative, ensuring Miles stays under.

Thump, thump, thump.

The surgeon scrubs up at the sink, then slips on her latex gloves. She approaches the instrument stand and scans through the tools, double-checking that everything she needs is in place.

Thump, thump, thump.

Across from the surgeon stands the local witch, dressed in surgical attire, holding an ancient tome wrapped in plastic for sterility. Her eyes are shut, and she appears to be humming and softly chanting to herself.

“Everyone ready?” Dr. Skye asks as she surveys the room, taking in the various medical technicians and nursing staff. “This is a first for me, but hopefully, we can quickly manage anything that comes up during the procedure.”

“Yes, doctor,” the different voices agree.

“Ms. Rathbone,” she instructs gravely, addressing the witch. “You may begin.”

The witch stops humming and starts to cast a spell that will hopefully break the bond between Miles and Marissa, ultimately saving his life. As she chants, a chorus of unearthly voices recites the translation for everyone to hear.

“O Ghealach Dhiadhachd cho soilleir,”

“Oh, moon goddess, light so bright,”

“Sàbhail am fireannach seo bhon bhàs an oidhche seo,”

“Save this male from death this night.”

As the first words slip from the witch’s mouth, Dr. Skye takes a scalpel and begins to cut the mate mark from Miles’ neck. Once it’s free, she uses tissue forceps to place it into a metal bowl, where it immediately turns to ash.

The witch continues her incantation.

“Bris an ceangal rinn cho neo-ghlic,”

“Break the bond so unwisely made,”



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“Comharraich na fiachan dhuit mar a chaidh am pàigheadh.”

“Mark the debt to thee as paid.”

Miles lies still on the surgical table as the echoes of the final words fade. The air hums with energy. Suddenly, his body jolts. His chest lifts off the table, arching upward, as though something inside him is trying to break free. His muscles seize, his frame bends unnaturally, and then a soft light begins to glow from his chest. At first, it's faint, like moonlight slipping through the clouds. Then it intensifies, transforming into the image of a lunar eclipse: a darkened moon surrounded by faint shadows, symbolizing the goddess's bond of fate.

But something's wrong. The tattoo-like image fractures, jagged black lines running through it, similar to shattered glass, splitting the symbol into pieces. The mark glows with an intense, silvery light. As the beautiful design shatters and fades into an ugly scar, the light recedes. It's clear now: this bond, once pure, is broken, ruined, and reflected in the shattered symbol.

Thrum, thrum, thrum.

As the surgical team stands frozen in shock, Dr. Paisley calls out. “Stats? The team snaps into action. One of the nurses quickly checks the monitors, glancing up with a relieved expression. “His vitals are all good, Dr. Paisley. He's stable,” she summarizes, her voice steady.

Dr. Skye turns to the witch, eyes wide with disbelief and asks, “Ms. Rathbone, what just happened?”

The witch responds, her voice filled with disbelief, "There were two mate bonds within him. One was created by his decision to mark his chosen mate during a bonding ceremony."

"The other bond, the Lunar Eclipse Bond, is the moon goddess's mark, which has now appeared on Miles' chest. It symbolizes the bond he once shared with his fated mate, Paisley. This rare bond forms when two fated mates are born under a similar celestial event, like a solar or lunar eclipse. It doesn't have to occur in the same year. It's an especially powerful bond because it's said the moon goddess sealed it with her own hand during the celestial event—their connection, it is written in the stars."

"That bond should've never been broken...but it has been, because it was tainted by the chosen mate bond," her voice trailing off in a whisper.

Miles

I rise from my bed and look around, but the darkness surrounds me completely, thick and black, almost viscous. 'Hello?' I call out. 'Is anyone there? Where am I?' I take a few steps forward, reaching out and feeling a solid surface to my right. As I move along it, I hear voices in the distance. 'Hello?' I shout again, louder this time."

I feel a pinch in my neck where my chosen mate mark lies, as the voices swell, chanting:

"O Ghealach Dhiadhachd cho soilleir,"

"Oh, moon goddess, light so bright,"

"Sàbhail am fireannach seo bhon bhàs an oidhche seo,"

"Save this male from death this night."

“Bris an ceangal rinn cho neo-ghlic,”

“Break the bond so unwisely made,”

“Comharraich na fiachan dhuit mar a chaidh am pàigheadh.”

“Mark the debt to thee as paid.”

I feel a burning in my chest, just above my heart, and suddenly a light bursts forth, a fire that sears and etches a symbol onto my skin. I fall to the ground, my body writhing in pain. It’s as if the goddess herself is tracing a beautiful tattoo onto my heart, which blooms out onto the surface of my skin. It’s the image of a moon rising in an inky black sky, slowly being eclipsed until only a black circle remains, surrounded by silvery wisps of moonlight. The beautiful image fills me with thoughts of pure love and safety, endless and eternal.

“Miles, my wolf-son,” a distinct female voice speaks from the darkness. “This mark over your heart symbolizes the gift I bestowed upon you—Paisley’s love and devotion.”

“I don’t understand!” I cry out, rising onto my knees. “Who are you?”

“I’m your moon mother, the moon goddess, Miles,” the feminine voice whispers, echoing from all directions. “But my heart aches for you, my wolf-son. You did not cherish the gift I gave you—you destroyed it through greed. You wanted too much! You wanted both. And in the end, you chose wrong.”

“I thought I had the right to make my own choice at the time,” I say, writhing in gut-wrenching agony. The pain isn’t physical now, but something far deeper—visceral, a soul-deep regret. “I now know that I made the wrong choice by choosing Marissa, but I thought I had the freedom to make that choice.”

“Not in this, Miles,” the moon mother replies softly but firmly. “You and Paisley chose each other before the worlds were born. So, the bond I gifted you and Paisley is no ordinary bond. It is a sacred one where you would’ve had perfect happiness with your chosen one. Didn’t you feel perfect happiness with Paisley?”

“Yes,” I choke on the word, bile rising in my throat as I realize the magnitude of my loss.

“You allowed lust to rob you.”

I sob uncontrollably.

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"You once had a pure heart, too, until Marissa weakened it. She was never meant for you, Miles. I sent you the fated mate you desired, one who was worth cherishing. But you didn't trust me enough to embrace the bond, leaving yourself open to corruption fully. Always receive my gifts quickly, my wolf-son, before they disappear."

"Oh, Mother Moon, I know I hurt Paisley, and I now see that Marissa is nothing compared to her. And I want to go back and do things over again so badly. If I could have that chance, I vow I will never allow Marissa to touch what I have with Paisley. I promise I will bond with her and marry her immediately," I plead. "Please, turn back time for us, just this once."

"I'm sorry, my wolf-son," the moon mother soothes. "But it's too late to reverse time. Perhaps, at that moment, just after you committed your betrayal, if you realized your error and felt remorse, it could've been undone. But that's not the case, is it?"

"Please," I continue to beg.

"So much time has passed. Our actions are like ripples on the water. Imagine a light rain, with all the drops hitting the water, creating ripples that dance on the surface, touching and interacting with one another. That's like our lives, Miles. Every action causes other actions and reactions... You can't even imagine. If our actions are bad, the consequences can be devastating. However, undoing your actions now can't be done. Miles, under these circumstances, they were irreversible at the moment you became intimate with Marissa again and cheated on your mate.

"You're on a different path now, and your past is set. Your journey now is to accept the fate of the bond you helped destroy and the pain that comes with that loss. You

must also acknowledge the faithlessness of Marissa, your chosen mate. There's no going back to either bond, Miles. This isn't just the consequence of your decisions, but a blessing, because you've suffered enough at Marissa's hands. Remember, redemption doesn't lie in reclaiming the past, but in finding peace in a new future."

"I'll never look back at Marissa," I promise. "I've learned that lesson. I'm a possession to her, not someone she loves. But I can't let go of the hope of a future with Paisley."

"I'm afraid you must, Miles," her voice echoes around me before falling silent.

I look down at the beautiful symbol of my bond with Paisley in horror as it shatters like glass, jagged black lines running over it and webbing across my entire torso. A flash of light erupts from it, fading as quickly as it came, and the image collapses into itself, leaving an ugly, ruined scar over my heart.

## Chapter 21—Faithless

### Marissa

I'm lounging on the bed, surrounded by the silence of my room. Even though Dragoness confiscated my potion and I haven't taken it in a week, everything is just as it should be. The soft hum of the club downstairs, the occasional chatter, and the smell of leather and whiskey in the air. It's all so familiar. So—mine. Dragoness may think she's the queen bee here, but in reality, it's me.

I stretch lazily, a smile tugging at my lips. I know they all still want me. They're just waiting for me. I'm the one they crave. Snake, the brothers, the prospects, they can't get enough of me, because I make them feel things no one else can. I'm their fix. Their obsession. I know exactly how to make them fall for me, how to twist them until they think only of me. They'd stop breathing, if they could, just for a taste of

me. I own them. I always do. Males are so very easy to control. They think they want power, but deep inside, they're just looking for someone to dominate them. And that someone is me. I know how to manipulate and fuel their desires, how to make them need me so badly they ache for me. It's a game I've perfected. I always win, and I always will

Just like I own Miles, he's mine.

No one else will ever matter to him the way I do. Paisley is too bland, too vanilla. I'm the flavor he craves, the spice he wants on his tongue. He's just waiting for me to come back to him when I'm ready, like always. After I've had my fun. A laugh bubbles up in my throat.

I take a drink from the glass of amber liquid in my hand. It burns as it slides down my throat, instantly warming me. But then, something feels off. The room seems to close in around me, the air becoming heavy and stifling.

A low hum begins to fill the air, a sound I don't quite recognize at first. Voices faintly chanting—whispering and hissing in the background.

“O Ghealach Dhiadhachd cho soilleir...”

“Oh moon goddess, light so bright,”

My body tenses as the words strike me in the heart. My chest tightens and my breath hitches as the chanting grows louder, more insistent.

“Sàbhail am fireannach seo bhon bhàs an oidhche seo...”

“Save this male from death this night.”

I sit up in bed, confused. My heart starts to race as the air suddenly feels colder. My glass slips from my hand, hitting the floor with a heavy thud.

“Bris an ceangal rinn cho neo-ghlic,”

“Break the bond so unwisely made,”

Something is wrong—terribly wrong. An unseen force is pulling at me.

“Comharraich na fiachan dhuit mar a chaidh am pàigheadh.”

“Mark the debt to thee as paid.”

I clutch my chest tightly, a burning sensation spreading through me, near my heart. The incanting grows louder now, ancient and powerful. I rip at my shirt, the pressure building as a strong, ominous feeling urges me to stop the voices.

And then, sharp, searing pain explodes from the very center of my being.



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I gasp, my body propelled forward as if struck by an unknown assailant. I feel as though I'm being torn open and ripped apart. My wolf, who I haven't felt in years, stirs and begins to howl in my head.

I look down and pull my blouse to the side, my breath catching in my throat. A light pulses from my chest, just above my heart. Then, a symbol begins to burn like a brand, spreading across my skin. A beautiful lunar eclipse, with silvery wisps of light glowing around the edges. A lone wolf appears, howling, crying to the moon.

I sink to my knees, overwhelmed by the beauty of the breathtaking symbol. I can't take a breath, and tears prick my eyes as I gaze at the vision before me.

Then, suddenly, the pain intensifies, throbbing with each beat of my heart, sending waves of agony through me. The lovely glyph on my chest shatters, splitting into jagged black lines that spread across my skin like a spider's web.

It feels like my heart is being torn from my chest. I try to scream, but no sound escapes my throat. The webbing grows, pulsing and spreading across my torso like shattered glass, leaving black residue wherever it touches. It weeps a thick, tar-like liquid, dripping and pooling in my lap.

Black tears.

I stagger back and fall to the floor as I tear at my skin, but the stains remain. I watch in horror as it webs down my arms and hands. I can feel the deep burns as it snakes across my once lovely face. The symbol itself is branded onto me. The liquid seeps from the mark, spreading across my skin and clothes.

A bright white light flashes across my vision, and I blink, finding myself lying in an inky-black void. The oppressive darkness presses down on my lungs. I try to rise, but cannot.

“Help! Help me!” I cry out in futility. “What’s happening to me?”

“Hushhhhhhhhh, daughter,” a harsh feminine voice chides me.

“Where am I?”

“You’re with the moon mother, child,” the voice echoes, twisting around me, taking my breath. “I’m here to answer your questions.”

“Where are you? Why can’t I see you?”

“You aren’t worthy to set eyes upon me, child,” the moon mother scolds. “Because of your greed and selfishness, you sought to take that which wasn’t yours. You are corrupted. Miles was never meant for you. You were meant for someone else.

The darkness dissipates into a thick fog, and suddenly, I’m in a sunny meadow, a distant observer. Before me, a slightly older version of myself stands, smiling up at a beautiful, strong Alpha with broad shoulders and long black hair. His blue-green eyes lookdown at me with a smile. Me! His lips hover near mine, his warm breath brushing my face, and I can almost taste the wine on his tongue. My body and mind ache for him like I’ve never ached for anyone before. I feel the promise of the fated mate bond curl around me like smoke from a fire.

“This was your fated mate, Marissa,” the goddess mocks. “But you were too busy conniving and manipulating to wait for him, so now he’s been given to another.”

“No!” I cry out in agony.

I watch as the Alpha in the vision releases me and turns to look behind him at a beautiful blonde with brown eyes, tall and lithe like me.

He runs to her, and she to him, meeting in the middle and embracing. His pillowy soft lips claim hers in a kiss that sears pain through me, both physically and emotionally.

“Do you know why he has been given to another?”

“No—yes.” I concede.

“You have interfered with a sacred bond that I gifted to Miles and Paisley,” the goddess says, her voice full of anger. “You have torn the very fabric of fate. Now, you will wear the Faithless Mark because you betrayed Miles after promising him fidelity and causing him pain again and again. You’re also responsible for the damage done to their bond... for the pain you’ve caused your sister wolf.”

As I watch the couple before me, the realization hits that I did this to myself. I took Miles from his fated mate. I destroyed their bond.

I shake my head, trying to push the vision and thoughts away, but I will never be able to do so. This mark—the one that is now seeping into my very soul—is my punishment. It’s proof of my faithlessness.

I’ve destroyed something pure. And in punishment, I have lost my future happiness.

Tears sting my eyes, but I can’t let them fall. I can’t break. No matter the pain I have caused or who I’ve hurt. I’ll never escape because the mark continues to burn and ache as it slowly fades to scars.

“Marissa,” the goddess speaks with authority. “These are the consequences. When you wake, you will be judged and sent to Prisoner Island for your crimes. You will

not be cared for within the confines of the prison system, but within the wilds outside. Your fated mate is the keeper of Prisoner Island, and as punishment, you will be forced to watch and feel the pain of your intended fated mate being with another for the rest of your life.”

“No, that’s too cruel!”

“It’s nothing less than what you intended for Paisley.”

The webbed mark pulses and continues to weep, despite now being a scar. It’s a constant reminder of the pain I’ve inflicted and will have to endure. I gasp to breathe, digging at my chest, but the burning pain never ceases.

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This is my punishment. This is my future.

My elaborate game is lost, and it's time for me to pay the price.

### Chapter 22 – Twin Forces of Ice & Fire

Paisley

I can barely breathe. The ache in my chest won't let up. It's a dull, exhausting pain that never fades. It began the night of Miles' betrayal at his bachelor party. I try not to think about it, but it tears at my soul. It won't heal.

Thoughts of Miles, of us, cling to me, persistent and painful.

He chose her. Marissa.

How could he choose her over me, his true, goddess-given mate?

I've asked myself that question so many times, and the answer remains the same: he just did. Then, when Marissa took off again, he returned with his apologies. *Mea culpa*.

But I refuse to fall for Miles' lies again. So, here I am still grieving, with a broken heart. Even after he marked and mated Marissa, I still feel the bond. It's fractured and mangled, a meaningless promise that throbs with constant, physical pain.

From the moment we met, when it was just the two of us, the bond felt life-giving.

Bone-deep.

Eternal.

Written in the stars.

His touch felt like home.

Our heartbeats synced.

Sadly, unbeknownst to me, she was always there, hovering like a ghost in our lives, always on the edge of his mind. I never imagined he'd turn his back on us and leave me for her.

I wasn't naïve. I didn't step into this blind. He told me their history, but others in the pack had warned me too. They said Marissa played a twisted cat-and-mouse game with Miles, and I wasn't the first to get caught up in it. She'd been drifting in and out of his life for years. I should've been more careful or simply stayed away from him.

But I trusted him because I thought the past was precisely that—past. I believed what we had was stronger, something untouchable, because it was fated. That made me feel I was the exception.

I now laugh bitterly at my foolishness.

Miles and Marissa certainly taught me a lesson I'll never forget.

Even now, as I lie here, locked in this bedroom at the motorcycle clubhouse, the ache in my chest feels like a gaping hole I could get lost in. The pain fills the very cracks where our love used to live.

And then... darkness descends.

I shiver as I'm thrust into a void. Everything around me fades until a pitch-black abyss swallows me. I can't see. I can't feel. I can't hear anything except the wild, frantic thump of my desperate heartbeat.

Then, a low hum. Faint at first, distant, as if traveling through water. It grows steadily louder until foreign words begin to take shape and fill my head.

“Bris an ceangal rinn cho neo-ghlic...”

The words sound ancient and ominous, causing my heart to skip a beat.

“Stop!” I scream. The agony in my chest increases as the voices swell.

“Comharraich na fiachan dhuit mar a chaidh am pàigheadh...”

“Mark the debt to thee as paid...”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

A debt? Fire rips through me, and it feels like the tapestry of fate is unraveling—pulling at me, twisting around me, binding me, and consuming me. I try to untangle myself, but I can't. The darkness moves deeper, penetrating me as the chanting grows louder.

Just before I succumb to the blackness, a gentle light breaks through like a small sliver of moonbeams cresting a storm cloud. It's calming and inviting.

The burden of pain I've carried since Miles broke me begins to ease, as if the light is healing me. I can breathe deeply for the first time in months. As the glow deepens, warmth surrounds me and seeps into the fractured spaces.

Then, it transforms, taking on the shape of a glyph. A beautiful, ethereal moon hangs overhead. It's so enchanting that tears well up in my eyes. I watch as a unique celestial event unfolds—a lunar eclipse. A dark shadow glides across the silvery orb, its edges delicate and luminous.

As the image sharpens, it begins to pulse. Slowly, it detaches from the sky and cascades toward me like a comet, trailing tiny stars in its wake. Just before it pierces my chest, I rise to meet it, instinctively drawn to receive it, and warmth rushes through me. When the stardust clears, a radiant tattoo appears, delicate and shimmering just above my heart.

For a moment, complete peace washes over me. Every hurt is erased, and all my brokenness is made whole. The ache that has been my constant companion lately disappears, replaced by this stillness that makes me feel healed.



But then... it shatters.

And the ties that bind me to Miles are finally severed, and all that's left is relief.

When the image settles on my skin, it's bleeding. This beautiful tattoo is made even more haunting by a webbing of fractures. It's as if something sacred has broken. The pain has faded, replaced by a deep sorrow that's slowly waning.

'Paisley...'

The voice comes, soft and soothing in the space around me, and then there she is—the moon mother.

"Do you know what that mark is called?"

"No," I whisper.

"It's the Shattered Bond," she replies. "It represents the tattered remains of the connection between you and Miles. It also symbolizes your beauty and strength despite the brokenness."

I bow my head with grief.

"That which was between you, and Miles was special because it was sealed under a rare celestial event—the lunar eclipse," she continues. "It's a bond that was never supposed to be broken."

I quietly begin to sob at the magnitude of what was lost between us.

"You chose each other," she says. "Not just in this life, but before the Earth was formed. It was always your and Miles' destiny, written in the stars. But... the fault is

not yours to carry. You were betrayed.”

“He chose Marissa,” I whimper.

“Yes, he did. And she deceived him,” the moon mother whispers. “They will pay the price.”

“The debt?” I ask. “I heard chanting before that spoke of a debt being paid.”

“That’s right. The debt for the broken bond must be paid, but it’s not yours to pay.”

The darkness begins to gather around me.

“You’re innocent in this, Paisley; you have another true mate,” the moon mother says. “Within you lies an unawakened bond, someone you chose before time began. This one is pure and without blemish. But it’s not without trials.”

“I don’t understand. How can I have two true mates?”

Before time was measured, a prophecy was spoken:

“Two mate bonds were created before the world began—one of ice, the other of fire. The first will shatter you; the second will restore you with a true love’s kiss. Within you, both were meant to join, but deceit tore the bonds apart. The choice is yours: choose both, choose one, or neither. In your choice, true happiness will be found. Decide, and your heart will be healed, and your path will be sealed.”

“Your bonds will never be what they once had the potential to be. Not pure, nor without scars,” she whispers. “But they are still there, awaiting your final decision.

“Does that mean I have the freedom to choose Miles and this other true mate?”

“Yes,” she replies. “Or even neither.”

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I'm not sure how I feel about that. The deep ache has disappeared, replaced by a peaceful understanding that settles within me.

The tattoo stays, beautiful but imperfect. It's a promise of a future full of happiness; that reassurance is enough for now.

Lynsey

Yesterday, we scheduled a meeting, set for three days from now, with the key players to discuss what the club refers to as a trial for Joyride. Although not a traditional pack like the others, we're just as established and adhere to the same rules, though with a morally grey tint. Alpha Commander tolerates our presence because we help keep Stone Mountain Kingdom clean. We're his not-so-secret, dirty little secret.

Since Joyride's trial is set for three days from now, Miles Reid has enough time to recover so he can travel. Alpha Rex Stone and his second, Beta Knight Pierce, will meet with Drágon, Snake, and me to uncover the truth behind the lies Joyride has spread. We must address the danger she has caused through her wrongful kidnapping of Paisley Woods.

Joyride informed us that she had an encounter with the moon goddess in a dream. When she woke up, she found a scar on her chest, which had spread, webbing out to cover her entire body, including her face. Sawbones gives her a clean bill of health, but is convinced it's a curse. Joyride agrees with him, claiming the goddess gave it to her as punishment, though she refuses to say for what. We'll find out soon enough at the trial. Drágon can compel truth.

Oddly enough, during Joyride's experience with the moon goddess, Paisley fainted in her own room. While she was out, a tattoo of a shattered eclipsed moon appeared on her chest, in the same spot where Joyride's scar had appeared. She has since slipped into a coma and hasn't regained consciousness. Sawbones can't find anything that would cause Paisley's condition, but he assures us that she's otherwise fine. So, we've got someone sitting with her at all times until she wakes up.

## Chapter 23—Mates

### Drágon

It's late at night, and something has awakened me.

There is darkness all around the room, but I have a distinct sense that I'm not alone. I rise from the bed and stand, only to realize that I'm no longer in a bedroom. I'm standing in an endless, dark field.

Looking up at the indigo sky, I see a purple moon in the process of an eclipse. The stars that fill the sky are unfamiliar. There's no Big Dipper, no Orion's Belt.

The presence I sense lurking nearby is silent and still, but I can hear their breathing. Suddenly, the thunder of wings fills the air as the wind whips violently around me. Like a flock of startled birds, dozens of dragons take flight, soaring into the sky, their shimmering scales a colorful kaleidoscope of greens, reds, blues, golds, and blacks. The sight takes my breathaway as I watch the beautiful display of my brother and sister dragons.

I feel a gentle touch on my arm and turn to find a beautiful, curvy woman. Her long blonde hair curls in soft ringlets down her back, and her doe-brown eyes gaze at me with adoration. I know her. I can sense her deep in my soul, a bond that connects us. She feels so soft and warm. Am I dreaming?

“Is this real?” we both ask in unison.

“It’s a memory,” whispers an otherworldly voice. “From before time began.”

“I know you, don’t I?” I ask the smiling female.

“Yes,” she sighs. “You’re one of my soulmates. The moon goddess joined us.”

She turns to the other side, and there stands another male. He’s tall, with brown eyes and dark hair.

“I know you too, brother,” I say, feeling the tether that binds us all together.

He nods, gazing lovingly at the woman. “You’re my soulmate as well,” he tells her.

“Yes,” she says, smiling at him with devotion.

The voice whispers a prophecy on the wind:

“Two mate bonds were created before the world began—one of ice, the other of fire. The first will shatter you; the second will restore you with a true love’s kiss. Within you, both were meant to join, but deceit tore the bonds apart. The choice is yours: choose both, choose one, or neither. In your choice, true happiness will be found. Decide, and your heart will be healed, and your path will be sealed.”

The female takes my hand, and I kiss it, sealing our promise. She then takes the other male’s hand, and he kisses it, binding their vow.

We turn our eyes to the sky, admiring the dragons cavorting above, celebrating the eclipse. Both of us males hold the female’s hands in contented silence when another female approaches me.

“Come with me,” she cajoles sweetly, but her presence is unwelcome, and I push her away firmly.

“Come with me,” she insists, pulling on my arm.

“No!” I say firmly. “Leave us alone.”

She smirks at the female holding my hand and dances around to the other male, smiling at him alluringly.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

As the new female gently caresses the other male's arm and smiles flirtatiously at him, she whispers in his ear. Giggling, she continues her touches, and with each advance, the other male becomes more captivated by her, being enticed away from our shared bond. He smiles down at her, slipping off with her, irreparably severing the connection.

The female, still holding my hand, is devastated by the male's abandonment and collapses to the ground, clutching her chest. I watch in horror, unable to move or comfort her.

"Save me!" She cries, her voice raw with pain. "Help me!"

"How?" I ask, my voice filled with desperation.

"True love's kiss," answers the disembodied voice.

I wake with a jolt, gasping, sitting upright in my bed. I search the dark room around me, finding nothing amiss. The scene from my vision is slowly fading, leaving an ache in my chest over my heart. I press my palm to it and look down. Under my hand is a new tattoo: a shattered eclipsed moon. I stare at it, wondering: What's going on? What is this? What does "true love's kiss" mean?

Knight

We're currently on our way to the Talons & Claws MC compound. We left our Gamma, Cress Sartz, in charge of the pack while we're gone. Cress is a skilled female warrior; we're confident she can manage things in our absence.



A vigilante-style trial has been called for Marissa. It seems she's joined the Talons & Claws MC, where she's been hiding. Thankfully, she stayed away from Paisley until recently. Now, Marissa has made some serious claims, accusing Paisley of supplying drugs to teens, which ultimately led to Paisley's kidnapping. We all know how Marissa loves to stir up trouble for her. The Talons & Claws, however, are notorious for taking out the scum of society—those involved in drug dealing and trafficking. Because of their “services,” Alpha Commander turns a blind eye to their morally gray activities.

They take loyalty to their club very seriously. Because Marissa lied and tried to frame Paisley for her own selfish reasons, the club is more than a little angry. This is especially true since Marissa's vendetta against Paisley is personal, while Paisley is innocent.

We're about an hour away from the motorcycle club headquarters. Alpha Stone is in the passenger seat, and I'm driving. Miles is in the back with Rachel, our medical tech, who wants to check on Paisley. She's concerned because Paisley hasn't had her Amra since the kidnapping.

I'm concerned about Paisley, just like everyone else in the vehicle, but the closer I get to the MC headquarters, the more my wolf is acting up. He's pacing in my head, chanting, “Mate, mate, mate.” It's bizarre because up until now, he's had a strong interest in Paisley—so much so that I concluded we were mates—but he's never been this agitated.

Miles is acting a little jumpy, too. I can see him in the rear-view mirror, and his eyes reveal that his wolf is eagerly scanning the forest outside the windows, almost as if he's tracking prey. I'd think something else was bothering our wolves, mine and Miles' if it weren't for Alpha Stone and Rachel. They look calm and collected, as if nothing is triggering their animals.

As we continue the drive, my wolf grows more insistent, pushing me while chanting repeatedly, “Mate, mate, mate.” I shake my head to clear it and try to exert a little more control over him. “Settle!” I order silently, and for a moment, it works. He stops his antics.

Miles

I can feel something in the wind tonight. Since the surgery, my bond with Marissa has been severed, and it’s like I’m finally free. For the first time in years, my mind is clear and not haunted by thoughts of her.

But I’m still plagued by memories of my time with Paisley. Like a warm summer day, Paisley brings a soft caress of color to my life. Calm, beautiful, effortless, rare. Everything is more real, peaceful, and content with her.

Marissa, on the other hand, is an adrenaline rush, and like a junkie, I craved the intense, addictive chaos. The highs were thrilling, but the lows were draining. It was like being swept up in a violent, exciting, but damaging storm. Now, I see my relationship with her for what it really was: a toxic, destructive cycle.

My wolf is pushing me forward. Despite the moon mother’s words, I feel my bond with Paisley even stronger now. Although it hangs by only a few frayed threads, it’s a tapestry of colors connecting us, pulsing and strengthening the closer we get to the MC compound. For the first time since my bachelor party, I feel hopeful.

Rolling the window down, I stick my head out and feel my wolf coming forward, scenting the air. Even though we’re still miles away, I swear I can smell her sweet wildflowers and honey aroma. I close my eyes and recall her on the eve of our bonding ceremony, entwined in my arms, looking up at me with those adoring doe-brown eyes, her long blonde hair curling down her curvybody. That last kiss we shared, so full of promise and love, makes my heart ache with loss.

Looking forward, I whisper, “I’m coming, Paisley. It isn’t too late for us. I promise forever this time.”

Lynsey

It’s my turn to sit with Paisley. Although she’s still unconscious, I can see that her physical state is changing. For one, she’s running a fever, her skin is hot to the touch, and her body is drenched in sweat, so much so that it almost looks like steam is rising from her skin. I’m not sure if it’s magic at play or something else, but her condition is definitely worsening.

About an hour ago, she started talking in her delirium, her words frantic. She keeps repeating over and over.

“Save me!” She whimpers. “True love’s kiss.”

I don’t know what it means, and Sawbones is at a loss as to how to help her. We continue to bathe her with cool towels, and Sawbones has started an IV drip to administer fluids into her system. It doesn’t look good.

## Chapter 24 – Quasi-Tribunal

Drágon

After that dream last night, I had trouble getting back to sleep, and now I’m fighting exhaustion. It doesn’t help that flashes of it keep bombarding me, even while I’m awake. I can’t get that beautiful female’s face out of my mind—the devastation she suffered and how she kept begging me to save her. The unseen voice whispered that I could do so with ‘true love’s kiss.’ What am I supposed to do with that?

And the ache I’m left with, the lingering feeling that I know all three of those shifters.

I felt the betrayal of the other male deep within my soul, and the deceit of the other female still fills me with anger. I gasp as the realization hits me. The other female was Joyride. Did I know Joyride previously? The voice called it a memory, “From before time began.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

The vision plagues me, and my dragon is unsettled and restless, like I feel when we prepare for a fight. Unease. Something is looming, and I can't put my talon on it. But the closer I get to the clubhouse, the more my dragon pushes me forward.

I shake my head in puzzlement and stuff my dragon back down. I need to focus on driving. I'm returning to the compound after working out some partnerships with other packs. I hope we can become more mainstream, making our jobs easier. Our goal is to protect the innocent and clean up our kingdom. Glancing to the side, I look at my baby sister. She's only a few years younger than Lynsey and me, but Emaline has been through a lot in her short life.

As a teenager, she was kidnapped by traffickers because of her dragon heritage. Dragon shifters are rare, having been hunted to the brink of extinction. But Em was prized for her beauty as well. In her human form, she's tall and statuesque, with long red curls and big gold eyes. Her time as a prisoner with the traffickers damaged her mentally, and I've been sending her to a therapist since she was 17.

I'm bringing her home from her latest stint at the mental health facility, because her therapist said he wants to give her a break. He feels like she's finally improving, but it doesn't appear so from the outside. She sits, staring straight ahead through the SUV's window, almost in a catatonic state. She's remained silent since I picked her up this morning. I've tried talking to her several times, but she isn't responding. Her therapist said to give her a few days before I start pressing her to speak.

I sigh heavily and turn my attention to the road. Even with all my worries about Em, my inner dragon remains distracted by the remnants of the vision.

We finally arrive at the clubhouse, and the main room is eerily empty and quiet. I take Em to her room, and she remains silent. The texts I've been receiving from Lynsey and Snake indicate that everyone will be gathering in the conference room. Lynsey sent me a full report of the events that occurred during my absence, and strict discipline will be meted out soon.

I'm also aware that the subject of the investigation, a female picked up due to Joyride's prevarications, is now sick and in a coma in one of the guest rooms. I plan to check on her once Joyride's tribunal is over.

Alpha Stone and his pack members have arrived, and we've all gathered in a meeting room. I sit at the head of the table while Joyride sits at the other end in the "hot seat." She's an unwilling participant, so we have her strapped into her chair. Sweating profusely, her eyes nervously dart around at the others assembled. I'm not sure if she's aware of it, but I have the gift of perceiving lies, so everyone here will have no choice but to tell the truth. I don't think anyone except Joyride will have issues with this.

I'm still struggling with the dragon inside me who wants to be free. He senses a disturbance, and it's all I can do to trust my brothers to keep things secure. He's currently overly territorial and wants to patrol the borders to ensure nothing and no one encroaches on our lands. He feels fiercely protective.

"Snake," I address my VP. "Have a couple of the prospects do an intensive security sweep. My dragon's hackles are up, and I can't explain it."

"Will do, Prez," he lifts his cell and sends a text, likely to a couple of the on-duty prospects. He looks up at me, places his phone on the table, and nods.

"Thanks," I acknowledge, addressing the group. "Shall we get this started?"

Murmurs of agreement fill the room.

“Byte,” I turn to my technology specialist. “Is the video and audio ready to go?”

“Yes, Prez.”

I look around the room. Someone placed printed name cards in front of all the attendees: Lynsey, Que, Snake, Byte, Alpha Blake, Beta Miles, and Beta Knight. My attention is suddenly caught by Beta Miles, and I recoil visibly. The dream I had last night flashes in my mind. Like putting together a puzzle, the complete picture begins to emerge: Joyride and Beta Miles were both in my vision. Three common elements are present in this room at the moment. I don't believe in coincidences. So, who is the other female from my dream? Where is the missing piece?

I shake my head, trying to focus. We have a quasi-tribunal to conduct.

It takes some time, but eventually, Joyride's pitiful excuse for her actions is revealed. As I sit at the head of the table, watching for false statements, I find none until we come to her. Joyride's testimony is littered with lies, half-truths, and evasions, nearly avoiding the answers altogether. She's a skilled liar. It's more time-consuming to question her than anyone else because getting her to admit the truth is like trying to catch smoke with your hands.

But, finally, we're done, and I'm not the only one who looks fatigued. Everyone around the table is clearly flagging, while Joyride is actually slumped forward in her chair as far as she can go with her constraints. Snake looks devastated, while Beta Miles appears sad. So many families and lives have been destroyed if even half of what's been said is true, and I know it is.

“Marissa Hunt,” I decree. “The charges against you are grave. The most grievous of which is that your actions caused members of the club to unjustly kidnap an innocent

female from another Alpha's jurisdiction, which could have resulted in a war between packs. This is treasonous against the club and the kingdom, which is punishable by death."

Marissa jerks her head up and gasps, her eyes blown wide in shock. I see Snake flinch beside me, gritting his teeth. I know he has caught feelings for her, but after hearing about her crimes, I'm not sure how he can still support her.

"Since they're the most severe, those are the ones we'll address here today," I say, leaning back in my chair and interlacing my fingers. "First, I strip you of your road name, 'Joyride,' and outlaw you from our club."

At this, Joyride, now Marissa, with her arms still strapped tightly to the chair, lays her head on the table and begins to sob loudly.

I ignore her dramatics, honestly, over it. "Further, I propose that, instead of death, we banish Marissa to the wilds of Prisoner Island for the rest of her natural life. Is everyone in agreement?"

A resounding "Yes" echoes from all around the room.

"I think that is fitting," Alpha Stone agrees. "I tried to show her the devastating results of Cheating Mate Syndrome, but she blatantly disregarded me, nearly costing the lives of others in my pack besides Paisley. I would also request that she be formally exiled from The Wind Howl Pack and banished from Stone Mountain Kingdom."

"I agree with that suggestion," I note. "As is custom, we'll insert micro trackers into her bloodstream through her femoral artery. She cannot remove or disable them, and they'll prevent her from ever leaving Prisoner Island."



Marissa's sobbing escalates into howls of despair as she begins to bang her head against the table.

"Snake, can you get Sawbones in here to sedate Marissa?" I ask detachedly, without emotion. "Make sure he brings the tracker injections as well."

He nods, though I know he's not happy about it. Taking out his cell, he sends a text, then looks at me and groans, "It's done." Wiping a hand across his face, he turns his attention to Marissa and stares longingly. A glance at Miles reveals he isn't much better off than Snake, a foolish male.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

I can be a merciful leader, so for Snake's sake, after Marissa has been sedated and the trackers inserted, a backpack is prepared for her, filled with cereal bars, other high-calorie snacks, water, bedding, changes of clothes, and other necessities she'll need to survive. The prisoners in the wilds are provided with essentials, but to ease Snake's mind, I give her a head start.

Marissa's unconscious form is packed into an SUV and stowed in the back seat. Lynsey and Que get in the front and fasten their seatbelts.

"Well, I think we're done here," I announce as I tap the hood of the SUV with my knuckles. "Be safe, guys." I turn to go inside. "Let's go check on your packmate, Alpha Stone."

The unease I've been feeling settles on me like a shroud. My dragon paces back and forth in my mind, roaring so ferociously that it rumbles loudly in my chest.

Yes, let's do it. I've been worried about her. My med tech, Rachel, was with her all afternoon. Hopefully, she has an update.

### Chapter 25—True Love's Kiss

#### Drágon

As we make our way upstairs to the sleeping rooms, my dragon thrashes through my thoughts. He's prancing and roaring, throwing waves of fire through my veins, pushing me to the point of bursting into flames. I'm sure if you looked into my eyes, they would be molten pools of lava right now. I've never experienced this before, and

my dragonkin are too far away to be of any help in understanding what's plaguing me.

Just as we reach the door to Paisley's sick room, Byte comes stomping up the stairs behind me with a tablet in his hands. "Prez, it's Lynsey. She says she needs to talk to you." Lynsey and Que are on their way to Prisoner Island to drop off Marissa Hunt. I take the tablet from him.

"What do you need, little sister?" I address Lynsey.

"Drágon, Que, and I have arrived at the docks. However, Marissa has invoked the ancient tenet of Lost Soul's Contrition before she's banished."

One of the age-old rules of Draconion or Dragon-kind law, known as the Lost Soul's Contrition, dictates that the one being punished, like Marissa in this case, has the right to express her regret or sorrow for her sins or wrongdoings before punishment is meted out.

"I don't have time for this," I growl. But I know that we're honor-bound to let Marissa express her sorrow. "Who does she wish to speak to?" My dragon's stomping continues unabated.

"Miles," Lynsey says flatly.

"What does she seek?"

"A Mercy Binding," Lynsey sighs.

"Impossible!"

The person to whom the contrition or apology is made has the right to grant a Mercy

Binding if they choose. In this case, Miles can show leniency toward Marissa by allowing her a second chance or reducing the penalty by accepting part of the punishment himself. It creates a delicate balance between mercy and justice. However, this is typically applied in cases where the offender's actions, although morally wrong or illegal, were motivated by altruism or a willingness to risk everything for the sake of others.

This doesn't apply here. Marissa had no such selfless goals. Instead, she carelessly destroyed families and lives without a second thought. Even now, just asking for this reveals her selfish nature. There would be no justice in affording her this time-honored rite. Nonetheless, it's within Miles' power.

And she really believes he will.

"Put her on screen," I order.

Marissa's pale face appears. I stare at her, unable to hide my disgust. After all Miles has endured because of her cruelty and infidelity, does she actually think he'd still show her mercy? That he'd take part of her punishment for helping him destroy the only real thing he ever had?

The delusion. Blind, oblivious delusion. It would almost be funny if it weren't real life. She actually believes this is her happy ending, as if all the pain she's caused doesn't matter. Does she think Miles is hers by right, some paused life she can just press play on again when it suits her?

"How dare you even suggest such a thing!" I snarl, and she shrinks back.

My blood curdles as a sudden, sharp scream pierces the air from inside Paisley's sick room. My head snaps toward the sound. "What's going on?" I charge through the door, passing the tablet back to Byte without another thought. There, just inside, I see

a beautiful unconscious female on the bed, thrashing wildly.

“Save me! Save me!” she cries, her voice filled with panic, her hands outstretched, grasping at nothing. The room echoes with her torment as she begins to convulse. Miles rushes to her and lifts her into his arms. Byte stands to the side, holding the tablet facing outward, and I see Marissa on the screen, her face screwed up in anger, shouting unintelligibly.

My dragon roars when Miles touches Paisley, but I know I need to restrain myself, as it's evident that Paisley's condition is deteriorating rapidly. It's at this point that everything fades out of my sight, and the vision I had last night surges into my consciousness.

The indigo night sky, the eclipsing purple moon, the colorful display of dragonkin dancing against the expanse of stars in the heavens.

The female, whose hand I kiss, our vow. The other male abandoning his bond with our female. Her devastation, her pleading look to me.

“Save me!” She cries, her voice raw with pain. “Help me!”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

“How?” I ask, my voice filled with desperation.

“True love’s kiss,” answers the disembodied voice.

As the dream recedes, I emerge from it as if pulling myself from a thick, clear gel, slipping slowly but with a sharp pop of release. My vision clears, and reality snaps back. The pieces of the puzzle fall into place. My vision's key players are here: me, Paisley, Miles, and Marissa. The female of my dream is Paisley, the one lying on the bed with Miles wrapped around her. Her convulsions continue unabated, and she chants without stopping.

“Save me! Save me!”

“Save me! Save me!” I echo her words from the vision, whispering. “True love’s kiss.”

“Save me! Save me!”

“True love’s kiss!” I shout in the pandemonium as my dragon thunders inside me viciously. I barely have him restrained.

“That’s what she’s been saying all day in her delirium: ‘True love’s kiss.’ I don’t know what it means,” The female, who I suppose is the med tech, Rachel, states. I can barely hear her over Marissa’s vitriol over the tablet and the excited chattering of everyone else in the room.

“Quiet!” I command as my Alpha power washes over everyone, and even Marissa

shuts up. Deathly silence fills the room, except for Paisley's frantic, breathy words on repeat.

"Save me! Save me!"

"Mute her," I order Byte, pointing to the tablet displaying Marissa's twisted visage. "Keep her facing this direction; she is necessary for this." Byte does as I say, as Marissa's mouth moves furiously in silent screams, no sound escaping.

I quickly share with the others in the room the vision I had last night, giving as much detail as I can without prolonging Paisley's suffering. Then, I reveal the prophecy:

"Two mate bonds were created before the world began—one of ice, the other of fire. The first will shatter you; the second will restore you with a true love's kiss. Within you, both were meant to join, but deceit tore the bonds apart. The choice is yours: choose both, choose one, or neither. In your choice, true happiness will be found. Decide, and your heart will be healed, and your path will be sealed."

Miles is on the bed, rocking Paisley. Her face is a lifeless pale, her pallor revealing her exhausted and weakening condition. I'm sitting on Paisley's other side, still shaking and chanting.

"Miles, based on my vision, I believe you and I were meant to be Paisley's true mates. However," I say, pointing to Marissa, "she helped you destroy the bond between you and Paisley before you two were even born, and she did so again here over the last year."

He drops his head into Paisley's neck and breathes deeply, lamenting. "I know, I had a visit from the moon mother, but I have to try. I can't see a future without her in it." He looks up and glares at the tablet, where Marissa's shocked face stares back. She's on mute but can still hear every word we say.

“I can’t believe I let Marissa cost me my true mate. I knew it, as I did it, but I didn’t stop.”

I watch as Miles lowers his head and gently kisses Paisley’s lips, but nothing happens. She continues to chant breathlessly despite his touch.

“Save me! Save me!”

Miles, realizing that he will not be able to save her with “true love’s kiss,” contorts in anguish as he begins to sob, his mouth still pressed to hers. Tears slip down his face, bathing her in his pain. He sinks his face into the slope of her neck, where the mate mark would be, and howls.

Though thoroughly territorial, my dragon accepts that Miles is no competition and allows him to say his goodbyes.

Miles pulls away from Paisley and looks at the tablet once more. He shouts, “I hate you, Marissa!” He moves to the back of the room and tries to gather himself.

My dragon urges me to take Paisley into my arms, so I do. Looking at this beauty, fire burns in my heart, licking through my veins. I know her not only from my vision but on a visceral level. The moment I touch her, the chanting stops, and she sighs. I push her hair from her face and wipe away the moisture from Miles’ tears. Caressing her plump bottom lip with my thumb, I admire her perfect cupid’s bow. I press a chaste kiss on her mouth, and she gasps. I dip my tongue to hers, and I’m instantly transported.

The room around us begins to melt away, and I feel pulled, like being sucked into a whirlpool. My hand cradled her head, my other arm around her waist, so soft, binding me to her even as we were tugged deeper into the vortex. She begins to respond by kissing me back, tasting like honey, and I drown in her, consumed by the kiss.



The air around us feels sultry and dark. The room disappears, replaced by the world of my vision—an indigo night sky, a purple eclipsing moon, the heavens filled with colors.

I look down and find her eyes open, and she's smiling at me, still wrapped in my arms.

“Are you here to save me?” she asks, her voice as sweet and desperate as the kiss we shared.

“No,” I reply. “You're here to save me.”

Chapter 26—Paisley’s Promise

Miles

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

Alpha Stone sent me to a Beta workshop at Stone Mountain. We regularly attend educational classes provided by the Alpha Commander to help us become better leaders for our packs, so I always seize the opportunity. However, life feels rather colorless at the moment.

It's my lunch break, so I go into the café next door to the headquarters. It's a small mom-and-pop eatery that most employees and meeting attendees visit for breakfast and lunch.

As I grab my meal, I turn to look over the tables to find a spot to sit, and my eyes lock on Paisley. I startle until I realize she's smiling at me. It's been a long time since I've had the pleasure of being the recipient of her warmth. I lift my eyebrows in question, and she nods, gesturing to the seat across from her invitation. Hesitantly, I approach, looking around the room for her mate.

"Paisley," I smile softly. "It's been a while."

"It has, Miles," she replies, her expression regretful.

At this moment, it hits me: the pain of parting from Paisley is far greater than anything I ever felt when Marissa left me. I think I've finally realized the magnitude of my mistakes and the cost. Wanting Marissa was a leftover from my feelings of abandonment because she never stayed. I thought Marissa was the key—if she wanted me, I felt worthy. Now, in retrospect, I know the exact opposite is true. Marissa was never deserving of me, and I sold myself short, losing the best thing that ever happened to me.

My grandma used to say, Chase the glitter and miss the gold.

Speaking of gold, I stare into Paisley's doe-brown eyes, the pain hitting me sharply. She looks away.

"What brings you to the capital, Miles?" she asks in a conversational tone.

"Beta workshop," I say, taking a bite of my sandwich, which turns to dust in my mouth. I force it down with a gulp of water and set the rest back on the plate. "You?"

"Luna workshop," she giggles, rolling her eyes. "Can you imagine me as a Luna?"

"Yeah, I can," I say softly. "You'll make a great Luna. You would've been a great Beta mate, too."

"I think so, too," she drops her gaze again, her voice tinged with sadness. "Anyway, Drágon is transforming the club into a more pack-oriented structure. It wasn't founded with the wild party scene most people associate with motorcycle clubs, so he's shifting the focus to highlight the successful businesses it operates. Right now, he's out having lunch with the Alpha Commander and a few other Alphas."

"Ah. That's good. I've heard a lot of good things about him."

"Yeah," she nods in agreement. "He's a good male."

"Paisley... I'm sorry..."

When I open my mouth, she sighs loudly, slightly turning her head. She looks at me out of the corner of her eye.

"Miles..." she begins, stopping me by holding up her hand and shaking her head.

Frustration radiates from her, and it's obvious that she's done with me. She is so done.

"Miles," she starts again, taking a deep breath. "Let me clarify something here so we can be perfectly clear. I still feel a weak energy flow through our mark."

She absently rubs the spot on her breast where I know the symbol is etched; I feel an answering twinge in my own ruined one as she strokes hers. "I also know we could be made whole again as mates." My heart leaps with hope. "I can sense that you genuinely regret your actions and want my forgiveness." Her eyes brighten with unshed tears as she blinks rapidly, trying to hold them back. "But you don't realize I've been crushed by the damage done to our connection from the lingering intense pain from being abandoned and betrayed. I want to heal, but the bond won't allow it—you won't allow it."

I take a sharp, involuntary breath.

"You were my everything, Miles. My knight in shining armor, my hero, my light, my breath. I built myself around you and placed you up on a pedestal."

I lower my head in shame. "That's the danger of being on a pedestal; it's a long way to fall."

She drops her gaze shyly, voice dropping just enough to make me lean in. "You were kind of my daddy kink, too. You made me feel safe and protected, until I didn't."

Her words catch me off guard. I stare at her lovely face for a moment, drinking her in. Heat flickers through me, unexpected and not unwelcome, at the memories she evokes. But it quickly dies under the weight of everything I put her through.

I go quiet. "That year we were together, before Marissa's ghost rematerialized, was

the happiest of my life up to that point. I realize now that it was just a pipe dream for me. She's always been a shadow between us."

I lower my gaze, unable to deny it any longer. I've been lying to myself all along. I never truly gave up on Marissa. I inserted Paisley into my life as a placeholder, but I never fully acknowledged it until now.

"It's my deepest regret," I admit. "I truly loved you, Paisley. I still do."

"It wasn't enough, Miles. Not enough," she accuses.

I nod in agreement. She deserves the truth, even if I'm digging my own grave. "Please let me make it up to you. Allow me to put you on a pedestal, finally."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

“I don’t want to be on a pedestal, Miles. I only want to be loved fully, truly. Just me.”

“I do love you fully and truly. Please forgive me,” I beg.

“I can forgive you, Miles, but it comes with a price.”

“Anything,” I gasp.

I'll forgive you if you walk away from me, never to return, and let this connection sever completely. As long as we are tethered, I'll still consider you mine. I'll always look over my shoulder, wondering when she'll return to sabotage us. I'll forever ache with the fear that you'll be out with friends, and she'll decide it's time to pick you back up for playtime, and you won't even think of us. I'll never be able to trust that you won't crush my heart again if I entrust it to you.

“Never again, Paisley, I swear,” I whisper, shaky. “Marissa has been banished to the Wilds of Prisoner Island and will never interfere with our bond again.”

“That’s not good enough, Miles,” she glares at me. “I wanted you to love me for who I am, despite Marissa, not just because she’s physically unattainable now. That makes me feel like an afterthought. I refuse to be your second choice again. You chose me only after it became clear that an honest relationship with her was impossible.”

“No! That's not true.”

“Yes, it is! The minute—and I mean the minute—she showed up, thoughts of me went straight out of your head! Paisley? Who?” she whisper-hisses at me. “Even after

she cheated on you and dosed you with stolen Amra to deceive you and hide her betrayal, you still defended her! When she and her friends bullied me, you sided with her!” She jabs me in the chest with her finger, her voice steadily growing louder during her tirade.

“I...”

“You have to accept reality. I don’t care what you believe; you need to examine your actions, Miles, and let me be in peace. In peace!”

She stands up, takes her untouched lunch, and leaves the café. I have to be the better person for her. It’s time to stop being the selfish male I’ve always been and finally think of Paisley for once. I need to free her from this soul-sucking bond, I realize as I watch her walk away.

“I, Miles Reid, accept your rejection, Paisley Woods, and release our bond,” I quietly choke out.

I feel immediate pain radiating through my chest as the last fragile tendrils of our tether snap. Paisley stops abruptly, turns to face me, and smiles. “Thank you,” she mouths, rubbing her chest as she continues on her way, leaving me and my pathetic, shattered heart to grieve the final loss of her.

Paisley

Lying in bed later that night, I reflect on my life as it is now. Drágon and I are in the capital, newly bonded, and beginning our life together. We combined a work trip with our honeymoon, and we’re attending meetings and workshops today to prepare ourselves to lead our new quasi-pack. It’ll now have most of the same structure as a standard pack but with less formality. With the Alpha Commander’s silent approval, the focus will remain on our own brand of vigilante justice.

The club's focus during leisure time will shift. There will be no wild parties, and the concept of "club girls" will become a thing of the past, especially since Drágon and I want pups. I refuse to raise them in that atmosphere. Activities will become more family-oriented, and those who disagree are welcome to leave.

I can still hear the shower running as I roll over in bed and reflect on the conversation that Miles and I had today. He finally understood and let go completely, easing my heartache. His releasing me from the last remnants of our bond is healing.

Drágon enters the bedroom with his sweatpants hanging low on his hips. He lies beside me, pulling me close as I trace the fractured, eclipsing moon tattoo over his heart.

"Sia rumag, sia itov. My mate, my love," Drágon sighs seductively in Draconian, the language of dragons, as his fingers gently stroke my arm. I close my eyes, curl against him, and savor his touch. I could listen to him speak all night long. His slightly Romanian and Russian accent deepens when he uses his native tongue.

The past month has been the happiest of my life since meeting Drágon. We've gotten to know each other and allowed our families time to gather. However, we decided not to postpone the bonding ceremony. No bachelor or bachelorette parties were needed; we excitedly said goodbye to being single and quickly became mates.

The month we spent getting to know each other allowed me to organize the ceremony. Since my time at Wind Howl Pack was filled with mean girls and unhappy memories, we held it outside on the clubhouse grounds.

"Paisley," Drágon whispers softly against the shell of my ear. "I don't know what has changed today, but our connection has deepened to my very core. Do you feel it, too?"



I roll over, deeper into Drágon's warm chest, and look up into his fiery red eyes; his dragon stirs beneath the surface, primordial and ancient. Our bond simmers like a pool of lava, the energy ebbing and flowing, woven by the heat of invisible flames.

"I saw Miles today at lunch," I sigh, nuzzling into Drágon's neck and inhaling his smoky scent. "He finally accepted my rejection and released me from that tie. Once he did, I felt your presence in my soul deepen." I tap my chest. "It shifted my focus, and I can now feel the pain easing as I'm freed from the broken promise of his bond."

Drágon tilts my head back gently with his fingers under my chin and looks into my eyes. "I'm glad you're finally free of that burden, Paisley," he says against my mouth. I lean forward and press into his warm kiss.

I feel the heat of his body pressing against mine, and my heart thrills. Our bond is true and strong, representing the light after the darkness. I'm his first choice—his only one.

As we join together, I feel pure and untainted energy pulse through our bodies. Each stroke gently mends the frayed edges of my heart and soul. The process doesn't erase the past but begins to heal the wound. The shattered eclipse marks on our chests glow as the cracks and fractures fill in and fade away. The tattoos blossom into beautiful matching mate marks, transforming from symbols of brokenness into representations of love, recovery, and new beginnings.

Epilogue—When Knight Falls

Knight

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:14 pm*

As I follow everyone up the stairs to check on Paisley, my wolf grows increasingly frantic. He howls so loudly in my head that I can't even make out what's being said outside Paisley's room. The door at the end seems to call to me as I slip away towards it unnoticed in the chaos.

As I draw closer, I understand what's pulling me down this hall. Memories assault me as I scent her—Emaline, the mate who rejected me years ago. The compulsion to go to her is so strong that it's obvious my attraction to Paisley was just that—a fleeting attraction.

I silently open the door without knocking. There she lies on the bed, staring unseeingly at the ceiling, so small, so damaged, just like she was when she rejected me. I couldn't leave her then and wouldn't have, but I'd been forced. I'll never leave her again. I kneel at her bedside, clutching her hand.

“Emaline?” I sob, gutted at the sight of her.

Emaline

Darkness.

Thick and heavy presses upon me so that I can hardly breathe. My limbs are tangled in the sheets as if wrapped in chains. I have no strength left to fight, and nothing breaks through the bindings.

Hopelessness.

It clings to me like a film, covering my skin and leaving me cold and empty. There's no escape from it; it's been like a lover's kiss for so long, holding me enthralled. Nothing can change it; I don't even bother to imagine a different life—there's no point.

Despair.

Rising in my throat, bitter and thick, like a soundless scream—unbearable. I lie here, staring at the ceiling, waiting for something that will never come.

Desolation.

I roll over onto my side and pull my knees up to my chest as the walls seem to close in on me. Suffocated by emptiness and silence, I feel the weight of complete isolation. Even when I shut my eyes, there's no escape.

Void.

It fills my mind until there's no room for anything else—the darkness, the endless black. No space for light or hope, only these mangled memories. Goddess, how I long for nothingness, for my thoughts to be swallowed up and lost as if I never existed in the first place.

Anguish.

The raw, all-consuming anguish tears at me from the inside. The only outward evidence is my nails digging into my skin as I clench my fists. I don't feel external pain anymore, so engulfed in the nightmare, just lurking beneath the surface, on the verge of breaking free and pulling me down, drowning me in it.

Broken.

I look in the mirror and recognize the face staring back at me, but that's not the person inside. The calm façade in the mirror doesn't reflect the hollow shell that I am. The fragile image in the mirror is made of glass, yet I'm already shattered and cracked beneath the surface. I'm broken, and nothing can be done about it.

I lie here in my bed at the clubhouse, spiraling and trapped in my thoughts, each one darker than the last. I can't escape, so I'm lost in my head. Then the door opens, and light splashes across the sheets. I scent him before I hear him. Suddenly, he's here, clutching my hand desperately.

"Emaline?" The pain in his voice shatters me all over again.

"Knight?" I croak out, my throat dry. "Mate?" my dragon calls, lifting her head for the first time in years. "He's back."