



# Tempted By the Wolf

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** He's her brother's best friend. She's his fated mate. Can one weekend give them a second chance at love?

Elena

I've loved Jake since I was a teenager, but he never returned my feelings. As the alpha's little sister, I'm used to being overlooked, but Jake's rejection broke my heart.

Six years later, Jake is still the man who invades my dreams, but I'm not the girl I used to be.

A freak car accident destroyed my chances of becoming a professional ballet dancer. I'm working two jobs to put myself through college, and I don't have time for romance.

My best friend's wedding is the only distraction I've allowed myself all year, but my brother is determined to ruin that, too. A shifter wedding is no place for the alpha's human sister, so he's assigned me a chaperone for my own protection. Jake.

For one weekend, I'm supposed to platonically share a room and a bed with the guy who brutally rejected me — the man I hoped I'd never see again.

Jake

Elena has always been The One, but her brother is my best friend.

I pushed her away once, and it almost killed me. That's what happens when a wolf fights the urge to mate. The bond slowly drives him insane.

Six years later, Elena's back in my life. But she isn't the girl I remember.

Rafael's little sister is all grown up, and this time around, my wolf is powerless to resist her

I have one weekend to win her back — one chance to make her mine.

**Warning:** Tempted by the Wolf is a steamy brother's best friend romance featuring a sexy, possessive wolf shifter and a second chance at love. Sparks may trigger a forest fire in your panties.

**Total Pages (Source):** 50

## CHAPTER ONE

### ELENA

The warehouse is already packed when we arrive, and the scent of sweat coats the back of my throat. The low roar of the crowd presses in on all sides, and I try to take deep breaths. The electric charge in the air is almost palpable, but whether that's in anticipation of the match or the fights that will break out afterward, I can't be sure.

It looks as though every shifter in the state has turned out for this bout. Shifters from other packs — and other species — don't mix well, so this type of match has always struck me as a recipe for disaster.

Glowing lupine eyes follow me through the crowd, though it isn't the sort of attention a girl wants. They can tell that I'm human by my scent — probably the only one here.

A few of the wolf shifters recognize me as Rafael Cabrera Garcia's little sister, and they quickly avert their eyes. Others glare openly as I pass. I jerk my chin up higher.

To her credit, Carmen keeps a firm grip on my hand as she elbows her way through the crowd. She seems oblivious to the looks we're getting, but she's more astute than she looks. My best friend since childhood is a she-wolf — and a ballsy one at that.

I can't tell if it's fear or resentment that makes the other shifters look at me that way. Maybe it's the implicit threat that surrounds me like a halo whenever I touch down in my brother's territory. I've been away so long, I almost forgot what that felt like.

I might be defenseless against the wolves, bears, and mountain lions packed into this place, but if any one of them touched a hair on my head, they'd be dead before they could find an exit.

It should make me feel invincible, but it only highlights my weakness. Loud noise has been a trigger for me since the accident, and I can already feel the migraine coming on. My palm is sweaty in Carmen's grip, but I don't say anything. She's my one friend who hasn't treated me differently since it happened, and I don't want her to start now.

Finally, the huge chain-link panels of the cage come into view, gleaming under the spotlights. An enormous octagonal ring looms over the crowd.

Two male shifters are pacing the cage — a wolf and a black bear, by the look of them. They're in human form, shirtless and sweaty. The rules of the match stipulate that they're not allowed to shift in the cage, which makes this a test of self-control as much as fighting prowess.

As I watch, the wolf shifter pounces, cutting in with a jab-hook so fast that I don't even see the strikes until the bear stumbles back. The wolf follows up with a kick that catches his opponent in the ribs, and the crack that echoes through the arena makes me cringe.

The crowd cheers and boos, stomping their feet, and my unease intensifies. There's nothing like violence to whip up a crowd, and when that crowd is made up of apex predators, things can escalate quickly.

Carmen catches my eye, and I wrinkle my nose.

"Why did you drag me here?" I yell.

I just flew in for Carmen's wedding. This match was an unplanned detour on our way home from the airport.

"I love watching sweaty men duke it out. Don't you?"

I scrunch my eyebrows and shake my head. As Carmen's maid of honor, I made sure to plan an outrageous bachelorette party, but a bunch of shifters slinging bloodaren't on the menu.

I look back in time to see another kick connect with the bear's jaw. The wolf continues his punishing sequence of strikes until he has his opponent pressed against the cage wall.

The wolf's limbs move in a blur of violence — so fast I can't follow their trajectory. I can only understand what happened by the bear's reactions. A ferocious growl rends the air, and then things take a turn.

The bear catches the wolf around the neck and yanks the man's head to his chest. Once they're in the clinch, the bear pivots until they've traded places. He delivers blow after bone-cracking blow. He's not as fast as the wolf, but he's stronger.

Watching them go at it, it's easy to see why shifters need a league of their own. They'd demolish any human in a UFC fight and expose their kind on live TV.

Blood sprays the cage floor as the bear lands one nasty blow, and the metal panels groan against the weight of the shifters. The roar of the crowd is deafening.

The wolf hits the mat in a bloody heap, and the screams and shouts rattle my eardrums. The ref shoots forward to call the knockout, and the crowd gets even louder. My temples throb, and colors blur in my vision.

Someone thrusts the bear shifter's fist into the air, and he glares out at the spectators, chest heaving. A look of power and pride burns in his eyes. It's not just a victory for him or his family. It's a victory for all the bears in attendance.

There's some shifting and grumbling as the spectators find their friends or leave to get drinks, and when I look over, I see a familiar face in the crowd. Raf.

My brother turns his head at the exact same moment, and our eyes lock across the room. Surprise flashes through his eyes just before his brow creases with worry. That concern morphs into disapproval as he turns and stalks toward me.

Shit. I know that look. It means I'm about to be in trouble.

What was I thinking, letting Carmen drag me here?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:29 am*

OfcourseRaf would be at the fights. This is his territory.

“Elena?” My brother’s voice booms over the crowd as he cuts through the horde of shifters to reach me.

If we were at home and it was just the two of us, I’d be ready with the sass. But here, surrounded by multiple species of shifters, Raf’s asshole-alpha mask is firmly in place, and dominant energy oozes off him.

“What are youdoinghere?” he demands as soon as he’s close enough not to shout.

“Hey, Raf. Good to see you, too!” I gush, only half sarcastically. Itisgood to see my brother — even if he is an overbearing ass.

Raf’s scowl flickers as though I short-circuited his alpha-ness, and he rolls his eyes before tugging me into a rough embrace. I smash my face into his chest and breathe in the scent of home. I’m barely five foot five, and Raf towers over me.

He plants a quick peck on the top of my head before pulling back to look at me. I blink at him in defiance, hoping he can’t tell that I’m on the verge of one of my “episodes.”

Raf slides an accusatory gaze to Carmen. “You know she shouldn’t be here,” he says in a low, dangerous tone. “The noise alone —”

“Oh, take a trip to the ladies’ room and untwist your panties, Raf. I’vegoother.”

I swallow. The long history between my best friend and my brother is the only reason Carmen can talk to her alpha that way. Judging by the way my brother's jaw twitches, it's taking all his self-restraint not to ream Carmen for dragging me to the fights.

"No offense, Car, but you're no match for these people." His eyes dart around to encompass the room. "This place is a powder keg ready to explode, and I don't want her anywhere near it."

"Chill out, big bro," says Carmen with an eye roll. "We'll sneak out before the last fight."

"I didn't even know you were coming home," says Raf, directing this at me. His tone is accusatory, and I catch the flicker of hurt in his eyes.

Guilt twists my stomach, and I pray that Carmen can read the room. "Yeah, sorry I \_\_\_"

"She didn't tell you I'm getting married?" Carmen butts in. "Elle's my maid of honor!"

Crap.

Rafael's eyes snap back to me, and I have to suppress a grimace. There's a reason I didn't tell my brother I was flying in from Boston — or about the wedding.

"You're not going," he says, his response automatic.

Indignation and annoyance flare in my gut. I'm so glad I left Colorado. "Yes, I am."

"Don't worry," says Carmen. "I'll make sure she gets a quality lay."

I wince. Leave it to Carmen to throw gasoline on the fire.

My brother looks as though he might be sick. “That’s not my concern,” he growls, each word hitting like a shard of ice. “There are going to be wolves from eight different packs at that wedding, and I can’t be there to protect you.” His chilly gaze slides back to Carmen. “It would be seen as an overstep.”

“And you’re not invited,” she reminds him. “No one wants Lord Buzzkill at —”

“I don’t need your protection,” I tell Raf, drawing myself up to my full meager height. “I’m twenty-two years old, and I’ve been around wolves my entire life.”

“Not without me, you haven’t,” he shoots back. “And things are . . . different now.”

I suck in a breath through my nose at the implication in Raf’s tone, shame and fury churning in my gut.

My brother has always been an overprotective, overbearing ass, but he became borderline insufferable after the accident.

“Take a chill pill, Raffy. I’ll be there,” says Carmen. “I mean, obvs. It’s my wedding. Besides, these are all our friends. Nothing is going to happen to Elena.”

“Oh yeah?” Raf growls, his tone acidic. “When have I heard that before?”

Carmen’s eyes crinkle with hurt and rage. Even for Raf, it’s a low blow.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

“Will you two quit?” I hiss, irritated with both of them. “I’m a grown-ass woman. I don’t need protection from either one of you.”

Carmen and Raf exchange a look that says, quite plainly, that I do.

I clench my jaw. This is what’s so infuriating about being a human with a shifter brother. I’ve been immersed in pack life since before I could walk, surrounded by powerful wolves. My friends were shifters. I dated shifters. And yet, I was never one of them.

That fact became brutally apparent the night Carmen’s ex-boyfriend came to pick us up from a party after throwing back one too many shots himself. He took a left turn after the light turned red, and a truck crossing the intersection T-boned our car.

Shifters are notoriously hard to kill, and AJ walked away without a scratch. Carmen broke her arm in the crash, but it healed in a matter of days. I was diagnosed with an epidural hematoma — bleeding around the brain. I’d also sustained a fractured collarbone and dislocated my shoulder.

Even for humans, bones and muscles heal relatively fast. The brain takes longer, and sometimes it never fully recovers.

Carmen opens her mouth, but before she can say anything, music blares over the loudspeakers, and the crowd goes wild. A spotlight beams down near the back of the arena, and I see the next fighter and his team walking out.

I’d been so caught up in this little family reunion, I’d almost forgotten there were

more fights on the card. The walkout song is Eminem's "Lose Yourself," and the fighter —

The man's tall frame looms over the crowd, and my stomach drops to the floor.

If I was surprised to see Raf here, it's nothing compared to the gut punch I feel when I see the fighter cutting through the crowd. He's got to be six three, six four at least, with a strong, sharp jaw and short dark hair.

My breath catches in my throat, and Carmen makes a surprised sound of recognition. "Is that . . . Jake?"

"Yep," says Raf, following my gaze to his best friend and our former next-door neighbor. I hear the disapproval in his voice.

I haven't seen or heard from Jake Carson in six years. The messed-up part is that I've thought about him plenty.

"I told him he should quit taking fights," says Raf. "But he doesn't listen to me."

I'm not surprised. When we were kids, Jake was always getting into scuffles with the rougher kids in the neighborhood. It wasn't until he took up boxing at the Y that he stopped getting into trouble. When he turned eighteen, he started training mixed-martial arts and joined the shifter fight league.

As I watch Jake climb the steps leading into the octagon, a little shiver rolls through me. Jake moves with a predatory grace that only shifters have.

He steps into the cage, and another song blares over the loudspeaker as his opponent struts in. Every head turns to look at the dark-skinned mountain-lion shifter heading for the cage, but I'm still too busy watching Jake.

His face looks the same as it did when I was a teenager, but his shoulders and chest are broader — his whole body more filled out.

Even so, the man doesn't have a scrap of fat on him. His biceps look as though they might have been carved from a block of marble, and he's got a set of killer washboard abs. His fight shorts hang low on his narrow hips, revealing a thin line of dark hair that disappears beneath his waistline.

I lick my lips, which suddenly feel much too dry.

“Talk about a blast from the past,” Carmen mutters.

I nod, though I don't take my eyes off the man in the cage.

Jake bounces from one foot to the other to keep his muscles warm as he waits for his opponent. This is the closest I've been to him in six years, and yet the thirty feet separating us might as well be thirty-thousand miles. So much has happened since I knew him.

The referee says something to the fighters, and Jake reaches out to bump his gloved fist against his opponent's in a show of good sportsmanship.

The mountain lion ignores the gesture.

They move back to get some distance from one another, and Jake tilts his head toward his left shoulder — a tell he's had since we were kids that I know means he's nervous.

As I watch, his gaze drifts out to the crowd to find Rafael. Then his eyes latch onto mine.

## CHAPTER TWO

JAKE

Elena.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

My heart squeezes as my eyes lock on hers, and I blink to clear my vision. Either the bright cage lights are making me see things that aren't there, or I'm so nervous that I'm hallucinating.

Elena is supposed to be in Boston — at least, that's what Raf told me. But when I open my eyes, I see her standing there, and everything else melts away.

The cage.

The crowd.

My opponent.

Suddenly, none of it seems to matter one bit. My whole world narrows to her.

What the hell is Elena doing here of all places? She can't have come all this way to see my fight — not after the way I left things.

Last I heard, she had a shifter boyfriend that Raf didn't approve of. But maybe they broke up.

Before I can let myself get too excited by that prospect, the ref yells "fight" to begin the match, and I yank myself back to reality.

My opponent stalks toward me, and beneath the permanent stench of old sweat and blood that coats the cage mat, I catch his feline scent. He's not as tall as me, but he's got a thicker build. I also know from watching his fights that the dude is fast as fuck.

His golden eyes are rimmed with black as we circle one another — the only sign that his lion is close to the surface. His ebony skin glistens with sweat, but his breathing is controlled.

I want this fight to be over quickly, so I throw out an experimental jab. The mountain lion slips my punch effortlessly and comes back with a cross of his own. I parry his strike and turn with a side kick that sends him sailing back.

The big cat recovers almost instantaneously and launches himself at me. I keep my hands up and weather his hailstorm of punches, but my head isn't in the fight.

Of all the people I thought might show up tonight, I never expected to see Elena. And yet here she is, watching my fight. My wolf whines in delight.

My opponent dodges my sloppy left hook, circling out with a bizarre expression. Shifters are sensitive to one another's energy, and I know I must be putting out some super-weird vibes. I'm anxious and horny and beside myself with longing.

Focus, Carson. Focus.

This fight is a crucial stepping stone on my path toward the title, but I'm finding it hard to care.

The mountain lion dances in for another attack — an impressive combo that culminates in a roundhouse kick to the body. I reach down instinctively to capture his leg, driving him into the cage wall. The whole thing rattles as he hits the chain-link panel, catching me with a knee to the chest.

I grunt and dig in with a strike to his liver, but the bastard doesn't even seem to feel it. Heat stings my cheek as his fist grazes the side of my face, and I pummel him back.

The horn blows, signaling the end of the round, and I stagger to my corner. I can see Coach's lips moving as he shoots water into my mouth, his eyes wide and animated as he explains what he wants me to do.

I'm only half listening. My every thought is consumed with her.

Elena at my twenty-first birthday, her face lit by the glow of candles as she beamed up at me and stole the breath from my lungs.

It took me two tries to blow out my candles.

Elena under the glittering streamers at her sweet sixteen, eyes full of expectation.

Elena standing on tiptoe, smelling like coconut, as her small hands curled around my shoulders.

Elena's lips pressing against mine as soft as a butterfly's wings.

I shake my head and get to my feet a second before the horn blares. The mountain lion stalks toward me looking more feline than ever, and my body moves on autopilot as I deflect each of his strikes.

When I counter, I throw as much power behind my punches as I can muster. I want to end this fight so I can get down there and see if it's really her.

My kick to the guy's head stuns him briefly, and I follow it up with a punishing combination that drives him back to the cage wall. The crowd goes wild, but my wolf doesn't preen. He's completely focused on eliminating the threat.

My opponent surges forward, trying to take me down, but then my fist flies out of its own accord and connects cleanly with his jaw.

## Page 5

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I see the light leave his eyes a split second before he drops to the mat like a sack of potatoes. The ref yells at me to step back, and my wolf bristles at the man's sudden proximity.

The mountain lion doesn't stir as the ref counts it out.

One.

Two.

Three.

The crowd explodes in a deafening storm of cheers, boos, whistles, and claps. The wolves are celebrating, the big cats are sore, and I don't care about any of it.

I barely have the patience to stand there and acknowledge my victory as someone yanks my arm into the air. Two shifters I don't know bound into the cage, and Coach pulls me into a hug that's more backslap than embrace.

I was considered the underdog in this fight, which is why my win is such a big deal.

I stagger out of the cage, blinded by the lights, and search the shadowy faces in the crowd for hers. The rest of my team tackles me before I make it off the steps, and I'm dragged forward into the sea of bodies and noise.

I think I grin, but I'm moving in a daze. Then I see Raf, and behind him is . . .



Her.

She's even more beautiful than I remember — goldenskin, dark eyes, glossy black hair, and lush pink lips that have haunted me for years. She's petite enough to tuck under my arm.

When she sees me, her lips part slightly, and a hard look passes through those chocolate-brown eyes. The look is gone as soon as I see it, replaced by a congratulatory smile.

"Congrats, bro," Raf hollers, throwing an arm around my shoulders and slapping me on the back.

"Thanks, man."

Elena's friend Carmen appears behind Raf. "You were . . .scary. And amazing. Scary amazing."

A chuckle rumbles through me, and I grin at Carmen. Elena shoots her friend an annoyed look and finally meets my gaze.

"Hey, Lena," I say, my voice softening automatically the way it used to whenever I talked to her.

It started because she was Raf's little sister — five years younger than me. Even when I was eight or nine, I felt intensely protective of her.

"Hey, Jake."

My smile widens. "Long time no see."

I have to hold back a grimace at my own lame greeting. Long time no see?

Elena gives me a squinty sideways look, but I catch the twinkle in her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. “Shouldn’t you be in Boston?”

“She’s here for Carmen’s wedding,” says Raf, his voice dripping with disapproval. “I told her it wasn’t a good idea.”

“Will you tell him he’s being ridiculous?” Elena cuts in, crossing her arms over her chest and drawing my eyes to her perky little breasts.

I clear my throat and look away. In that moment, it’s as though no time has passed. Raf and Elena are still bickering. Raf is still trying to control her life. The two of them were always putting me in the middle.

Raf probably assumes I’ll take his side. He thinks I see Elena as a little sister.

For years I told myself that was all I felt — that platonic, brotherly love. But the night Elena kissed me in her living room, that illusion was shattered forever.

“I don’t know,” I say slowly. “There are gonna be a lot of wolves there.”

## Page 6

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I don't voice the second part of that statement, but the spike of irritation I sense from Elena is so intense that I might as well have.

Elena is human.

She's always resented the way Rafael treats her, which is why I choose my next words carefully. "But Elena's a big girl," I say to Raf. "I'm sure she can handle herself."

Raf shakes his head and drags a hand through his hair, which is the same raven black as his sister's. "I don't like it."

Of course he doesn't.

Rafael is an alpha, and alphas like to control everything. It's the reason he went from being her big brother to being her prison warden as soon as he came of age.

"I'd feel a lot better if one of us was there . . ." Raf continues.

Suddenly, it's as if a lightbulb has just gone off in his head. "You should go with her."

"What?" Elena and I speak at the exact same time. Our eyes meet, and we both look away.

"A bunch of your pack brothers will be there," he says. "And I can't go."

"You're not invited," Carmen grumbles.

Rafael ignores her. “It would look like I’m trying to exert my authority as alpha, since the wedding’s in my territory.”

“Not to mention that bringing your brother as your date to a wedding is superfucking weird,” Carmen adds.

“Raf, stop,” Elena snaps, stepping between me and her brother. “I don’t need a bodyguard. It’s just a wedding. Besides . . . maybe I already have a plus-one.”

Inside, my wolf lets out a low growl. He can’t stand the thought of Elena walking in with another man on her arm.

“Better not be that Derek fucker,” Raf grumbles.

“He is going to be there,” says Carmen in that annoying, teasing voice of hers. “He’s Rowan’s best man.”

My wolf gives a menacing snarl. Derek is the shifter guy Elena was dating around the time she had her accident.

“Do you already have a plus-one?” Raf asks his sister.

“No.”

She sounds a little disappointed at the admission, but my wolf relaxes.

“Perfect,” says Raf, clapping his hands together. “You can take Jake.”

A mixture of horror, embarrassment, and anger flits across Elena’s face. “I’m not taking Jake!” She glances awkwardly in my direction. “I already told you I don’t need a chaperone. Anyway, I’ll be busy Thursday through Sunday. I’m sure Jake has

better things to do than babysit me all weekend.”

I cringe inwardly at her use of the word “babysit,” but I guess it’s not reasonable for her to consider it a date.

“Nope,” I say quickly, smiling despite my disappointment. “No plans.”

Raf raises his eyebrows at Elena as if to say all their problems are solved.

Heat blooms on her cheeks, and I can scent the frustration pouring off her. It’s a little insulting, but I’m so excited by the prospect of an entire weekend with Elena that it’s difficult to care.

“I’ll go,” I say before this can escalate into World War III. “I love weddings.” Not true. “It’ll be fun.” Possibly true — if Elena can loosen up and see me as something other than her chaperone.

She crosses her arms and lets out a petulant huff.

“Either you go with Jake, or you don’t go at all,” says Raf.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

“You aren’t my keeper,” Elena protests. “You don’t get to tell me what to do anymore.”

Raf lifts his eyebrows in warning. “You want to test that theory?”

A chilling silence passes between them. I’m simultaneously disgusted and impressed that Raf is threatening to use alpha command — disgusted, because it essentially strips away a person’s free will, and impressed that he’s never tried to use it on Elena before now.

Raf’s been threatening to use alpha command on his sister since she got her first boyfriend, but it was always just a threat. None of us even knows if it works on humans.

Elena’s nostrils flare with anger, and she gives Raf a look that would make any lesser man back down. But the Garcias are a stubborn bunch.

“Fine,” Elena grits out.

It takes every ounce of my self-control not to thrust my fist in the air and whoop.

Elena turns to look at me. “Can you get off early on Thursday? Carmen’s bachelorette party starts at eight, and I need to get to the hotel and make sure everything’s ready.”

I nod. “Pick you up at three.”

“Sounds good,” Elena sighs. She looks as though Raf is forcing her to eat a bowl of sand for dinner, but I’m too stoked to mind.

A whole weekend with Elena? My wolf can hardly believe our luck.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ELENA

Jake is a full ten minutes early when he pulls up in front of my house on Thursday. He’s in the same green Jeep Cherokee he drove when I was in high school, and I remember him pulling double shifts at the Kwik Trip to be able to afford it.

My bags are mostly packed by the front door, but I’m still rummaging through my closet in search of a swimsuit coverup.

“Él está aquí, hija,” calls Mamá from the living room.

“Shit,” I whisper, peering through my blinds. What kind of person shows up ten minutes early?

Groaning frantically, I grab my bathing suit, coverup, and a pair of flip-flops and hurry to the front door. It’s bad enough that Raf roped Jake into this. I don’t want to keep him waiting.

I especially don’t want my mother to have the chance to ask any awkward questions. She was suspicious when I told her I was taking Jake to the wedding but that the two of us weren’t dating.

Stuffing the flip-flops into the front zip pocket of my suitcase, I grab my purse and start rolling the bag around to head out the door.

“Te amo, Mamá,” I say, flinging the door open.

To my surprise, Jake isn’t waiting in the Jeep. He’s standing on my front porch.

“Juana,” he says, inclining his head at my mother.

“Ah, Jake!” Mamá wipes her hands on her apron and wraps her arms around him, beaming from ear to ear. “Que bueno verte!”

“Ha pasado demasiado tiempo.”

Mamá beams, but I roll my eyes. It’s been too long?

What has gotten into him? I wonder, staring at Jake as he hugs my mother.

First, he agreed to be my werewolf bodyguard for the entire weekend even though the two of us haven’t spoken in years. Now he comes to the door and chitchats with my mother as though we’re going on a date?

When they finally pull apart, I see Jake looking around our little house with a wistful expression. It looks exactly the same as it did when we were younger — pink walls, plants everywhere, the little St. Francis plaque hanging over the doorway.

And Jake . . . he looks the same. He’s clearly a man now, but standing just inside my living room brings me back to the last time I saw him.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

It was my sweet sixteen, and all my friends were there. It was a balmy August night, and everyone was crowded into the backyard. “Something Just Like This” by the Chainsmokers was playing.

My friends and family had just sung me happy birthday and cut the cake. I’d gone to get more forks when Jake walked in the door.

He’d been working that night, which was why he was late. Not that Jake and I typically hung out. He was always around but separate in the way that older siblings’ friends always were. He and Raf were too old to be interested in whatever my friends and I were up to, but tonight was special. It was my birthday. I’d been so excited for my party, and Jake had told me he’d swing by.

I’d been waiting all night for him to arrive, though I never would have admitted it. The party was fine, but I had this feeling that the night wouldn’t be perfect until Jake got there.

“Hey, birthday girl,” he said, beaming at me the way he always did, even though I was Raf’s annoying little sister.

“Hey.” My voice came out thin and breathless. My cheeks were flushed from the heat, and I could feel my hair sticking to the back of my neck. But I was wearing my new pink dress — the one that my mom almost didn’t buy me because it was a little short in the back.

“Good party?” he asked, his voice distant as he took me in with one quick glance. His gaze didn’t linger, but his throat bobbed as his eyes skimmed down my legs.

“Uh-huh.” I licked my lips and shifted my weight in my straw wedge sandals. With the three-inch lift, I was tall enough that if I stood on tiptoe and lifted my chin . . .

Jake cleared his throat. “Got you something.”

“What?” My belly did a little flip. “You didn’t have to get me anything!”

“It’s your birthday, Lena,” he said with an eye roll. “OfcourseI got you something.”

The butterflies in my stomach intensified. Jake was the only one who called me that.

Reaching into his back pocket, he produced a tiny box — atinywrappedbox. My heart squeezed at the image of Jake’s big fingers wrangling Scotch tape and tying the little pink ribbon.

Unable to hold back my smile, I undid the ribbon and tore the paper off to reveal a soft blue velvet box. My hands trembled as I opened it up, and my breath caught in my chest.

Inside was a delicate gold bracelet with a tiny charm in the shape of a sun.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered, staring down at the bracelet in amazement. No one hadevergiven me jewelry, unless one counted the hoop earrings I’d begged my mom to get me for Christmas.

This was different. This was jewelry from a guy. It had to mean something, right?

“It’s for your name,” he said, his voice coming out slightly strangled. If I hadn’t known any better, I would have thought that Jake was nervous. But that couldn’t be right.

He cleared his throat. “Lena means ‘ray of light.’”

“It’s . . .” I shook my head and fumbled with the box to get the bracelet out. It was so pretty and delicate, and it was from Jake. I wanted to wear it immediately.

“Here,” he said, his warm fingers closing around my wrist.

That’s when my heart stopped beating.

I tried to breathe as Jake worked the clasp, but my lungs wouldn’t expand. The gold chain felt cool against my overheated skin, and when he was finished, Jake’s fingertips lingered on the inside of my wrist.

“Thank you,” I whispered. The bracelet was real gold. I could only imagine how many shifts he’d had to work to afford it.

“Don’t mention it.” It should have been a throwaway line, but I knew it wasn’t. The way he’d said it — the way he’d whispered it — made everything around us fall away.

I was feeling bolder than normal. Carmen had gotten her older sister to buy us some Rum Chata for my birthday, and I’d had a couple of shots.

I didn’t overthink it. I just reached up on tiptoe, closed my eyes, and pressed my lips against his.

I heard Jake’s sharp intake of breath. His lips were warm yet unyielding.

Then I felt his hands on my shoulders, and he pushed me away.

I broke the kiss with a gasp, heat searing my cheeks.

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Ohgodohgodohgod.

“Elena,” he said, sounding horrified.

His use of my full name told me just how badly I’d fucked up. I’dkissedJake. His eyes were wide as he wiped his mouth, as though he wanted to erase the kiss from his body and memory. “We can’t.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I shouldn’t —” Tears burned in the back of my throat, but I couldn’t cry in front of Jake. “I have to go,” I muttered, turning and sprinting back toward the kitchen.

“Lena, wait!”

But I didn’t wait. I ran.

That was the last time I saw Jake Carson.

“I’m ready,” I say quietly, yanking myself out of the hazy nightmare.

I’m not sure how polite to be to Jake, all things considered. My sixteenth birthday is ancient history — he probably doesn’t even remember it. I know he thinks he’s doing me a favor by offering himself up as my chaperone.

On the other hand, he’s participating in Raf’s plan to control me for the rest of my life, so my feelings toward him aren’t super warm. At least, theyshouldn’tbe.

“Diviertete y ten cuidado,” says my mom as I wrestle my suitcase over the threshold.

I roll my eyes. Have fun and be careful. Mom’s been saying the exact same thing to me since I was twelve. “Always am, Mamá.”

“No te preocupes, Juana,” says Jake, reaching down and grabbing my suitcase by the handle. He also takes the garment bag I have slung over the arm of the couch.

Mamá beams at him.

I bite the tip of my tongue to hold back a grin at Jake telling my mother not to worry. He’s always made an effort to speak Spanish at my house since my mom’s self-conscious about her English. It started with a few broken lines that she would patiently correct, and now he’s actually decent.

Suddenly, it hits me how much Jake was over here. He spent more time at my house than he did at home.

I follow Jake out to his Jeep. He doesn’t even glance toward the house next door. Another family lives there now, but the house is exactly the same. I climb into the front seat as he loads my suitcase in the back, trying to relax.

I’m doing okay until Jake slides in beside me, filling the inside of the Jeep with his familiar scent. Jake smells like clean laundry and some delicious aftershave he wears, but there’s also a warm spicy scent that is unique to him.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I tell him quietly. This is my last chance to bail.

“Do what?” he asks, looking confused.

“Give up your weekend to go to a wedding for people you barely know. I shouldn’t

have let Raf rope you into this.”

“He didn’t,” says Jake, flashing that easy smile that makes me weak in the knees and draping a hand over the steering wheel.

I shoot him a disbelieving look, and he chuckles. The sound rumbles through my whole body, warming my insides.

Shit. Apparently, six years and a traumatic brain injury aren’t enough to make a person immune to attraction. Jake still makes me all tingly and stupid inside.

“Like I said, it’ll be fun. Open bar. Good food. Dancing.” He looks over at me and lifts an eyebrow. “I know how much you loved dancing.”

My lips twist into a smile despite my best efforts. I’ve been dancing since I was three. I was training to start my career as a professional ballet dancer when the accident brought my dream to a grinding halt.

For a while, no one knew if I’d ever walk again — let alone dance. Traumatic brain injuries can cause a lot of crazy symptoms, and some can linger for years.

A year after my TBI, I was still struggling with balance, which meant a career as a prima ballerina was out. So I transferred to the Boston Conservatory at Berklee to study contemporary dance.

“And I do know Carmen,” Jake adds. “You two were thick as thieves when we were younger.”

I raise my eyebrows. I’d been looking forward to Carmen’s wedding for the better part of a year, but with Jake, I don’t know how to act. He might not remember my sweet sixteen, but I sure as hell do. I’m not that girl anymore, but I still feel the sting

of his rejection and the heat of embarrassment as though it were yesterday.

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“I’m yours for the weekend,” says Jake, his grin widening.

I try not to read too much into those words. If Jake only knew the thoughts running through my mind, he’d turn this car around.

Nope, not going there, I tell myself, tearing my gaze away from his stupidly gorgeous face.

Whatever Jake felt or didn’t feel for me is in the past. I have to stay in the present and protect my heart.

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### ELENA

It’s a short drive from my childhood home to the hotel where the wedding will take place. Jake and I pass the time getting caught up on each other’s lives. He asks how I’m liking Boston and which dance companies are at the top of my list for after I graduate. I ask about his fight training.

Apparently, Jake’s had to cut back since he took a job in private security. His boss is the new alpha of the Red Feather Lake pack near Fort Collins and works security for other high-ranking wolf shifters.

It’s a little hard for me to imagine Jake putting on a suit and going to work for this security firm, but it sounds as though he enjoys it.



We pull up in the circle drive of a swanky hotel, and Jake drums his fingers on the steering wheel. The SUV in front of us is a sleek Mercedes, and all the other vehicles are later-model luxury cars.

A valet appears to park Jake's Jeep, and a crease knits his brow. I'm not sure if he just doesn't like the thought of parting with his precious Jeep or if he's feeling self-conscious.

I certainly feel underdressed as we waltz into the lobby. A giant vase of lilies is situated inside the tall glass doors, and the whole place smells expensive.

"Good afternoon," says an elegant woman behind the front desk. "Checking in?"

"Yes."

Jake follows me over to her, toting my suitcase, garment bag, his backpack, and a second garment bag that must contain his clothes for the wedding. He turned down the valet's offer to have the bags brought up to our room, but now I'm worried that schlepping all our stuff through the fancy lobby makes us stick out like a sore thumb.

"We're here for the Rodriguez-Blanski wedding."

"Ah, yes," says the woman, smiling warmly.

"Reservations for Elena Cabrera Garcia and Jake Carson."

The woman's fingers clatter over the keyboard. "Yes, I have the reservation for Mr. Carson right here."

I smile and shift my weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. I know Raf called and paid for Jake's room, but it still feels weird.

The woman prints out something for Jake to sign and then types my name in. “Cabrera Garcia, Cabrera Garcia . . .”

“You might check under ‘Garcia,’” I say, trying to be helpful.

The woman grimaces and then glances to her left before leaning forward over the desk. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I have a note in my system that says my manager did try to contact you.” She lowers her voice to just above a whisper. “Your card was declined when we tried to place the hold for your room. Since we were unable to reach you, we could not hold that reservation.”

My throat goes suddenly very dry, and my cheeks heat with embarrassment. I vaguely remember getting a few calls from a number I didn’t recognize, but I assumed they were spam calls.

“I am so sorry,” I murmur. “Let me just —” My fingers fumble for my wallet, but I stop with my credit card halfway out.

Before I left Boston, I took my car to the shop for a funny little shimmy it did whenever I tried to accelerate, and I’d just charged twenty-five hundred dollars worth of repairs on this card.

My stomach sinks. My credit-card limit is three thousand, and I use this card to pay for groceries and gas. It’s practically maxed out.

“Just a sec,” I say, my bottom lip quivering as I stare at the other cards in my wallet.

I work two part-time jobs at dance studios in the city to pay my expenses, but it’s nearly the end of the month. I have exactly forty-seven dollars in my bank account, so giving her my debit card is out of the question.

I'm about to make some excuse to leave so I can figure out my next step, but Jake's warm, rough fingers encircle my wrist. "It's all right," he says. "I've got this."

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His tone is light and easy — as though it's no big deal. He knows why I'm hesitating, and he's offering to cover my room.

Now I really want to die.

“Here,” he says, handing over his card before I have a chance to object.

The woman's eyes crinkle with sympathy as she opens her mouth, and my dread compounds. “Unfortunately, we are fully booked this weekend. We simply don't have any open rooms.”

My mouth falls open, and I want to cry. This really can't get any worse.

“It looks like we have you in a king room, Mr. Carson,” she says brightly. “So the two of you should have plenty of room.”

The blood drains from my face. “But we can't —”

“Great,” says Jake, cutting me off and smiling at the woman. He taps the edge of his key card on the counter once, sticks it in his pocket, and then scoops up our garment bags as he heads toward the elevator.

Horried and at a loss for words, I turn and run after him.

“Jake, wait,” I say as the elevator opens. “This is silly. We don't need to share a room. I'll just call and make a reservation at another hotel.”

Never mind that I'll have to call Raf and ask him to book it. I know he won't mind — my brother is loaded — but I try never to ask him for anything.

Jake shakes his head and punches a button. "Nah. Raf asked me to keep an eye on you. How am I supposed to do that if you're at another hotel?"

"Then we'll both get rooms somewhere else," I say, feeling suddenly desperate.

"Why?" asks Jake. "The wedding is here. You're the maid of honor. Carmen'll want you close."

I grit my teeth and rack my brain for some other argument. Damn Jake and his valid points.

"Besides . . . I trust you to keep your hands to yourself."

I open my mouth in indignation, but then I remember that Jake offered to pay for my room.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "For trying to help me back there. Please don't tell Raf."

He shakes his head as if to say he would never tell my brother. "Consider it forgotten."

I let out the breath I've been holding, and the elevator doors slide open.

"I know it's none of my business, but I'm surprised Raf hasn't, uh . . ." Jake trails off, squinting as though he's trying to come up with a tactful way to say it.

"Set me up so I never have to work another day in my life?" I let out a bitter laugh.

"Don't think he hasn't tried."

Jake's eyes flicker in my direction, but his expression is unreadable. While Jake, Raf, and I all had similar hand-to-mouth upbringings, my brother's grades and test scores were good enough to secure a full-ride scholarship to Stanford.

While other students drank and partied their undergraduate years away, Raf studied like a maniac and built his data-mining company from the ground up. He sold the business in an eight-figure deal and used the money to launch his next endeavor, which made him a billionaire at the age of twenty-seven.

"I don't want Raf's money," I say quietly as we pad down the elegant hallway toward our room. "Raf's spent enough on me for one lifetime."

Jake seems to be waiting for me to elaborate, so I take a deep breath and continue. "Carmen's ex was uninsured at the time of the accident, and the cops determined it was his fault. No payout. Mamá was fighting with our insurance over every little thing, so Raf paid for my medical expenses out of pocket. He paid for my surgeries, the rehab center, PT, in-home care . . ." I shake my head. "I'm not taking any more of his money."

"I get it," says Jake.

"You do?" I try not to publicize the fact that I'm Rafael Cabrera Garcia's little sister, but people always seem to find out. Most people I've met in Boston think I'm crazy for not wanting Raf's money — especially when it's so hard to make ends meet as a dancer.

Jake nods. "Sometimes owing someone makes you feel like you can't go against their wishes. I get wanting to be your own person."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. Of course Jake gets it. He knows Rafael better than anyone.

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“But you should know that Raf didn’t care about the money,” he adds. “He was a mess when you were in recovery. I doubt he has any idea how much he even spent.”

Jake rummages in his back pocket for the key card, and I open my mouth to ask how he knows what Raf was like when I was recovering from the accident. Raf had me transferred to Chicago to the best TBI rehab center in the country shortly after I was diagnosed. Jake was here in Colorado.

But before I can get the words out, the keypad blinks, and Jake throws open the door to our room.

I suck in a breath as the huge canopy bed comes into view. It’s draped in crisp white linens and seems to dominate the entire room. The walls are painted a hue of deep yellow that’s not quite goldenrod and not quite mustard. Sunlight streams in through tall French doors, which housekeeping left cracked for a bit of fresh air. The light breeze stirs the gauzy white canopy, and I exhale slowly.

It’s both luxurious and cozy — perfect if Jake and I were here on some romantic getaway. Instead, I’m supposed to platonically share a bed with my brother’s best friend who brutally rejected me on my birthday.

I have the worst luck.

Jake’s low whistle tickles my ears as he wheels my suitcase into the room. He hangs our garment bags in the closet, then crosses to the bed and bounces on the edge of the mattress. “Nice.”

It's ridiculous, but being cooped up in this romantic room with Jake is just too much. I have to get out of here.

"I'm going to the pool," I announce, turning toward my suitcase so Jake can't see how flustered I am.

I came to Carmen's wedding to have fun and celebrate my best friend's big day. I'm not about to let this thing with Jake ruin the whole weekend.

I grab my bikini and storm into the bathroom as Jake turns on the TV. I dress quickly and run a hand through my hair, belatedly realizing that I left my coverup in my suitcase.

Feeling self-conscious, I slide back into the room and grab my coverup. Jake's gaze burns through my skin as I turn to leave.

"A swim sounds nice," he says, making me jump. "I . . . think I'll join you."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### JAKE

Moving like a predator, I stalk down the hallway and take the steps to reach the pool on the ground floor. I wasn't going to let Elena hit the pool alone — not after she strutted into the room wearing that tiny fucking bikini.

She's already down there when I arrive. The sunflower-yellow fabric of her swimsuit barely covers her ass, and don't even get me started on that top. Her glossy black hair cascades down her back, and I find myself wondering what it would feel like wrapped around my hand. Elena's long golden legs dangle into the water as she laughs at something Carmen said.



Carmen. Talk about a bad influence. I swear, that girl lives to make trouble.

“Yo!”

I turn at the sound of Maddox’s voice and break into a wide grin. I hadn’t realized he was going to be at this shindig, and it’s good to see a familiar face.

Maddox is a big guy — dark-haired and well-inked. He looks like somebody who should be dressed in leather, straddling a big black Harley. Instead he’s lounging in a pool chair and sipping a beer. Beside him is Nick, another one of my pack brothers.

I plop down in the empty chair on Maddox’s other side, and he hands me a cold Corona.

“Thanks, man,” I say, taking a long drag.

“Didn’t know you were gonna be here.”

“Neither did I.”

Maddox gives me a strange look, and I nod toward Elena. “Rafael wanted me to keep an eye on his sister this weekend.”

Our little town of Gold Creek is a forty-minute drive from Denver, but every shifter in Colorado knows Raf.

Maddox’s eyebrows creep up, and he shakes his head as a chuckle rumbles up his throat. “So you’re here to keep her from getting fucked by the groomsmen?”

“Basically,” I grunt, my wolf snarling at Maddox’s implication that Lena would sleep with any other male here.

Nick doesn't speak, but I know he's listening. He stares out at the party with sharp green eyes that could cut fucking glass, as if he half expects someone to throw a grenade into the gaggle of females drinking and chatting at the other end of the pool.

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Nick is a delta wolf, which places him outside the pack hierarchy altogether. Where dominant wolves can use alpha command to force individual wolves to do their bidding, a delta wolf can manipulate emotions and influence the entire pack at once.

I've known the guy for five years, and I still find it creepy as hell.

"You gonna come out with us tonight?" Maddox asks. "We're pregaming in Damon's room, then we're gonna head to Cascade for —"

Maddox breaks off, and a whirl of movement catches my eye. A woman with honey-blond hair is sprinting toward the water. She shrieks and pulls her legs up into a cannonball position as three human males gawk and whistle from the sidelines.

A low growl rumbles beside me, and I see Maddox shift his weight forward, preparing to stand. The blond is Maddox's mate, Paige, and those human dudes have no idea what they just stepped in.

Before he met Paige, Maddox was the mad dog who did the pack's dirty work. He's settled down quite a bit since he mated, but any new level of zen he's achieved goes out the window where Paige is concerned.

While Maddox watches Paige swim across the pool, my gaze drifts over to Elena. The water laps at her perfect breasts, and one of her bikini ties floats behind her.

I have a sudden graphic fantasy of the two of us alone in the pool. I swim up behind her and give that string a little tug, cupping her warm breasts as I plant a trail of kisses down that perfect golden neck.

Elena has a dancer's body — lithe and petite. I bet I could get her in some truly spectacular positions and make her come so hard that she —

“You gonna go for it?” Maddox asks, ripping me out of fantasy land.

I whip my head around to look at him, panic squeezing my guts. He's followed my gaze across the pool to where Elena is lounging, and the look in his eyes says he knows where my head was.

“What?” I ask, trying to play it off.

Nick might be picking up on my lust and angst, but Maddox isn't a fucking mind reader.

“The water,” he clarifies. “You gonna get in?”

“Oh . . . I don't know. Maybe.” Relief ebbs through me, though I know I can't get in the water — not when it would put me so close to Elena in her yellow bikini.

Besides that, watching her has given me a . . . situation down south. Sitting with my legs spread wide, it's hard to tell, but if I were to stand, everyone would know exactly how I feel about Raf's little sister.

That knowledge is enough to make me sweat, and it takes me back to the last time I saw Elena before I left town for good.

I was twenty-two, and I was in Denver visiting Raf. There wasn't a lot going on that night, so we decided to crash our old high-school team's basketball game before the planned hunt with Raf's pack.

I hadn't known Lena was on the pom squad. Otherwise, I wouldn't have come.

I'd made every effort to avoid the Garcia house since the night of her sweet sixteen — since the night she kissed me.

That night, I'd sworn off temptation. Lena thought I didn't want her, and she was right.

I didn't want her. I needed her — needed her like I needed water or air. But I couldn't cross that line. Lena was five years younger and Raf's baby sister. Raf was the closest thing I had to a brother, and he would've disowned me if he knew the thoughts I had about her.

But this . . . this was some special form of torture.

There she was, dancing and smiling in her red-and-black uniform — short skirt, sleeveless top, bright-white tennis shoes that set off her smooth, golden skin.

Seeing her out there moving to the music, I couldn't help but smile. I'd meant what I'd said when I gave her that bracelet. Lena was my sunshine.

The squad finished their number and headed for the bleachers, where a pale, muscular guy in a baggy white T-shirt was waiting. A giant rhinestone glinted from one ear. He said something to Elena, and her lips pinched together.

Inside, my wolf snarled.

"Who is that guy?" I asked Raf.

Raf shook his head and scowled. "Mikey. Some shithead Elena dated once or twice. I caught him feeling her up in his car." The alpha's voice trembled with fury. "I told her he was bad news, but she wouldn't listen to me. They broke up when she caught him screwing some sophomore under the bleachers."

At those words, the growl rumbled from my chest to my throat.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

Lena pulled a smile that didn't quite meet her eyes, but the guy kept talking.

"Seems like he can't take a hint."

"Yeah," Raf agreed. "Elena's got his number, though. And he's only human."

To anyone else listening, it might have sounded as though Raf was excusing the shithead's behavior, but I caught his true meaning. The kid was a danger to his sister, but a human was easily dealt with.

At that moment, Elena turned to go, but the creep with the earring grabbed her by the arm.

Before I knew it, I was on my feet, ready to break both the guy's legs. Lena yanked her arm away and said something that made the creep jerk his head back. Attagirl. She flounced off to rejoin the pom squad, but the guy kept watching.

"Be right back," I said to Raf.

"But there's only twelve seconds left on the clock, and we're down by two points."

I didn't answer him. It was nearly the end of the fourth quarter, but I no longer felt invested in the game.

I stalked out of the gym and waited on the other side of the concessions stand. I heard a whistle and the squeak of sneakers on the court. Then the crowd went wild.

Judging by the sounds of celebration, I knew our team had scored and won. I didn't move. I waited as students poured out through the double doors, high-fiving and shouting and celebrating.

The players, cheerleaders, and members of the pom squad would be in the locker rooms, which were only accessible from the gym and from the hallway just behind me.

So I waited.

Sure enough, the creep with the earring came slinking out with the throng of people. His pale eyes drifted over me as he exited with the crowd, and I knew I didn't imagine the shiver that went through him.

Humans could be pretty dense, but even the stupidest of them could sense a predator.

Takes one to know one, creep.

I waited until he slunk down the hallway and then turned and followed him. He leaned against the wall outside the women's locker room.

A grim smirk twisted my mouth. Sometimes, I hated being right.

"You waiting for Elena?" I called.

The creep looked up, and his face scrunched into a scowl.

"Maybe. What's it to you?"

I let out a dry chuckle. This guy really was a genius.



“Everything,” I ground out.

The guy opened his mouth to reply, and my fist flew out — knocking his head back against the wall. He staggered, and I aimed a kick just above his knee. His leg crumpled beneath him.

I continued to land punch after punch until he was a limp, bleeding mess on the floor. Then I scraped him up off the tile and carried him out the double doors.

“Stay. Away. From. Her.”

A loud shriek from one of the girls on the other side of the pool tugs me out of the memory.

Before that night, I’d told myself I just had to wait. If I waited until I turned twenty-six, then I could allow myself a shot with Elena.

She’d be twenty-one. It would no longer be rob-the-cradle inappropriate. Raf would have to come around once he saw just how much I cared for his sister.

But after I’d left that creep’s blood splattered over the brick wall outside the locker rooms, I knew I couldn’t ever have her. If we got together and it didn’t work out, I’d spend the rest of my days taking out my rage on any man who dared get close to her, rather than fighters in a cage.

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Sure, it's been torture hearing Raf tell me about her life — including every guy she ever dated — but I'm good at pretending not to care.

Growing up, I'd pretended I didn't care about going to school in dirty clothes that were a size too small.

I'd pretended I didn't care that my own shitty parents were too fucked up to go to work or make sure there was food in the house.

I'd pretended I didn't care that I had to swipe my friends' uneaten scraps from the cafeteria just so I'd have something to eat between lunch and the free breakfast they offered at school. And if it was a weekend, I'd hang out at Raf's as much as I could just so I didn't go hungry.

So, yeah . . . I could pretend that I didn't care about the beautiful girl who was old enough and practically within reach. I could do it because I had to.

Suddenly, my skin feels much too tight. My whole body tingles with the urge to shift, and I need to work off some of this energy before shutting myself in a hotel room with temptation.

"I'm going for a run," I tell Maddox, getting to my feet and clapping him on the shoulder.

Maddox fixes me with that same odd look, but he doesn't say a word as I stalk out of the gated pool area and head for my Jeep.

## CHAPTER SIX

### JAKE

When I finally get back to the hotel room, I hear the shower running. My muscles are quivering, and my skin still tingles from the change. I drove out to the nearest wildlife refuge and let my wolf run as far as I could, but it did little to take the edge off.

The scent of Elena's coconut shampoo wafts from the bathroom, and my cock twitches in my shorts. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to think about anything other than Lena naked in the shower.

But then the water shuts off, and she steps out of the bathroom. She's wearing one of those tiny hotel towels, the edge tucked in between her breasts. Her golden skin is still damp from the shower, and her dark hair is drying in soft curls that stick to her neck.

Her eyes widen when she sees me, and a delicate flush paints her cheeks. She wasn't expecting me to be here.

"Sorry, I'll just —" I gesture at the empty bathroom behind her. "Give you some privacy."

"Okay," she chokes, ducking back in to grab her toiletry bag and skirting around me.

That warm coconut-and-vanilla scent intensifies, seeping into my pores, and my cock swells at the knowledge that her pussy is bare beneath that towel.

Not helpful, I tell myself as I retreat into the bathroom and slam the door behind me.

I turn the water on as cold as it will go and strip out of my shorts. My dick is standing at attention, stiff as a board, and all I did was see her in a towel.

This weekend is not going well.

My teeth chatter as I step under the icy spray, but Elena's delicious scent lingers. I spy the offending shampoo resting on the shelf in the shower beside a bright-pink razor.

I wonder if she shaves her pussy.

The thought pops into my head completely unprovoked, and I realize what a huge mistake I've made.

I should never have agreed to come here — much less offer to share a room with her. I thought I was strong, but my addiction is stronger, and this weekend is a test I do not need.

Bracing my hands against the wall of the shower, I will my erection to go away. No way am I jacking off with Elena on the other side of the wall.

I emerge with a towel wrapped around my waist to find Elena getting ready. Mercifully, she's wearing clothes as she straightens her now-dry hair.

But fuck, that dress. It's a shimmery little gold number that barely covers her ass. Her long toned legs taunt me as she fixes her hair, and she's wearing a pair of matching gold heels that bring her head almost to my nose.

I don't miss the way her eyes catch on my chest when she sees me in the mirror. But then she tears her gaze away and clears her throat loudly. "What are you doing tonight?"

Peeling off that poor excuse for a dress and licking you all over.

Seeing if you do have that sweet little pussy.

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“Not sure yet.” My voice comes out strangled, and Elena shoots me a funny look.

“I’m going to Cascade with Carmen and the girls for the bachelorette party. Won’t be back ’til late.”

I snort. “Not dressed like that, you’re not.”

Cascade is by far the shadiest nightclub in the Denver metro area. They pour the stiffest drinks and employ the laziest bouncers. It’s not uncommon for girls to get drugged and date-raped there.

Elena jerks her head around to look at me, and in that moment, she reminds me of Raf. My girl might be human, but if she were a shifter, she could command a pack.

Shit. When did I start thinking of her as my girl? Elena has never been mine, no matter how much my wolf might want to pretend otherwise.

“Excuse me?”

I gesture at her dress, shaking my head. “That thing is a wardrobe malfunction waiting to happen.”

“So what? We’re going to a nightclub. You’re supposed to dress a little slutty for a nightclub.”

“Then I hope for your sake that there’s an extra seat in the limo, because I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not!” Elena cries, sounding half scandalized, half amused. “It’s a bachelorette party. That means ladies only.”

“And Maddox told me a bunch of the guys are also going to Cascade tonight — a bunch of shifter guys.”

“I’ll be fine,” says Elena with an eye roll, turning back to the mirror and fixing her hair.

I let out a long huff of air, grab some clothes, and head back into the bathroom to change.

You asked for it, sweetheart.

Despite my earlier comment, Elena looks utterly confused when I emerge from the bathroom dressed in jeans and a nice T-shirt.

“You’re not serious,” she says, a nervous laugh bubbling up from her throat.

“Raf asked me to stick to you like white on rice this weekend. And even if he hadn’t” — I scowl at her outfit — “I’m not letting you go to Cascade dressed like that with only Carmen and her friends for backup. I’m coming.”

By the time we pull up in front of the club, I already want to blow my brains out. My ears are ringing from the loud “woo” sounds all women make at bachelorette parties as they toss back Jell-O shots in a limo. Carmen is already three sheets to the wind, and I’m honestly impressed she can still walk in a straight line while wearing four-inch heels.

Elena’s the only one not drinking. According to Raf, she hasn’t had a drop of alcohol since her accident. I spent some time reading up on traumatic brain injuries while she

was recouping, and apparently alcohol can make TBI symptoms worse.

I catch a few lustful glances from the other she-wolves in attendance, but they might as well be store mannequins for all the attention I pay them. I'm too busy trying not to stare at Elena as she laughs and jokes with her friends.

Unfortunately, when we get to the door, the hitch in my plan becomes apparent. The bouncer waves the tipsy bachelorettes through without hesitation but pulls back the rope and stops me with a scowl.

"I'm with them," I grumble, angry that he's preventing me from putting myself between Elena and every scummy guy in Denver.

"Not right now, you're not."

I narrow my eyes at the bouncer, contemplating bribes and threats. But the guy looks strangely familiar. He's at least six two and three hundred pounds. His face is a bit leaner and meaner than when I last saw him, but I'd recognize him anywhere.

"Jerry?" I ask, squinting sideways at the guy I had homeroom with freshman year of high school.

He jerks his head back, doing a double take. "Jake?" A wide grin spreads across his face. "How the hell are ya?"

"Not bad," I say, my whole body relaxing as I smile back. Jerry was always making me laugh. I haven't seen him since high school.

"Good to see ya. Go on in," he says, waving me through. "Have a great time."

I nod my thanks and skirt into the club, cutting through the crowd in search of the



girls.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

The music is deafening — some horrible techno remix of a trending pop song — and the buzz of the bass rattles my ribs. Fake smoke swirls near the ceiling as strobe lights and laser beams flash in the dark, and dozens of different smells bombard my senses.

Cologne.

Sweat.

Laundry detergent.

Alcohol.

Bodies are crammed so close together that I can't see an inch of floor space. My boss, Eli, would have a fit if he were here. Loud music, poor visibility, too many bodies — it's a security nightmare.

Out of habit, I locate all my exits and scan the perimeter for anyone who looks as though they don't belong. I'd been worried about Elena getting roofied or groped in some dark corner, but venues like this give my wolf fits — especially since Eli trained me to look for threats.

I find the bachelorettes doing tequila shots at the bar and roll my eyes. Typical Carmen. The woman is trouble with a capital T.

I can already see the vultures circling — douchey-looking guys in their early- to midtwenties. My senses tell me they're all human, but that doesn't mean they aren't a

threat. I see the predatory way their eyes rove over Elena — even if she doesn't.

One man in a pink T-shirt heads straight for her. He's either going to try to buy her a drink or ask her to dance.

Over my dead body.

Not bothering to check my shifter speed, I shoot over to her side, brushing past Pink Shirt in a blur. The guy looks to his side, clearly confused, but I'm moving too fast for him to see me.

In two seconds flat, I'm standing beside her. Elena looks startled by my sudden appearance, and I see the pulse in her neck jump.

"Wanna dance?" I ask, leaning in close so I don't have to shout. It's so damn loud in here I'm not sure how Carmen or the other she-wolves can stand it.

"What?"

"Do you — want — to dance?" I repeat, speaking loud enough for Pink Shirt to hear. I'm close enough that I can smell the sweet tang of her sweat and the grapefruit seltzer on her breath.

Elena gives me a funny look, her lips pinching as she tries to suppress a smile. "Withyou?"

"Yes, me!" This time, I do shout. Irritation pricks my insides. Why is she looking at me as though I just beamed down from another planet?

"O-kay . . ." Elena's voice is cautious but not displeased.

My wolf preens, and I resist the urge to fist pump as I take her dainty hand and lead her onto the dance floor. Her fingers are warm as they curl around mine, and my heart gives a happy little jolt.

Men are idiots. Women risk life and limb coming to these horrible clubs where they might get drugged or assaulted because they love to dance. And yet, dudes leave them sidelined by the bar all the damn time.

My girl loves to dance more than most. Elena fucking lives for it.

The music fades into another upbeat pop song, and I twirl her around. Elena's golden dress catches the purplish strobe light as she spins, a laugh slipping out of her.

Damn. She is so fucking gorgeous.

I know my moves won't be up to her standards, but I'm not a bad dancer. I try to lead and give her the chance to really show what she can do. But then she starts to sway those hips, and I just can't stop myself.

I spin her around and pull her close, her perfect ass nestling against me. I feel her sharp intake of breath, and for a moment, she goes absolutely still.

Elena's scent overwhelms me — vanilla and coconut and something warm and sweet that's only her. My heart feels as though it's left my body — pounding between us as I wait to see if she'll pull away.

She doesn't.

Tentatively, I slide my hands down to grip her hips and start to move her with the beat. Elena's body moves in perfect sync with mine, and suddenly, I can't breathe.

The swell of the music overwhelms my pitiful heart, and everything else melts away.  
I'm drowning in a cloud of coconut heaven — drowning in her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

I'm almost a foot taller than Elena, and yet her body fits perfectly against mine. The tight curve of her ass presses harder into my thigh, and all I can think is that it would be the perfect place to nestle my cock.

My johnson twitches a little at the thought, and I try to focus on something other than the warmth of her skin or the soft whisper of her hair as it catches in my stubble.

But then Elena reaches up and hooks a hand around my neck. My skin tingles at her touch, and my pulse leaps.

Her movements become more fluid as the music picks up, and I realize she's having fun. My chest aches, and I tug her closer, allowing my hands to move just a fraction of an inch until my thumbs find the creases of her hips.

Then another scent wafts up to greet me — the sweet tang of female arousal.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Elena's not just having fun. Elena is turned on.

A soft growl rumbles up my throat as I sweep my hands over the tops of her thighs. Elena's rhythm falters for half a second, but she doesn't pull away or let go of my neck.

The DJ lays down a more intense beat, and I grind harder against her. Elena keeps dancing, though I'm positive I'm not imagining the shallowness of her breath or the way her body quivers.

Feeling bold, I tilt my hips so that my erection nudges between her ass cheeks, and a soft sigh slips from her throat as she rubs against me.

Hot, maddening desire pulses through me, and my mind goes entirely blank. I let my hand drift up to caress her side, roving over her stomach until it brushes the underside of her soft, supple breasts.

Elena sucks in a breath, turning her head to the side so her cheek is pressed against my chest.

I forget everything and everyone around us as I touch her through her clothes, my right hand exploring her ribs and the soft plane of her stomach as my left grips her hip. I'm dying to let my fingers wander between her thighs to find her most sensitive spot, but we're in the middle of the dance floor, and there are certain things I want to do to her in private.

But then the song starts to fade into something else, and I hear her name cut through the noise in a low, masculine voice.

Elena stiffens in my arms, and there's a loud record-scratch in my mind as another man's name tumbles from her lips.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ELENA

"Derek?" I choke as my ex cuts through the crowd toward me. It's so weird seeing him here after almost two years apart that it takes my brain a moment to catch up.

Derek is the shifter guy I dated for six months back in Boulder. He's tall and handsome with sandy-blond hair and cool gray eyes, but his looks hold no appeal for

me anymore.

“You here for the wedding?” Derek asks.

“Yeah,” I say, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

I’m not sure why, but having Jake in the same room as my ex is awkward as hell. It’s worse when I realize that I’m still touching him.

Jake’s left hand is splayed across my thigh, and his right hand is resting on my stomach. I can feel his body heat burning through my dress.

As if he read my mind, Derek’s flinty gaze slides up to Jake, who stands a good three inches taller. “Who is this?” he asks, his voice smooth and dark.

There was a time I found that voice incredibly sexy. Now it just makes me feel sick to my stomach.

“This is Jake,” I say, resting my hand over his before I realize what I’m doing. I hurriedly snap it away. “He’s a . . . friend.”

Jake stiffens against me.

“A friend, huh?” Derek’s voice is practically dripping with condescension.

“We go way back,” Jake rumbles. “I’ve known Elena her whole life.”

Derek’s mouth stretches into a sneer, revealing the sharp points of his canines. I can feel the testosterone rolling off these two.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

“Oh,” he says. “Your Raf’s friend from the neighborhood.”

The disdainful emphasis Derek places on the word “neighborhood” makes my insides clench with a defensiveness I haven’t felt since junior high. Yeah, my family didn’t have a ton of money growing up, and we lived in a mostly Hispanic neighborhood that my white classmates would refer to as the “bad part of town.”

The people on my street weren’t bad. They were just poor — especially Jake’s family.

These last few years, housing prices have shot up so much that Denver’s poor can’t afford to live there anymore. They’ve opened a Starbucks and a Whole Foods three blocks from my house, but Derek’s implication still makes me bristle.

Was halfway this stuck up?

“I don’t live there anymore, but yeah,” says Jake.

Derek lets out a short chuckle and offers his hand. “I’m Derek, by the way. Elena’s boyfriend. Maybe she’s told you about me.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” I mutter at the same time Jake says, “Nope. Doesn’t ring a bell.”

I can hear the smirk in his voice as he shakes Derek’s hand. Derek’s nostrils flare in irritation, and I sense the conversation is about to go south.

“It was nice running into you,” I say to Derek, hoping he’ll take the hint. “We should

grab a drink and catch up later on this weekend. Who knows when we'll get another chance?"

Hopefully, never.

Beneath the steady throb of the music, I hear a low growl from the wolf behind me.

"Why wait?" says Derek, his smile turning predatory. His gaze flickers to Jake again before settling back on me. "There's no time like the present. Let me buy you a drink."

I hesitate. I only said what I said to be polite. There's nothing more awkward than "catching up" with an ex, and I have absolutely no intention of grabbing that drink. I was hoping he'd forget in all the wedding craziness, but I can't exactly refuse now that he's putting me on the spot.

"Maybe a dance?" Derek coaxes, turning on that charming smile that's allowed him to be so successful in sales.

"We're actually in the middle of something," Jake butts in, and I feel a rare swoop of gratitude for the overprotective, infuriating, and confusing shifter who's digging his fingers into my side.

"Yeah," Derek chokes. "I saw exactly what you were in the middle of."

"Then you should know it's not a good time," says Jake coolly.

The air crackles with a wolfish energy that makes me shrink back against Jake's chest. I'm not sure if all humans can sense when two wolves are about to erupt into violence, but I can. Call it a special skill I developed growing up among shifters.

“Actually, I think it’s a perfect time,” says Derek, sneering as he looks Jake up and down. “Wouldn’t want word getting back to Rafael that his old pal from the ’hood is making his sister look like a whore in public.”

The words hit me like a punch to the stomach, and I feel Jake’s body turn to stone.

“What — the —fuck?” I blurt before Jake even has a chance to get all hot and bothered. My whole body thrums with rage, and I feel a familiar jab in my temple that lets me know I have a migraine coming on. “You wanna rewind and try that again?”

“Sorry, babe. But that’s how you look.” He shrugs and tosses Jake a withering stare. “That’s what happens when you hang out with trash. They makeyoulook like trash.”

“Jake isnottrash,” I growl, my hands shaking with fury. Hell, my whole body is shaking. I don’t remember the last time I was this angry, and the intensity of the feeling scares me.

But Derek apparently doesn’t know when to shut his damn mouth. “You wouldn’t fuckme, but you’ll fuckhimon the dance floor in front of everyone?” He chokes out a breath of humorless laughter. “Typical.”

I bristle. I wasn’t fucking Jake. I might havewantedto, but we were just dancing.

“Isthiswho you’ve been saving yourself for?” Derekdemands. “Some piece of shit who wants to make you look like a slut?”

My mouth falls open in shock and fury. That’s when Jake tackles him.

I don’t even feel Jake move behind me. His body becomes a blur as he dives past me, and I feel the vibration of Derek’s head hit the floor.

Jake's fist flies out and connects with Derek's mouth. Blood splatters the floor, and somebody screams.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

There's a roar as the crowd moves back, and I hear more shrieks and yells as Jake lays into my ex. Derek knees him, and the two shifters roll.

Girls in short dresses and heels stagger away as Jake lands on top and continues pummeling Derek. Two burly guys in black T-shirts burst through the crowd. One of them makes a grab for Jake and earns an elbow to the jaw for his trouble.

Finally, the humans manage to peel the two shifters apart. Derek is thinking clearly enough to let one of the bouncers yank him to his feet, but Jake just keeps on swinging — his face a mask of lethal rage.

Somebody screams as his fist slams into Derek again, and that sound seems to bring him to his senses. His body goes slack, though I can see a muscle working in his jaw as the bouncer marches him through the crowd.

Carmen catches my eye through the sea of people and mouths, "What the fuck?"

I shake my head, still buzzing with adrenaline. The truth is, I have no idea how things escalated so quickly.

In the six months we were together, Derek never uttered a derogatory word in my presence. He never put me down, and he was nice to my mom.

Our breakup had been amicable — or so I'd thought. I guess he was a lot saltier about me never sleeping with him than he'd let on.

It wasn't personal. I hadn't been that into any of the boyfriends I'd had in high

school. When I went off to college, I'd dated a little, but it was never anything serious.

Derek and I had only been seeing each other for a few months when I had my accident, and I broke up with him three months into my recovery.

For six months after the wreck, I didn't think about anything except dancing again.

The doctors were uncertain if I ever would, but there was no doubt in my mind.

I had to dance again, or there was no point in living.

First, though, I had to sit up. Then I had to stand. After that, I had to put one foot in front of the other and take my first step.

For months, I fought to dance. There was no room for anything other than reaching that goal. There certainly wasn't room to think about sex, which was why I'd cut Derek loose. I couldn't afford to have any distractions, and Derek had seemed all too happy to let me go.

I suppose I could have found time to date in the nine months I'd been in Boston, but I was stupidly holding onto my V-card. I could kill Derek for throwing that in my face.

I let out a huff and storm after the guys, if for no other reason than to make sure they don't kill one another. The bouncers shove them into the alley, which smells like rotten meat and French fries.

The harsh orangish light from the street lamp falls across Derek's face, and in that moment I realize that I don't know him at all.

He wipes the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, tosses me a filthy look,

and limps toward the sidewalk. Jake watches him go, shoulders tense, and I don't know what to say.

All the defensiveness I felt on Jake's behalf disappears, leaving an icy fury in its wake. While I hadn't expected Derek to lash out like that, I could have dealt with his insults. In fact, him doing a complete one-eighty and making an ass of himself saved me from having to make awkward small talk at the wedding and deflect any we-should-get-back-together vibes.

But Jake attacking him made his insults more public and searing than they'd been when they were just words.

I can't go back inside the club. It was clear to anyone watching that they were fighting about me, and it's all the other bridesmaids will be talking about.

Carmen's friends are nice enough, but I'm sure some of them have pigeonholed me as "Carmen's Latina friend from the neighborhood."

As if this weekend wasn't going to be awkward enough with Derek as Rowan's best man, now I have to interact with him after he said all those horrible things and got a rise out of Jake.

I'm not sure why that last part bothers me so much. Maybe because it makes Jake seem like the thuggish hothead that Derek implied he was. But that's not Jake, and I can't stand for an asshole like Derek to walk away thinking he was right about him.

Grinding my back teeth together, I turn on my heel to walk around to the front of the building, pulling out my phone to call an Uber. I'll text Carmen from the car and explain what happened. She'll be bummed that I had to call it a night, but she'll understand.

“Where are you going?” Jake’s voice is a low growl that makes my insides quiver.

I don’t understand how Jake still has this effect on me after all these years, but right now, it just pisses me off.

“Back to the hotel,” I bite out, not turning to look at him.

I’m not sure if I want to deck him or kiss him, and that pisses me off even more.



### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### JAKE

I'm still fuming by the time we get back to the hotel. My skin feels roughly two sizes too small, and it's taking every ounce of my self-control not to shift in the backseat of Elena's Uber and burst through the window out into the street.

It's a miracle I didn't shift right there in the middle of the club.

I haven't been this out of control since I was a teenager, and it scares me. All these years, I thought I'd found a way to appease my wolf — fighting in the cage rather than fighting on the streets.

But one little insult hurled at Elena, and suddenly it's like I'm fifteen years old again with an uncontrollable rage burning in my gut. I lost control tonight just like I did the night of the basketball game, which proves just how bad Elena is for me.

And yet, despite the rage humming beneath my skin, my mind keeps circling back to what that ass-clown Derek let slip.

Elena never slept with him?

That can't be right. I know from Raf's updates that she dated the guy for nearly six months.

And what did he mean that she's been saving herself? Elena can't be a virgin. No way.

She's been sneaking around with boys since the ninth grade. Her best friend is Carmen, for crying out loud.

I don't say a word to Elena as we take the elevator up to our room, and the stench of her anger fills the small space. I know she's embarrassed about the fight and mad she had to leave the club early, but I'm not going to apologize for defending her.

That Derek guy is a fucking asshole, and he deserved a lot worse than he got.

I don't care if he's in the wedding or if Elena date him. Derek Tyson is bad news. He's a transfer from the Beaver Creek pack, and I've heard way too many stories about how those guys treat their females.

Maybe that's why he's Elena's ex. He sure as shit must have done something stupid to lose her. If Elena were mine, I'd never let her go.

"You didn't have to start a fight with him, you know," Elena growls the second we reach our room. "You could have just walked away."

A fresh wave of fury hits me straight in the gut, and I round on her so fast that she takes a step back.

"Walked away?" I glare at her, my voice shaking with the force of my rage. "After he insulted you like that?"

"He was just jealous."

"You're defending him?"

"No, I —"

Elena breaks off at the look on my face. How is it that this Derek fucker shows up out of the blue, insults her, and suddenly I'm the bad guy?

Oh, because Derek has money and went to a fancy school, while I'm the hotheaded piece of trash who never went to college.

I drag in a breath through my nose, willing myself to stay calm. "If you think that I was just going to walk away after he called you a —" A strangled noise slips out of my throat, and I rake a hand through my hair. "You don't know me very well at all."

"No," she snaps. "I do know you. I just thought you'd gotten past this . . . this . . ."

She gropes for what she's trying to say, looking just as frustrated as I feel.

"This what?" I bite out. "Go on — say it!"

"This chip on your shoulder that makes you fly off the handle like a total psycho!"

My left eye twitches as I glare at her. Chip on my shoulder? Look who's talking. Elena won't ask Raf for a dime, even though he's a fucking billionaire who wants nothing more than to take care of his family.

"You know what? I'm going to bed," I growl, ripping my T-shirt over my head and tossing it onto the floor. "But thanks for being so goddamned honest. It's good to know where I stand with you."

Elena opens her mouth, but no words come out. It's just as well. I've got nothing more to say to her tonight.

I storm over to the little closet by the bathroom and yank out the extra blanket. Elena turns away as I strip down to my boxer briefs and flop down on the tiny loveseat by the window.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

“What are you doing?” Elena demands. She’s still averting her eyes, but her voice cracks with something like guilt.

“What does it look like?” I grumble.

“This is your room,” she says, her voice small and helpless. “I’ll . . . sleep on the couch.”

“Fine,” I hiss, launching myself off the sofa and ripping back the covers before climbing into bed.

Silence stretches between us, long and heavy. Guilt gnaws at my insides.

I might be angry, but not angry enough to make her sleep on the uncomfortable loveseat. She needs to be rested for the wedding, though I certainly don’t want to squeeze myself onto that horrible couch again, either.

“You don’t have to sleep on the couch,” I say slowly, my voice ringing out in the dimly lit room.

“What?”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The bed’s plenty big . . . if you want to share.”

Elena’s throat bobs as she considers my offer. She looks startled but weirdly relieved.

“Oh . . . okay.”

I roll onto my side, kneading my pillow. When Raf asked me to look out for Elena this weekend, I jumped at the chance. Part of me was hoping to get back in her good graces after all this time.

It was a stupid thought — not to mention reckless — and I've already shot it to hell. Elena fucking hates my guts.

I toss and turn as Elena digs in her suitcase, grabbing her toiletry bag, a lacy thong that she hides underneath, and two tiny scraps of silk.

Ho-ly shit.

"You're not wearing that," I growl before I can stop myself, startling her so badly that she jumps.

Elena's hair flies around as she turns with a glare. "Trying to tell me what to wear again?"

"I'm trying to be a gentleman."

Okay, so the gentleman ship might have sailed already, but at least I'm making an effort.

"These are the only pajamas I brought," she says in a tremulous voice. "I thought I'd be in a room alone."

"You wear those skimpy pajamas when you sleep alone?"

It's too dark to tell if she's blushing, but I can scent her embarrassment.

"That's none of your business."

I grind my teeth and rub a hand down my face. She isn't making this easy.

I take a deep breath. "If you wear that to bed, I'm not promising that I'll be able to keep my hands to myself." I crack a grin. "Now that I know you still like me."

The cocky wolf in me can't resist tacking on that last bit, and I know immediately that I've riled her.

"Who said I like you?" Elena squeaks. I notice she doesn't touch my use of the word "still" with a ten-foot pole.

A slow smirk spreads across my mouth. "You did when you let me put my hands all over you at the club."

Elena scoffs. "Somebody's full of himself. It was just a dance."

Come the fuck on. Is she really going to pretend she wasn't just as turned on as I was?

"Sweetheart, I may not be a professional like you, but even I know that there's no such thing as 'just a dance.'"

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

She makes an irritated noise in her throat, but she's still too flustered to speak.

"Let me ask you this," I say, sitting up in bed. "Would you let Derek dance with you like that?"

"That's not a fair question," she says, not meeting my eyes. Her voice is quiet and a little timid. "Derek and I are over."

"And you and I never even got started."

The words come out rougher than I intended and hang between us like a promise. I wish I could see her expression better, but she won't look at me. Her throat bobs as she continues to rummage in her suitcase, but I don't think she's really looking for anything.

"You can grab one of my T-shirts," I say. "They'll all be huge on you, but I promise they're clean."

Elena gives a jerky half nod and digs a white tee out of my bag. She scurries into the bathroom to get ready for bed, and I lie back on the pillows and try not to think about her sliding off that slinky gold dress without me.

I have every intention of acting as though I'm already asleep to make the sharing-a-bed thing less awkward, but when she finally emerges, I can't help sneaking a peek.

My world explodes into a million pieces.

Elena is drowning in my T-shirt, and yet she looks somehow perfect. The light from the bathroom illuminates her curves beneath the thin material and gleams off her legs, which are bare from her mid-thighs.

Despite her earlier efforts with the hair straightener, Elena's curls are rebelling. Her dark locks are twisting at the ends, curling over my shirt.

Fuck. Me.

I never should have suggested that she wear my clothes. It's so much worse than seeing her in that skimpy sleep set— and by worse, I mean a million fucking times better.

A second later, Elena flips off the light, thrusting the room into near total darkness. I see her shadowy form moving toward the bed, and I feel the mattress shift as she pulls back the covers.

I'm aware of every little move she makes as she slips into bed beside me. I hear her fluffing two pillows for her head and know she's about to reach for a third, which she'll fall asleep hugging.

It's creepy as fuck that I know how many pillows my little sleeping beauty needs, but I practically lived at the Garcia house when I was younger.

As she snuggles in, I catch a devastating whiff of her coconut shampoo. Her scent mixes with my own, and my wolf growls in satisfaction that our mate is wearing my clothes.

Shit.

Mate.



The word pings around in my head like a pinball —so fast I can't quite grasp it.

Mate.Mate.

I try it on for size, feeling my chest swell with emotion as my guts twist in fear. It's not a word any shifter takes lightly, and the implication makes me shiver.

The mating bond is stronger than marriage — stronger than the bond of the pack. And yet the second it slides into my mind, I know it's true.

Elena is my fated mate.

I've heard countless stories from my pack brothers about what it was like when they found their mate —heard them chuckle at the possessiveness that overtook them the first time they laid eyes on her.

I always thought it sounded like a sort of temporary insanity. It's not something I ever wanted to experience for myself. And yet, I think I have.

I know I have.

It's the same territorial rage I felt tonight when that idiot Derek came sidling up to her. Contrary to what I said to Elena, I didn't just start the fight to defend her honor. When Derek made a claim on her, I wanted to rip his fucking head off.

But if Elena is my fated mate, that means she's always been my mate.

I've known Elena since she was born. I remember when her parents brought her home from the hospital.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

I don't remember much from my childhood, but I have a vivid memory of staring down at the little pink bundle of blankets at a soft, squishy baby Elena. Even as a little boy, I knew it was my job to protect her.

As a future alpha, Raf felt it, too. I always thought my urge to keep her safe was me fulfilling my duty as her big brother's best friend.

The impulse stayed with me as we grew up — the feeling becoming so engrained that I never looked at it too hard. Until now.

Elena, probably four or five years old, falling off her bike. I'd been next door at my place making Hamburger Helper, and I saw it happen from the kitchen window.

I ran outside and scooped a crying Elena off the sidewalk, carrying her back to her yard and setting her in the grass.

Her little face was red and tear-stained, and she had a nasty scrape on her knee. I still remember the little pink butterfly clipsshe wore in her pigtails. I kissed the skin just above the wound and ran into her house to find a bandage.

I let the Hamburger Helper burn. It was late enough that my dad had slept off the pills and booze and early enough that he hadn't started drinking again. When I came back inside to the smell of burnt beef and macaroni, he shoved me into the doorframe so hard that it made my ears ring.

My mate.

Elena, twelve years old, in the passenger seat of my beloved Jeep. I'd just driven it off the used-car lot, and Raf had called and asked if I could pick up his sister from a sleepover. His mother had told him to do it, but for whatever reason, he couldn't.

I could tell Elena was upset about something as soon as she got in the car. She'd been hanging out with Casey Taylor —the queen mean girl of her grade. Judging by Lena's puffy red eyes, the sleepover hadn't gone well.

I'd been so excited about the lux after-market sound system my Jeep had come with. I'd been dying to play Eminem's *Recovery* album as soon as I drove it off the lot, but seeing Elena so sad, I let her blast Katy Perry all the way home.

My mate.

Elena, fifteen years old, at her Quinceañera.

Her mom had hired a DJ, and someone hadn't given the guy the memo that Elena's dad was dead. When his voice boomed out to announce the father-daughter dance, I read the panic in Lena's eyes.

She was just standing there in her poofy blue dress, looking like Cinderella waiting for her prince to show up.

Raf was busy sneaking booze in the kitchen. All of her uncles and cousins were there, but they were either engrossed in conversation or else just staring like a deer caught in the headlights.

I bolted to her side with shifter speed and pulled her onto the dance floor. I can still feel the sharp pinch in my chest at the relief and gratitude in her eyes.

My mate.

Elena, lying in a hospital bed all beat-up and bruised from the accident. Tubes and wires snaked all over her body, and the only sounds apart from her heartbeat were the mechanical beeps and sucking noises from her ventilator.

The doctors had shaved a section of hair on the right side of her head, making her look like some badass punk-rock chick who'd been in a bar fight. She had thirty-six staples holding her closed. I'd counted each and every one.

But it wasn't the shaved head or the staples that bothered me. It was Elena's scent. She smelled like burnt plastic, antiseptic, and gasoline.

I didn't think she knew I was there. She hadn't opened her eyes.

I'd never been the type to pray — didn't know who or what to pray to. But I prayed then that she would be all right. She had to be all right.

My mate.

I hadn't had a single romantic thought about Elena until the night of her sweet sixteen, so I'd never considered that she could be my mate.

But that night when she looked up at me with those big brown eyes like I hung the fucking moon and stars, I knew my feelings toward her had changed. That didn't make them okay, which was why I'd left town and joined the Gold Creek pack. I was a twenty-one-year-old with poor impulse control. I didn't need that level of temptation.

I almost told her how I felt after she woke up in the hospital, but Raf had told me she was dating some guy named Derek, so I stayed away.

But now . . .

Elena's not a kid anymore, and she's not a sixteen-year-old girl. She's a beautiful woman sleeping two feet away, and my dick is as hard as a rock. I want nothing more than to close the distance between us and slide my hand up the soft skin of her thigh to see if she's as turned on as I am.

My wolf wants me to mark her. Claim her. Mate her. Fuck her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

But I don't. I want to do things right.

I've waited this long for Elena. I can wait a little longer.

### CHAPTER NINE

#### ELENA

The other side of the bed is empty when I awake the next morning, but the T-shirt I'm wearing smells like him.

Bringing the neck of the shirt up to my nose, I inhale Jake's clean spicy scent and groan. Why does he have to smell so good?

I'm so content lying there in the comfy hotel bed that it takes me a minute to remember why I went to sleep in such a bad mood.

Then the memory of the confrontation between Derek and Jake comes flooding back, and I smash my face into the pillow. Every member of the wedding party was at the club last night, which means they must have all witnessed the brawl.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. I'm still Carmen's maid of honor. I need to focus on her.

Rolling over, I pick up my phone to check my messages and see a flood of notifications crowding the screen. I must have had my phone on silent, because I have no fewer than six missed phone calls from Carmen and a slew of drunken texts.

10:21: You're leaving????? But the party's just getting started!

10:38: Whoa. Derek is pissed! What happened with you guys?

11:14: Are you and Jake shacking up?

11:17: Guuurl, you better answer me!

1:01: How big is Jack's penis?

\*Jake's

1:45: Elena!!!

1:52: Ur my best friend, and I love u, but Drek is gross.

\*Derek

Snorting, I set my phone down and stare at the ceiling. I know I need to say something to Carmen since I bailed on her bachelorette party. But my feelings are so tangled and confused that I honestly don't know if I should be defending Jake or complaining about what an overbearing ass he is.

Breathing in his yummy scent, it's hard to be too angry with him.

I can't count the number of times I've fantasized about sleeping with Jake, and last night he and I literally slept together. I don't know why, but last night felt more intimate than if we'd made out in the back of the Uber or had filthy, passionate sex in the nightclub bathroom.

We slept in the same bed, and his oversized T-shirt is chafing my nipples.

I realize with a flush of heat that if Derek hadn't shown up when he did, I would have let Jake do a whole lot more than get a little handsy on the dance floor. The thought makes me squirm, and I feel pathetic.

While Jake may not have returned my feelings, he was my first love. And I'm still not over him.

By the time I drag myself out of bed, Carmen is grumpily sipping mimosas in the hotel restaurant and poring over a seating chart. She's a little green and looks as though she'd rather be spending the morning with her head in the toilet, but a few of her family members are fighting again, which means she needs to redo the seating chart.

Unfortunately, her head is fuzzy from the hangover, and she keeps forgetting which of her aunts are on speaking terms and which are still cat-fighting. Carmen's family also has two Josés and three Marcos, which makes rearranging the tables even more confusing.

After breakfast, we shut ourselves in Carmen's room to assemble the wedding centerpieces. It takes longer than expected, and by the time I get back to the room to change for the rehearsal dinner, I'm running a little late.

I'm also beginning to worry.

I haven't seen Jake all day long, and I'm starting to wonder if he murdered Derek and skipped town or if he's just avoiding me.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

I'm still fretting over Jake by the time I slip into my dress, which I blew half of my entire paycheck on. It's a gauzy periwinkle number with several layers — the longest of which hits just above my calf.

I let my hair dry curly and leave it down, which makes it easier to hide the thick rough scar over my right ear.

I'm about to leave to go downstairs when I hear a soft knock at the door. Thinking it must be Carmen letting me know about some last-minute change to the ceremony, I throw open the door without looking through the peep hole and stagger back on my heels.

Jake is standing outside the door, looking more handsome than I've ever seen him. He's wearing a charcoal suit with a crisp white shirt underneath, left unbuttoned at the top for a slightly less-formal look. He smells amazing, as always — clean and spicy and masculine.

“Hey,” I manage, still shocked to see him standing there.

The corner of his mouth lifts in a grin. “Hey.”

“I thought . . .” I swallow and tug nervously at the gauzy layer at my chest, which swoops across my left breast and makes the super-low cut passably modest. “I haven't seen you all day.”

Something dark flickers in Jake's expression, but it's gone so quickly I'm not sure I didn't imagine it. “Figured you'd be busy with the bride,” he says, his eyes

smoldering as he takes me in. “You look beautiful, Lena.”

My heart flutters uncontrollably — both at the compliment and the nickname. His face is so serious as he says it that I know it’s not a throwaway line. I blink a few times and clear my throat. “Thanks.”

I’m not one of those girls who’s oblivious to her looks. I’m used to guys gawking at me. What I’m not used to is getting this attention from Jake — or getting a compliment that’s so sweet and sincere.

“Shall we?” he asks, holding out his arm.

I swallow and then nod, baffled at seeing Jake all cleaned up and acting like a gentleman. Where is my rugged fighter who was brawling in the club less than twenty-four hours ago?

But I take Jake’s proffered arm and shiver when he lays his other hand over my wrist. He smells even more delicious up close, and my head spins from the physical contact.

Calm down, I tell myself. He’s just escorting you to the rehearsal dinner because Raf asked him to keep an eye on you.

And yet I can’t shake the feeling that Jake and I are here together — as in, together-together. It’s making my poor heart go nuts.

The rest of the wedding party is already gathered in the ballroom when we arrive, along with the bride and groom’s immediate family. Since Jake is neither family nor a member of the wedding party, he wouldn’t normally be invited to this, but he is technically my date.

He brings me up to the front of the room to join the bride and groom, but just as he

turns to leave, Derek walks through the door. I turn toward Carmen to avoid his gaze, my anxiety ratcheting up.

If things had gone differently, we might have come here together. Instead, he humiliated me at Carmen's bachelorette party.

I don't see the look Jake gives him as their paths cross, but the air crackles with tension. Derek quickly lowers his eyes, and my jaw hits the floor.

As a human, I've never been able to pick up on the subtle hierarchy among shifters the way my brother can, but it was always my understanding that Derek was a highly dominant wolf. For him to submit to Jake, he must have been utterly cowed.

I try not to smirk as he comes to stand beside Carmen's fiancé, but my smugness is quickly extinguished at the look on Derek's face. He's staring at me as though I'm some disgusting thing he scraped off the bottom of his shoe. I'm sure I'm not the only one who notices, either.

My cheeks burn, and I look away, shrinking under his gaze.

I don't know what it is about Derek that always made me feel less than. My brother is analpha, for crying out loud — not to mention the billionaire CEO of the fastest-growing company in Denver.

But maybe that's it. No matter how well I do in life, I'll never be one of them. Derek never invited me to any pack events when we were dating, nor did he introduce me to any of his friends. It was as though he wanted me to understand that I would never measure up. I would always be the human girl who wasn't good enough.

I feel Derek's chilly gray eyes boring into me for the entire rehearsal, and I'm so flustered that I forget what I'm supposed to be doing when Carmen hands me her

bouquet. She gives me a funny look but doesn't miss a beat. Everything goes off without a hitch.

I'm relieved when the run-through is over and I'm able to join Jake at the long table. He must realize how hard it was for me to stand up there next to Derek, because he shoots to his feet and pulls out my chair like a perfect gentleman.

I flash him a grateful smile, and I feel the heat of his body on my cheek as Jake leans in. I expect him to whisper something sweet, but his voice is low and rough. "Do not ever let me see you shrink like that because of someone like him."

His voice is so quiet I doubt if even the shifters right next to us heard, but it steals my breath away. I shiver as Jake pushes my chair in and takes his seat beside me.

JAKE

The other guests fill in the seats around us, and my skin prickles from the proximity of so many wolves. The chatter dies down as the groom's father gets to his feet to toast the happy couple.

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Elena raises the glass in front of her and brings it to her lips, but she doesn't take a drink.

After that, servers appear with huge platters of food — much more food than would be required for a human wedding party. Everybody digs in, except for Elena, who just stares at her slice of prime rib as though it's the most fascinating thing in the world.

I lean in slightly to catch her scent, and the bitter tang of panic coats my tongue. I turn to ask if she wants to get some air, but then the groomsman sitting across from Elena opens his mouth.

“Not very nice of Carmen, throwing you to the wolves,” he says to her. His tone is lighthearted and conversational, but the chatter at the table dies down.

It's then that I realize Elena's the only human here.

The other groomsmen chuckle, and my mate pulls a smile that doesn't quite meet her eyes.

“Elena is used to being surrounded by animals,” says Carmen loudly, shooting the groomsman a warning look. “She did grow up with Raf and Jake.”

More knowing chuckles.

There's not a shifter here who doesn't know Rafael Cabrera Garcia. I try to fly under the radar when I'm in another pack's territory, but a lot of wolves know me from the shifter fight league.

“And you, Carmen,” Rowan adds to his soon-to-be-wife. “You can howl with the best of ’em.”

A round of scandalized laughter breaks over the table. Carmen rolls her eyes and shakes her head, blushing despite her best efforts.

“How about you, Elena?” the groomsman presses, waggling his eyebrows. “Are you a screamer?”

The water goblet in my hand shatters, and I hiss as a piece of glass embeds itself in my palm. Water and blood drench the pristine white tablecloth, but Elena seems to be the only one who notices.

“Stop being a perv, Rhett,” Carmen interjects. “Rafael gave me strict instructions to protect Elena from all of you.”

Not true, but I like Carmen a little more for telling her fiancé’s friends to back the fuck off.

My hands are shaking with barely contained fury, but I can feel Elena watching me out of the corner of her eye. She’s waiting to see if I’m going to lose my shit, so I busy myself with picking glass out of my hand so I don’t leap across the table and strangle that asshole.

“She doesn’t mind, do you, Elena?” another groomsman teases. “We don’t bite.” He leans forward and lowers his voice to a suggestive whisper. “Not unless you ask us to.”

The wolves break into another round of bawdy laughter, and I grip my fork so hard that the metal starts to bend. Blood is pounding in my temples, but I resist the urge to flip over the table and beat the ever-living daylights out of the whole pack of them.

My jumping in to defend Elena's honor would only embarrass her further.

She's the only one who seems to notice me bending my fork out of shape. I catch her staring out of the corner of my eye.

"Take it from someone who knows," Derek breaks in, not looking at Elena as he cuts his meat with savagery. "Elena won't be asking any of you to do anything. No matter how long you date her."

There's a scandalized round of "whoas" from the groomsmen, and something inside me snaps.

"That sounds like a you problem, not an Elena problem," I growl, my voice just loud enough for the shifters sitting nearby to hear.

"What did you say to me?" Derek snaps.

I take a deep breath and concentrate on cutting my prime rib into tiny little pieces so I don't turn the knife on him.

In this moment, I'm grateful for my martial-arts training. Coach always says that emotions have no place in a fight, and I've had to learn to shut them down on command.

"I think you heard me just fine."

Derek's nostrils flare, and the bitter scent of rage fills my airways. He throws his napkin down on the table and lowers his voice to a furious whisper that nevertheless reaches all the shifters' ears. "It figures that Elena would enjoy slumming with you. You can take the girl out of La Alma, but you can't take La Alma out of the girl."

“Dude,” says Carmen’s fiancé at the same moment I burst to my feet. I don’t have time to think about what I’m doing. I just drive the tip of my steak knife straight through Derek’s right hand.

A roar of pain makes my ears ring, and my skin itches with the urge to shift. My vision has already begun to change, and I know my eyes have lightened to a wolfish arctic blue.

There’s an uproar from the other groomsmen, but I’m distracted by the swish of fabric. Elena turns and flees the table, and I feel her sudden loss of warmth.



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The rest of the groomsmen are on their feet. I know they're waiting to see if Derek's all right before they shift and tear me to pieces.

"We'll finish this later," I growl at Elena's ex, whose eyes have lightened to a shimmering amber. I can see his facial bones beginning to change and black hair sprouting along his temples.

Sodramatic. I purposely aimed for a spot where I wouldn't sever any tendons or go through bone, and Derek is a shifter with superhuman healing. His right hand will be stiff but usable by morning. At least the injury will keep him from rubbing one out thinking of Elena tonight.

I've never been one to walk away from a fight, but the fight that matters isn't the kind I can win with teeth and claws. The woman I'm fighting for just walked out of the room.

Not caring how it will look to the other shifters, I stride out after Elena. She isn't in the alcove outside the ballroom, but I pick up the trail of vanilla and coconut and follow it down the hallway.

It ends abruptly at a set of French doors leading out onto the terrace. Swallowing down my nerves as I formulate an apology, I open the door and slip outside.

It's completely dark aside from the moon, but my wolf vision is good enough that I can see her clearly. Elena is bent over the decorative stone wall, hands braced on the top. Her breaths sound uneven and ragged, and I taste the same panic on the back of my tongue.

“Elena?”

“Go away.”

The words feel like a punch to the gut.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I say, dragging a hand through my hair. “I wasn’t trying to start anything, but I couldn’t just sit there and let that jackass talk about you like that.”

“It’s fine,” she wheezes, shaking her head. “Just go, okay? I’ll be up in a minute.”

I hesitate. It’s fine?

I can tell from her tone that it’s definitely not fine, but Elena isn’t the passive-aggressive type. I know she’s still pissed, but she’s not tearing me a new one, which means something else must be wrong.

“What’s with you?”

“Nothing! Just leave.” Elena’s words come out as a growl, but I can tell she’s crying.

“No,” I say as gently as I can. I grip her shoulders and spin her around. “Elena, talk to me—”

The words die on my tongue. Elena’s big brown eyes are swimming with tears, and she looks like a cornered animal.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as terror overwhelms me. I’ve never seen her like this.

Elena’s bottom lip quivers. Then she bursts into tears. I just stand there like an idiot as she launches herself at me and buries her face in my chest.

“It’s these stupid — panic attacks,” she chokes, fisting my lapels as her body heaves with sobs. “Ever since — the accident. Sometimes I g-get — and I c-can’t control it.”

“Shh,” I whisper, wrapping an arm around her quaking shoulders as understanding hits me.

Raf has been unusually tight-lipped about Elena’s limitations since the accident. I knew she still had some issues with her balance, which basically destroyed any chance she had of becoming a professional ballet dancer. He also told me she didn’t drink alcohol, that she had trouble finding the right words when she was overtired, and that she sometimes got really bad migraines.

He didn’t tell me she was having panic attacks, though, and my heart aches for her.

I don’t have any idea how to help her, so I just pull her against my chest and rub soothing circles over her back. I alternate between making soft shushing sounds and planting light kisses along the top of her head.

Comforting words spew from my lips like a song I’d forgotten I knew the lyrics to. I don’t know half the things I’m even saying, but they must be working, because Elena’s sobs die down.

I continue to rub her back until a shudder rolls through her and she pulls away. The terror I scented is gone now, replaced by a burning shame.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, scrubbing under her eyes and trying very hard not to look at me.

“For what?”

A humorless smile stretches her lips. Elena could never look ugly to me, but that’s

the only word I can think to describe that self-deprecating smile. “For being such a mess.” She lifts her eyebrows. “I never thought I’d be that girl who runs out of a rehearsal dinner to cry, but that’s just one of the lovely things I get to deal with now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

Since the accident.

She shudders. “I’m a wreck. No matter what I do, my stupid brain has a mind of its own.”

“Stop it,” I growl, irrationally angry at this version of Elena that’s so damn hard on herself. “You aren’t a wreck. You could never be a wreck. Not to me.”

Her head trembles in half a shake, but I grab her chin and turn her to face me. “Look at me.”

I can feel Elena resisting my command, but the dominant pull in my voice is hard to ignore.

When she finally meets my gaze, the vulnerability in her eyes steals my breath away. I soften my voice and loosen my grip. “Why didn’t you tell me about the panic attacks?”

“When?” she asks.

Her implication is clear. When in the two years since the accident would she have told me? It wasn’t as though we spoke.

“Fair enough,” I say with a hard swallow. “But why didn’t Raf tell me?”

“Raf doesn’t know everything about me,” Elena murmurs. “No matter how much he likes to think he does.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

“I haven’t told anyone.”

All the air rushes out of my lungs. Elena’s been carrying this burden alone?

I shake my head. “Why not?”

“Would you?”

I open my mouth, but no words come out. I don’t like to lie — especially not to Elena — and the truth is that I would probably want to keep something like this to myself.

“Exactly,” she says, correctly interpreting my non-answer. “It’s bad enough being the alpha’s human sister. Breakable. Weak. Damaged.” Her voice breaks on the last word, but she purses her lips and doesn’t cry. “The last thing I want is to give people another reason to look down on me.”

“You are not damaged,” I say, my voice coming out in a fierce growl. “You’re not weak, either.”

Elena scoffs and tries to look away, but I keep hold of her chin and force her to meet my gaze.

“To go through what you did and refuse to give up on your dream?” I shake my head. “You are one of the strongest people I know.”

Her lower lip wobbles, and in this moment, I want nothing more than to cover her mouth with my own. I want to kiss her — bury her pain with the force of my love — but I know it’s not the time.

“I should get back in there,” she says, scrubbing her cheeks and fixing her hair so the curls cover up the spot where she still bears the scar from her surgery. “It’s still Carmen’s rehearsal dinner. I don’t want to bail.”

“Fuck the dinner. You don’t owe those assholes anything. Plus, I don’t think there’s going to be much of a party since I put my steak knife through Derek’s hand.

A sudden laugh bursts out of Elena, but it turns into a hiccuping sob. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“He deserved it.”

Her bottom lip quivers, and I see on her face that the last thing she wants to do is face those wolves again.

“You’re not going back to the dinner,” I announce. “I’m taking you up to bed.”

## CHAPTER TEN

### ELENA

The next day is Carmen’s wedding.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

Once again, Jake is gone when I wake up, and once again I stay in bed for nearly an hour, dreading what I have to do. Carmen has set a tight schedule for the day, starting with a ladies' brunch, pictures, her "getting ready" champagne toast, more pictures with the wedding party outside the church, the ceremony, pictures, and the reception.

Fortunately, by the time I join the other bridesmaids for brunch, the rehearsal-dinner antics seem to have faded in the group's memories. The latest scandal is one of the groomsmen groping Carmen's cousin Kim in the elevator the night before.

I don't join in the bridesmaids' shrill laughter, but the distraction puts me at ease. For the rest of the morning, I focus on helping Carmen get ready and making sure none of the other ladies drink too much before the ceremony.

The bridesmaid dresses are tolerable, as bridesmaid dresses go — three sheer layers of lavender fabric that hit just above the knee. I pin my hair up in loose ringlets and pull on my strappy heels.

The wedding party piles into a white stretch limo to ride to the church, and I sit as far away from Derek as I can manage. When we merge onto the highway, I sneak a peek at Derek's hand and feel a burst of smugness when I see that it's covered in white gauze.

I might not approve of Jake's methods, but the results are damn satisfying.

The afternoon is a blur of group photos, "I dos," and holding up Carmen's dress while she pees. I don't see Jake at the wedding ceremony, but I know he's probably somewhere in the church.



By the time we get back to the hotel for the reception, my feet hurt, my back aches, and I'm exhausted from all the smiling. I run up to the room and splash cold water on my face, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

You can do this.

I've been looking forward to Carmen's wedding for months, but now I'm counting the minutes until it's over.

Begrudgingly, I fix my hair and cram my swollen feet back into the heels. As I rummage in my makeup bag for a spare bobby pin, my fingers brush the little velvet box fitted into the side pocket.

I haven't opened it in nearly six years, but I brought it to the wedding on a whim.

Fingers shaking, I slip the box out and open it up. Inside is the delicate gold bracelet with the little sun charm that Jake gave me for my sixteenth birthday.

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I drape it over my wrist and fiddle with the clasp. It's simple enough that it complements my lavender dress. I decide to go for it.

Flinging the door open, I nearly smack right into Jake. His eyebrows lift in surprise when he sees me, and I don't miss the way those blue eyes linger on the line of my collarbones before traveling down to my exposed legs.

His mouth stretches into a wide grin. "You look . . ." He clears his throat and shakes his head, but then his eyes snag on the bracelet.

He reaches for my hand so fast I don't have time to pull away. His warm fingers encircle my wrist, tugging it toward him for closer inspection.

His thumb brushes the little sun charm, and Jake goes very still. “Is that . . .”

I nod, my throat suddenly very dry.

He shakes his head. “I can’t believe you still have it.”

“OfcourseI still have it.” Even after what happened between me and Jake, the bracelet is still one of my most treasured possessions.

Jake’s throat bobs as he turns the bracelet around on my wrist, shaking his head in disbelief. “It looks good on you. And you . . .” He clears his throat. “You look amazing.”

I smile, heart thudding. “You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

That’s an understatement. Jake looks as though he just stepped off the cover ofGQ. His button-up shirt hugs his muscular frame perfectly, and his slacks could have been made for him. My pulse jumps as I imagine undoing all those buttons, unbuckling his belt, and —

I swallow thickly and tuck that thought into the far back corner of my brain.

Jake’s grin turns wolfish, and my face prickles with heat when I realize he caught me checking him out.

“Shall we?” he asks, offering me his arm.

Relief, gratitude, and nervousness flood my system as I link my arm through his, and the heat seeping through his jacket makes it hard to think about anything except his hand on my arm and the light brush of his hip against mine as we make our way down the hall.

That clean, spicy scent surrounds me, and I feel as though I might burst with pride waltzing into the reception with Jake by my side — Jake, the man who didn't hesitate to fight for me at the club or at that awful rehearsal dinner.

By the time we reach the grand ballroom, I find myself standing a little taller. Walking into the room with Jake, it feels as though I have some kind of armor against the other shifters' ridicule and judgement.

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Derek's hateful gaze follows us across the room, but Jake seems totally unaware of the haughty wolf as he orders himself an old-fashioned and a cranberry seltzer for me. It makes it easier for me to ignore Derek, too.

For once, I'm not worrying about how I'll excuse myself gracefully if I feel a migraine or panic attack coming on. I feel strong — practically invincible. I might even enjoy myself tonight.

We've just gotten our drinks when Carmen and Rowan make their entrance, and as soon as other couples start moving toward the center of the ballroom, Jake pulls me onto the dance floor. He holds me close, but not too close, and I have to resist the urge to run my hand up his warm, solid chest to feel the tiny hint of stubble along his jaw.

Jake moves well for such a large man. I suppose it's all his fight training. I know he's only here because Raf asked him to come, but the way he pulls me closer for the slowsongs tricks my body into thinking there might be something more.

At one point, Carmen's cousin pulls me away for yet another group photo before the bride and groom cut the cake. I squeeze Jake's arm and follow her to the head table, where Carmen is holding court.

A familiar expensive-smelling cologne tickles my nostrils, but that's the only warning I get before Derek's hand closes around my arm.

I jerk my head up to look at him. His gray eyes are bloodshot, and I can smell the whiskey on his breath. "Can we talk?" he asks.

“Now’s not a good time,” I say, tugging my arm out of his grip. “They’re about to cut the cake.”

“It’ll just take a second.”

I let out a huff of air. The last thing I want to do is listen to Derek’s pitiful drunken rant, but judging by the look on his face, he’s not going to let this go.

I don’t want to make a scene at Carmen’s reception, so I give Derek a stiff nod and follow him out of the ballroom and onto the hotel terrace.

The cool night air is actually a relief after the hot and crowded ballroom. I rub the back of my neck as I wait for Derek to spit it out, trying to release the tension from the day.

“I wanted to apologize for my . . . behavior,” he says. “The other night . . . I was out of line.”

“Which night?” I ask before I can stop myself. “The night you called me a slut, or the night you announced that I was a cold fish in front of the entire wedding party?”

I can’t see Derek’s expression in the dark, but I sense his swell of rage right before he tamps it down. “Both, I guess.”

I gnaw on my bottom lip, waiting for this to be over. Does he expect me to say I forgive him or something?

“I came here this weekend thinking you and I might . . .” Derek trails off and makes a gesture with his hand. “Instead, you show up with him, and I just . . . lost it.”

“Fair enough,” I say, propping my hands on my hips. “Are we done?”

Derek scoffs. “That’s all you have to say to me?”

“What do you want me to say?” I ask, feeling suddenly very tired. “That I forgive you? That it’s all water under the bridge?”

“Yes, for a start. Then maybe you could apologize to me for bringing that piece of shit with you just to make me jealous.”

I choke out a laugh. White-hot anger sears my insides, but I’m so stunned by Derek’s ego that it actually tempers my rage.

“Apologize to you?” I blurt, the words turning to ash in my mouth. I shake my head. “Jake is not the piece of shit here. I’m sorry that you’re so self-centered that you think I would actually bring him with me just to make you jealous.”

Derek reels back as though I slapped him.

“I hate to break it to you, but nothing I do has anything to do with you anymore.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Derek bites back. “All the nights I spent worrying about you after the accident, and you couldn’t give a shit about me.”

“You were worried for me?” I choke out incredulously. “You weren’t even there!”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I was too busy with work to sit vigil at your bedside like your precious Jake. It doesn’t mean I wasn’t with you.”

I jerk my head back. Now he’s not even making sense. Jake wasn’t at the rehab center in Chicago. He couldn’t have been.

But suddenly, all my resentment toward Derek bubbles to the surface. It happens so

fast it gives me a head rush, and I feel the familiar stab of a migraine coming on. “Do you know why I was out with Carmen that night?” I demand, my voice shaking with the force of my anger. “Or have you forgotten that part?”

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Derek blinks. He doesn't remember what happened the night of the accident, which makes it sting even more.

"You and I had a date, remember?" My voice shakes on the last word, and it's only then that I realize how much anger I've been holding on to these past two years. "You and I were supposed to meet at Luigi's, but you stood me up."

"I had an important call," he grumbles. "This huge account down in Dallas that we'd been trying to close for months."

"And you couldn't havetexted?" My eyes fill with tears, but I blink them back. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly to keep the sobs at bay. I need to get this out. "I'm not saying it's your fault that I was in that car wreck. But that night you showed me who you really are. It just took me a while to see it."

"And who is that?"

"A selfish, entitled ass."

Derek lets out a slow breath through his nose, and his golden-amber eyes gleam in the dark. They're that color because they're his wolf's eyes, and I'm suddenly very aware that it's just the two of us out here.

"So that's it, then," he murmurs. "That's what you really think of me?"

I swallow. I've never been more aware of my human status than I am at this very moment. Here I am, alone with a wolf who could quite literally tear me to pieces.



“I guess that’s what happens when your brother becomes alpha and you run off to some fancy arts college. You forget that you’re just the weak human runt that your father’s human slut of a wife shat out.”

My hand flies out so fast I don’t have time to consider what I’m doing until I feel the sting of flesh on flesh. I hit Derek so hard that his face jerks to the side, and in the soft glow of the moonlight, I can see the angry red handprint on his cheek.

As the adrenaline surges through my veins, the full magnitude of my mistake hits me. I just slapped a shifter!

“You shouldn’t have done that, Elena,” Derek growls, his voice low and deadly calm.

“Oh, I think she should have.”

The sound of Jake’s voice makes me whip my head around, and it feels as though my heart might burst out of my chest.

The lights from the hotel gleam behind him, giving him an otherworldly glow. He’s loosened his tie and undone a few buttons of his shirt, revealing several inches of his perfectly toned chest.

“Because if Elena didn’t hit you, I was going to do much worse.” Jake cracks a menacing grin. “Still might.”

“Walk away, little wolf,” Derek growls. “Elena and I are in the middle of something.”

“Careful. Your wolf is showing,” says Jake softly. “And I think you’re done.”

Jake is right. Derek’s starting to shift. Dark hair is sprouting all over his body, and his face is beginning to change shape.

“Jake —” I want to tell him to get the hell out of here, but I know he won’t listen.

To my appreciation and annoyance, he doesn’t rush to shift. Jake undresses as though he has all the time in the world, hooking a finger through the knot in his tie and sliding it out from under his collar. His fingers work the buttons of his shirt one at a time, and when he reaches down to undo his belt, Derek is already sprawled on all fours.

My heart flies into overdrive, but I needn’t have worried. By the time I look back at Jake, the rest of his clothes are on the ground.

I hardly have time to wonder what happened to the fully naked Jake when a mass of tawny fur leaps from behind the low stone wall.

Jake tackles Derek in a swirl of fur and claws, and the two of them roll. I shuffle back to get out of the way as Jake lands on top.

Growing up with Raf means I’ve seen my share of wolves. And Jake’s animal is magnificent. For a start, he’s huge. Long silky rust-colored fur mixes with shades of cream and gray. His eyes flash a dangerous arctic blue as Derek nips him under his foreleg.

In a flash of fur, their roles are reversed, and the wolves tussle for position. A pained yelp rends the air, but they’re moving too fast for me to tell who was hurt.

Claws scrape the terrace as they fight, and I shrinkback in horror when I catch a flash of long white teeth. One of them must be wounded already, because bloody claw marks mar the stone.

Then the black wolf digs into Jake’s back, and my heart leaps to my throat. Jake’s yip of pain slices through me like a knife, but Jake is a fighter — born and trained.

He whips around in a flash of teeth, his growl ripping through the darkness. Soon he has Derek by the neck, and he shakes him like a rag doll.

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For one horrible moment, I think Jake might snap his neck. But then he releases the black wolf with a growl, and Derek tears off into the night.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

#### ELENA

For a long moment, the only thing I hear is the sound of my own breathing and the distant whoosh of cars on the highway. The air is cool enough that I can see Jake's breath as his wolf pants and chuffs.

"Are you hurt?" I whisper, stepping toward him with my hand outstretched.

It feels unbelievably stupid, approaching a wounded wolf, but this is Jake. My heart trusts him in a way that my mind can't comprehend.

As I bury my fingers in his silky fur, Jake goes utterly still. He doesn't move as I caress his back, carefully avoiding the matted patches of fur that are sticky with blood.

It's strange, touching his body with such abandon when I wouldn't dare do the same to him in human form. Jake closes his eyes when I reach the side of his long neck, and his mouth opens in a contented pant.

Then I remember that Carmen's wedding guests aren't the only ones staying at the hotel. I glance around, but thankfully there aren't any humans staring in horror at the giant wolf on the terrace. Of course, that says nothing of any guests who might have

been looking down at the gardens from the upper stories.

Jake seems to be thinking along the same lines, because he shakes and starts to shift back into a man. Bone and muscle reshape themselves, skin blanketing the area where fur once was. It doesn't matter how many times I see a wolf shift; I'll never get used to the strange beauty of the transformation.

Panic grips me when I see Jake's naked body sprawled out on the terrace, but my eyes snag on a long bloody gash just below his left armpit.

"Are you all right?" I huff as Jake finishes the change. His eyes are closed in a slight grimace, and I remember that a wolf's body is extra-sensitive after the shift.

"Fine," he grits out, opening his eyes. "It'll heal faster with the shift."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Done what?"

I roll my eyes. "Defend my honor . . .again."

"Oh." Jake shakes his head. "You were doing a fine job defending your honor all on your own. I was just ripping into Derek because he's an asshole."

I snort.

Jake chuckles but winces when the motion pains some injury he's downplaying. He hasn't moved from his position on his side, and I keep my eyes trained on his face.

Jake's smile fades, and he shakes his head. "When I saw you walk out here with him, I thought . . ."

My heart takes so long between beats that I worry it might stop altogether. The wind has gone from the trees, and I don't even dare to breathe. "You thought what?"

Jake's rough exhale tickles my knee. "I thought you and he came out here to . . ." He trails off and scratches the back of his head. "Anyway, I . . . I guess I got jealous. I followed you out here to make sure he didn't try anything, and . . ."

Then he overheard.

But my mind gets caught on what Jake said about being jealous, and my heart resumes its frantic gallop.

"You were jealous?" I repeat, unable to stop the slow smile that's spreading across my face. I take a deep breath. "I didn't think . . ."

"Didn't think what?" Jake's question comes out so sharp that I really don't know how to respond.

All this time, I'd thought Jake was just being protective for Rafael's sake — that he didn't like Derek near me for the same reasons my brother didn't. But maybe I was wrong.

I shake my head. "Never mind," I mumble. "It was a really long time ago."

Jake's eyes flash, and for a moment, they look almost wolfish again. "What was?"

I take a deep breath, my cheeks burning. "My sixteenth birthday," I say in a huff. "I didn't think you even liked me after . . . after what happened."

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Jake's gaze softens, and he reaches for my hand. Despite the fact that he's lying naked on a cold slab of stone, his rough fingers are warm around my cold ones. His other hand plays with the bracelet. "You mean when you kissed me and I pushed you away?"

His voice is so low it's barely a whisper.

"Yeah." My cheeks are hot, and I have the sudden urge to pull away. I feel stupid for even bringing it up. "Like I said, it was a really long time ago."

"I think about that night all the time," he admits, looking at the ground.

"What?"

Jake nods.

"Why?"

His throat bobs as he swallows. He's silent for such a long time that I think he might try to avoid answering the question. But then he looks back at me, squints, and breaks into a rueful grin. "Because it was the best night of my life — and also the worst."

I suck in a breath.

"The kiss was the best part," he adds in a hurry. "Just in case that wasn't clear."

My heart gives an erratic thump. For a long moment, neither of us moves or breathes.

Each second feels as though it could hold a lifetime. “And the worst?” I whisper.

“Pushing you away,” he says, his grin morphing into a scowl. “It . . . wasn’t easy.”

“Then why did you?” I ask, my voice low and breathless. It might be ancient history, but I need to know. That sad girl inside me needs to know.

Jake’s brows knit together. “Lena, you were sixteen. I was twenty-one. It wouldn’t have been right.” His expression grows thoughtful. “Besides . . . you were Raf’s little sister. If I’d had a sister your age and Raf went after her, I’d fucking kill him.”

“But you . . . wanted to kiss me,” I say slowly. For some reason, it feels important to clarify that part.

Jake makes an aggravated noise in his throat and tugs his hand out of mine. He looks away, and for a second, I think I’ve made him angry. A muscle works in his jaw as he gnaws on the inside of his lip.

“I wanted to kiss you that day and every day since,” he whispers. Then he drags in a strangled breath and turns to me with a pained look in his eyes. “It’s always been you, Lena. You’re my fated mate.”

My heart skips a beat at those words, then revs into overdrive. I’ve heard of fated mates from Carmen and other shifters who ran in our circle, but the way Jake says it makes my entire body come alive. I somehow forgo the need to breathe.

Jake reaches for my hand again, twining his fingers through mine. “Lena, I never want you to think . . .” His eyes are swimming with concern when he meets my gaze, and I feel the weight of his shame. “You should know that my feelings weren’t romantic until that night. For years, I just felt protective of you. I thought it was because you were Raf’s little sister. Even after you kissed me, I never let myself think



of you that way. It felt wrong, but . . .” He shakes his head. “It was never wrong, Lena. I know that now. The love I felt for you then . . . what I feel for you now . . . there’s nothing purer than that.”

Hearing those words, my heart is so full that it feels as though it might burst. Jake loved me — might still love me. And he thinks I’m his fated mate?

In this moment, there are no words. Everything I’ve carried for Jake all these years comes rushing to the surface. I forget all about Raf and Derek and Carmen’s wedding as I lean forward and crush my lips to his.

For a full heartbeat, Jake just freezes, and a thousand bolts of horror stab through me. But then his rough hands tangle in my hair, and a low groan rumbles up his chest.

His kiss isn’t soft or tentative the way mine was. He devours my mouth like a man who’s been starving and pulls me to him so fast that I lose my balance. I gasp as I catch myself on Jake’s bare chest, and his arm locks possessively around my waist.

I realize then why Jake didn’t kiss me back all those years ago. My chaste peck on the lips was no match for him or his insatiable need.

His kiss is rough and demanding. Hungry. Possessive.

I kiss him back with equal fervor, six years of pent-up angst and frustration rushing forward in a heady mix. My hands claw at his hair. Teeth clash. Our tongues tangle as we destroy one another, his hands gripping the sides of my face with a bruising pressure.

When I pause to catch my breath, Jake captures my bottom lip between his teeth and sucks it into his mouth. One of his hands trails down to cup my breast, his fingers light and gentle.

But when he squeezes and begins to caress me through the fabric of my dress, I let out a moan that turns his touch from tentative to rough.

Wetness pools between my thighs as Jake massages my nipple, and I tilt my head back to give him better access to my neck. His lips plant a trail of teasing kisses along my jaw before brushing over my pulse point and the tendons of my neck.

I pull him closer, egging him on, but I can't get close enough. I want Jake inside me. I want to consume him. I want every inch of this man.

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“We should go,” I gasp, my voice embarrassingly ragged as Jake’s other hand dips under the hem of my dress and begins tracing slow circles along my inner thigh.

Jake’s laugh rumbles against my mouth. “You think we’re putting on enough of a show for the rest of the wedding guests?”

I glance behind him to the windows of the terrace, and my cheeks heat. There are definitely people in the hallway just inside, and I’m sure we’ve had an audience for at least part of our interlude.

“Maybe,” I breathe, my skin burning wherever Jake’s hands wander.

“Careful, Lena,” he says with a chuckle. “We take this behind closed doors, and I can’t promise I’ll be a gentleman.”

“You said that once already,” I remind him. “About sharing a bed?” My mouth twists in a smirk. “You and I have slept together for two nights in a row, and you’ve been nothing but a gentleman.”

A dark look flashes through Jake’s eyes at the implied challenge in my statement, and something about it gives my stomach a pang of nervous anticipation.

“Trust me, sweetheart. Now that I’ve kissed you, there’s no sharing a bed unless I’m fucking you in it. You’re gonna have to lock, chain, and barricade that door if you don’t want me to lay you out on our bed, strip you naked, and spend the entire night with my tongue and cock buried in your sweet little pussy.”

My mouth falls open at the filthy words that tumble effortlessly from Jake's mouth. He's never said anything remotely sexual to me in the years that I've known him, and my entire body is suddenly too hot.

"Is that a promise?" I whisper.

Jake doesn't answer, but the smoldering look in his eyes is enough to make my core clench with need.

I glance at the night sky, which is never truly dark in Denver. "The night's already half gone," I say. "We'd better get started."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### JAKE

Once I scent Elena's arousal, I can't get her upstairs fast enough. I manage to yank on my pants and my unbuttoned shirt — just enough clothing that we won't attract too much attention from the humans staying at the hotel.

I loop an arm around her waist and half lead, half carry her through the ballroom. I see one of Carmen's bridesmaids out of the corner of my eye. She's making a beeline for Elena — probably to rope her into yet another group photo — but I just keep moving toward the double doors on the other side of the ballroom.

The second we're alone in the elevator, the leash on my control snaps. My wolf rises to the surface, growling with the urge to mark her as I pin her to the mirrored wall and crush my mouth over hers.

Elena tastes like mint and chocolate, and I curse the elevator for being so damn slow. I've waited six years to devour her. My wolf won't wait much longer.

My hand skims up the inside of her thigh, and I groan as my fingers brush the wet lace of her panties. She's completely soaked.

"Oh, baby," I growl, stroking her through the fabric. "You are so — fucking — wet."

Elena trembles at my touch, and a little hum sound escapes her throat. My cock aches with need.

"You see what you do to me?" I growl, grabbing her hand and leading it down to my throbbing member.

Elena sucks in a breath as she palms my length, which only grows harder at her touch.

My fingers continue to trace her sensitive folds through the fabric of her panties, and I shudder as more wetness seeps through the lace.

I bring my hand out from under her dress and dip my finger into my mouth.

Fuck, she tastes so sweet. I need more.

Elena's mouth falls open in shock as I slowly lick her nectar off my finger. Then I reach under that skimpy purple dress again and shove her panties to the side. She quivers as my finger finds her opening. Then I slip one finger inside her.

Elena yelps in surprise, gripping my shirt as her warm channel clenches around me. I pull back to admire the innocent shock on her face before devouring that mouth.

She rises on tiptoe to kiss me back, and my tongue strokes her as I move my finger in and out, stretching her sweet little cunt. She starts to move against me — on me — moaning softly against my mouth.

She's wet and needy and so fucking tight. Just imagining being inside her makes my balls ache with want, but she's so small down there that I'm worried I might hurt her.

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Carefully, I slip another finger inside her, and Elena makes a strangled noise of pain. I freeze, giving her a moment to adjust before sliding my fingers out and ramming them back in.

Elena squeals, but it's a cry of pleasure this time. I moan as she seats herself on my hand, her juices slicking my palm. The sharp ding of the elevator pulls me out of the moment, and when the doors slide open, I hear a soft gasp.

I whip my head around in time to see an older couple gaping at us from the hallway. Luckily, my body is so big that only Elena's legs are visible, but I'm sure it's obvious what we're doing.

There's a long beat of silence as the couple just stares. In the mirror on the wall opposite us, I see Elena's horrified expression. The couple lets the doors slide shut, and the elevator starts to move again.

I chuckle at the look on Elena's face, my fingers still inside her. I kiss her senseless until we reach our floor, unwilling to leave her sweet pussy empty for the rest of our short journey.

When the elevator finally reaches our floor, I withdraw my fingers slowly and tug down the hem of her dress. I about yank her arm off as I drag her down the hallway, my fingers fumbling in my pocket for the key card.

I hold the card to the reader, but the light turns red. Red. Red. Red again.

Finally, the little light turns green, and I throw my weight against the handle and

shove the door wide open. It bangs loudly against the wall, and I tug Elena inside before slamming it shut and throwing her up against it.

I crush my mouth against hers as I hike up her dress, yanking her panties down so fast that I hear the rip of fabric. Her inner thighs are slick with her juices, and I thrust my fingers inside her again, groaning when her walls clench around me.

Elena moans and rides my hand, grinding her clit against my palm as she chases more friction. I love the feel of holding her this way, my hand cupped around her mound. Her delicious coconut scent mixes with the tang of feminine arousal. She is so fucking wet for me, I can hardly stand it.

My wolf is begging me to mark her. Claim her. Make her mine. But I've waited so long for my sweet Elena. I need to do this right.

It takes great effort to slide my fingers out of her wet, hot core and tear my lips from hers. "Take off your dress," I growl. "And take down your hair. I want to look at you."

Elena stiffens. It's an order, not a request, and for a moment, I wonder if I should have softened my demand. But right now, my mind is more wolf than man, and trying to temper my instincts is completely beyond me.

Sliding away from me, Elena steps out of her ruined underwear and reaches up to pull a pin from her hair. One luscious dark curl tumbles down. Then another. Then another.

When she works around to the side of her updo, I catch a glimpse of the long white scar just above her right ear. She unconsciously fluffs her hair to bring some curls forward to cover it, but I close the distance between us and capture her wrist.



“Don’t,” I whisper, bringing her hand down to her waist and sweeping her hair over one shoulder. “You should never hide your scar.”

I gently tuck a curl behind her ear to expose that graceful white line.

“It’s ugly,” she protests.

“No.” I shake my head. “It’s beautiful — just like the rest of you.” I trace the line marking where the surgeon saved her life before planting a soft kiss there.

When I pull back, Elena’s eyes are bright, and my heart stutters. “Now take off that dress.”

Elena shivers at the order, reaching up to drag the thin straps down her arms. I watch intently as she shimmies it down her waist and over her hips until it pools on the floor.

I suck in a breath at seeing my mate completely bare. I can’t even absorb her beauty. Her chest rises and falls more rapidly than is natural, drawing my gaze to her perfect breasts. They’re just the right size to fit in my hands, soft and supple, with rosy nipples that pebble up under my inspection. Faint tan lines criss-cross her chest, showing what she’s hidden from the world — hidden from everyone but me.

As my eyes drop lower, my cock twitches in my pants. Tucked between those soft, soft thighs is her perfect pussy, the thin line of dark hair glistening with need.

I can hear Elena’s heart pounding from here, but she doesn’t shrink under my gaze. In fact, judging by the way her scent intensifies, she likes being naked for me.

“On the bed,” I say, my voice low and ragged.

Something like worry flickers through her eyes, but she turns away so quickly, I don't have time to scrutinize it.

I've imagined this moment for years, but now that I have Elena alone and naked, I can't decide how I want her first.

On all fours?

On her back?

Against the wall?

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Straddling my lap?

But as Elena puts her knee on the bed and crawls into position, the sight of her perfect, supple ass in the air makes the decision for me.

“Oh, sweetheart. You shouldn’t have done that.”

My shirt is still open in the front, and I just shrug out of it.

“Done what?” she squeaks, her voice oddly panicked.

“Given me the perfect angle to punish you for going out to the club in that skimpy gold dress.”

She turns her head to look over her shoulder, and a nervous pink flush colors her cheeks. I can’t tell if that wild look in her eye is nerves or excitement. Maybe a little of both.

Her back is ramrod straight as she kneels on all fours, waiting for her punishment like the good girl she is. The clink of my belt buckle is the only sound, apart from her shallow breaths.

I yank the belt out of my belt loops and test the leather in my hands. It’s stiff enough to make her ass sting but soft enough not to leave a mark.

I unzip my pants and yank them down, along with my underwear. My cock springs free, hard and ready to sink into Elena’s sweetness.

Prowling toward her, I put one knee on the bed and stroke the soft swell of her ass. My hand drifts lower, fingers brushing the backs of her legs before diving between her thighs. My middle finger grazes her dripping-wet core, and Elena shivers violently.

“Mmm,” I groan, sliding one finger into her pussy. “You’re so tight, baby.”

Elena clenches around me — hard — and I reach up to find that little bundle of nerves. Elena’s butt cheeks clench in response, and I draw a soft moan from her lips as I start to work it in slow, hard circles.

She rolls her hips into me, begging for more, but I have no intention of letting her come just yet. Looping the belt over on itself, I bring it down on her right ass cheek.

Elena screams and bucks against my hand. My sweet girl liked that.

I bring the leather down again, and her back arches with her squeal. I resume my slow circles against her clit, alternating between pleasure and pain.

When I stop to fist my own shaft, Elena makes a little growl of frustration. My dick is so hard it could punch through a wall, and I can’t take it anymore.

I slide my cock between her legs, where my head nudges at her slick, wet entrance. Elena’s whole body stiffens, and I pause.

Something isn’t right.

“Lena?” I ask.

The room fills with the sound of her ragged breathing, and my chest clenches with horror. I pull back and turn her toward me. Elena’s eyes are bright and alert, but her

jaw is stiff.

“You having a panic attack?”

“N-no. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” I growl, furious with myself for pulling out my belt when I should have just stuck to the basics.

“No, I’m good,” she stammers. “I just, um . . .” Elena swallows and flushes a deep shade of crimson, dropping her gaze to the mattress.

“You just what?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“I just haven’t, uh . . . done this before. I got nervous, but I’m fine now.” She pulls a tight smile. “No panic attacks.”

I gnaw on my bottom lip, trying to follow what she just said. “You haven’t done it on all fours before? Or you haven’t been whipped before?”

“Yeah.”

“Which is it?”

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“Both. I, uh . . .” Elena presses her lips together, as if trying to find the words. “I haven’t actually donethisbefore.” She gestures between her body and my cock, and slowly, the realization hits me.

“You’ve never . . .” I suck in a breath. “You mean, you’re avirgin?”

Elena rolls her eyes. “I hate that word. It makes me sound like a princess who’s been locked in a tower her whole life.”

But an odd feeling is rising in my chest. I’m still furious with myself for going too fast with her, but I’m also elated.

My mate is a virgin. I get to be her first. Her last. Heronly.

Before I can say or do anything stupid, I sit down on the bed and gather her into my lap, pressing a kiss to her temple and working my way down to her mouth. “Baby, you should havetoldme.”

“I just did.”

I snort and bury my face in her sweet-smelling hair. “I meanbeforeI used my belt on you.”

“I actually liked that.”

“I could tell,” I rumble, the words coming out more like a growl.

Elena playfully swats my chest, but I capture her hand and hold it against my heart so she can feel how hard it beats for her. She presses her face into my neck, planting a kiss and whispering, "Please don't stop."

And my heart fucking bursts.

"Stop?" I gently grab a handful of her hair and pull back so I can look her in the eye. "Baby, I'm just getting started. I'm gonna eat your sweet little pussy until you come so hard that you scream. Then I'm going to take what's mine."

Elena shivers at my words, but I scent only excitement.

Setting her on the bed, I drop to the floor on my knees. I can't remember ever kneeling in my life. I bow to no one except her.

Slowly, reverently, I push her knees apart and stare down at her weeping slit. She's bare except for a thin strip of dark hair, and nestled in the center of that is her swollen pink clit.

Elena squirms under my gaze, but I position myself between her thighs so she can't snap her legs together.

"Lie back," I whisper.

She does, and I hitch both of her legs over my shoulders and bury my face in her folds. She jerks violently at the overload of sensation, but I grip the tops of her thighs and lap up her juices before parting her lips with my fingers.

I lick a sensuous trail up her center, lavishing attention on her sensitive nubbin before licking my way back down to her entrance. A soft gasp escapes her when I flick my tongue inside, swirling and tasting and teasing. I reach up and pinch her nipple

between my fingers, and Elena bucks her hips wildly.

Grinning, I move up to her throbbing clit and take the little bundle of nerves between my teeth. Elena groans and grinds against me, and I slide two fingers inside her to deepen the sensation.

I continue to nip at her clit and stroke her insides until she's a trembling wreck beneath me.

"Jake —" she rasps.

"Not yet, baby." I growl the words against her mound. "Not until I tell you to come."

My mate makes a sexy little note of protest. I slide my fingers out of her and deliver a sharp smack to her beautiful cunt.

Elena squeals and bucks against me, and I slide out from under her thighs. Army-crawling over her hips and torso, I stare down at her smooth golden skin and those rock-hard nipples.

My balls ache at the sight of them, and I dive down and take one into my mouth. I lick and kiss and nip and suck until Elena's hand wanders down toward her pussy.

"What did I tell you?" I taunt.

Elena's hand freezes before she reaches that swollen pink nub, and I mentally kick myself for stopping what would surely have been its own sweet, sweet torture.

But I don't want her to get herself off. All her orgasms belong to me.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:30 am*

“Bad girl,” I murmur, plucking Elena up off the bed and laying her across my lap. I take up my belt and give her two quick lashes.

A strangled cry slips from her lips, but my girl takes her punishment well. My hand gravitates toward those raised pink welts, tenderly rubbing the sting away.

The lush, tangy scent of arousal wafts up to greet me. I knew Elena liked being spanked, but maybe I underestimated just how much.

Flipping her up, I set her in the chair beside the bed and kneel between her thighs. She watches me warily as I finger my belt, looping it over my hand and flicking the tip over her throbbing clit.

“Jake!” My name rips from her lips as Elena throws her head back, fresh nectar gushing out of her. I give her pussy two more gentle whips, reveling in the way her body arches into the chair.

“Good girl,” I murmur, caressing her inner thighs with my thumbs as I bend down to lap up her juices. This time, when my tongue caresses her clit, her groans sound almost pained.

“I’m gonna take care of you, baby,” I whisper, sliding two fingers inside her as I suck that little bundle of nerves.

She squeezes her eyes shut and tries to clamp her thighs together, but my body is in the way.

“Come for me, Lena.”

And my mate explodes into a thousand pieces, wetness gushing out of her.

“That’s it,” I whisper, stroking her insides to coax her through each wave.

I let her tremors subside before I start up again, sucking on that pretty pink bud.

This time when she comes, I’m not so patient. I flip her over the arm of the chair and bend to lick her from behind. My cock is aching to be inside her, and when I rise up, I let it slide over her creamy, wet folds.

Elena gasps and reaches down to grip my length, grinding her clit against me.

“Fuck,” I grit out as Elena moans.

I wrap an arm around her breasts, crushing her against my chest as she rides my shaft. It feels amazing to have her skin to skin, my hard cock against her soft core.

But it’s not enough to satisfy my wolf. I need to be inside her.

“Jake,” she bites out. “Please. Please.”

“Come for me, baby,” I growl. “Come all over my cock.”

Elena screams and bucks her hips, her pretty folds sliding down my shaft. I feel the muscles of her ass clench as she comes, and I know I’ve reached the limits of my restraint.

Hauling her off the chair, I throw her down on top of the covers. I know there are better ways to bed a virgin than on all fours, but my wolf is too wound up. Her

coconut scent is all over me, and I want nothing more than to sink my fangs into her soft flesh and make her mine.

Brushing her hair out of her face, I lean down and look her in the eye. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

That’s all I need. Grabbing my jeans from the night before, I root around until I find a condom. I tear the wrapper off with my teeth and roll it onto my dick.

Nudging her thighs apart with my knee, I fold my body over hers and slide my cock up against her folds. She goes incredibly still as the head of me nudges at her entrance, and I fold an arm around her so I can palm her breast.

She sucks in a breath as I enter her from behind, and I pause to let her adjust to the feel of me.

My balls throb so hard they hurt, but I wait until I’m sure she’s ready.

I slide in a bit more, and my eyes roll back in my head. She feels even better than I could have imagined. Nothing could have prepared me for this.

Leaning over to make sure she’s all right, I slide the rest of the way inside her until I’m seated to the hilt. Elena moans as she takes all of me, and I have to bite down on my lip to keep myself from coming.

Slowly, I pull out almost all the way, trembling with the effort of keeping my wolfish tendencies in check. I slide back into her, and Elena groans. I take that as an encouraging sign.

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I pump in and out a few more times, my legs shaking so much it's embarrassing.

"Harder," she whispers.

Holy shit.

The tenuous grip on my self-control snaps, and I slam all the way into her. A sharp cry tears from her throat, but it's tempered by the husky notes of pleasure.

Gripping her by the hips, I put a foot on the bed to go deeper. Elena's juices run down my cock. Her thighs are slick with the stuff. She takes every inch of me like a champ, but I need to see her face.

Pulling out, I turn her to face me, and my jaw nearly hits the floor. Elena's cheeks are flushed with desire, and her lips are parted in longing. She loops her arms around my neck and starts to climb me like a tree.

Good God, I don't deserve this woman. Ineverdeserved Elena. But when she wraps her soft legs around my waist, I grip her ass as hard as I can and try to lose myself inside of her.

My orgasm hits like an explosion, and my knees nearly give out. I drop her onto the bed before I collapse and bury my face in her breasts.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JAKE

Elena's wallscunch around me, milking every last drop of my cum. I don't remember her climaxing, but judging by the rhythmic throb of her pussy, she came again at the exact same time.

As the heady postcoital fog begins to lift, panic edges in to greet me. I was supposed to take Elena's virginity soft and slow, and instead I whipped her, plowed her from behind, and nearly brought down the walls with my fucking.

Shit.

Terrified of what I'll find, I lift my head from her gorgeous tits. Elena's still breathing hard and fast, but her eyes are closed.

"You all right?"

"Mmmhmm." She sounds as content as a cat on a sunny windowsill.

"Did I —" I swallow down the dread rising in my throat. "Was I too rough?"

"No."

Relief like I've never known floods through me, and I reach up to touch the side of her face. I tilt her head toward me, and she opens her eyes. "You're sure?"

"Yes." My mate grins and rolls her eyes. "I'm a little sore down there, but that's it. It was —" She lets out a cackle. "—not what I expected."

"Sorry I didn't bring any rose petals. Or Rum Chata."

Elena's cheeks heat at my reference to her sixteen-year-old self's drink of choice, and she gives my arm a playful smack.

“It wasn’t what I expected either,” I admit.

Something like anxiety flashes through her eyes, and she rises up onto one elbow. “Was it . . .” She presses her lips together. “I mean, I don’t really know what I’m doing. I’m sure I —” Elena breaks off and looks at the floor.

I realize how she must have interpreted my comment. She’s worried she didn’t “perform.”

“Lena,” I growl, giving her shoulder a squeeze. “Look at me.”

It’s a long moment before those brown eyes meet mine, and I wish she could feel just how intensely I burn for her. “You did amazing. You are . . .spectacular. I just meant that I never expected this to happen.”

A smidgen of relief crosses her face, but something else is bothering her.

“What is it?” I ask, running my finger down her breast and brushing over her nipple. The little bud pebbles up at my touch, and I can’t resist giving it a pinch.

“What you said before, about me being your mate . . . Doesn’t that entail . . .youknow . . .”

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My stomach clenches when I realize where she's going with this. She sounds unbelievably worried.

"Typically, yes," I tell her, still stroking her breast. "It's customary for a wolf to mark his mate."

"With a bite," she adds, almost as if she's checking her facts. But this is a girl who grew up surrounded by shifters. She knows all about mating — or sheshould.

"Yes."

Elena worries her bottom lip between her teeth before meeting my eyes. "Will it hurt?"

"Only for a second."

She nods, and her expression morphs into something like resolve. "All right."

"All right what?" I ask, my voice trembling at the implication.

She can't possibly mean what I think she means. I know I need to mark her — my wolf is demanding it — but I want to take things slow.

"I'm ready for you to mark me."

"Are you sure?" I ask. "Because it doesn't have to be tonight. We could wait a while. There's no rush."

Elena nods. "I'm sure."

My throat goes very dry. "You have to be sure, Lena. Because once I mark you . . . there's no going back." My voice is hoarse with vulnerability and need. I don't tell her that it's already too late — that she's already mine. With my mark or without it, I'll never let her go. "You'll be mine. Forever."

"I know," she whispers. "And I . . ." She takes a deep breath. "I want to wear your mark."

A wild excitement streaks through my chest. Elena wants me to claim her. She wants the whole world to know that she belongs to me and that I belong to her.

The thought makes me instantly rock hard again, but then that thrill morphs into panic. Elena is human — fragile as hell and slow to heal. What if I really hurt her?

"You won't hurt me," she says, as though she read my thoughts. Her hand comes up to caress my cheek, and a low growl rumbles through me at her feather-light touch. "I trust you."

ELENA

A delicious shiver rolls through me as Jake slides between my thighs and plants a kiss on my swollen nub. Fire shoots through my veins at his touch, and my core clenches in anticipation.

Jake's tongue flicks over my most sensitive spot, making torturous, unhurried circles. I moan and lie back, savoring the feeling of his rough hands on my thighs before his thumb parts my folds, and he licks me from ass to clit.

I shudder as he laps me up. I'm already dripping wet. Dripping wet and . . . confused.



I asked him to mark me, but he appears to be distracted. He lavishes attention on the flushed lips of my pussy, taking one between his teeth and giving it a gentle tug.

An embarrassing groan of pleasure slips out of me, and I rake my fingers through his hair. However I might have imagined sex with Jake, I never anticipated that he'd be able to make me feel like this.

Then his fingers are inside me again, stroking that magical spot. Pressure starts to build low in my abdomen, and I clench my thighs together as he coaxes and licks and bites.

When he sucks my clit into his hot, wet mouth, I squeal and thrash on the bed. Jake captures my wrists and pins them to the mattress, forcing me to submit.

My orgasm rocks through me with overwhelming force — stronger and harder than the last. Jake eases each wave with gentle licks before folding his body over mine.

I sigh. Jake is hard everywhere I'm soft. Huge. Warm. Masculine. He towers over me by nearly a foot, and yet our bodies somehow just fit.

Then Jake pulls back to look at me, and I'm startled by the naked terror in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "N-nothing," he croaks. "Everything's perfect."

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My heart squeezes at his words, and he threads his fingers through my hair. His kiss is scorching hot on my lips, burning with the fierceness of his need.

He reaches between us to pull off the used condom, but I stop him as he moves to get another.

“Can you . . .” My skin tingles uncomfortably at what I’m about to ask. “Can you tell if I’m fertile from my scent?”

Back in high school, Carmen told me shifters could detect subtle changes in a woman’s scent depending on where she was in her cycle. Asking the question out loud, though, I worry she might have been pulling my leg.

Jake’s nod is so small that I almost miss it. “You aren’t. You’ll start to bleed in three or four days.”

I blink. He’s right. My period is due in three days exactly. It’s both impressive and disconcerting.

“Then I want to feel you inside me,” I whisper, shocked by my own admission. “Just you.”

Jake’s eyes smolder at my request, and I catch the flash of a grin before he kisses me again.

Shifters are immune to human viruses and infections, so there’s no reason to use a condom if I can’t get pregnant.

Jake wastes no time after that. His head dips down to kiss my neck as his hand finds my breast. He tweaks my nipple between his skillful fingers, and I arch into his touch.

His mouth lingers in the soft valley where my neck meets my shoulder. Then I feel him nudging at my entrance.

There's the briefest twinge of pain as he enters me, followed by a delicious fullness. I groan against his neck, squeezing him with my channel.

Jake's massive body trembles over mine as he slides back out, almost to the tip. I whimper in protest and grip his shoulders, needing all of him inside me. Jake complies with one hard thrust, and I dig my nails into his skin.

Jake takes his time with me, but I can feel his restraint waning. The tension in his body ratchets up my own desire.

I want him to mark me. Claim me. Fill me with his cum. It's as though I've been starving for him my entire life, and now that I've had a taste, my desire is insatiable.

Jake seems just as ravenous as I am, though, and that makes me feel better. I can feel his hot breath on my neck as he rams inside me. I shudder at the task of taking all of his length, but I want him to fill me again and again.

I bite down on the thick muscle of his shoulder, egging him on, and Jake's moan gives me a wild surge of satisfaction. My bite may heal in a matter of seconds, but I've marked him, too.

That simple act seems to cause the careful wall he's built around himself to crack, and I feel it when his wolf takes over. Jake's movements become jerkier as he slams into me, his balls slapping between my ass cheeks.

I hold on for dear life, moaning his name as he fills some space inside me I didn't know was empty.

When he slows his pace, I know it's time. Jake's whole body is shaking as he plants a soft kiss at the base of my neck.

"Lena?" His voice is hoarse, ragged and worried.

"It's okay," I whisper. "Mark me. I'm ready."

His only reply is a pained groan of release as he sinks his fangs into me. My body jerks at the sharp pinch, but the pain is tempered by Jake's quiver of pleasure. He's still rock hard inside me, and I give his member a reassuring squeeze.

Jake grips the back of my neck as he moves in and out of me, and soon the pain ebbs away. I can feel the pressure building deep inside me, revved up by Jake's own level of need. It's the most intimate act I've ever experienced, and I never want it to end.

When Jake withdraws his fangs and captures my mouth, his kiss is bruising and tastes of my blood. He wants to claim me, body and soul. And I want to let him.

I scream his name as my orgasm rips through me, my hands clawing at his hair and scratching his neck as they try to find something to hold on to. I feel a warm gush as he fills me with his seed, and the release overtakes us both.

Jake's tongue makes slow circles over my wound, cleaning it with his healing saliva. Then he collapses over top of me, and I feel his heart hammering against my abdomen.

For several minutes, we just lie there in silence — Jake's body a comforting weight. When he finally lifts his head to look at me, his eyes are wary with concern. "Are you

all right?”

“Fine,” I say, my mouth stretching in a sleepy grin.

Jake exhales and rolls off of me, tugging me against his chest. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted this. Lena, I . . . I love you.”

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At those words, my heart nearly gives out, and I snuggle tighter against him. “I love you, too.”

A low satisfied growl reverberates up his chest. “My mate.”

I sigh. “My mate.”

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

#### JAKE

I awake to the flutter of Elena’s breath on my arm. I spent the night curled around my mate, breathing in her glorious scent. The first rays of sunlight glimmer over the buildings in the distance, though the sky is still a muted blue.

Staring down at the woman in my arms, I can hardly believe the last few days.

Lena is all I’ve dreamed about for six years, and here she fucking is. Not only am I lying naked in bed with the woman I love, but I took her virginity and gave her my mark.

The bite is still red and swollen, but the healing powers of my saliva are already at work just as surely as my venom is. The wound will heal in just a few days, but she’ll carry my scent for the rest of her life.

My body thrums with a restless energy, my skin itching with the need to shift. I’m wired and starving, which is common after mating. The wolf in me needs to run and

hunt, but I don't want Lena to wake up alone.

Moving carefully so I don't disturb her, I pull myself out of bed and locate a pair of my jeans. I pull them on and slip out of the room, determined to find us some breakfast.

The hotel lobby is deserted the morning after the wedding. Everyone is sleeping off hangovers after the reception, but I follow the scent of bacon toward a room off the lobby.

I'm so focused on the hunt that I miss the acrid stench of a horribly familiar cologne.

"Well, well . . . if it isn't the prize fighter?"

I whip around in the direction of the voice and see Derek sprawled across one of the leather sofas, still in his wedding attire. His pants are ripped from his hasty shift, and all the buttons are missing from his shirt. It hangs open in the front, revealing a pale hairy chest. An empty glass rests on the table in front of him, and the guy reeks of alcohol.

"Drinking alone, I see." I don't even feel bad about being a dick to him. Derek is lucky I let him live after the things he said to my mate.

He scents the air, and his expression turns sour. He can smell Elena on me, and my wolf preens a little.

"So. You finally fucked her." Derek raises his empty glass and flashes an equally empty smile. "Congratulations. Someone should."

I bristle a little at his use of the word "someone." No one fucks Elena but me.

“That was some Grade A pussy, I’m sure,” Derek drawls. “But what happens when she wakes up?”

“The fuck are you talking about?” I growl. My wolf raises his hackles. I’m two seconds away from putting this guy’s head through a wall. I should just walk away.

“What happens if Elena does regain her full faculties?” Derek slurs, looking at me slightly cockeyed. “What then?”

I turn to leave, fed up with his bullshit. He’s just bitter that Elena dumped him.

“She’s going to want to continue her training,” Derek calls after me. “She wants to be a professional ballerina. She wants to be the best.”

“I know,” I grind out, stopping in my tracks. I have no idea why I’m still having a conversation with this asshole.

“She’s enrolled in one of the most competitive dance programs in the nation, and she still has trouble with her balance.”

“I know.”

Why is this guy trying to mansplain Elena to me? Part of me thinks he just likes the sound of his own voice, but there’s another part of me that’s worried he knows something I don’t.

“I’m just saying . . . Someday, she may not be limited by her brain injury anymore, and she might wake up and realize she’s tied herself to a piece of trash fighter who can’t give her the life she wants.”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, but I force myself to stand tall. I just took



his ex's virginity and gave her six back-to-back orgasms. Why am I even still listening?

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“I don’t have time for this,” I grit out. “I’m fucking hungry.”

I keep walking toward the banquet hall, but Derek’s stupid voice calls after me. “Just because she wants you now doesn’t mean she’ll want you three years from now. You are nothing, Carson. Everyone knows it. I know it. Rafael knows it. Hell, you probably know it. And one day, Elena’s going to realize that she’s tied herself to a man who’s going absolutely nowhere.”

ELENA

The bed is cold when I wake up. And there’s too much space.

The other two times I shared a bed with Jake, his six-foot-four frame hogged most of the mattress, which is why this is so weird.

The feeling of aloneness creeps in slowly. Then it hits me all at once.

My eyes fly open, and I turn my head. Jake’s side of the bed is empty.

Drawing the covers up to my chest, I sit up and look around. The movement elicits a twinge of pain where Jake gave me his mark.

He’s not in the bathroom, and he’s not on the couch. His phone and wallet are gone, too.

That’s weird.

Wrapping the sheet around my torso, I inch out of bed and wince at the pleasant soreness between my legs. I can smell Jake on me — likely an effect of the mating bite. He said our scents would merge.

It's strange to wake up smelling different but also familiar.

Looking out over the terrace, my gaze drifts to the blacktop where Jake's Jeep was parked the night before. It's gone. My eyes make a circuit of the parking lot and circle drive, but I don't see it anywhere.

What the fuck? Did he leave?

His black backpack is still slumped in the corner, but I can't think of any reason why he would get in his Jeep and drive off the morning after we —

Pain unlike anything I've ever known slices through my gut as the realization hits me.

Stupid girl. I may have been a virgin before last night, but I'm not unfamiliar with how these things work. The guy fucks the girl and then bounces. Carmen's had plenty of hump-and-dumps.

But last night wasn't just sex. I gave him my virginity. He gave me his mark. The mating bite is a big deal among shifters — more serious even than marriage.

So why would Jake slip out of bed without a word, as though this was some shameful one-night stand?

He wouldn't, I tell myself. Jake's not like that.

But Jake did run all those years ago, and we didn't speak for six years.

Righteous indignation flares hot in my gut, and I grab my phone off the bedside table.

I find Jake's number and wait while it rings. An automated outgoing message picks up, and I jab my screen to end the call.

That doesn't mean anything, I tell myself. Maybe he's driving or . . . ignoring me.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I tap his name again. This time, the call goes straight to voicemail.

What — the —fuck?

Tears burn in my throat, exploding halfway between a sob and a hiccup.

Stupid.

That's what I am.

What kind of girl pines for a guy for six fucking years and then sleeps with him the first time he shows the slightest bit of interest?

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I bet he didn't even give me a true mating bite. It's probably some shifter version of a hickey — his way of telling everyone at the wedding that he fucked the alpha's little sister.

Shifters belong with other shifters. That's what Raf always told me.

He meant that shifters should date shifters, but I always took it to mean that I'd never really be one of them. I was a human. Weak. Breakable. I'd always be on the outside looking in. But maybe I should have taken his words at face value.

Hot shameful tears spill over, but I hurriedly scrub them away. I've spent enough time crying over Jake. I'm not going to waste any more.

But then I hear a low beep, and the door to our room glides open. Jake's huge hulking frame fills the doorway, two tall coffees wedged in the crook of his arm and a plain white sack in his hand.

He freezes when he sees me standing by the window with tears streaming down my cheeks.

"Lena?" His eyes crinkle in confusion and worry, and I burst into a fit of full-blown sobs.

"What's wrong?" he growls, his tone low and menacing. He glances around as though trying to identify the source of my distress. Then he dumps the coffees and bag on the dresser and vaults over the bed.

He pulls me into his lap and brushes away my tears, searching my face with concern.

Seeing his reaction makes my chest clench with love and warmth, but that warmth is quickly doused by shame. Was it really me who thought that Jake had left, or was my sudden paranoia my brain playing tricks on me?

Mood swings are common after a traumatic brain injury. For months after the accident, I'd had crazy ups and downs. I'd be fine one moment and crying the next. Sometimes, I'd explode with rage over a tiny slight or shut myself in my room for days.

I thought I'd gotten a handle on that, but maybe I'm having a relapse.

"It's stupid," I whisper, mopping under my nose and wishing Jake had come bursting in just a few minutes sooner. "I-I thought you left."

"I did leave," he says. "I was starving, and you were asleep, so —" He gestures at the bag of food, which smells like bacon and chorizo. "They weren't serving breakfast downstairs until nine, so I jetted out for some burritos."

My stomach clenches. Jake didn't abandon me. He ran out to get me a breakfast burrito.

A strangled laugh bubbles out of me, and I shake my head at my own stupidity. "I'm sorry," I gurgle.

"What are you sorry for?"

"I'm sorry for doubting you and . . . acting crazy."

Jake's eyebrows knit together, and he traces a thumb down my jaw. "You aren't

acting crazy.”

“Yes, I am,” I say, staring down at my fingers, which are messing with a thread that’s come loose from the bedsheet. “I thought you’d left me. I mean, really left me.”

“Lena.” Jake’s voice isn’t annoyed or chiding. It’s soft and pained. His rough hand comes up to cup my cheek, those blue eyes boring into mine. “I would never leave you. Never. Do you understand?” He breaks into a broad grin that makes my chest ache. “There’s no getting rid of me now. You’re my mate.”

I smile back at him, but my heart’s not in it. He says that now, but it’s only been a few hours. What if this was me having a setback, rather than a run-of-the-mill overreaction?

“Lena . . .” Jake’s voice is a low growl. He’s been watching me intently this entire time, as if everything I’m thinking and feeling is written across my face.

“What if . . .” I keep pulling on the loose thread, wondering if the whole sheet will unravel if I tug in just the right spot. “What if I don’t ever get better?”

It’s such an effort to get the question out that my voice is barely a whisper.

“What if my injury . . .” I trail off. I’ve made it this far by thinking positively and refusing to accept the limitations doctors told me I might have. So it’s hard for me to come out and say what I need to tell him. “I just need you to know that I might not ever be one-hundred percent.”

“Lena,” says Jake, his brows pulling together as he strokes my face. “There’s nothing to fix.”

“I had a traumatic brain injury,” I mumble. “There was definitely some fixing to be

done.”

“I know. I was there.”

Jake’s words take me by surprise, and I finally look him in the eye. “What do you mean you were there?”



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“I came to the hospital after the accident,” he says quietly. “I knew you weren’t awake yet, but I just . . . needed to be near you.”

I blink. Something Derek said the night before comes floating back to me: I was too busy with work to sit vigil at your bedside like your precious Jake.

It hadn’t made any sense at the time, but somewhere in the recesses of my mind, a memory surfaces. Jake slumped at the foot of my bed while the machines beeped and hissed. For years, I’d thought it was just a dream, but . . .

“You were there?” I whisper, my eyes filling with fresh tears.

He nods, reaching down and gripping my hand. “Of course I was there.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What was there to say? ‘I’ve loved you your whole life. I’ve just been too chicken-shit to do anything about it’?”

My heart flutters. “I guess not,” I whisper. “That would have been weird. But you still could have told me.”

Jake snorts, still studying our intertwined fingers. “I know your body doesn’t always do what you want, Lena, but that doesn’t mean you’re broken.”

His eyes snap up to meet my gaze, and his face is etched with something like desperation. He needs me to understand. “You are perfect. And you are mine. Your

struggles are mine. Your triumphs are mine. Your joy is my joy. Your pain is my pain. And nothing is ever going to change that.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JAKE

Four days later. . .

I’m already sweating by the time Raf walks into the gym, and it isn’t from my workout. I called to ask if he wanted to meet me to train while he was in Gold Creek. I figure he’s going to want to hit me once I give him the news, and I might as well get a good sparring session out of it.

Raf seems wary as he stalks onto the mats, looking every inch of the dangerous alpha. He’s wearing black athletic pants and a plain gray tee, but even the guy’s T-shirts are designer brands.

Gold Creek Boxing Gym is one of those good old-school gyms. Coach’s prize belts from the eighties line the walls. There’s a creaky platform in one corner with an actual ring, and heavy bags hang from the ceiling. A few of the bags are reinforced with tape, and the whole gym reeks of sweat and old leather.

It’s not exactly Raf’s kind of place, but he still seems comfortable here.

“How was the wedding?” he asks, tossing his bag on the floor. He doesn’t say hello or give any other kind of introduction. Raf doesn’t believe in meaningless chitchat, but right now I’d give anything for a little small talk.

“Fine,” I say, watching him carefully as he crouches down and pulls his wraps out of his bag.

“Elena won’t return any of my phone calls,” he grumbles. “I was beginning to worry.”

I fight back the grin that’s tugging at my mouth. No one else in the state of Colorado would dare dodge the calls of a billionaire CEO alpha. Leave it to Rafael’s baby sister to get his undies all in a twist.

There’s a long pause and then he asks, “Something happen?”

I swallow. I’ve never run from a fight in my life, but this may be the closest I’ve come. Telling Raf is the whole reason I asked him to meet me, and suddenly, I don’t have the words.

“Jake . . .” Raf stops rummaging in his bag. He’s gone completely still. “Is there something I should know?”

“Uh . . .”

In three quick strides, Raf is on his feet and across the room. I don’t catch the moment his eyes start to change. Instead, I’m left staring into a pair of golden wolf eyes rimmed with coal-black lines. “What — did you —do?”

Somewhere deep inside of me, my wolf stirs and snarls. Around Raf, my animal can usually relax, but since I marked Elena as my mate, he’s been on high alert.

“I claimed her.”

Surprise, indignation, and a murderous rage flash through Rafael’s eyes. His neck goes stiff as he processes what I just said, and I know he’s fighting the shift.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen him get this worked up about anything in his life —

except maybe when his father was murdered. It's terrifying and a little insulting.  
“You —what?” he rasps.

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“I claimed her,” I repeat. My heart is punching against my ribs. “Elena is my mate.”

“The fuck she is!” Raf snarls, drawing his right shoulder back as though he’s preparing to deck me.

I lower my chin but hold his gaze. “She’s my fated mate,” I say. “I didn’t know until the wedding, but she . . .” I take a deep breath and let it out in a huff. I feel the need to explain. “She was always mine — even when we were young. I kept my distance all these years, but not anymore. I’m . . . I’m fuckin’ in love with her, man.”

Raf stiffens, and he gets this funny look in his eyes. He isn’t swinging at me yet, which I take as a good sign.

I hit my gloves together to release some of my pent-up energy and take a few pacing steps. I practiced this conversation at least a dozen times on the way over here, but every version I imagined ended with me beaten and bloody.

I don’t care. Raf can be angry if he wants to be, but Elena is my mate, and he’ll have to respect that.

There’s no stronger bond for our kind than that of a mated pair. Not friendship. Not pack bonds. Not even blood.

“I know,” he says softly, unraveling one of his cotton hand wraps and beginning to wrap his knuckles.

I swallow. “You know?”

Raf lifts an eyebrow. “I’m not an idiot. I see the way you look at her.” His mouth twists into something like a sneer, and for the first time, I think he might actually hit me. “I can scent the way you feel when you two are together.”

And here I thought I’d always managed to keep the stink of my lust from leaching out.

A muscle works in Raf’s jaw, but his movements are controlled as he wraps his hands. “I thought maybe you just wanted to fuck her. I knew you wouldn’t, but it always bugged me. Then you showed up at the hospital after her accident, and . . .” A pained look comes over him. “I knew — knew you loved her, anyway.”

I let out the breath I’ve been holding. Raf doesn’t look happy, but he doesn’t look murderous, either. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did.” Raf frowns at me in surprise. “Why do you think I always kept you in the loop about what she was up to? I was sort of hoping you’d take the hint and finally make your move.”

I sigh. Figures. Raf is a strategist. A CEO. An alpha. He’s calculating and subtle in a way that I’ve always found annoying as fuck. If that was his version of dropping a hint, I’m sure glad I didn’t wait for his approval to tell Elena how I feel.

“I kept trying to deny it,” I admit.

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeat, my voice rising with incredulity. I lift my hands at my sides and then drop them back down. “I was afraid of losing the only family I’ve ever had.”

Raf blinks at me, and a thousand tiny emotions flicker through his eyes before he

tamps them down. Most people probably would have missed the subtle change in his expression, but I've known Raf since we were kids.

"You could never lose me," he says, his voice thick with emotion. "We're brothers. I might want to kick you in the nuts now and again, but you're stuck with me."

My chest squeezes with relief and gratitude, and I have to swallow a few times before I'm able to speak. "I won't hurt her," I promise. "I could never hurt her."

"You'd better not," he says, finishing wrapping his hands. "Or I really will have to kill you."

ELENA

The steps leading up to my apartment seem extra-dingy as I lead Jake up to my place. My heart is doing all kinds of crazy gymnastics in my chest. This moment feels significant.

When I first moved to Boston, I was crashing in a house with four other dancers. It was crowded and messy, but I was living my dream.

It wasn't until I picked up a few part-time teaching jobs at local ballet studios that I was able to afford a place of my own. It's a studio apartment roughly the size of a shoebox, but I've been proud to call it mine.

Until now.

Now my building seems run-down and shabby, and I'm nervous to show Jake the tiny apartment where the two of us will be living together.

Jake says he can get a job in private security anywhere, but my school is here.

Apparently, shifters don't do long-distance relationships when it comes to their mates, which is just fine by me. I don't think I could stand to be two-thousand miles away from Jake.

"It's not much," I warn him, fumbling in my purse for the key. The brass number nine fell off my door long before I moved in, and only the unvarnished outline of the digit signifies which apartment is mine.



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“Will you stop?” Jake chuckles. “If it’s good enough for my mate, it’s good enough for me.”

I suck in a breath. It’s been a week since he claimed me, and I still get a little thrill every time he calls me his mate or I catch sight of his mark in the mirror. I’ve wanted Jake since high school — maybe even longer — and part of me can’t believe this is real.

The scent of old building wafts out to greet us as I push the door open. The apartment is dark, but a sliver of light from the street below trickles in from a gap in the curtains.

I flip on a lamp, and my insides squirm. Every piece of furniture was a Craigslist find, apart from the dresser I rescued from the curb. There’s a battered laminate table from the eighties with two chairs, a faded green loveseat, and a slightly scratched TV stand. I don’t actually own a TV yet, but that’s the next thing on my list to purchase.

I do have a free-standing ballet barre against the wall, which is currently acting as a drying rack for my leotards. The apartment didn’t come with a washer and dryer, which means schlepping to the laundry mat every other week and hand-washing in between.

Jake takes his time surveying the apartment, taking in the tiny kitchenette and the art I scrounged from Goodwill.

“Where’s the bed?” he asks, turning to me with a devilish gleam in his eyes. “I was told they do have beds in Boston, which is the only reason I agreed to move here.”

Heat floods my cheeks, and I rub the back of my neck. This is the part I've been dreading the most.

"Ah." I shift my weight from one foot to the other, stalling. "That's the benefit of only having three hundred and fifty square feet to work with. Everything has to be super high-tech."

Jake's brows crinkle in confusion. "I don't think they've made any major innovations to beds since humans slept on fur hides. A bed is just a horizontal surface for sleeping and fucking."

"What about the modern innerspring mattress?" I tease. "Or the waterbed? Memory foam?"

"Are you telling me you have a waterbed out on the fire escape?"

"No," I say, a quiver of mirth rattling in my chest. "But sometimes, beds are horizontal, and sometimes . . ." I cross to the little table and scoot it across the floor. I do the same with the two battered chairs, clearing a space in the middle of the apartment.

I open the little double doors that look just like a closet and give the metal handle a hard tug.

Jake watches in astonishment as the old Murphy bed folds out from the wall. The thing is a double — not even a queen. It snaps into place with a lot of squeaking and creaking, and I hurriedly straighten the rumpled covers.

"Sometimes they're vertical," I finish.

A broad grin stretches across Jake's face. "That's hilarious." He flops down on the

mattress and gives it a bounce. The bed squeaks so loudly it's comical. "This should be fun."

I grimace. "It's a little small."

"Small is good," says Jake, pulling me into his lap so that I'm straddling his hips. His hands cup my ass through my jeans, and I feel the hard length of him press against my core.

"You think we can . . . make it work?" I ask, squinting at him through one eye as I cringe. "Because if you've changed your mind or want to get a bigger place —"

"Sweetheart, for you, I could make a bar stool work."

I let out the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

"Besides . . ." He glances around my tiny apartment, and his eyes crinkle in a contented smile. "I like your place. Correction: our place."

Our place.

Just the thought makes my heart squeeze.

Gazing down at the beautiful man beneath me, I can't quite believe he's mine. I run a finger down his face, delighting in the contrast between the smooth skin of his cheeks and the faint stubble along his jaw.

Then Jake's fingers find the back of my neck, and he crushes his mouth to mine. His kiss is hard and demanding and possessive, and yet I feel the tenderness behind it. Jake shifts beneath me, gripping me under the hips, and lays me down on the squishy mattress.

His mouth travels from my lips to my collarbone, not stopping at the neckline of my shirt. As he shifts his weight, the old bed creaks loudly, and I burst into a fit of giggles.

“It’ll work,” Jake murmurs, grinning against my breast. “I just hope our neighbors have earplugs.”

## EPILOGUE

JAKE

Two years later. . .

The auditorium is dark when I slip in unnoticed — the lone intruder at the closed rehearsal. Canned orchestral music plays from the speakers, and the place is empty apart from three seats in the front row.

The rehearsal director, choreographer, and venue manager watch as Elena and her partner move across the stage. She's dressed in a lilac leotard, nude tights, and a see-through white skirt that taunts me as it floats around her thighs.

The hot stage lights beat down on the dancers, and my shifter vision follows a single bead of sweat as it slips down the front of Elena's leotard. Her partner is a svelte Ukrainian dancer named Danilo, who twirls my mate around the stage as effortlessly as someone with shifter strength.

I might be stewing with jealousy at seeing another man put his hands all over her if it weren't for how much I like Danilo. He's been practicing tirelessly with Elena for the last six weeks to get her ready for opening night.

This is the last rehearsal before her debut as a professional ballerina.

The closing number culminates in something called an angel lift, and Elena's been a nervous wreck all week. I'm not worried. I've seen her and Danilo execute this lift perfectly a hundred times in rehearsal, but sometimes emotional scars run deeper than physical ones.

It was this type of lift that made her think she'd never be a professional ballet dancer, but she spent a year training with someone who specializes in rehabbing TBIs in athletes, and she's been improving week by week.

A few months ago, she received an invitation to audition for the New York City Ballet. Lena insisted she wasn't ready, but there was no way in hell I was going to let her pass up this opportunity.

She got the spot, and we moved to New York. The company works her harder than I've ever trained for a fight, and she crawls back to our tiny apartment every night, exhausted but happy.

Watching her float across the stage like a butterfly, I'm so fucking proud she's my mate.

The little velvet box nestled against my thigh is practically burning a hole in my pocket. Inside is the engagement ring I picked out for Elena. It's been sitting in my sock drawer for over a month. Tonight I'll ask her to be my wife.

The dancers finish the number, and the director tells them to take five. Elena's gaze snags on me, lurking at the back of the auditorium. I know she can sense me even if she can't seem — just another perk of the mating mark.

"What are you doing here?" she asks as soon as she's within earshot.

"Thought I'd come by and wish you good luck," I say.

Not that she needs it. The girl works harder than any dancer in the company, and she's got the choreography down pat.

Elena smiles, and the sight of her sweaty, exhausted, and so damn happy makes my

chest ache with joy. “You’re not supposed to wish someone good luck. You’re supposed to say ‘break a leg.’”

“See, you still have so much to teach me,” I say, taking her by the hand and pulling her closer. Perspiration heightens her scent and sends all the blood rushing to my cock.

“Clearly.”

I drop my voice to a low murmur, even though there’s no one nearby. “Like . . . how to get inside you when you’re wearing this.” I gesture at her ballerina getup, which, besides naked, is my favorite look on Elena.

Her nipples pebble up through the thin fabric of her leotard, and she crosses her arms over her chest.

“Shh.” She tosses a quick glance over her shoulder, a nervous grin tugging at her lips.

“I think we need to rehearse a lift of our own,” I growl, gripping her around the waist and hoisting her up.

Elena laughs and twines her arms around my neck, but her expression turns serious as I seat her soft core against my throbbing cock.

“We’re on a break,” she whispers, glancing back toward the stage.

I lift a shoulder in a shrug. “Then we’ll have to be quick.”

Before she can utter another note of protest, I yank her out of the auditorium and into the deserted vestibule. I capture her mouth in a kiss as I back her into an empty coat closet, the taste of salt on her lips making my wolf perk up.

A low moan rumbles up my chest as I tweak her nipple through her leotard. My other hand finds its way under that gauzy skirt, touching her through her clothes. Elena moans, and I clap my hand over her mouth as she grinds her hips against me.

Fuck. This must be why they have closed rehearsals. How's a guy supposed to pleasure his mate when they only give the dancers five-minute breaks?



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Exercise always makes her horny, and judging by the way she's riding my hand, Elena is wet and ready. I shove aside the fabric at her crotch, but her tights form a nylon seal that's tougher to crack than a damned chastity belt.

Getting impatient, I grab the top of her leotard and tug it down her shoulders. Elena sucks in a gasp and covers her breasts, which only makes it hotter.

I wiggle the leotard down over her hips and yank her tights down with it. I'm pleased to see she's not wearing any underwear. Her delicious pussy is on full display, and I love the idea of fucking her when the rest of the dancers are just on the other side of this wall.

"Good girl," I whisper, bending down on one knee and running my fingers along her seam. She's already dripping with need, and my fingers come away drenched in her juices.

I hold her gaze as I lick them one at a time, savoring the taste of her sweetness.

Later tonight, I'll be getting down on one knee for an entirely different reason, and the thought makes my cock twitch.

Elena trembles at my brazenness, and I dive in to lick her sweet rosebud clit. Her breasts heave as I lap at her nubbin, and her thighs quiver with barely contained need.

I spread her legs wider so I can enter her with my tongue, and she fists her hands in my hair.

“So wet,” I whisper against her sex, pausing to part her flushed lips to gain better access to that tight little bundle of nerves.

Elena moans as I eat her out, lapping up all her nectar. Her thighs tremble as she comes around my tongue, and I know we’re running out of time.

Getting to my feet, I fumble with my belt and tug down my fly. My cock springs free.

Turning her to face the wall, I bend her over and plunge into her from behind. I have the foresight to cover her mouth, and Elena moans around my hand. Her sweet, warm cunt squeezes my dick, and I nearly black out from the sensation.

Fisting the base of her French braid, I pull out slowly and ram back in, eliciting a low grunt. I fuck her harder, using her braid for leverage — filling the closet with the sounds of our lovemaking.

Elena’s walls clench around me as she comes again, and I explode inside of her. I squeeze my eyes shut as I pump in and out a few more times, her pussy milking every last drop of my cum.

She’s still trembling as I slide her tights back up over her ass, running my hand over her mound through the thin material.

She’s panting when I turn her around and tug her leotard back into place.

“I need to clean up,” she whispers, her cheeks flushed from her orgasm.

“No,” I say, wrapping her skirt around her waist and tying it off with a bow. “You’re gonna get back up on that stage and dance your best while my cum drips out of your pussy.”

A look of horror flashes in her eyes. “I can’t.”

“Youwill.” I bend down to give her a quick peck on the lips, tugging gently on her braid. “Or I’ll have to punish you later.”

Even in the dark, I can see her flush, but there’s a method to my madness.

Elena dances best when she gets out of her own head and just lets her body take over. I figure the slight distraction of my cum leaking out of her might just do the trick.

When I’m sure she’s presentable, I shove her out of the closet and follow a few paces behind as she walks back into the auditorium. I watch from the dark as she rejoins the company, self-consciously straightening her braid.

She dances her final number flawlessly, and when Danilo hoists her up for the big lift, my heart nearly explodes with pride.