



The Challenge (The Pack 2)

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Category: Fantasy, Young Adult, Horror

Description: Jess Carter wasn't looking for a place to belong when she arrived in Banks, Idaho. It was supposed to be a temporary spot to finish out her last year of high school and bond with her dad.

Meeting Dom changed everything.

Now, the Pack needs her. Dom needs her. And she's figuring out she needs them if they plan to survive what's coming.

A challenge has been issued and if the Pack doesn't respond they'll be seen as weak. With the motel at capacity, they have a lot to lose if the challenge coming their way isn't met. Caleb is struggling, Anna is absent, and Sam refuses to see her brother or father. Can Jess bring them together before the Hanley's finish tearing them apart?

Book 2 in the Pack series. Recommend reading The Pack first.

Total Pages (Source): 84

Chapter One

“You’re going to your mother’s. That’s final,” Dad barked, or attempted to bark. My standards had gone up since Dom entered my life. Dad tried to be intimidating but fell short when compared to a giant black wolf.

“No,” I enunciated clearly least he think he’d changed my mind.

“Yes!” He shouted in exasperation. “I’m your father. You have to do what I say.”

I shot him an, “Oh, really?” look and he huffed. “The same way I had to do what Mom said? Come on, Dad. I’m eighteen.”

“I will throw you out,” he threatened, nodding as he pointed at the door. “How you like them apples?”

“Well, it’s a motel.” I braced my hands on the countertop of our small efficiency apartment, the one attached to the motel where we lived and ran the rundown motel my Dad had bought on a whim. “I could just book a room.”

“I won’t rent you a room,” he declared with a sharp nod.

“Well, I could always go stay with Dominic at his place,” I suggested, watching as he blanched. “But that won’t be necessary since I own half the motel.”

He growled and I stuck my tongue out. “I win.”

“Why are you so stubborn?”

“I’m your daughter?”

“Yes, and I want you to be safe.”

“I can’t really think of anywhere safer, Dad.” I glanced at him and seeing his worry, eased up. “The Pack patrols constantly. Most of the time Dom is sleeping outside my window.”

“So long as he stays outside,” Dad interjected, pointing at me.

“Outside,” I repeated. “Plus, Trent is still renting a room and we have more guests than we know what to do with.”

“Women and children,” Dad corrected, concern tightening his expression. “They’re going to come for them eventually.”

“I know and they need our protection,” I reminded him. He wasn’t the only one worried about the sudden influx of guests and how vulnerable they were. I knew Dom was running himself ragged patrolling, and part of it was because his sister was the one who’d led them here.

“I want you to be safe,” he mumbled, giving up the fight as he came and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “And a little distance from your teacher wouldn’t hurt either.”

“He’s not my teacher,” I said in exasperation, elbowing him lightly. “He’s a coach at the school and we keep it completely appropriate.”

Dad shot me a look and I amended, “PG-13.”

He groaned, “Not helping your case.”

“Seriously, Dad, you have nothing to worry about on that front.” For now, I added mentally. His sharp glance gave me a moment’s pause, wondering if he’d suddenly developed the ability to read my thoughts.

I relaxed when he said, “I love you, Bunny.” He squeezed my shoulder and released me. “I have to go finish some paperwork. You going to be okay?”

“Yep, Anna’s coming over in a little while.”

“Alright, you girls stay close, okay?”

I patted his arm, knowing he needed the reassurance. “We will stay on pack lands.” He kissed my forehead and went out the door, and a few seconds later, I heard the office door open. The apartment was next to the office on the bottom floor of the two-story motel, but Dad had intentionally left them separate when he’d remodeled. It was one of the many changes he’d made after he bought it with my college fund. The place retained the retro vibe I loved, but had lost the creepy pay by the hour feel I’d noticed when I’d first moved here.

I flopped backwards on my bed and noticed some long black hairs on my pillowcase.

Dom! Keep your hairy butt off my bed! I shouted mentally. A silent chuckle drifted through my mind and I rolled my eyes.

Marking my territory, he rumbled, and I growled.

Say that to my face, I challenged him, smirking when there was no reply. That’s what I thought, I added in satisfaction.

The sound of my window opening caught my attention in time to see a massive figure slip through it with an ease that suggested he'd done it more than a few times.

I jumped up from the bed but there was nowhere to run, even if I was stupid enough to attempt it.

“Dom,” I said warningly, holding out my hand. He arched one perfectly black eyebrow, waiting. “My Dad is in the office.”

He shook his head, unconcerned. “I can only stay for a minute.” His broad shoulders were bare, only a loose pair of workout shorts keeping him decent. He stepped closer and I backed up, bumping into the bed as he continued to stroll closer. There was no escaping him and I couldn't stop my shiver as he caged me in. “I'm here to mark my territory, you might say,” he growled low, his sheer size keeping me in place. He was enormous and there was no escaping him once he had you.

He tossed me on the bed and I bounced lightly, my eyes widening as I realized his intent. “NOOOOO,” I cried, trying to wiggle away, but it was useless as his fingers ran along my sides. Giggles erupted from me as I squirmed, but he was merciless.

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“Who’s the big bad wolf?” He taunted as I tried to grab his forearm and hold him off. My fingers couldn’t wrap all the way around and I couldn’t budge his arm.

“Uncle.”

“Nope. Who’s territory is this?” He continued to tickle me as I gasped, flopping like a fish. “Hmmm? Who?”

“Dom! It’s your territory, you big bad wolf,” I shouted. “Now, let me go!”

He stopped tickling me, but his hands kept my arms firmly anchored against the bed as he leaned forward. A sharp nip along my jaw had me gasping as he pressed his lips against a particularly sensitive spot on my neck. His mark burned and any attempt at struggling on my part ceased.

“MINE,” he growled again for good measure, shoving himself up in a smooth move as he crossed back to the window. The loose pants did nothing to hide his reaction and I gave him a slow smile.

“Mine,” I repeated back to him as I sat up, feeling my hair spill across my shoulders. My ponytail must have loosened during our tussle and I knew he didn’t mind as he watched me gather it up.

“Yours,” he agreed, slipping back through the window and disappearing.

A minute later, my door opened and Anna walked in. Her nose wrinkled and she looked at me. “Dom was here?”

“You just missed him,” I answered, pointing to the window. She saw my messy hair and the rumpled bedspread and grimaced.

“Thank God for small favors,” she muttered and I grinned. I felt around for the ponytail holder as I yanked my hair back.

“How’s Caleb?” I asked bluntly, knowing that was why she wanted to come by.

“Overwhelmed, sad, angry, pick an emotion.” She collapsed on my desk chair, her own expression unhappy. “I don’t know how to help him.” She bit her lip. “I don’t know if he wants my help.”

“I imagine Caleb doesn’t know what he wants right now. He just lost his dad.” I gave her a sympathetic glance. “I would lose my mind if something happened to my Dad. Even now, after he just told me I’m going to live with Mom.”

She shot me a panicked glance. “You’re leaving?”

I snorted. “Hell no. Like me living with my Mom would ever happen. I’d move in with Dom first.”

Anna’s eyes widened comically as she glanced at the window and then the bed. “Have you two?” She wiggled her fingers and I shook my head.

“No! Why does everyone assume that?”

“Because it’s the next step,” Anna answered logically. “You’re already partially mated which is basically unheard of. You’ve pushed so many boundaries what’s one more?”

“He’s a teacher at our school?”

“Coach,” Anna said dismissively.

“We’re in the middle of a potential pack war?”

“Okay, I could see why your dad might want to send you away.”

“What about your parents? And Gregory? What are they saying? With Caleb as Alpha?”

Anna rubbed her face, not answering and I sank into the bed, grabbing a pillow. “That bad?”

She nodded, “They want Hank or Dominic.”

“But Caleb...”

“His dad wanted him to be Alpha, but everyone thought that was years away and it would have been fine if that was the case. But it’s not and Caleb isn’t ready.” She jammed her fist in her mouth after she said it, her eyes glossy as she admitted out loud something none of us wanted to say. “Jess, I’m worried.”

“Dom doesn’t want the alpha position,” I rushed to reassure her, knowing it was true. I’d read it enough times in his mind to be confident in my words.

“I know that. I know Hank doesn’t want it either, but it’s more about what the Pack wants.” Dominic’s father, Hank, had been beta of the Pack, essentially the enforcer and for the moment he still was, but everyone knew Dom would take the position eventually. “It’s dividing people and we can’t afford that right now. It’s only a matter of time before they strike at us again.”

“The Hanleys,” I murmured, remembering the massive fight that had taken place in

the motel parking lot a couple weeks before. They'd also been responsible for kidnapping me and I had no love for them. Anna was right when she said they'd retaliate. We had their women and children after all.

"Have you talked to Sam?"

I sighed and nodded. "I have but she won't budge."

"I can't believe she doesn't want to talk to Dom. Their dad, I can understand." Anna's eyes met mine as I nodded in agreement. Hank Navarre was roughly the same size as his son, but he'd had years to perfect the intimidating stare. It was all I could do to form words in his presence. I could only imagine how Sam would feel facing her father after all this time.

"I'm still working on her. I know Dom wants to see her and Nicky."

"He's adorable," Anna cried and I nodded. He was Samantha's son by one of the Hanleys, but there was no mistaking he was a Navarre too. The unusual yellow eyes were a dead giveaway. They were a trait shared by all the Navarre's I'd met so far.

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“I still can’t believe they shot him,” I murmured, my mind still stuck on the fight that had happened right outside of the apartment. The Hanleys had come here to kidnap me back after I’d escaped them. My dad shot the sheriff, who happened to be a Hanley, to save me. The true loss came when someone shot the Navarre Alpha, Caleb’s father, in cold blood.

“It’s not our way,” Anna agreed quietly. “It’s why they couldn’t take the Pack.”

“Take the pack?” I questioned. “What do you mean?”

Anna looked at me in surprise. “I forget how little you know about the Pack way.” I tilted my head, we’d been through this before, I was completely ignorant about Pack life. It was random chance and a dart that brought me to the tiny town of Banks, Idaho, home of a wolf shifter pack, and the place my life had turned upside down. Apparently, I got my shifter genes from my dad, but he didn’t know any more about it than I did since he’d been adopted as a baby. I couldn’t shift into a wolf like Anna and Dom, but I had the right genes that if I mated with a shifter there was a high probability our children would be able to shift. A valuable trait in the shifter world.

“Another wolf can challenge for Alpha,” she continued and my mouth dropped open. “That’s why things have been so tense. Dominic or any wolf in our Pack can challenge Caleb.”

“But Dom protects Caleb,” I reminded her. “And a challenger can’t take the whole pack, right?”

“Wrong. If someone challenges for Alpha and wins, they get the Pack. How do you

think the Hanleys wound up like they did?”

“That’s horrible,” I answered, remembering the total control the Alpha exerted over the Hanley pack.

“That’s why its so important to have a strong Alpha. It’s another reason rogue wolves are run off.” I glanced at her curiously. “A wolf without a Pack has nothing to lose. Challenging an Alpha and winning will give him his own Pack.”

“Yeah, but not everyone wants to be Alpha. There would be challenges all the time.”

“You have to win,” Anna stated, her face drawn. “It’s a fight to the death.”

Chapter Two

Her words froze me in place as I considered what she was saying. Caleb was vulnerable at the moment and the Pack was in turmoil. If a challenge came now, he might fall. “What happens if they don’t accept the challenge?”

“You forfeit or,” she hesitated suddenly and my eyes narrowed.

“Or?” I drawled, having a feeling I wasn’t going to like her answer.

“Someone can fight in your place,” she answered slowly. “The same rules apply, but it’s more a proxy fight?”

“Someone like Dom,” I concluded, piecing it together.

“Someone liked Dom,” she echoed as I pressed my lips together. I knew Dom would step into Caleb’s place in a heartbeat if it came to it.

“He....ohhhh. He didn’t say a word,” I snarled, pissed beyond belief.

“There hasn’t been a challenge and there’s no guarantee Dom would accept it on Caleb’s behalf.” I shot her a disbelieving glance and she shrugged. “Okay, so we know he would, but it doesn’t mean Caleb would ask him too.” Worry flickered across her face as she admitted her own fear and I went over to her.

“It seems like we both have things to worry about,” I sighed, knowing I wouldn’t stop Dom, even if I could. He was overprotective, overbearing, and born to keep everyone around him safe. I couldn’t fault him for that. I knew he’d do anything in his power to keep Caleb safe. He was the closest thing Dom had to a younger brother.

“I didn’t mean to worry you,” Anna said softly, her lithe body making me feel clunky as I stood next to her. “Dom – well, he’s Dom.” I nodded, understanding her perfectly. Dom was Dom. There was no getting around it. “I have to go. I told my Mom I would help with dinner.”

I nodded, “I’ll walk you out.”

We went out the door and almost bumped into Trent as we turned the corner.

“Whoa, sorry ladies.” He stepped back as we came to a sudden halt. “I wasn’t expecting to run into two beautiful women.” He popped the sucker from his mouth and gave us a charming grin. “Anything I can assist you with?”

“You could move out of our way,” Anna challenged, crossing her arms, completely unimpressed by him. “Why are you still hanging around here anyway?”

His grin dropped as he spun the sucker between his fingers. “Dom asked me to hang around. Keep an eye on the motel and his sister.” He ducked his head so he could meet Anna’s eyes. “Run off any big, bad wolves.”

She gave him a tight smile. “Just as long as you don’t become one of them.” She zagged around him, waving at me as an afterthought as she disappeared into the woods.

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“Feisty little she-wolf,” Trent commented, turning back to me once she was out of eyesight. “Don’t see those very often.”

“What? Feisty?” I asked cluelessly.

He gave me a blank stare. “No, wolfy. Females aren’t generally furry.”

“Anna mentioned something about that once.”

“What? That she’s rare?”

“Rare? What do you mean?”

“Female wolves are rare. Especially now. We’re lucky if we see a female that has the right genetics to have shifter pups. You, for example.” He rolled the sucker around his mouth for a second, staring at where she’d disappeared. “She’s something else.”

“No argument here,” I said breezily, dropping the subject. Anna had the right to privacy and I didn’t plan on gossiping about her. “I’m off to see Sam.” I twisted around to go back to the stairs and it took a second to realize he was following me. “Mmm, can I help you?”

He shrugged, “Figured I’d go with you. Keep my promise to Dom to check on her.”

“You could do that any time,” I called after him as he charged up the stairs. He paused at the top, using the railing as a push up bar while he waited for me.

“Nah, she doesn’t really want to see me,” he admitted candidly. “You’re doing me a favor. She won’t slam the door in your face.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure of that,” I muttered under my breath, catching a glimpse of his taut muscles as they flexed. “She might consider this siding with the enemy.”

“She doesn’t see you as an enemy,” he answered to my surprise. He smiled and tapped his ear. “Excellent hearing.” He shifted so I could pass him. “Sam isn’t too fond of male wolves right now. Doesn’t mean she won’t talk to you though.”

“Yeah, but I’d rather avoid pissing her off,” I drawled, the steps familiar as I went to the room I’d occupied when I’d first arrived. It had been completely redone after one of the Hanley pack had marked it.

“Better you than me,” he answered knowingly, chewing on the now bare sucker stick. “Best I’ve been able to get is a fuck off.”

I fought a smile, having no problem imagining Sam giving him hell. She’d single handedly orchestrated the escape of most of the women and children held by the Hanley pack, and my escape as well. I had no doubt of what she was capable of, but she wasn’t convinced. She’d been holed up in her room with Nicky since their escape and I was worried.

“Do you know why she won’t talk to Dom?” I asked, stopping before I reached her door and forcing Trent to stumble.

“Ah, no?” He answered, avoiding my eyes.

“But you have an idea?” I pushed, narrowing my eyes as I went toe to toe with him.

“You do know better than to challenge a wolf right?” He gestured to my stance, my

legs wide and arms on my hips. “Cause I’m chill by most standards but you’re ruffling my fur.”

The door to Sam’s room banged open as she charged out, wild eyed. “Back away from her,” she screamed, holding something in her hands as she faced Trent.

“Whoa,” he called, holding up his hands as the sucker stick fell out of his mouth. “Not doing anything.”

I eased back a step, lowering my arms from my hips. “It’s fine, Sam. My mistake.” She didn’t look away from Trent, edging closer, and I wasn’t sure she even knew who he was. “Sam,” I said sharply, stepping in front of Trent when she got to close. She jerked her arms up and I saw the Taser in her hand.

“Jess,” she answered, and the tightness in my chest eased. “I thought he was going to....” She trailed off and her arms dropped. “Never mind.”

“Hey, thanks.” I reached for her arm, wrapping my hand around her wrist and noticing how fragile it felt. “You didn’t know what was going on and you came charging to my rescue.”

“My duty is done,” Trent said gallantly, tipping an imaginary hat. “You are safely at your destination.” His gaze lingered on my face for a second and I nodded briefly. I had to get to the bottom of this, for all of our sakes.

“I’m sorry for that by the way,” I tossed out as he turned away.

He paused, “You didn’t know.”

“That excuse only works once,” I replied, not willing to forgive myself so easily, for what could have happened.

“That is true,” he acknowledged with a tilt of his head. “But today, it holds.”

He whistled as he walked down the hall and I saw a few curtains ruffle. My chest tightened once again as it occurred to me that most of the women hadn’t left their rooms since we’d gotten them settled. Sam stood in the doorway of her own room, her eyes restlessly scanning the corridor and parking lot.

I managed to catch her eye before she ducked her head and Nicky toddled up to her leg, patting it as he said, “Momma.”

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“We’re safe, baby. Momma will keep you safe,” she whispered as he turned those golden yellow eyes to me. He slunk behind her leg, hiding from me, and I exhaled.

“We need to talk.”

Chapter Three

“You can’t keep hiding,” I told her, keeping my voice calm but firm. Nicky played with a stack of blocks my Dad had dug up from somewhere as I sat next to Sam on the bed.

“I’m not hiding,” she denied instantly. “I’m regrouping.”

“By hiding?” She shot me a glare and I held up my hands. “What else should I call it? I’ve stayed in this room. It’s not that nice. Anyone who voluntarily chooses to lock themselves in here is hiding or seriously into self-punishment.”

She snorted, rubbing her neck as she watched Nicky knock down the blocks he’d stacked. “And you’d be the expert on both?”

“I have been known to hide under the covers on occasion.”

“And self-punishment?”

“We might have painted but this room is still only 250 square feet. For you and a toddler. I would call that some type of punishment.” I squeezed her hand and she closed her eyes. “You refuse to see Dom or your dad. You tell Trent to fuck off,

which I completely understand by the way.” She smiled faintly and I pushed on. “You barely come out of this room. It’s not healthy. They need you.”

She sent me a sideways glance, her mouth firm as she pushed back a lank lock of hair.

“You haven’t showered in a while,” I added, wrinkling my nose.

“I can’t take care of myself. What makes you think they need me?” She asked, choosing to ignore my last statement.

“They followed you here. They trusted you with their lives. Their children’s lives.” She closed her eyes, but not fast enough as a tear trickled down her cheek. “They need what you represent, Sam. A chance. An opportunity for a different life.”

“I’m scared,” she admitted finally, the words hollow. “They’re going to come and I can’t protect them.”

“You don’t have to,” I told her, shifting closer as I draped my arm over her shoulder. “You just have to show them how to live in spite of the fear.”

“What if I don’t know how?”

“But you do,” I argued, shaking her. “Why do you think you ran away from the Hanleys? Because you knew what it was like without that fear and hate and rage.”

She licked her lips, the dry skin cracked and chapped. “I don’t know if I’m strong enough to be that girl again.”

I laughed, startling her and Nicky, as the sound filled the space. “Strong enough? Is that a joke?” I released her, standing up to face her directly. “You might be the

strongest woman I've ever met and I'm a little tired of the pity party you've got going on here." She flinched as I held up two fingers, barely an inch apart, to indicate how tired of it I was. "You are better than this."

"You don't understand," she growled, a little fight coming back to her.

"No. I don't. I didn't live your life." She blinked at me as I waved my arm around crazily. "But you know who did? Them. They know. They understand. And they need you."

She stared at me warily, probably waiting for me to start jumping around or doing something equally crazy, but I just crossed my arms. She needed to make the decision.

"You might be right," she said haltingly. "I feel stuck. Too scared to move forward and too scared to go back." She swallowed, hollow eyed as she stared at Nicky playing. "I didn't think we'd make it. I thought they'd figure it out. That they'd drag us back and punish us." I relaxed my arms as she spoke, remembering the terror I'd felt when they held me captive and realizing she'd felt that way for years. I couldn't begin to comprehend it. "I don't know what to do." She shrugged, her eyes pleading as they met mine. "I don't know what's next."

I smiled, knowing exactly what came next as I said, "Let's start with a shower."

Her breath came out in a rush and I grabbed her arm, tugging her to her feet.

"I know. Sounds crazy, but I promise you everything is better after a shower. And clothes. Clean ones," I added with a nod. She stared at me and I shoved her toward the bathroom. "Go. Trust me." She glanced at Nicky. "I will take care of him. In fact, I'll take him downstairs. We'll go for a walk." Her fists clenched involuntarily, but after a moment, she nodded. "One step at a time, Sam."

“Hey, Nicky, Nicky, my little mickey,” I sang catching his surprised glance. “Why don’t you and me go exploring?” He glanced at Sam, who nodded encouragingly, a smile fixed on her face. He nodded warily, but allowed me to take his hand. “We’ll meet you downstairs,” I told Sam as I led him to the door. When she didn’t tackle me at the door, I let out a sigh of relief.

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“Do you know who I am?” I asked him curiously and he shook his head. “I’m Jess and you’re staying in my old room.” I held his hand tightly as we slowly made our way down the stairs. “I’m friend’s with your uncle,” I paused, uncertain if he knew about Dom. “Dominic?”

He glanced up at me and then nodded and I smiled. “He’s a secret,” he confided, his voice barely a whisper. He put his finger to his lips and I forced a smile as I wondered how many secrets he kept.

“Well, he doesn’t have to be a secret anymore,” I told him firmly. “Your mom is really brave and she wanted you to know him.”

“That’s why we ran away from Daddy,” he replied solemnly and I flinched at the acceptance on his young face.

“You’re a brave boy. Just like your mom and your Uncle Dom,” I said, not knowing what else to say. We walked down the breezeway, stopping when the office door opened suddenly. Hank Navarre walked out, pausing when he saw me.

“Jess,” he rumbled, his enormous size rivaling that of his son, but his voice was deeper, almost gravelly. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too, sir,” I answered automatically, inexplicably nervous around the man. I could blame his size but it was more the air of command he maintained. I could see why the Pack would want him as alpha. I couldn’t imagine any wolf having the nerve to challenge him.

“And who is this little guy?” He asked, keeping his voice low as Nicky ducked behind my leg. I knew the moment Hank realized his identity because he sucked in a sharp breath.

“This is Nicky,” I replied, my hand running over the dark brown locks falling in his face. “He’s a guest at the motel.” I nudged him lightly and he stepped out from behind my leg. “Nicky, this is Hank Navarre.”

Nicky looked up, and I watched as his head tilted back so he could take in the impressive height of his grandfather. “Are you a giant?” He asked, his voice polite, but his fingers clung nervously to my pant leg.

Laughter boomed from Hank as he kneeled down. “Some might say so, but if I am, then you will be too, little Nicky.” He reached out one hand to Nicky. “It’s nice to meet you, finally.” Nicky stretched his hand toward Hank’s, glancing at me and I nodded. Hank shook it gently as I watched, catching sight of my Dad standing in the door of the office. “You’re a mighty fine boy, Nicky Navarre.”

“My last name is Hanley,” he replied quickly, glancing over his shoulder carefully.

“No, it’s Navarre,” Hank corrected, easing back to his full height. “And you’ll never need to be afraid again. You have a pack now. One that will protect you,” he promised, his eyes gleaming. He glanced at me and gave a quick nod. “I have to go. Keep him safe for me.”

“Always,” I answered, my hand still on Nicky as we watched Hank cross to the forest. It was rare anyone arrived by vehicle, most preferring to take the shortcut though the woods to the Pack houses.

“Who is he?” Nicky tugged at my shirt and I glanced down at him.

“Your grandfather,” I replied, crossing my fingers Sam didn’t beat me for telling him.

“Will I be as big as him one day?”

“Bigger,” I replied, making my eyes wide as his mouth dropped open. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, Bunny. I see you found a new friend.”

“Yep, Sam needed a shower. Figured we’d take a walk.” I gestured to my Dad.

“Nicky, this is my Dad.”

Nicky giggled, glancing at me. “Why does he call you Bunny? You’re not a bunny.”

“That’s a good question,” I replied, pursing my lips at my Dad. “Maybe one day I’ll tell you. For now, let’s go see what we can find in the field.”

I led him to the small grassy area separating the motel from the forest, knowing there was a wolf or two patrolling the area. They’d be impossible to spot unless they wanted to be seen but I took comfort knowing they were there. The dense tree line didn’t seem as threatening as it once had when I didn’t know what the nightly howling represented. The Pack had been protecting me from the first moment Dominic had set eyes on me and I knew they were determined to continue protecting us.

“I’m going to be a wolf one day,” Nicky mentioned idly, his fingers sinking into the earth as he got down on his hands and knees. “I’ll be big and strong and no one will be able to hurt us.”

“You will. You’ll be the defender of your Pack one day,” I replied, propping my chin on my knees as I watched him pretend to be a wolf. I turned my head slightly, feeling eyes on us, and watched as Trent melted back into the woods, as silent in human form

as he was as a wolf.

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“I’ll be as big as the giant!” He bounced up, arms stretched to the sky, more open and little boy than I’d ever seen. “I’ll howl and all the bad wolves will run away.” He raced around the green space, making howling noises as I watched in amusement.

“Thank you,” she whispered, easing down next to me.

“It really is amazing how silent you are,” I mused, shaking my head. “Either that or I’m really unobservant.”

She chuckled under her breath. “You learn. It’s really hard to sneak up on a wolf. I’ve had years of practice.” We watched Nicky tumble in the grass for a minute. “Thank you for watching him. For reminding me why I did it.”

“He’s a smart boy. I think he talks better than I do.” I grinned at her and she bumped my shoulder.

“Flatter my child and I’ll give you anything.”

I opened my mouth and then hesitated.

“What is it?” She prompted in a no bullshit voice.

“We might have sorta ran into your dad,” I replied in a rush, bracing myself for whatever backlash was coming my way. When she didn’t say anything, I peeked at her through my lashes. “Well, that went better than I anticipated.”

“He was okay?” She pointed at Nicky and I nodded. She nodded too and we just sat

there nodding for a second. “Dad.....Dad saw him?”

“Yeah, they spoke.” I rubbed my mouth, debating the next part. “Your dad told him he was a Navarre not a Hanley.”

Sam snorted. “Of course he did.”

“Nicky wanted to know if he would be as big as Hank,” I added and Sam smiled.

“We do tend to be bigger than average,” she admitted in pride, her own height towering over mine at six feet. “He’ll be a giant like Dom.”

“He told me he was going to be a wolf.”

“He will,” she answered with a nod. “He’s got the right genes.”

“How can you tell?”

“Smell for one, but the eyes were a dead giveaway. All Navarre men born with those eyes are shifters.” She glanced over at me. “And the Hanleys did blood tests. Certain markers are present in shifters.”

“How modern,” I quipped, striving for light and falling flat when she gave me a pained glance.

“They took care of the ones that didn’t have the ability,” she murmured, her fingers curving when she said, ‘took care.’ “Wren,” she shook her head, unable to finish. “I was lucky.”

“And now you’re free,” I reminded her.

She turned a burning gaze toward me. “I won’t be free until every one of those bastards is buried.”

“Okay, then,” I said with a gulp. “Noted. Death to the Hanleys.”

“To the bastards that hurt us,” she corrected, some of her intensity easing as she turned back to Nicky. “Not all of them were bad.” She paused. “Most of them, but not all.”

“We can make a list,” I suggested, wondering if I’d just offered to write a hit list for Dom’s sister.

“And mark them off one by one?”

“If it makes you feel better,” I said honestly.

“Frank Hanley,” she said, nodding. I patted my pockets searching fruitlessly for something to write on or with and finally settling on my phone. I opened a blank message and typed Frank Hanley in.

“Who is he?” I asked idly, trying to decide if I needed to maintain some type of database.

“Nicky’s father.”

I paused, lifting my head, but her demeanor didn’t change. “Okay,” I replied and decided to skip descriptions. It was probably better that way. “Next?”

“Kyle Hanley.”

“I’m guessing they’re all going to have the last name Hanley.” I typed quickly, not

asking who he was for fear of the answer. “Which is kind of gross. Are they all related?”

“Pretty much,” Sam said shortly. “Dennis Hanley. Joe Hanley. Nicholas.”

Her voice faltered on the last name and I glanced up. “Was he one of the good ones?”

Her mouth worked for a second. “No, he was the worst of them all. He’s their alpha.”

“Oh.” I hurried to type his name when I heard Sam snarl.

“What’s he doing here?”

“What?” I looked up and saw a man at the edge of the forest. He stared at us and fear jolted through me. “I don’t know him.” I reached for Sam, my gaze searching for Nicky, relieved to find him close. “We should go. I don’t know how he got through the patrol.”

“Because he’s the Alpha’s brother,” Sam replied, her eyes locked on him and abruptly I realized she knew him.

“Who is he?” I asked her and her eyes clouded.

“Payne.”

Chapter Four

“Like literal pain or metaphorical?” I questioned, my forehead wrinkling as my gaze darted between them.

Sam blinked and glanced at me. “No, his name is Payne. He’s Caleb’s older brother.”

“Ohhhhh, well now I feel dumb.” I squinted at him, trying to get a better look. “Huh, I just realized I’ve never met Caleb’s brother.”

“You’re not missing much,” Sam muttered.

“He’s cute,” I mused. “Is that like a wolf thing? You’re all really attractive.”

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“He’s not a wolf. Doesn’t have the gene.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember something about that. They’re half-brothers, right? Caleb and Payne?” I glanced at Sam, who had her gaze focused on the ground now. “Who names their kid Payne?”

“It’s a family name. The Alpha’s first wife.”

“You know a lot about him,” I mentioned carefully.

“That’s what happens when you grow up pack. You know everything about everyone.” Her head came up suddenly and she growled low in her throat. I jumped at the sound, but it was nothing compared to Payne’s reaction. I had no idea how he heard her, but he spun on his heel and disappeared into the tree line.

“Good riddance,” Sam muttered through clenched teeth. “He always was a coward.”

“Harsh,” I stated, keeping one eye on her as I turned to face her. “It’s almost like he did you wrong.”

Her gaze flickered to mine briefly. “Don’t go imagining fairy tales where there are none.”

“Pretty sure most people would consider my life the stuff of fairy tales,” I answered, shoving myself upright. “Now, we have work to do.”

“Work?”

“Yeah, they need to see you coming out here, but it’s going to take more than one little spin around the yard to break the fear chaining them.” I was kind enough not to include her, but the way her gaze dropped made me think she knew. “None of you will be free until you live like you’re free.”

“They could grab any of them.” Sam gazed up at me. “Do you know what they’ll do to them if that happens?” I shook my head. “They’ll make an example of them. In the most horrifying way possible.”

“Then we don’t let anyone get caught.” I crouched down so I was eye to eye with Sam. “Don’t trade one prison for another, Sam.” My eyes flickered to Nicky. “Teach him what it means to grow up safe and happy.”

“You’re really annoying sometimes,” she grumbled. “I don’t know if I pity Dom or he’s getting what he deserves.”

I squinched my nose as I considered. “I’d say he’s getting what he deserves,” I determined finally and she laughed ruefully.

“You don’t take offense.” I shook my head and she sighed. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Seriously? I have to come up with a plan too?”

She stared at me until I couldn’t hold my smile back any longer. “He definitely deserves you,” she snapped, swatting at me. “I thought you were serious.”

“Welllll,” I started, dodging away from her long arms. “I don’t actually have a plan, but I thought we’d start with a picnic.”

“A picnic?” Sam repeated doubtfully. “What kind of picnic?”

“A Pack picnic,” I declared, proud of myself for coming up with the idea.

“A Pack picnic?”

“Is there an echo?”

She ignored my comment, her hands flying as she listed the reasons my idea wouldn't work. “You need Alpha approval. The Elders' approval. That's if the women would go, if the Pack would allow them on their lands.” She paused for a breath, staring at me.

“So, we need to talk to a few people,” I shrugged. “Easy peasy.”

Her eyes almost bugged out of her head. “Easy?” she broke off with a gurgle. “Do you understand why I brought them here? On the outskirts of Pack lands? A neutral ground, you could say?”

I shook my head slowly.

“Because bringing them without invitation would have been a declaration of war,” she spit out. “It would have forfeited their lives if the Alpha chose.”

“So, we ask nicely.”

She groaned and I shrugged. “Look, I admit, I don't know Pack laws or etiquette or whatever you want to call it, but it doesn't have to be hard. We can make new rules. It doesn't have to be the Hatfields and McCoys anymore.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Because it is?”

“There’s a lot of prejudice and bad history between the packs.”

“And I’m sure with good reason, but you’re a Navarre and the Pack respects your family. If anyone can make a change, its you.”

She smiled sadly. “They respect my father and brother. I’m the slut that ran away with a Hanley.”

“And now, you’re the slut who came home. The prodigal child.”

She gritted her teeth, holding back whatever she intended to say as she glanced at Nicky. “You are determined to make this work.”

“Nobody said it’d be easy.”

“Actually, you said easy-peasy,” Sam reminded me with a fake smile.

“For me. You, not so much.” I rested my hand on her arm. “I don’t think you give them enough credit. I’ve heard the whispers.” She grunted, her mouth drawn tight, and I shook her arm. “They talk about how brave you were to save the women. How proud they are of what you did. They whisper, ‘Of course, she did, she’s a Navarre.’” She glanced at me, startled, and I smiled. “They say your name with reverence.”

She swallowed, a gleam of moisture in her eyes as they met mine. “You better not be making this shit up, because I will hurt you.”

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“Just saying what I heard.” I held my hands up. “No fudging, elaboration, or falsification.”

“Now, you’re just trying yourself.”

“It happens occasionally. I can talk to Dom, to Anna, and Caleb. Figure out how to make it happen.”

“Little Anna?”

“She’s not that little. She was here earlier. She can talk to Caleb. He listens to her,” I answered, and caught her surprise. “There may be some mutual crushing going on there.”

“Caleb and Anna?” Sam repeated doubtfully. “Her parents are elders.” I nodded. “Caleb is Alpha now.”

“Yeah, is there a point here?”

“I...things have changed since I’ve been gone,” she replied, shaking her head. “You really think this will work?”

“I think we have to try.” I glanced up at the motel, catching a few curtains swaying. “They can’t stay here forever. If they’re not Hanleys then they need to find a new Pack.”

“Some might leave,” Sam murmured, her eyes scanning the forest restlessly. “Go

back to their homes. Start over somewhere else.”

“And that’s fine. But they need to take the first step.” I poked her shoulder. “And they need you for that.”

“Alright, alright. I got the message,” she sighed, rubbing her shoulder. “I’ll talk to them.”

“That’s all I’m asking.” She shot me a look. “Okay, that’s not all I’m asking but it’s a start.” I glanced at the trees where I’d last seen Trent. “Why do you give Trent such a hard time?”

“I’m not interested,” she stated bluntly.

“Interested in what?” I asked baffled.

“In another wolf mate,” she spelled out.

“I don’t think that was the idea,” I told her hastily. “I mean Trent is a rogue. A lone wolf. He probably doesn’t even want a pack.”

“It might not have been your idea, but I know my brother. And it was definitely his plan.” She held out her hand. “Come on, Nicky. Bath time.” She chuckled at my astonished face. “You’ve got a lot to learn about how Pack life works. It still runs on the concept of father/provider and mother/caretaker. Dom will act as provider but only until he can find a suitable replacement.”

“Trent,” I murmured and she nodded.

“Bingo.” My expression must have concerned her because she continued. “It’s not a bad way of life, but I’ve had enough of being provided for, and so have most of the

women here. You're not wrong when you say things need to change, but it's not just the Hanleys and the Navarres anymore. It's the entire way of life."

She walked back to the motel as Nicky waved at me, calling, "Bye, Bunny." A smile lifted my lips briefly at what he'd decided to call me before quickly disappearing.

Something wrong? The thought tickled my mind and I knew Dom had picked up on my emotions.

No... I pushed the thought to him, still awed by our ability to communicate telepathically. It was a side effect of our mating bond – the one we hadn't fully completed yet because I wasn't ready to have sex with him or commit my life to a guy I'd known only a few months.

Yeah, I'm not buying that. What's going on?

I waffled for a moment. Trent? You're setting your sister up with Trent?!?

A beat of silence met my mental shriek. Is there something wrong with Trent?

How about the fact that she just ran away from an abusive boyfriend? Spouse? I'm not really sure what they were but I don't think she's ready for another big strong man to take care of her. Especially since she put ol' Frank at the top of her hit list.

Hit list? He asked carefully. What exactly are you and my sister planning?

Nothing, I denied, locking my phone as I glanced around.

He snorted, the sound distinctly wolf like. You need to work on your lying.

I'll keep that in mind, I answered, projecting an image of me rolling my eyes. We are

planning something though.

I'm afraid to ask.

You weren't eavesdropping on our conversation? I asked, knowing he had a better handle on the mental bond since he was used to the Pack bond.

I don't eavesdrop, he growled, shaking his head.

Sure you don't. I teased as I put my back to the wall and slide down to the ground. It wasn't easy to have a mental conversation and walk.

I try to give you your privacy. You know that, don't you?

I do, I answered, sorry I'd teased him about it. We want to plan a picnic. Well, I do and I think I convinced your sister.

A picnic?

On Pack lands, I stated, figuring it was better to get it out of the way.

His sigh was so loud I could almost feel it against my skin. You don't do anything by half, he grumbled.

Sam said practically the same thing. Apparently, I'm asking the impossible.

She would know better than anyone would, he said cryptically. I can talk to Caleb, but we're going to need more than that.

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Elders?

Yeah, and I think you should talk to them.

Me? I squeaked, embarrassed that even telepathically I sounded terrified. You don't think someone else....say Anna, would be a better choice?

You have to convince Anna first, he replied, shocking me.

What am I missing? I murmured internally, forgetting for a second that my mind was wide open to him with our connection.

They're female, he replied and I shook my head.

Duh?

You remember my reaction to your scent?

My body had an extreme reaction to his question as adrenaline from the memory flooded through me. He'd barely been able to control himself and that was after he'd rescued me from the Hanleys chasing me. I'd felt the strong urge to jump him and I'd barely known him.

That wasn't even the first time, he reminded me. It was the second time and a thousand times stronger than I ever expected. You want to invite a bunch of breeding females onto Pack lands? You're going to get some push back. Especially from the women.

I really hate the term breeding females, I muttered automatically as I considered what he'd revealed.

It's not a derogatory term. Just a statement of fact. They can all have shifter babies. Their scent hits us hard.

You too?

Not me, he denied instantly. Not with you around. You don't know how many guys I've had to warn away from you though.

Warn away? I laughed. You mean there were actually some brave enough to incur your wrath?

You don't know your own appeal, he said smugly. I'm a lucky guy.

Uh huh, more like genetics has you panting at attention, I told him.

Genetics might have brought you to my attention, he allowed. But they aren't what keeps my attention.

Smooth, I murmured and felt his smile. You're telling me I'm fighting a losing battle?

No, I think you're right. I just want you to be prepared. He slipped from my mind and I dropped my head back against the wall.

"You look like you've lost some of that sparkly determination you had," Trent noticed, his body loose as he sat down next to me. "Sam tell you to fuck off too?"

I wiggled my fingers, "Not exactly." I smiled internally. "I'm not exactly her favorite

person at the moment though.”

“You got her out of the motel room. I consider that a win.” He squinted at the tree line, no doubt picking out things my normal eyes would never spot. “So why you out here? Not that it isn’t safe, but you being indoors would make the guard dogs happier.”

“Can you hear them?” I asked curiously.

“Nope.” He rotated his shoulders as he glanced at me. “That’s a pack thing.”

“You think about being pack?”

“All the time,” he admitted candidly. He saw my start of surprise and smiled.

“Wolves are pack animals. It’s instinct. Our nature. We need the bond.”

“Why....” I stopped myself, wondering if the question was too personal.

“I was fifteen and like Caleb, supposed to be the next alpha. My father was challenged and lost. The new alpha gave me a choice. Leave or die.”

“That is horrible,” I breathed, starting to understand why Caleb’s position was so precarious. Without Dom and Hank standing with him, he might have already been outed.

“It’s the way of life for some packs.”

“You couldn’t challenge him?” Trent shook his head lightly.

“I wasn’t prepared to be alpha,” he glanced at me with knowing eyes. “Or the fight it would take to become alpha.”

“Caleb.”

“He’s in a precarious position. One I don’t envy him for. He’s lucky though.” Trent crossed his arms over his knees, back braced against the wall next to me. “He has Dom.”

I nodded, tipping my head back to see the first stars appearing as dusk settled over the motel. “And Anna.”

Trent glanced at me in surprise. “Anna and Caleb?”

I shrugged. “She’s had a crush on him forever. It seemed like they were growing closer.”

“He’s alpha,” Trent said bluntly.

“And she’s a kickass she wolf,” I retorted.

“Yeah, she is,” he replied, a note in his voice. “She’s a rarity. I’m not sure he can appreciate that.”

“You don’t even know him,” I said hotly. “Caleb is a sweetheart.”

“With a fucking ton of responsibility thrust on him,” he answered mildly. “It’ll change a man.”

“He won’t run away from it,” I shot back, irrationally angry over what he was saying. “Caleb has friends who will support him. Help him follow the path his dad set for him.”

“No doubt you’re right,” he replied, lifting his hands up slightly.

“Don’t placate me,” I said harshly, pushing myself to my feet.

“How about this then? I hope you’re right and he doesn’t change. That the Caleb you knew is still there when this is all over.” He stared up at me lazily, not concerned that I stood over him. “But you know he won’t be. You know because you’ve already been down this path and there’s no going back.”

“You don’t know me,” I answered sharply.

“No, but I recognize a kindred spirit.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re not trying to make a move on me are you?”

His eyes widened for a second before his shoulders started to shake, silent laughter pouring from him. “Hell no, I like my balls right where they are,” he finally gasped. “Attached to my body,” he clarified when I continued to glare. “Don’t get me wrong, you smell nice, but not that nice.”

“So you’re not in lust with me?”

He fought back the last chuckle, and stared at me seriously. “I am not. And it has nothing to do with the fact that Dom would kill me or the fact that you carry a gun at all times.” He stretched his legs out, making his body open and vulnerable. “I’m not a Hanley or Dom would never allow me near you. Not all wolves are controlled by their baser desires. Yes, you could give me wolf pups, but,” he hesitated and I arched a single eyebrow. “You’re not my type,” he finished carefully.

“There’s someone else,” I pounced on the idea instantly and knew I was right when his eyes flickered away. “Who? Sam?”

His gaze came back to mine and he shook his head adamantly. “I like her, but no.” He pushed himself up. “And that’s all you need to know.” He shook his finger in my face. “No matchmaking.”

I tilted my head back to maintain eye contact, but I made no promises. He grumbled a little, sighing when I refused to answer. “Dom has my sympathy.”

“I’m sure he appreciates it,” I retorted sweetly, my mind racing as I tried to figure out who had caught Trent’s attention. His story had tugged at me and I wanted to see him get a chance at happiness. However, there was a motel full of women he could be interested in, and that didn’t include the women of the Navarre pack. I’d have to keep my eyes peeled to see if there was anyone he paid special attention to.

“You ready to go inside yet?” He asked pointedly and I realized he’d been keeping watch over me.

“Seriously, do you have some telepathic link with Dom?” I growled as I headed back to the apartment I shared with my Dad. “I swear it feels like you channel him sometimes.”

“No, just years of friendship and the absolute understanding that you are more important than anything to him.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I doubt that. He has his sister back, and Caleb, plus the Pack. I think you overestimate my place.”

“And I know you underestimate it,” he answered, leaning against the wall as I opened the door. I glanced up at him, his absolute seriousness catching me off guard. His eyes gleamed in the dim light, faintly reflective and reminding me forcefully that I wasn’t dealing with a human. “Never doubt he’d forsake his Pack and his life to keep you safe.”

With that, he disappeared into the deepening darkness, leaving me to grapple with the implications of his words. I knew I cared for Dom, loved him even, but was I ready to commit that deeply? Sacrifice that much for him?

I shut the door mindlessly, and caught sight of my dad sliding a frozen dinner into the apartment size oven. He whistled tunelessly, not seeming to notice I’d entered the

apartment, and I took a moment to observe him. There were a few more streaks of silver in his dark hair and I thought the lines might be a little deeper around his eyes, but the easygoing expression he always wore hadn't disappeared.

He'd spent years putting up with my mom's discontent without ever losing his smile and only now did I understand how much I'd relied on that. On him. Could I forsake him for Dom if I had to make the choice? My eyes burned as he opened every cabinet searching for the plates he swore I hid from him. I knew my answer was no. I wouldn't sacrifice my dad for Dom. Or Anna. Or Sam. I would fight for all of them.

No matter what it cost me.

Chapter Five

Loud knocking interrupted my last-minute attempt to finish my homework on Monday morning and I growled. It had to be the day Dad decided to make an early morning supply run to Boise. I ignored the fact that he'd had to go because of the sudden influx of nonpaying guests we had, which was sort of my fault.

"I'm coming," I shouted, shoving the hair out of my face as I slammed my textbook closed. I'd have to deal with getting an incomplete on it. "Jeez, hold your horses," I grumbled as they continued to pound on the door. I took a second to peek through the peephole. I doubted a wolf could get within a mile of the place, but the Hanleys had used humans to do their dirty work in the past.

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I reared back when I saw a guy with a nose ring and ear gauges standing there. He had tattoos going down both arms and they were definitely not the sexy kind. More like the scrawny, malnourished kind. He started banging on the door again and I jerked it open to make him stop.

“You Jess Carter?”

My eyes narrowed at the question. “Who’s asking?” Any natural politeness I might have had vanished under my newly suspicious nature. I hated it but everyone had become suspect in my world.

“I got a package for you,” he replied, his movements a little too jerky for my comfort. “You don’t even got to tip me. Just take the little bastard.”

My eyes widened at his words and I started to shake my head. “No.....no, no, no, no.”

“Yeah, my job was to deliver him and that’s it.” He dropped a kid’s backpack on the ground, a T-Rex staring up at me from it, and hauled ass.

“I didn’t accept the delivery,” I shouted after him, but he didn’t hear me or more like he didn’t care, and I flipped a one fingered salute at his back.

A throat cleared and I lowered my head, already knowing what I’d see.

“Monster,” I sighed, defeated.

“Sissy,” he said in the exact same tone.

“So, Mom got tired of you since I wasn’t around to keep you from terrorizing people?”

“She hired nannies,” he answered, his little body straight as he stared up at me.

“How many?”

“Seven.”

I let out a low whistle. “That’s a new record even for you,” I answered, trying to keep the admiration out of my voice. Any perceived weakness was blood in the water with the monster.

“Are you going to let me in?”

“Are you going to behave?” I replied, not changing my tone.

“Depends,” he smiled and I suppressed an instinctive shiver. “Do you have cookies?”

“Is Mom a bitch?” I asked rhetorically, shifting so he could come through the door. He stepped inside and I gestured to the backpack laying on the ground outside. “You gonna get your stuff?” He glanced back at me, sizing me up and I held his stare. No weakness, I chanted to myself.

He let out a disgruntled sigh, but moved to the door to grab his dinosaur backpack.

Jess?

Not now, I answered Dom, knowing I couldn’t lose my focus for a second if I wanted to lay the right foundation. Monster had a sixth sense for weakness and he’d exploit it in a second. I’d met full grown adults who couldn’t hold a candle to his five year old

canniness.

“Cookies?” He repeated, the arch of his eyebrow a mirror image of mine. In fact, he was a miniature replica of me except for the brilliant copper colored hair on his head. Hair that happened to be the exact same color and texture of Mom’s new husband. Except he hadn’t been her husband when Monster was born. Dad had been.

I fought off a spurt of indignation on Dad’s behalf, knowing he had never treated Monster any differently. Mom was the one who’d done that. Favoring him and making comments to drive a wedge between Monster and Dad and me. It had been her favorite pastime.

I walked to the cabinet praying Dad hadn’t midnight binged on the cookies because there would be hell if Monster didn’t get his damn cookie. Relief poured through me at the familiar packaging. I grabbed it and pulled out a cookie.

“Two,” he demanded, hand out as his lower lip pushed almost as far out.

“One,” I corrected, holding it out of reach. “Did you eat breakfast?”

His eyes narrowed as he considered which answer would get him what he wanted.

“Honesty will get you two. Lie to me and I’ll eat it in front of you,” I told him and his little body seized with indignation.

“No breakfast,” he gritted out. “He wanted to get rid of me.”

“Now, was that so hard?” I handed him the cookie and put the rest in the cabinet. He shot me a betrayed glance and I rolled my eyes. “Easy there, Monster. You can have the other one after you eat breakfast.” I gave him a pointed stare. “I remember how your mind works.” He let out a huff, but accepted my terms with a nod.

I pulled eggs and cheese out of the fridge and started to make him a cheese omelet. I glanced at him over my shoulder, seeing he'd pulled himself onto one of the barstools. "It took you longer than I thought."

"She thought she could convince you to come back," he muttered around a mouthful of cookie. "When you refused, she tried to send me to a boarding school."

"What?" I shrieked, egg flying off the spatula as I whirled around. "You're five!"

"I know!" He threw his hands up. "They wouldn't take me. She told them she'd pay them extra but they still wouldn't." I narrowed my eyes on him.

“What’d you do?”

“Set the bathroom on fire,” he answered promptly and my eyes almost bugged out of my head. “Just the trash,” he added hastily.

“I showed you how to start a fire in case of emergency,” I reminded him, shaking the spatula at him.

“It was an emergency!” He shouted in exasperation. “Don’t burn my eggs.”

“Don’t be such a demanding little shit,” I retorted as I turned back to his eggs and moved them around the skillet. “I can’t believe you set a bathroom on fire.” I eyed him. “I don’t know if I’m terrified or impressed.”

“Impressed,” he said, stumbling over the word slightly.

“You’re a little too smart for your britches,” I told him, scooping his eggs onto a plate. “One day that’ll get you in trouble.”

He shoved a forkful of eggs in his mouth and gave me a gap toothed grin. I grabbed his chin and examined his mouth. “You lost another one,” I commented and he nodded excitedly.

“I still have it,” he said eagerly, dropping the fork and digging into his pocket. “I was waiting till I saw you before I put it under my pillow.” He shoved it into my hand and went back to his eggs as I inspected the little tooth. We both knew he’d waited because without me there was no tooth fairy and it hurt that he already knew that at

the age of five, and I squeezed the little tooth until it made an indent in my skin.

“You better hope the tooth fairy knows where to find you,” I replied, making a good show of inspecting the tooth for any cavities. “There’s a lot of wolves around here, she might get eaten.”

“Wolves don’t eat tooth fairies,” he dismissed. “They eat deer, elk, moose, caribou, and bison. Occasionally, rabbits, beavers, birds and fish.”

I blinked as he rattled off the list, impressed in spite of myself. It always amazed me how smart he was considering his parentage.

“You clearly didn’t get your intelligence from Mom,” I answered and he grinned.

“I got it from you, Sissy,” he told me confidently and I didn’t correct him. He most definitely didn’t get his higher than average IQ from me, but who was I to tell him differently? “Aren’t you supposed to be at school?”

“I am,” I answered, swiping some of his eggs from his plate. “But seeing as how you showed up unexpectedly I think I’m going to be late.”

“I can go with you,” he offered and before I could reply, I heard the familiar rumble of a Jeep. He hopped off the barstool and raced to the window. His eyes grew wide when he saw the jacked up Jeep parked right in front of the door and I wondered if Dom had bothered to put the top on. He didn’t get cold like I did so the sharp bite of the weather didn’t bother him.

“Sissy,” he said uncertainly the emotion so unusual for him, I glanced over. “There’s a giant outside.”

A heavy thump followed his words and he jumped.

“Maybe you should let him in,” I replied, smiling. I only allowed it because I knew it was Dom on the other side. Jess? He whispered against my mind when the door didn’t open immediately.

One sec, I replied as Monster screwed up his courage and opened the door. Dom’s eyes met mine instantly and I saw when he realized I was across the room. He glanced down and both eyebrows lifted.

“Who are you?” They said in unison and I giggled.

“You first,” Monster retorted, straightening himself. “My house.”

Dom blinked and then proceeded to cross his arms, the muscles bulging in his tight black t-shirt. “My girl,” he replied in a low rumble. Monster quaked but didn’t back down.

“My Sissy,” he answered back, his tone clearly stating his claim trumped Dom’s.

“I’m Dominic Navarre. I’m here to pick Jess up for school.”

“You look to old to go to school,” Monster replied.

“I coach,” Dom answered through gritted teeth. “And you are?”

“Monster,” he answered promptly and with a quick glance back at me, he lowered his voice. “You have any cookies?”

Dom shot me a helpless glance and I raised my hands. “He showed up this morning,” I told Dom before adding, “And quit begging for cookies, Monster.”

“I’m just saying if he wants to date you, it’d go a lot easier for him if he gave me

cookies.” He stomped back toward me as I opened the cabinet with the cookies. “It’s a guy thing.”

“Ohhhh,” I drawled, dropping a cookie in his palm and mentally counting how many I had left to bribe him with. “A guy thing. You should have said something sooner.” He crammed the cookie in his mouth and maneuvered the straps of his backpack on to his shoulders.

“I’m ready,” he told us through a mouthful of crumbs.

“Ready?” Dom mouthed helplessly.

“Monster is going to school with us today,” I answered with a shrug. “Dad is in Boise and I can’t afford to miss any more days.”

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“I might be able to pull some strings,” Dom offered, eyeing Monster warily.

“That’s sweet but maybe not the best idea?” I wrinkled my nose and he exhaled, knowing I was right. It wouldn’t help our already questionable relationship if he showed me favoritism at school.

“Maybe someone could keep an eye on him? Sam?” Dom was desperate and I spared half a second’s thought on his suggestion before shaking my head.

“Is Trent around?” I asked, knowing he might be the only one wily enough to keep up with Monster. Dom shook his head.

“He went with your Dad as protection.”

“Then no, he’s with us or I stay here.”

Dom relented with a sigh, moving out of the door so we could pass him. “Why does this feel like a terrible idea?”

“Because it is,” I answered as Monster hopped to the oversize Jeep. He bounced up and down as Dom came toward him.

“I’ll lift you in, little man,” he told him, stumbling over man instead of using the name Monster.

“You can call me Monster, all my friends do.”

“You have friends?” I asked, surprised, and he shrugged.

“You.”

“Well, I bet we can find you some more in this town,” I replied with a grin. “You’re not the only Monster around anymore.”

Dom eyed me like I’d lost my mind and I shrugged.

“Monster, tell him what happened at your last school.”

“I burned it down!”

Dom had just lifted Monster up to the truck seat and he almost lost his grip at that announcement. He tossed him into the back and spun around to me. “What the hell?”

“It was just a trash can,” I reassured him, bracing my hand against his chest as I scrambled into the high seat. I patted the hard muscles of his chest as he continued to stand there. “We’re going to be late.”

Dom shut his mouth, shaking his head as he slammed the door shut and went around the front.

“He’s not like us,” Monster commented from behind me. “He smells funny.”

I turned my head as it felt like time slowed down. “What?” I breathed, staring at Monster with new eyes. He blinked at me, those wide brown eyes a duplicate of mine and with a stunned clarity I realized, our Dad’s.

“He’s not like us,” Monster repeated. “You know that right?”

I nodded, unable to speak as Dom reached for the door handle. I lifted my finger to my lips and Monster smiled, nodding. I turned back around as Dom hopped in and turned on the heater for me.

“This should be an interesting day,” he murmured and as I glanced back at Monster, I thought to myself, you have no idea.

Chapter Six

The ride to school was silent as Dom kept glancing in the rearview mirror at Monster. His forehead scrunched as if he was puzzled by something and I suddenly wondered if Monster smelled funny to him too.

Like...

Not human.

The words buzzed through my brain as I started to put things together. The innuendoes our mother had made implying Monster wasn't my Dad's. The bright copper hair that didn't seem to belong, but the eyes. God, the eyes. They'd been staring me in the face for the past five years.

How could I have missed the damn eyes?

Shit brown was my favorite description and Dad always corrected me. “Chocolate, Bunny. We have dark chocolate eyes.”

He'd been right but when he said we I'd never realized he'd meant the three of us. The implications were almost too huge for me to comprehend, especially with Monster's revelation that Dom wasn't like us. I knew that, of course, but the fact that he'd realized it so quickly – I glanced over my shoulder at him, his body too small for

the seatbelt, and knew.

He had the right genes.

The genes that would make him different.

Special.

A shifter.

He caught my eyes then and I forced a smile, turning my head to face forward again.

Monster? Please tell me he has a real name.

A smile twitched my lips involuntarily at Dom's mental pleading, the note of horror I detected in his thoughts that we actually called him Monster to his face.

Theodore, but only use that if you want to set him off, I warned him seriously, but I couldn't help my smirk. I had a feeling he wouldn't be able to resist and would eventually see why we called him Monster.

Uh huh. He glanced in the rearview at Monster again and I could almost hear his next thought. How much trouble could he be?

"Jess Carter, report to the nurse's office." The intercom squealed, making all of us wince. "Immediately!" I recognized the sound of an adult at the end of their rope and scooped up my backpack. The teacher waved me from the room, clearly, he'd already gotten the gossip from the teacher's lounge.

“Oh, crap,” I breathed as I took in the destruction. “Monster? You alive in here?” I entered the room slowly, a cloud of what I hoped was baby powder hovering in the air and coating every surface. Every surface that hadn’t been destroyed, that was.

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“Jess!” His little boy voice held such joyful hope I instantly became suspicious. “You came!”

“Yeah, I think you pretty much insured that would happen,” I drawled, finally spotting him in the corner, his clothes somehow untouched by the powder. “Where’s Nurse Elridge?” He pointed and I recognized the human shape slumped over the counter. “Nurse Elridge?” I exclaimed, rushing over to her.

“Take him.” The low growl had me stopping in my tracks. “Take him and never come back.” I backed up, gesturing with my fingers for Monster to follow me. He hopped down from the stool he’d been spinning on, his backpack on his shoulders.

“Bye!” He cried cheerfully and I watched her flinch. I grabbed his arm and shuffled him out of the nurse’s office, grateful for once that I didn’t have to clean up his mess.

“What part of be good don’t you comprehend?” I hissed as we went down the hall. I checked the time and figured it was better if I just waited until the bell rang. Lunch was next anyway.

“When are you going to tell me what Dom is?” He challenged mutinously, arms crossed, little chin sticking out.

“After school. Remember? You were supposed to behave today for the people watching you and I would explain.” I leaned down and got right in his face. “Three periods and you’ve gone through the librarian, the counselor, and the school nurse.” I huffed. “That’s not behaving.”

“They were mean,” he protested, puffing out his chest. “Not a single one would give me a cookie.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did it ever occur to you they might not have a cookie?”

He deflated, a flicker of what I hoped was shame crossing his face. That hope died when he glanced back up at me and asked, “Do you have a cookie?”

I groaned, throwing up my hands. “Look, we’re about to eat lunch with a bunch of people that aren’t like us. If you can behave there might be a cookie in it for you.”

“Now,” he demanded promptly, his hand out. I shook my head.

“No. After what you just did in there?” I waved my hand to the nurse’s office and he grimaced. “You’re lucky I’m offering you a cookie at all. Now, I mean it. Behave and you’ll get a cookie when lunch is over.”

“Fine,” he pouted, lower lip pushed out adorably. A passing student aide saw it and said, “Awww.”

“You want him?” I offered, already pushing him toward the soft-hearted fool. Her eyes widened and she shook her head, alarm on her face as she hurried off in the other direction.

“Impressive,” I sighed. “Your reputation proceeds you.” I tugged on his backpack to get him moving. “You’re lucky I have enough money for your lunch. Otherwise you’d be eating my scraps.”

“Someone would feed me,” he boasted and when I lifted an eyebrow he gave me his best innocent face, the one that had conned more than one adult into giving him what he wanted. “Who could resist this face?” He eyed me. “Besides you?”

“No one I’ve met so far,” I agreed as we came to a stop in front of the cafeteria doors. “Remember, no mentioning they aren’t human, alright?”

“What’s the big secret?”

“Their lives.”

“Oh. But you know it.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “And soon you will too. Even better than me.”

“I’m like them.”

“You’re also too smart for your own good.” I crouched down in front of him. “Look, I’ll explain, I promise, but you have to be careful here. Not everybody is a good guy, okay?” He nodded, his face serious and I suddenly understood the fear Dom held when it came to me. Protecting Monster had become my number one concern.

“Hey, Jess.”

I spun around at the familiar voice, surprised he was here. “Caleb.”

He grinned, but I could tell it was half-hearted. He wasn’t the same boy I’d first met when I showed up. The lighthearted guy, the easygoing one who balanced out Dom’s taciturn nature was gone.

“I didn’t realize you’d come back.”

“Today is the first day,” he admitted, looping his thumb under the shoulder strap of his bag. “Figured it was time.” His expression hardened, forcibly reminding me he wasn’t just a teenager anymore. He was Alpha. “Prove I’m fit for duty.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me,” I reminded him. “Or Dom. Or Anna.”

He nodded, but wouldn’t meet my eyes and I knew he didn’t feel that way. He would need to prove it to himself first.

“Who’s this?” He jerked his head to my little brother, eyeing him curiously and I laughed.

“You mean you haven’t already heard?”

Caleb smiled sheepishly. “I’ve been keeping a low profile.” He glanced around. “Dom doesn’t even know I’m here.”

My eyebrows arched in surprise but before I could say anything the bell rang. Students streamed out of classrooms and we were caught in the wave headed into the cafeteria.

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We got our food, Caleb giving Monster a cookie before I could stop him. The smug look Monster threw me had me narrowing my eyes in warning and he hastily shoved the cookie in his mouth.

We sat down and it wasn't long before the tables filled. My presence at the 'Pack' table was no longer a source of gossip but Monster was another story. Rumors were wild about him.

"So, he's you and Dom's love child, huh?" Caleb had the first genuine smile I'd seen so far.

I glanced up, scanning the room, as curious gazes flickered toward us. "Seriously? That's what they come up with? I thought we were doing a pretty good job of hiding our relationship," I huffed, glaring at the few who didn't drop their gazes when I met their eyes.

"That's what bothers you?" Caleb shook his head, a small chuckle escaping him. "You and Dom are so obvious it hurts."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, really." He tilted his head toward me, his smile changing. "Maybe we should give them something else to talk about."

I laughed nervously, his implication catching me off guard. "Haha, but I think Anna would be upset."

He gave me a startled glance but didn't say anything as members of the Pack arrived, greeting him. Dom arrived next, sitting next to me, and cementing the idea of our 'love child' in the minds of half the school.

"Do you know what people are saying?" I asked him immediately but he wasn't looking at me. Instead, his gaze was focused on his Alpha, the one he was sworn to protect, and the one who hadn't told him he was going to be at school today.

"Caleb," he rumbled and the table fell silent. Caleb glanced at him defiantly and I held my breath. "Glad to see you back." Caleb seemed to deflate as he gave Dom a short nod, and turned back to someone who'd asked him an earlier question.

"To answer you, yes. I've heard the rumors about your brother and so far the most popular one is that he's our love child." Hearing the words come out of Dom's mouth, I couldn't stop a giggle. It sounded so ludicrous when he said it. I mean, it was ludicrous anyway, but his dry statement made it twice as funny. "You find it amusing?"

"Only when you say it," I retorted, being sure to keep a clearly defined space between us. It didn't seem to stop the rumors though, especially when Dom glanced over at Monster curiously.

"I heard he's caused some trouble."

"Depends on your definition of trouble," Monster answered, staring back at Dom. "I was just exploring."

"And exploring involves rearranging multiple shelves in the library?" Dom asked dryly.

"I was looking at them," Monster said defensively.

“Reading the counselor’s notes about students over the intercom?” I winced at that one. “How can you even read yet? You’re four.”

“Five and Jess taught me,” Monster answered, throwing me under the bus without a qualm. “I didn’t realize the intercom was on.”

Dom narrowed his eyes at Monster. “And a compulsive liar. Lovely.” He glanced at me, switching to the bond to add the next part. He’s a sociopath in the making.

I choked because the thought had crossed my own mind. He’s bored, I said in a lukewarm attempt to defend my brother. And too smart.

That’s an understatement. I heard weariness in Dom’s thoughts and a sense of worry, and neither had anything to do with Monster.

What’s bothering you?

Caleb.

The one word held a wealth of meaning as I felt him pull back from the mental bond.

“I can take Monster this afternoon,” he said aloud and Monster suddenly looked scared. “We can get to know each other.” Dom leaned around me to smile at Monster, who suddenly wasn’t so brave.

“If you let me stay with you, we can forget about the cookie you owe me,” he whispered to me.

“You can’t come to class with me,” I hissed back. “And you’re lucky they haven’t expelled me for bringing you here. Be grateful Dom is willing to put up with you and I suggest you behave for him.”

“But, he’s a –” Monster pleaded, almost slipping up as I glared at him.

“But nothing. You’ll be safe with Dom.” I eased my expression, seeing he was genuinely nervous. “I swear you’ll be safe with him.” Monster’s expression was resolute as he nodded. “Good boy,” I smiled.

He faced Dom and without a hint of fear asked him, “Do you have cookies?”

Dom’s gaze flickered to me as my head smacked against my palm.

“You have no shame,” I murmured to Monster who shrugged.

“You said I could trust him.”

“I can get cookies,” Dom interrupted and Monster gave him a considering look.

“I think I like you.”

“Why does that fact make me nervous?” Dom whispered under his breath. I rolled one shoulder, giving him a tentative smile.

“I recommend hiding anything flammable,” I replied instead of answering his question and he nodded slowly, eyeing Monster carefully.

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“Where’s Anna?” I asked curiously. I hadn’t seen her all day and she hadn’t told me she was going to be absent. My question diverted Dom’s attention from Monster as he cocked his head. I recognized his slightly unfocused gaze as he used the Pack bond to locate her. Only the ones with the ability to shift were connected that way, with the exception of a true mate bond like the one I shared with Dom.

Caleb snuck a glance at me and I quickly shifted my gaze. I’d never once felt uncomfortable around him, but today that had changed.

“She’s taking a makeup test,” Dom answered, his expression clearing. I nodded, relieved she was here at least.

“Does she want me to bring her lunch?” I asked, knowing the appetite of a shifter was something to be feared and admired. He shook his head, smiling.

“I asked her and she brought her lunch.”

“Did she know...” I trailed off and switched to our mental bond. About Caleb being here?

No.

The short answer said everything as we glanced at Caleb. He was smiling at something someone had said, but there was an emptiness in his eyes that chilled me.

I tapped my pencil against the desk, eyes on the clock as I counted down the seconds until sixth period ended. Anna glanced at me from across the room, her sensitive senses picking up on my anxiety. The bell rang then and only the fact that she was a shifter had her beating me to the door.

“What has you in such a rush?” She teased, her lithe steps keeping up with me effortlessly as I pushed against the stream of students headed to the front of the school and the parking lot. I was headed to the back of the school where the field house and hopefully my brother were. Still standing and alive, respectively.

“I haven’t heard a peep from Dom all afternoon.”

Anna sent me a sideways glance, still not grasping why it was a big deal and I realized she didn’t know about Monster.

“How was your test?” I asked instead of explaining the Monster situation.

“Bad,” she replied, fiddling with her backpack.

“Sorry.” I winced sympathetically. “I don’t guess you can take it again?”

She shrugged offhandedly. “No, it was my last chance.” Her tone was a little too casual and I slowed down.

“A certain someone’s presence didn’t distract you, did it?” I asked cautiously. “Or were you avoiding him?”

She smiled tightly. “It’s not really avoiding someone if they don’t notice your presence, is it?”

“He isn’t talking to you either then?”

“He doesn’t even seem to see me,” she burst out, stopping so suddenly I was five steps ahead before I realized. “I thought we were friends at least. Pack mates. You know?” I nodded vaguely, not having a clue, but figured now wasn’t the time to point that out. “But he’s pushing me away. Acting like we barely know each other. I thought we had a connection,” she finished in a rush, more upset than I’d ever seen her.

“Anna,” I reached for her arm, pausing as she tensed. She shook her head and I dropped my hand.

“I appreciate it, Jess. I do, and another time I might be able to accept your sympathy, but not right now.” She backed away, slipping her bag off her shoulder as she started moving faster. “I...I need space.”

She took off for the edge of the forest before I could utter a word, and I glanced around to see if anyone had seen her. Thankfully, the back of the school was empty and no one had been around to see her move faster than a human girl should be capable of moving.

I heaved a sigh as I trudged toward the field house and Dom’s office. He was the assistant football coach, a great cover to allow him to stay on the school grounds and keep watch over Caleb who was still a student. His job as beta was to keep the next Alpha safe. Current Alpha, I corrected myself morosely.

So much had changed so quickly it was hard to comprehend. Not the least, my little brother’s unexpected arrival.

“Jess.” My name was accompanied by someone grasping my elbow and tugging me around. “Hey.”

I jerked my elbow from his grasp as I glanced around. “Caleb,” I acknowledged

quietly, seeing the area was empty.

“Hey, I’m glad I caught you,” he said, dropping his arm as he shifted closer to me.

“Didn’t realize you were chasing me,” I replied sharply, easing back a step. He followed and I bit back an irritated sigh. He was like a damn puppy, hopeful and completely oblivious that his attention was unwanted. My irritation seemed out of proportion to the situation but my instincts were screaming at me that something wasn’t right. I wasn’t getting good vibes from him chasing me down.

“I’ll chase you anytime,” he leered at me and I choked back an involuntary laugh at the terrible line. Laughing would only encourage whatever delusion he was under that I might want his attention.

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“Yeah, let’s not.” I held up my hand and he stepped into it, his chest pressed directly against my palm. Heat radiated from him, and where my hand was placed I could feel his heart thundering. “Caleb, I’m not interested. I suggest you stop before you cross a line you can’t go back from.”

“I’m Alpha now,” he enunciated, his hands coming up to cup my shoulders. “You don’t need Dominic’s protection anymore.” I’d had enough, my hands snapping out to break his hold as I attempted to rein in my temper.

“I don’t need your protection either, Caleb,” I stated. “And I don’t want your attention.”

“We could rule the Pack.”

“You could also not be a jackass but clearly we’re past that point.” I jammed my finger against his chest. “You’re better than this. You know better than this. I’m with Dom. Your best friend? Remember him? The guy who has your back?”

Caleb stumbled back a step, his expression confused as I continued to ream him out. “Your dad died. You’re Alpha now. Big whoop. So far, I’m not impressed. It takes more than a title to make a man.”

“Cut me some slack,” he grumbled, crossing his arms defensively, his lower lip pushing out and reminding me forcefully of Monster.

“Oh, cut you some slack? How about I have a motel full of women and children on the run from a rival pack, I just found out my brother is a shifter, and now my

boyfriend's best friend is hitting on me? Sorry. I have no slack to give right now." I shoved his arms again and he stumbled back another step. "How about you not be a shitty friend? How about you quit pouting about how unfair it all is and get your shit together? How about you talk to the people that care about you before you wind up like the Hanley Alpha? Hmmm? How about that?"

"I wouldn't," he stuttered, his expression shattered. "I didn't mean – " he broke off, not seeming to know what to say.

"Consider this your only warning, Caleb," I continued, keeping my voice hard. "You pull a stunt like this again and I will tell Dom. And not only will I tell him, I'll pop popcorn while I watch him tear you limb from limb."

Caleb nodded dumbly, stumbling away from me, and finally breaking into a long lope as he headed for the trees. Part of me hoped he'd run right into Anna and she gave him a piece of her mind too.

Once he was out of sight, I slumped against the wall of the field house, drained. I hated the fact that I'd put that look on his face. That I'd essentially kicked a puppy right in the nuts, but I knew he needed to hear it. No one else was willing to do it and I was all about nipping that shit in the bud. My head fell back against the wall with a thump. Knowing I was right didn't help at all.

"Pop popcorn?"

Chapter Seven

My head jerked up as Dom leaned against the wall next to me. I hadn't heard or felt him nearby, which really shouldn't surprise me since most prey didn't sense the predator about to pounce.

“I...didn’t see you there,” I stammered, struggling to interpret his expression.

“I figured as much.” He ran his finger along my cheek and my eyes closed involuntarily. “You handled that well.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“The Alpha call kickstarts maturity in a young shifter. His mating instincts would be high and you are exceptional.”

“I’m with you,” I retorted, my eyes snapping open.

“Not fully,” Dom replied. “Which means any other wolf has a chance.” He shrugged ruefully. “Most wouldn’t be dumb enough to try and take it.”

I glanced over my shoulder at where Caleb had entered the woods. “He’s struggling.” I shook my head. “I didn’t realize how badly until today.”

“Neither did I,” Dom answered quietly, pulling me into his arms. “I don’t know how I missed it.”

“You wanted it to be okay. We all did.” I burrowed my head against his chest, taking what comfort I could in the brief moment. It was unusual for Dom to show any type of affection while on school grounds but today was clearly an exceptional day. I inhaled deeply, relaxing at his familiar scent, my eyes closing as evergreen and man mingled. He rubbed my arms gently before setting me away from him.

“I also didn’t realize how bloodthirsty you were,” he commented, tilting his head to indicate I should follow him. “Rip him from limb to limb? A little excessive.”

I shrugged, tucking my hands into my pockets so I wouldn’t be tempted to touch him.

“It seemed appropriate at the time.” I smiled slyly. “Are you saying you wouldn’t rip him limb from limb?”

“Absolutely not, they’d find his body scattered over three counties.”

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“Good to know,” I said faintly at his gruesome answer. “And Monster? He’s alive, right?” When I didn’t get an answer, I hurried after him. “Seriously, Dom.”

I heard his chuckle right before I slammed into his back. He’d stopped in the doorway and I ducked around him to see Monster sitting on the floor carefully sorting papers. I gazed around the weight room, not seeing any obvious signs of destruction.

“It’s not my first time dealing with a pup who is too clever for his own good,” Dom said, crossing his arms as he leaned against the wall.

“You know?” I glanced up at him in surprise and he grimaced slightly.

“It took me longer than I’d like to admit.” He turned to face me, one massive shoulder propped against the wall as he looked down at me. I wasn’t really short, more like average, but it still gave me a crick in my neck to stare up at him. “I wasn’t really expecting him to be a shifter.”

“Me either,” I mumbled, flopping against the wall. “He told me in the Jeep that you weren’t ‘like us’. That’s when I realized.”

“He told you that?” Dom had a puzzled expression as I nodded. “That’s unusually perceptive for one his age.”

“Are you really surprised at this point?”

“No,” he drawled hesitantly. “You’ve blown all of my expectations out of the water. But from a shifter standpoint, he’s young to already have developed that sense of

other.”

“You said it’s usually puberty before they....shift,” I stated carefully. He looked uncomfortable and I pushed. “Dom, puberty. Right? Like 14?”

“Most cases, yes.”

I sighed. “But not all cases.”

“No,” he answered apologetically. “There have been times when the shift came early.”

“How early?”

“6-7.” He winced as he said it as my heart dropped.

“6?” I echoed faintly. “Oh God.”

“That’s rare,” he answered quickly and I just stared at him. “Of course, what we have is rare so, yeah we should probably prepare ourselves.”

My thoughts hiccupped at his words and I said the first dumb thing that came to mind. “We?”

He gave me a tight-lipped smile. “Yeah, we.” He brushed a strand of hair from my cheek. “I think I might have mentioned this before, but I consider us a long-term thing.”

“You have – mentioned that,” I stammered, dropping my gaze. “It’s just that was before.”

“Before what?”

I steeled myself. “Before I had essentially a stable full of breeding females at my motel.”

He choked and I let out the breath I’d been holding. “A stable?”

“It was that or harem,” I grumbled.

“Both terrible,” he rumbled around a laugh.

“I know,” I sighed as my head thumped against the wall. “It’s a stupid and irrational fear and an insult to the women and you.”

“It’s not a stupid or irrational fear,” Dom answered and my head snapped forward as I glared at him.

“Explain.”

“Shifters want to mate with females that can give them shifter children...usually. There have been a few exceptions. And now, you’re housing a veritable buffet and trust me, the single wolves have noticed.”

“Single, like you,” I stated bluntly.

“No, single like Caleb and Trent, and others.” He reached for my hand, catching the tips of my fingers gently. “I’m absolutely, positively not single.”

“Mmhmmm,” I hummed, squinting at him. “But we haven’t,” I wiggled my fingers between us as he raised his eyebrows, “You know.”

He dipped his head, his nose skimming my cheek. “No, I don’t know. Can you be more specific?”

I growled in frustration and felt his own chest rumble in response. His low growl had my eyes flickering closed. “You have no idea what it does to me when you make that sound,” he murmured, his breath hot against my neck.

“I have an idea,” I whispered faintly, my hands coming up to grip his shoulders as I swayed. “A little weak-kneed?”

I felt his lips curl in a smile as he brushed his lips against my neck, oh so close to the mating mark he’d branded on my skin. “Not exactly, but close,” he agreed, as his mouth drifted closer to the brand burning on my skin.

“I’m finished,” a loud voice interrupted and Dom pulled back slightly as I gazed down at my pesky little brother. “You can do that later. Sissy, you owe me a cookie.” He held his hand out demandingly and I blinked. “I was good,” he added defiantly. He glanced at Dom uncertainly. “Right?” I also glanced at Dom, who was frowning down at Monster.

“Better would have been if you waited five minutes before interrupting,” he grumbled and I bit back a grin. “But yes, you were good.”

I reached into the side pocket on my backpack and dug out a Ziploc with two cookies inside. He reached for it eagerly, but I held it out of reach. “Nope. I’ll only give you both if you promise to behave all the way home.”

“I promise,” he answered instantly, eyes lit up at the sight of those cookies.

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“Really?” I asked doubtfully and he nodded eagerly. “All right then.” I tossed the bag to him and he tore into it.

“Monster wouldn’t by chance be short for Cookie Monster, would it?”

“How did you guess,” I answered drily. “But really shortening it to Monster just fit.”

“Let’s go.” Dom took the backpack from my shoulder, looping it over his wrist as he escorted us from the field house. “I need to have a word with Caleb.”

Dom dropped us off in front of the motel and instead of going back to the main road; he cut across the field and took the dirt road to the small community where the Pack lived.

“He’s cool,” Monster told me confidently as we walked to the motel office. Dad’s Range Rover was parked in it’s usual spot so that meant he was probably in the office.

“You didn’t seem so sure of that earlier,” I reminded him and he shrugged.

“He explained that he was a shifter.”

I stopped, crouching down so I was eye level with him. “And you’re good with that?”

He nodded slowly, his little mouth twisting.

“What is it?”

“I’m like him, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, you are. Or you will be one day.”

“Are you one too?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t get all furry and have four legs,” I teased, tickling his sides until he shrieked. “That’s reserved for little Monsters.”

“What is going on out here?” Dad stood in the doorway, his face stunned as he caught sight of the familiar copper head. “Monster?”

“DAD!”

I heard Dad’s grunt as Monster ran at him full force but he swung him around as if he weighed nothing. He sent me a questioning glance and I lifted my hands. He knew Mom as well as I did.

“I hope you bought cookies,” I muttered under my breath as I passed him and he nodded mutely, still shell-shocked by the Monster in his arms excitedly telling him everything that had happened.

“Fire?” I heard him echo in concern as I slipped into the apartment. I made a beeline for the cabinet where the cookies were stashed and immediately moved them. You could never leave them in the same place twice with Monster around.

My phone buzzed and I fished it out of my pocket. Anna’s name lit up the screen with a text asking if she could come by. I replied yes and headed for my room. Minutes later the window slid open and she crawled inside.

“When were you going to tell me about your brother?” She demanded the second she

was standing in my room. “I had to find out through the Pack line.” I grimaced at her mention of the way the Pack communicated with one another. I had no doubt I’d been the source of gossip more than once.

“If I’d seen you, I would have told you,” I said reasonably, completely ignoring the fact that I had seen her and hadn’t told her. She proceeded to wave her phone at me. “Or I could have texted you, but honestly I was kind of shocked. He showed up this morning unexpectedly.”

“How unexpected could he have been? Wouldn’t your mom need to tell your dad and arrange custody?”

“That’s not really how she works,” I said, sitting cross-legged on the bed. “She sent him via courier.”

“Courier,” Anna deadpanned.

“Yeah, and let me tell you that guy hightailed it out of here. Didn’t even let me give him a tip.”

“Your family is seriously weird.” She thumped down on the desk chair. “I mean mine might shift into wolves but I still feel like it has nothing on yours.” She shot me an accusing stare. “You knew he was coming, didn’t you?”

I wiggled my shoulders. “I didn’t know for sure, but yeah, after I refused Mom’s last invitation I figured he’d be sent here.”

“And the Pack stuff? How are you going to explain that?”

“Dom already did apparently.”

“DOM?”

“Yeah, Dom.”

“Wait.....is he a shifter?” The look on her face would have been hilarious if the reality wasn’t so serious.

“Yeah.”

“I...wow.”

“That’s how I felt. I had no idea.”

“Guess it’s a good thing he’s living here now.”

“Yep.” I kept my answers short waiting for her to tell me why she was really here. It wasn’t about my little brother, that was for sure.

“Dom went after Caleb,” she mentioned in a too casual voice.

“Went after like attacked?” I asked, poking my temple as if that would jumpstart the mental bond I had with Dom. He was damn good at blocking me when he wanted to while I’d yet to perfect the ability.

“No, he just wanted to talk to him.” She paused. “About you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

“Look, Anna, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” she replied, ducking her head as she played with the tassel on one of my pillows. “I overheard something I wasn’t supposed to because I was still in wolf form when Dom found Caleb.”

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“You really need to explain this whole Pack bond secret keeping thing a little better,” I muttered as she swallowed hard.

“He hit on you.”

“He’s confused and upset,” I tried to say when Anna interrupted.

“And I’m tired of making up excuses for him.” She attempted to smile, her eyes glossy. “I just need to accept that he doesn’t feel that way toward me.”

“I don’t know if that’s true or not, Anna,” I said a little desperately.

“It doesn’t matter. I have more pride than that.” She stood up, her smile more a grimace.

“Please, Anna, wait,” I called after her as she went back through the window. “Stay, talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she said with a shrug, jogging backwards toward the forest. I raised my hand to call out a warning but it was too late as she collided with Trent. He caught her as she stumbled and she shook him off angrily, dirt kicking up as she ran to the trees.

“Should I go after her?” He asked, pointing where Anna had disappeared. I shook my head tiredly. “She does seem to be in a hurry whenever she leaves here,” he said, trying to lighten the mood. I glared at him and he smiled. “Too soon?” He pulled a sucker out of his pocket and offered it to me. I declined and he pulled off the wrapper

and popped it into his mouth. “I don’t guess you’re going to pay a visit to Sam this evening?”

I raised my eyebrow. “Wasn’t planning on it?”

“Perhaps you should.”

I sighed and hoisted myself up on the windowsill. Trent hurried over to help as I half tumbled out the window. “Damn,” I grunted. “Anna made that look way easier than it was.”

“Shifter strength,” Trent said knowingly as he helped me stand. “Easy to underestimate.”

“So why do I need to visit Sam?”

“Well,” Trent pulled the sucker out of his mouth with a mischievous grin. “I haven’t gotten a chance to do my daily checkup yet.”

“Oh, waiting for me? You know it’s not very manly to hide behind a girl.”

“I consider it a well-developed sense of self-preservation,” he countered loftily. “Plus, she might have gone a little overboard with your girl power speech yesterday.”

“Girl power? Speech? I just told her to quit hiding.”

“She’s organizing a march on the Pack.”

“What?” I punched his shoulder as I raced for the stairs. “Why didn’t you lead with that?” I yelled over my shoulder.

He jogged to keep up, not even out of breath after going up the stairs while I had to stop and gasp. “It’s not today.”

I glared at him as he shrugged carelessly. “I overheard a few of the woman talking.”

“You were eavesdropping?”

“No. I just happened to overhear while patrolling,” he corrected without an ounce of shame.

“Uh huh.” I waved my hand for him to proceed.

“It seems their independence is reasserting itself.” He frowned worriedly. “Their feeling seemed to be that if the Navarre pack refused to accept them then so would anyone else.”

I groaned. “It’s not about accepting them. They need to slowly acclimate into the Pack.” I paced in front of him. “Sam knows this. She told me this. Why would she organize a march?”

“To prove she’s no longer afraid?”

“God, you say one little thing and people go nuts.” I scratched my eyebrow and started down the hall, banging on doors as I went.

“Whoa, what are you up to?”

“Setting them straight.”

Trent dogged my heels as doors started opening and heads peeked out while I continued all the way up to Sam’s room. As soon as I saw her, I pointed. “No one is

marching anywhere.”

“How did you?” She trailed off, glaring at Trent, who attempted to hide behind me. I elbowed him.

“You can tell Dom that when you saw her, she was fine,” I muttered to him.

“That sounds ominous.”

“You can go.”

The women had started to gather closer as Trent shifted restlessly behind me. “Now.”

“You’re definitely perfect for Dom,” he grumbled before jumping over the edge of the railing and dropping lightly to the parking lot below. “He’ll expect her in one piece, you know.”

I waved him off as I glared at Sam pointedly.

“We weren’t going to march right now,” she muttered defensively.

“You’re not going to march at all,” I told her, my gaze going over all the women there. “None of you. That’s not how this works.” I leaned against the railing as I stared at them. “They will accept you, but you have to give it time. You have to try first. Give a little.”

“We’ve given enough.” Someone cried and there were a few mutters of agreement. Sam looked torn but she didn’t disagree.

“To the Hanleys,” I answered honestly. “You’ve given everything to the Hanley’s but this Pack isn’t the Hanleys. They owe you nothing.” Stunned silence met my words

as I straightened up. “I owe you nothing. But I offer you shelter because you are human and in need. Not all of you will stay here when this is over. Some have already left.” A few shifted, glancing at one another. “The rest of you have nowhere to go and you’re scared. Scared of the Hanleys and scared of the Navarre Pack. You don’t need to be. This is a new experience for all of us. But we will find a way to coexist. To mingle. To not be afraid.”

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Slow nods met my words and I relaxed slightly. I hadn't really had a plan other than to prevent another war from breaking out. I wasn't sure I trusted Caleb not to react if a bunch of Hanley women showed up on Pack land.

"I think we should have a little party," I announced, surprising myself. Sam eyed me as I rolled with the idea. "We'll have a party out back. A barbeque. We can invite some of the Navarre pack." The women glanced at each other uncertainly. "We have to try," I pushed, glancing at Sam meaningfully.

"She's right," Sam said loudly. "It's a good first step." She glanced at me. "You'll let us plan it." I nodded, completely okay with that. "It'll be fun," she added, and I winced. That sounded like famous last words to me. "We'll go shopping and set up tables."

"You want us to leave here?" I didn't see who spoke but the voice was scared. "What if they capture us?"

"You'll have protection," I promised. "In fact, Trent will be at your disposal. Consider him your errand boy."

I glanced over the railing in time to catch the dark look he shot me. I smiled as I turned back to the women. "Plus you can travel in groups."

Nervous whispers ran through the women but slowly they nodded. "Great!" I clapped my hands. "It's settled. Barbeque in the back on Friday."

The women started to disperse as I made a beeline for Sam. "I wasn't going to go

through with it,” she exclaimed and I slowed.

“Huh?”

“The march. It was more to help motivate them,” she attempted to explain and I waved her off.

“Yeah, that’s not why I’m here.”

“It’s not?”

“No, I need someone to watch my little brother while I’m at school.”

“You have a brother?”

“Yes. He showed up today and he can be a bit of a handful,” I explained, glossing over the truth that he would give Dennis the Menace a run for his money. I smiled and she looked startled.

“Oh, no. I’m not taking care of him,” she denied, shaking her head adamantly. “You just dumped this party on my hands.”

“You took the party and come on, Nicky and,” I hesitated before mumbling really fast, “Monster, can play together.”

“What did you call him?” She asked suspiciously.

“Monster,” I answered with a sheepish grin. “Cute, huh?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Kind of terrifying actually.”

“He’s good. Just a little rambunctious.”

“Uh huh. Answer is still no. In fact, you can say it’s a hell no. I might owe you, but I am not babysitting a kid you call Monster.”

“Ah, come on, Sam. I’m desperate. He’s not welcome back at the school.”

She blinked. “Yeah, definitely no then.”

“I’m sure he’ll be good for you. I’ll even provide the cookies.”

“Cookies? I don’t even want to know what that means.” She waved her arm. “Why can’t your Dad take care of him?”

“He can. He just gets distracted.”

Sam crossed her arms. “Look, I get it, but I can’t do it.” I started to protest and she held up her hand. “But, I will offer you the name of someone who can.”

“I’ll take it,” I said happily, knowing it was the best offer I was getting. “Who is she?”

“Wren.”

“Wren,” I repeated, sure I’d somehow misunderstood her. “Wren? Quiet, little Wren?”

“It’s always the quiet ones you need to watch out for,” Sam said gleefully before shutting the door in my face.

“Wren,” I said again under my breath. “Of course, it would be Wren.” I headed for

the stairs since Wren was one of the few women who had elected to stay on the ground floor. I'd never really spoken to her since she basically ducked out of sight whenever she saw me, but my first memory of her had been of a small, brown haired bird of a woman. In fact, I'd thought Sam had read my mind when she'd called her Wren the first time.

I hovered outside of her door for a minute before knocking firmly. The door creaked open and I could see she'd left the chain on.

"Hi, Wren. It's Jess. Jess Carter?"

She nodded and I noticed her eyes were a light amber color, much lighter than I'd originally thought.

"Um, yeah, I was wondering if you could do me a favor? Actually, not really a favor, more like a job?" I paused, tilting my head as I considered my words. "A paid job." I nodded firmly. "Yeah, a paid job."

"I don't really have any skills," she whispered and I had to lean forward to catch her words.

"Um, Sam said you might be willing?" I took a shot at mentioning Sam. Wren had been part of my rescue squad when I'd escaped Hanley lands and she'd seemed to look up to Sam.

"What do you want me to do?" She asked as her voice grew a little stronger.

"Babysit my brother."

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The door shut in my face and I groaned. No way had she heard about my little brother yet! I lifted my hand to knock again, determined she would hear me out, when the door opened.

Wren had a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, brown of course, and she slipped though the narrowest crack possible before turning and locking her door. “I’d like to meet him.”

“Of course,” I stammered in surprise. “He’s with my Dad.”

“Your father is a kind man,” Wren told me and I nodded.

“He is.”

“You should be proud.”

“I am.”

I opened the office door to, unsurprisingly, a disaster. “Dad – ”

“Bunny! You’re back. Thank God.” There was no mistaking the relief in voice as Monster continued to open drawers and pull papers out.

“Monster,” I said warningly and he paused. “Do you remember what I said about behaving?”

“I’m helping Dad.”

“I don’t think this is the best way to help,” I replied.

Wren stepped forward, her hand out to Monster. “I’m Wren, and you are?”

He stared at her for a second, no doubt trying to decide how easy it would be to manipulate her before shocking me. “I’m Theodore, but my friends call me Monster.”

“Would you mind if I called you Theodore? I like it better than Monster.” He shrugged, almost bashfully, and I had to keep my mouth from dropping open. “That’s settled then. You’ll be Theodore and I’ll be Wren.” She reached down for a folder on the floor. “Now, let’s get this picked up.”

Monster immediately started helping her as I glanced at Dad, who was staring at Wren like she was the Second Coming. I shook my head and tiptoed out of the room.

“Where are you sneaking off to?”

I barely suppressed a shriek as Trent sidled up next to me.

“Thanks for throwing me under the bus with the ladies. A barbeque? Really?”

“Better than a march,” I retorted waspishly, marching back to the apartment. “What do you want anyway?”

“Anna’s phone number.”

I stopped, eyeing him. He gazed back at me unconcerned, the ever present sucker stick poking out of one corner of his mouth. “Do you ever not suck on those things?”

“Habit,” he mumbled around it, reaching for the sucker sheepishly.

“You’re going to rot your teeth out.”

“I brush,” he replied defensively.

“Why do you want Anna’s number?”

“So I can coordinate your little barbeque.”

“And you need Anna for that?”

“Chick seemed a little upset earlier. Figured if she was dealing with Sam and your little party it might be a good distraction.”

“One, she’s not a chick and I dare you to call her that to her face. Two, I’m keeping an eye on you, Trent.” I nodded, wagging my finger at him. “And I’ll give her your number and explain. If she chooses to contact you then, great. If not...”

He nodded. “I can take a hint.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

Chapter Eight

The next day I dropped Monster off with Wren before Dad dropped me off at school. It looked like Dom, Anna, and Caleb were skipping and I could admit to myself that I was a little worried. The mental link to Dom had been suspiciously silent and while I prided myself on not being one of those clingy girlfriends that needed to hear from their boyfriend constantly, I was a tiny bit miffed.

He could have at least let me know everything was okay between him and Caleb. Or even asked about his sister.

You could always ask him, the little progressive voice in my head whispered. I told her to shut up. He could contact me.

“Okay, so you were surrounded yesterday, but seriously you and Dom’s little boy is so cute,” Leah gushed, coming up beside me as I went up the front steps of the high school. I stopped in shock, since there was no way Leah actually believed?

She grinned and I started walking again.

“You had me there for a second,” I admitted grudgingly.

“I know,” she crowed, throwing a fist pump in the air. She laughed so loud other students turned to look. “It was awesome.”

“Not if it was your life,” I grumbled and she eased up.

“True. He is your brother though. The rumors got that much right?”

“Yeah, he’s my little brother.”

“He’s pretty adorable.”

“Yeah, if you like Chucky.”

Leah stumbled but rebounded quick. “Where’s Coach Studmuffin?”

“No idea,” I growled and she blinked in shock. “Sorry, it’s been a weird couple of days.”

“It’s been weird since you showed up,” Leah corrected, one of the few people at the school in on the fact that Dom and I were actually dating. She’d helped save my life

when the Hanleys kidnapped me by getting the message to Dom.

“I won’t argue that.” I stopped again as a thought came to me. “Would you like to come to a party on Friday?”

“Sure, where?”

“At the motel. It’s a celebration. Most of the Pack will be there.”

She looked hesitant at that information. “Do you think I should come?”

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“I’m inviting you, aren’t I?”

“No need to get snarky,” she told me. “Is this invitation only?” She glanced around the hall where students streamed around us and I grimaced. “I’ll take that as a yes, and in that case, I’ll be there. Who would miss an opportunity to mingle with the Pack?”

I smiled ruefully as she disappeared into the flow of students. Who indeed.

“She’s been a lifesaver, Bunny. I’ve never seen anything like it,” Dad enthused, shaking his head as he chopped something into mush. “She even came over today and put a roast in the oven for us.”

“That’s nice of her,” I commented. “What are you chopping exactly?”

“Salad. She said we needed to eat more fresh vegetables.”

“She did,” I murmured noncommittally. Dom shot me a glance that pleaded for me to play nice. Dad had reluctantly agreed he could join us for dinner and Dom was all about making a good impression. I guess me commenting negatively on the wonderful Wren wouldn’t help matters. “You should have invited her for dinner too.”

Dad’s head came up and when I saw his expression, I knew exactly who was now knocking on our door. “You did invite her,” I said with forced cheer. Between Monster and Dad, all I’d heard for the last three days were the wonders of Wren.

After an awkward dinner, and Wren insisting she help Dad with the dishes, I disappeared into my room with Dom, Monster coming along as our chaperone.

“What are we going to do now? Wren taught me this cool trick –”

“Okay, that’s enough about Wren.” I pushed open the window and hissed, “Trent.”

“What are you doing?” Dom asked, baffled. I shot him a glance before whispering, “Trent.”

“You called, my lady? What would your dear mate say if he knew you were whispering other men’s names at your window?”

“He’d wonder why they’d be dumb enough to answer,” Dom growled and Trent jumped in mock surprise.

“Ah, if it’s not one of my favorite friends.”

“And here I thought I was your only friend,” Dom said dryly.

“Harsh, Dom. Really, harsh.” Trent had his hand over his heart and I rolled my eyes.

“Okay, you two, are you done? Should I leave you alone?” They traded a speculative glance and I huffed. “Trent, I need a favor.”

Trent glanced at me and Dom and then down at Monster. “I have a terrible feeling I know where this is going.”

“Can’t I just go hang out with Wren?” Monster whined and I rolled my eyes.

“No, because then you wouldn’t be chaperoning Dom and I.”

“But if I go with him, I won’t be chaper-chaponing you either,” he said, stumbling over the word.

“Right, but Dad won’t know.”

“I won’t go,” Monster stated, nodding mutinously as he crossed his arms, and Dom looked at me in amusement.

I considered my options. The cookies I could use to bribe him with were in the kitchen and if I went to get them it would look suspicious, plus I didn’t want to watch my Dad make doe eyes at Wren.

“You like wrestling, kid?” Trent asked, poking his head in the window. “Cause that’s what I’m doing tonight.”

“I’m not supposed to watch violent shows,” Monster said, glancing between me and Trent.

“I wouldn’t call WWE violent,” Trent joked, twisting around so his elbows were propped on the windowsill. “I also have cookies.”

“Sold,” Monster crowed happily. “Let’s go.” He pointed at me. “And you owe me.”

“Yeah, yeah, go and keep your mouth shut about it.”

Trent lifted him through the window and glanced at us. “Two hours, you two. Otherwise, people might start talking.” He winked and I shut the window in his face.

“I had no idea you wanted to get me alone so badly.” Dom grinned as he slid his arms around my waist. “All you had to do was ask.”

I smacked his chest and winced at the immediate stinging sensation. “Ugh, it’s like hitting concrete.”

“Steel.”

“You have not an ounce of humility, do you?”

“Nope.”

“How’s Caleb?” I asked, totally changing the subject and possibly giving him whiplash if his look was any indication.

“Should I be worried that you’re asking me about my competition when we’re finally alone together?” He fell back on the bed, taking me with him as I sprawled on top of him.

“Only if he was competition,” I countered, placing a quick peck on the mark directly over his heart. He tensed at the action before rolling over and pinning my hands over my head.

“Living dangerously, are we?”

“It’s the only way I live,” I retorted, not the least bit nervous at being at his mercy. He nuzzled my neck, followed by kisses along my jaw before hovering over my mouth.

“I love you,” he whispered, pulling back as I stared at him in shock. He leaned back on his heels, keeping his weight off me. “I do. Love you. I’ve wanted to tell you for a while.” He glanced down at his hands, rubbing them together. Nervously, I realized in shock. Dom was nervous. “I didn’t want to say it over the bond. But to you. Face to face.”

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I pushed myself up on my elbows still trying to absorb the fact that a nervous Dom had just admitted he loved me.

“You don’t need to say it back, but could you say something, maybe? Are you okay with me loving you?”

“Well, yeah,” I said stupidly. “I mean I guess I kind of assumed?” I gave a one-shouldered shrug. “You did mention long term. I figure that’s not something you do with a girl you just like.”

His laughter shook the bed as he said, “And that’s why I love you, Jess.”

“You’re not saying this because you want to have sex with me, are you? Because I’m not having sex with a deadline of my brother showing back up.”

His laughter cut off abruptly as I spoke and he moved so quickly I couldn’t process it as he suddenly cupped my cheek in his hand.

“Absolutely not. I didn’t tell you I love you so you’d have sex with me, Jess. I told you because I need you to know it.” The corners of his eyes crinkled with worry and involuntarily my finger reached up to smooth the tiny lines. “I’ve seen too much uncertainty lately. I don’t want this to be one of those things. Us. I don’t want us to be an uncertainty.”

“We’re not,” I assured him. “So long as you don’t suddenly decide to hook up with one of the breeding females surrounding us.”

“Never,” he promised, his yellow eyes gleaming as he leaned down to kiss me. “Of course, that goes both ways.” I felt his lips curl up. “You can’t hook up some random wolf.”

“Well, Anna is pretty cute,” I teased and his chuckle rumbled through me.

“I won’t argue that,” he replied, his eyebrow arched wickedly and I thumped his side.

“Caleb....he’s not interested in her, is he?”

Dom eased down next to me, curling his arm under my head. “I don’t know. He was....before.” He didn’t need to explain when before was, we were all intimately acquainted with when hell had broken loose. “Now, I’m not sure Caleb knows what he wants and unless Anna is willing to wait and find out,” Dom trailed off as I nodded.

“Can I wish that things would go back?”

“I think we all wish it. Our Alpha died without honor, shot in the back by an enemy with no honor.” I stroked my hand along his chest, my fingers memorizing the dips and ridges of muscle as he spoke. “Caleb knew what his future would be, but none of us expected it so soon or this way.”

“What about his brother? Payne.”

I felt Dom shift. “You know him?”

I shook my head. “No, but Sam seemed to.”

“What do you mean? Was he here?”

“Yeah, a few days ago when I convinced Sam to come outside for a while. A guy showed up at the edge of the forest. I didn’t recognize him and was going to call out, but Sam knew him.”

“Yeah, she would.”

“She didn’t seem to thrilled to see him. I wondered why he would show up. He’s not a shifter so he wouldn’t be patrolling.”

“No, he wouldn’t.”

“Do you know why he would come here?”

“No, I can’t imagine,” Dom answered, smoothing his hand down my back, and smiling as I shivered at the sensation.

“Could you find out?”

“Are you asking me to meddle?”

“Yes,” I answered promptly and felt him sigh.

“There’s a lot of history here you don’t know about,” he said carefully and I lifted myself up to look at him.

“Oh, I’m aware,” I told him. “But I know Sam came back here because this is where she wants to raise Nicky. Because this is where her family is.”

“Family she won’t talk to,” Dom interjected shortly, a frown marring his expression.

“Yeah, I’m working on that. It would be helpful to know why she left,” I wheedled

and he shook his head.

“I wish I knew. It all happened right after I left for college. By the time I realized she was gone, she wasn’t answering my calls.”

“Can I say I find it surprising you didn’t storm over to the Hanleys and start a war right then?”

“Trust me, it was a near thing.” His expression tightened and I rubbed my thumb over his rock hard jaw. “Alpha’s orders were the only thing that kept me from going.” My finger stopped moving, as I comprehended what he said. He smiled mirthlessly. “An Alpha is more powerful than you think, Jess. We have to obey his command. Why do you think Caleb being Alpha has the elders so worried?”

“Your dad isn’t worried.”

“My dad.....he has other things on his mind. And he considers Caleb my responsibility. The same way Caleb’s dad was his responsibility.”

“Isn’t that a tad backwards? Shouldn’t betas be Alpha’s responsibilities?”

“They should and they are, but someone has to have the Alpha’s back. A strong beta can hold a pack together better than a strong Alpha can.”

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“Oh, that’s not conceited at all,” I replied, tapping his cheek.

“It’s not conceited if it’s true. Alpha’s have a guiding hand and a firm hand when necessary, but Beta’s hold a different role. We are the enforcers. We ensure the Pack obeys the rules.”

“You have to believe in the rules,” I answered and he nodded.

“We do.” He caught my hand. “Jess, will you talk to Sam? Maybe she’ll tell you what happened, but I’d like my sister back.”

I kissed his knuckles. “I’ll talk to her.”

A knock came on the window just then. “Everyone decent in there? Bit of problem out here.”

I slid off Dom and went to the window in time to see Trent slip out of the shadows.

“What problem?” I asked cautiously.

“I’ve lost your little brother.”

Chapter Nine

“Monster,” I called, knowing it was fruitless. He would have answered by now if he could hear me. Dom and the other shifters combed the woods, their night vision far superior to mine as I squinted in the darkness. The flashlight I held was meant to

protect what little night vision I had, but I still had to keep it away from sensitive wolf eyes.

“Where could he have gone?” Dad paused as he caught his breath and I just shook my head. I hadn’t been able to look at him since I’d told him Monster was missing. “Bunny,” he murmured. “It’s not your fault.”

I refused to glance at him and he sighed tiredly.

“It is my fault. I was responsible for him. I should have known he’d try something with Trent. It’s his nature.”

“Bullshit.” Dad’s hands wrapped around my shoulders and my head jerked up as he gave me a hard shake. “Don’t do this to yourself. It could have happened to anyone, myself included. Like you said, it’s his nature to push boundaries.”

“And I know that! So, I should have realized –”

Dad shook me again and my mouth snapped shut as he shouted. “You can see the future now? Hmm? I didn’t realize you were omnipotent.”

“Dad,” I stuttered, taken aback by his anger. “I’m sorry.”

“I know, Bunny. And it’s fine if you’re sorry that you lied and were in your room alone with Dom, but not because Monster ran off. You didn’t tell him to go play outside. You left him with a responsible adult.” His grip eased as he stared at me gently. “Do you blame Trent for losing him?”

“No, he was in the bathroom and Monster took advantage.”

“Exactly. If you don’t blame him, then you can’t blame yourself.”

“Dad,” I swallowed hard to try to prevent the sobs that threatened to break through.
“If they have him....”

“They don’t and if they do, we get him back,” Dad answered fiercely, dragging me forward in a tight hug. I clung to him desperately, needing him to be right. I remembered what it was like to be held by the Hanleys and I could only imagine what they’d do to my brother.

Sudden howls startled us and I called out to Dom through our bond. Monster?

We’ve got him. Headed your way now.

“They found him,” I told Dad, as relief flooded through me. I felt the tension drain from him as he tightened his arms around me.

“Thank God,” he murmured as we stumbled back toward the motel in the glow of my flashlight.

A few minutes later, a dark shadow separated from the forest as a large black wolf trotted toward me, Monster clinging to his back. I ran to them as Monster lifted a tear streaked face, snot dripping onto Dom’s fur.

“Sissy,” he cried, arms outstretched as I reached for him. “I’m sorry. I got lost.” I hoisted him up as he wrapped spindly legs around my waist. “I was trying to shift into a wolf.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” I whispered as Dad wrapped his arms around us both. Thank you. I added as Dom headed back to the cover of the woods. I glimpsed the weaving shadows as the other members of the Pack headed back home. Thank them all for me.

I felt his acknowledgement right before he slipped from the connection. I knew he

was probably talking to other members of the Pack and I tightened my arms around Monster.

“You can’t run off like that, Theodore.” His head came up at my use of his real name and I kept my voice firm. “There are bad people who might hurt you. You can’t go wandering the woods by yourself and you definitely can’t go shifting into a wolf by yourself.”

He nodded and I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Let’s get you inside and take a bath. You’ll have a busy day tomorrow telling everyone thank you.”

One bath later and an exhausted little boy slept burrowed in the middle of my bed as I leaned against the open window. Dad had offered to take him, but I wasn’t ready to let the little Monster out of my sight yet. The fear that the Hanleys could have taken him wouldn’t leave me. I thought I’d come to terms with my kidnapping but when Trent had said Monster was missing, it had all rushed back.

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An angry growl startled me from my thoughts and it took me a second to recognize it was Trent. “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” a low voice denied and my forehead wrinkled as I tried to figure out who he was talking too.

“Like hell you do. You were headed straight for the Hanley line,” he accused and in the silence that followed I deduced he must have interpreted the situation correctly. After a minute, it dawned on me who the other person was; the voice had been feminine, and the only female who’d been out hunting for Monster was Anna.

“Until you stopped me,” she snapped and I was positive it was Anna.

“Yes, I stopped you because it was suicide.”

“We needed to know if they had him,” she argued in a whisper shout. “Time was of the essence. No telling what they’d do to a little boy.”

“Initiate him into the pack. That’s what they would have done.” He paused as I wondered what he meant by initiate. “You know what they would have done to you if you’d been caught?” The silence was loud as Anna refused to answer. “They would have beat you, raped you, and done their best to break you.” I heard his throat clear as I leaned further out the window to hear his words. “You are a magnificent wolf, Anna, but you are just one wolf. You can’t go against a pack like that alone.”

“I just wanted to see if I caught his scent. If they’d come onto our land. Grabbed him.”

“I can appreciate that, but this isn’t the place for lone wolf shit,” Trent told her.

Anna snorted, “Said by the only lone wolf here.”

His next words were so low I almost missed them. “Not by choice.”

“I came to check on Jess and Monster,” Anna said quietly. “Then I’ll go home.”

“I’ll take you home.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I wasn’t asking,” he said sharply and I heard Anna suck in a sharp breath. “I don’t trust you and the last thing we need is you getting kidnapped. It would destroy what’s left of the Pack.”

“You act like you know us,” Anna retorted angrily. “But you’re not Pack.”

“I know. Trust me, I’ve been made well aware I’m not Pack, but you know what? I can see things just a bit clearer than you because of that fact. And I’m going to do my damndest to make sure you or anyone else doesn’t destroy it because of stupidity.” Anna made a choked sound and he sighed. “Let’s go. You can check on the kid in the morning.”

Only a light scrape against the concrete told me they’d left as I eased my window shut. I glanced once more at Monster, grateful they’d found him and Trent had stopped Anna from making a dangerous mistake. I crossed to the bed and smoothed a dark copper lock off his forehead. There had to be a way to fix the broken bonds that surrounded us. Otherwise, I was afraid we might not survive the coming days.

The morning light streaming through my window caused me to blink. It took a second to realize it was late, really late. I shot up as I checked the time on my alarm, wondering why it hadn't gone off.

"Your dad turned it off."

I'd like to say the reason I didn't shriek was because I'd instinctively known he was there, but that would be a lie. Instead, I blinked at him bleary eyed and repeated dumbly, "He did?"

The brilliant smile he gave me did nothing to get my brain working as I stared at him in stunned admiration. It wasn't often I got a full smile from him and my barely awake brain didn't know what to do with it.

"I think I like seeing you first thing in the morning," he murmured, bracing his forearms on the bed as he leaned over me. His lips skimmed my cheek and I frantically tried to decide if bad breath was worth the risk when he added, "You're much quieter than I expected."

I smacked his chest and exhaled right in his face, deciding he deserved a shot of morning breath after that comment. His chest rumbled as he rolled over onto the bed next to me.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" I asked rhetorically, dragging the covers back over my arms as I snuggled back into the bed. If Dad had shut the alarm off then I was taking full advantage.

"Because I'm in bed with my favorite girl?"

"Only girl," I corrected, grinning up at him.

“Only girl,” he echoed.

“And why are you in bed with me and not at school?”

“It’s Friday,” he offered in explanation, crossing his arms behind his head as he laid back and giving me a great view of his biceps.

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“Okay, then, why am I in bed and not at school?”

“Your Dad thought it might be a good day to play hooky since you were up so late last night,” Dom answered, cutting his eyes toward me as he literally hogged almost every square inch of my bed.

“Dad? My Dad? Decided it was okay for me to play hooky after losing Monster.”

“You didn’t lose him,” Dom chided and I tensed. “You didn’t. Your Dad said so. I say so. Trent said so.” I crinkled my nose, not quite ready to let the guilt go. “Anyway, don’t you have a party to get ready for?” His question was an obvious bid to change the subject and it worked.

I groaned, staring up at the ceiling and wondering if I could pretend to be sick. “That’s tonight,” I said flatly.

“Yup.”

“Frick.”

He chuckled, shifting so he faced me and using a finger to turn my head to look at him. “It’s a good thing you’re doing.”

I chuckled mirthlessly. “If no one kills each other or calls the cops.”

“I think the odds are in our favor,” he said, his enigmatic smile making eyes narrow.

“What do you know that I don’t know?”

“That my dad may have been sworn in as the acting Sherriff this morning while you were being a lazy bones.”

“Okay, I object to being called a lazy bones and what the hell?” My question ended on a shriek and at Dom’s hasty glance at the door, I realized his visit was completely unauthorized. “Also, are you trying to get on my Dad’s bad side?” I dropped my voice to an almost intelligible hiss but he heard me. He placed a fast kiss against my lips before rolling off the bed right as the door swung open.

Dad stood there, glaring suspiciously around the room. “Who were you talking to?”

“No one,” I managed, fighting not to look at the side of the bed where Dom laid.

“I heard you shout, Bunny,” Dad informed me.

“Yes,” I agreed to his surprise. “You did because I saw what time it is and how late I am.”

“Oh,” he replied, relaxing slightly at my explanation and I ignored the twinge of guilt at how easily I lied to him. “I turned your alarm off.” I barely repressed saying, “I know,” and giving myself away as I nodded and tried to look surprised. “I figured you deserved a break. You’ve been a trooper through all of this, especially with your brother.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said, swallowing back choking amounts of guilt as I ignored the presence of my boyfriend...mate?...hiding next to my bed. “I appreciate it.”

“I’m making pancakes with chocolate chips,” he offered, hovering next to the door as he made to leave.

“Because they look like cookies?” I added, smiling and he nodded sheepishly.

“It seemed healthier than feeding him cookies for breakfast.”

“Pro parenting tip right there, Dad,” I teased him. “I’ll join you in a minute.”

I waited until the door shut before rolling to the side of the bed and looking over the edge. Dom was squashed half under the bed, his legs drawn up comically as he attempted to fit in a space two sizes too small for him. I pressed my lips together, fighting a smile and he sighed.

“Go ahead and laugh.”

I did, pressing my face into the pillow to muffle the sound of my laughter and swiping away tears as he straightened to his full height.

“I should go. You have pancakes to eat.”

“You could always go around and knock,” I offered and he considered it for a moment before shaking his head.

“Too suspicious.” He gestured to the window. “I wanted to take a walk in the woods anyway.” The way he said it made me think it was more than an early morning stroll.

“Why?” I asked curiously as I sat cross legged on the bed.

“Your brother’s scent was all over the woods last night.” My forehead wrinkled as I tried to figure out what he meant. “More than if he’d just wandered off,” Dom clarified meaningfully.

“He’s been in the woods before?”

“Yeah, multiple times.”

“But why? How?”

“His scent was mingled with another.”

“Someone was walking around the woods with him?”

“Yeah, female.”

“Wren?” I cried in disbelief and he gestured for me to keep my voice down. “Sorry. Wren?” I whispered more quietly but no less disbelief. “You think she’s been taking him walking in the woods?”

“I can’t be sure without checking her scent, but if she’s the one taking care of him....I don’t know who else it might be.”

“But why would she take him out there?”

“I don’t know, but the trails we found,” Dom paused, squatting until he was eye level with me. “Not a single one crossed a path created by the patrols.”

My lips parted as his meaning sank in. “She’s avoiding them.”

He nodded, his expression serious. “We would have found him a lot sooner if his scent hadn’t been everywhere. It could explain why he was comfortable wandering into the woods at night by himself.”

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“We need to talk to Wren,” I murmured, absently rubbing my arms. He nodded, curling his fingers around my hand, stilling it.

“I’m going to follow the trails. Find out how far they go.”

“How far?” I repeated and he shifted uncomfortably. “How far do you think they go, Dom?”

He met my eyes and sighed. “It’s possible they go all the way to the Hanley border.”

Chapter Ten

I managed to get through breakfast, Dom’s words haunting me as I pretended the chocolate chip pancakes we ate were giant cookies instead. Monster’s giggles eased some of my fear as I fought to keep a happy face. Why had Wren been taking him into the forest? Where were they going? What were they doing?

I was desperate to talk to her but when Dad gave me that helpless look he’d perfected, I knew what he was going to ask before he even spoke.

“Can you watch Monster,” I stated at the exact same time as him. He smiled sheepishly, scratching his nose.

“How did you know?”

“I can read you like a book, Dad,” I answered, smiling at him fondly. “Why can’t Wren watch him?” I asked, fishing for information.

“She is going into town with some of the others to buy party supplies,” he replied absently, his mind already at the office and working on expense ratios and spreadsheets.

“Oh, that’s a little surprising.”

“Why?” His head came up, something in my question sparking his curiosity and I shrugged hastily.

“I just thought she’d be watching Monster instead of shopping. She seems to take her responsibility seriously.”

“She does. I actually told her she should go. Get out a little more.”

She seems to get out plenty, I thought privately, but gave Dad a bright smile. “You’re right and I’m here to watch Monster so it worked out perfectly.”

He beamed, obviously proud of himself and I let go of my plan to interrogate Wren.

At least for today.

Dad disappeared out the door as I turned to the little troublemaker. “Alright, Monster, you going to help me set up tables for tonight’s party?”

He stared at me speculatively. “Will there be cookies at this party?”

“Yes,” I said definitively. “More cookies than one little boy could ever eat.” His eyes widened for a second before narrowing in determination and I knew he’d accepted the challenge.

A knock on the door interrupted us and when I peeked through the peephole I was

surprised to see Sam standing there, bouncing on her heels.

“Hey,” I greeted her as I pulled the door open quickly. “I thought you’d be shopping with the others.”

She looked startled but recovered quick as she answered. “I am. Well, I’m supposed to meet up with them. I need a favor.” She spoke quickly, the words almost tumbling over one another in their rush to get out.

“Sure,” I answered slowly, feeling like something was off but not sure what. “What do you need?”

“Can you watch Nicky for me?”

“Uh, yeah, sure, I guess so,” I stuttered out as she let out a relieved sigh.

“Great!” She scooted backwards, waving as Nicky stood next to the door. “Bye, be good for Aunt Jess, Nicky.”

She disappeared around the corner as I glanced down at Nicky and muttered under my breath, “Aunt Jess?” He shuffled his feet, shoulders hunched and I knew I needed to do something to put him at ease.

“Hey, Nicky,” I said cheerily. “We were just going to go play out back.”

“I thought you said we were setting up for the party,” Monster accused, crossing his arms.

“We can do both,” I told him, locking the door and following where Sam had disappeared. I scanned the parking lot and field but she was nowhere in sight. “Nicky, do you know where your mom was going?”

He shook his head, bashful in my presence and I smiled gently. “Okay.”

“I thought your name was Bunny,” he whispered and I laughed.

“I answer to a lot of names,” I informed him, using the hand I held to twirl him around. He giggled, relaxing, as I rattled them off. “Jess, Bunny, Sissy, and now Aunt Jess.”

I took a deep breath as the title rolled around my head, suddenly feeling way to young to be someone’s aunt.

I like it, Dom’s thought echoed in my head, amusement coating it.

You would, I retorted. Find anything?

She was meeting someone.

What? The thought came out more like a shriek and I felt him flinch. Sorry.

Her trail goes all the way to the Hanley border. He paused and I sent an impatient thought his way. She didn’t cross to Hanley land. Whoever she met stayed on Hanley land and she stayed on Navarre. I can’t get a good read on the scent though.

So, Wren is meeting someone.

We don’t know for sure its Wren, he reminded me. I still need to verify its her scent.

Its hers, I replied, knowing it down to my bones. The question was who was she meeting? And why?

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Jess, the urgent note in his voice caught my attention as he continued, she knows better than to be on Pack lands without permission. She was avoiding the patrols. Keep an eye on her.

Easier said than done, I muttered. She went to town to get party supplies.

Monster? He questioned, and affection surged through me at his immediate concern for my brother.

Is with me. I glanced at him as he showed Nicky something in the dirt. I'm not letting him out of my sight until I know what the hell she's up to.

Good plan. I'm headed back to you after I check one more thing. His presence, the sense of him, disappeared then and I went to join Nicky and Monster.

I watched them for a while when it dawned on me that I had the perfect source of information playing right in front of me.

"Monster, what do you normally do with Wren?"

"We play games," he answered, pushing a truck through the grass.

"Do you play games in the woods?" I pushed, wondering if she'd told him to keep it a secret.

"Yeah," he replied and my stomach dropped. "She shows me different trees and plants and tells me what they do."

“Do?”

“Like heal and stuff. How to recognize pois...poisonous ones,” he said, stumbling over the word.

“That’s great,” I replied, forcing a smile. “Does anyone ever go with the two of you?”

Monster shook his head and I felt a spurt of relief that quickly disappeared with his next words. “Sometimes she meets someone though.”

“Meets someone? Like Sam or Trent?” I asked, trying hard to be casual. He’d clam up if he thought I wanted to know.

“No, someone else. I’ve never seen him.”

“Him? How do you know it’s a him if you’ve never seen him?” I teased, knowing he wouldn’t be able to resist telling me how he knew.

“I heard him. He talks funny,” he replied with all the attitude his five-year-old self could muster, which was a lot, I had to admit. “Wren has me sort different plants and then she leaves, but I can hear them.”

“Do you know what they talk about?”

Monster reluctantly shook his head, clearly disappointed his hearing wasn’t that good.

“Well, you’re not supposed to eavesdrop on people’s conversations,” I told him, ignoring the fact that I’d been doing a lot of that myself lately.

“She seems sad after she talks to him,” Monster added and I wondered if she’d left

someone behind, someone who wouldn't have been as welcome as the women and children.

Dom appeared at the edge of the forest then, distracting me from all thoughts of Wren as he sauntered from the woods wearing nothing but a loose pair of work out shorts. A shirt dangled from his hand but he didn't bother putting it on as he came closer.

Monster waved at him happily as Nicky stared at him in awe. I remember Nicky's reaction to his grandfather Hank and could only imagine what he thought of this other giant. Dom dropped down next to me, a fine sheen of sweat covering him even as I huddled inside a hoodie.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Nope," he replied, slinging his arm around my shoulders and tugging me closer. "I can keep you warm though." I snuggled in because he was better than any heater. His head ducked close to my ear as he whispered, "Is that –" His voice cracked slightly and he paused to clear his throat, letting the next part come through our mental link. Nicky?

"Yes," I answered out loud. "You want to meet him?"

"Sam?"

I hesitated, wondering how much I wanted to worry him. "She went to town. Asked me to babysit." I went with simple since he was about to meet his nephew for the first time. "Nicky, come meet your Uncle Dom."

Nicky's expression held a hint of fear, but he was a Navarre so he came over with only a slight hesitation. Monster followed him, looking awed that the younger boy had such a cool uncle. "He's your uncle? Cool."

“Hi,” Dom kept his voice gentle as he held out his hand, letting Nicky make the choice whether or not to take it. “I’m Dom. Your mom is my sister.”

Nicky nodded minutely, studying Dom with wide eyes. “She told me about you,” he replied, setting his hand in Dom’s larger one. The difference was comical, but Dom shook it gently, treating Nicky as an equal.

“Did she?” Dom swallowed hard, studying the little boy so hard I knew he was memorizing his features and knowing Dom probably his scent so he would be able to find him if it was ever necessary.

“She said you were as big as a tree,” Nicky giggled. “And that you were nothing more than a shadow when you turned into a wolf.”

“She’s right,” Monster said enthusiastically. “His fur is black. You can’t even see him at night. Except his eyes.” Dom nodded, tapping the skin next to his eyes.

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“The eyes are a warning.” Dom smiled wolfishly as the boys leaned forward eagerly. “To run.” They leapt back as Dom snapped his teeth, their fear turning to giggles as he growled for their entertainment.

He wrestled with them until Monster begged him to shift into a wolf. Dom glanced at me, a question in his eyes and I shrugged. It didn’t matter to me if he shifted for them. I could understand Monster’s fascination. He’d begun to hero worship Dom and knowing one day he’d be able to do the same thing had to be thrilling.

“Alright,” Dom agreed, throwing me a smirk as he hooked his thumbs on the waistband his shorts. “I’ve only got the one pair,” he told me nonchalantly.

I waved my hand with the loftiness of a queen. “Proceed. I find myself curious as well.” I tucked my hands under my butt after that so I wouldn’t chicken out and cover my eyes. I’d learned that nudity among shifters was normal, it just wasn’t my normal. Add in the fact that it was Dominic and I could excuse the fact that my breath came a little faster.

He arched his eyebrow at my comment, but I kept my gaze steady and he nodded, a hint of admiration in his eyes. He turned slightly, giving me a side view as his shorts dropped, and my lips parted as a gasp escaped. He was the same golden color all over, and while I’d never considered myself a fan of butts, his was the exception. The taut buns flexed as he glanced over his shoulder at me, smirking when my gaze stayed glued to the magnificent display.

The air seemed to shimmer around him and I watched in awe as a huge black wolf shook himself. There was definitely magic in the shift, I decided as the boys made

admiring noises. They stood still, uncertain how to approach the massive wolf whose head stood higher than their own. Dom looked at me, those familiar yellow eyes all too human as he shot me a pleading glance.

How? The thought pierced through me with a sense of helplessness. He didn't want to scare them even though they'd asked to see him shift.

Lower yourself, I told him. You're big. It's intimidating.

Do I intimidate you? The question came at me with the speed of a freight train and I sat stunned as he lowered his belly to the ground in front of the boys. Jess?

No, I answered, my response automatic. But I knew it was true. He didn't intimidate me. He never had even when he'd tried. The boys crept closer to Dom, pushing their fingers into his fur and he rolled over, showing his belly as his back wiggled in the grass. I snorted back a laugh. Yeah, I'm super intimidated by you, Dom.

He gave a low rumble, the sound more contented than menacing as the boys sat next to him, petting the wolf that could snap both their necks in an instant if he wanted.

I watched as he rolled around with them, letting them clamber all over him. I was distracted when a familiar person started jumping and waving their hands over their head trying to catch my attention. I glanced at Dom but he seemed to be occupying the boys so I stood up and walked over.

"Is there a reason you couldn't come over?" I asked pointedly, glancing back as her son rolled over Dom's back.

"I'm not ready," she whispered, never taking her eyes off her brother as he played with his nephew for the first time.

“He’s going to be at the party tonight.” I paused. “Your dad too.”

“I know,” she answered, her face tight.

“Are you going to hide in your room then?”

“No,” she said sharply, finally looking at me. “You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t because you won’t tell me. Kind of like you didn’t tell me where you were going this morning.” I raised my hand. “And don’t say the store because we both know that’s a lie.”

She had the grace to look ashamed but she also didn’t answer.

“He loves you, you know.”

“I know,” she replied defensively. “Its hard.” After a few minutes of silence, she looked at me, her eyes glossy. “It was my fault. I was the one that turned my back on them. How do I ask them to forgive that?”

My eyes went back to Dom and the laughing boys tumbling over him. “I don’t think you have to ask,” I answered finally.

A van pulled into the parking lot then, cutting our conversation short when I saw who was driving. “They’re back,” I said unnecessarily.

Sam eased back, her eyes lingering on her brother for a second before she said, “I’ll go help them unload.”

I nodded, moving to rejoin the boys when I caught sight of who was in the passenger seat of the van. I stopped, slipping to the shadow of the building as I watched Anna

climb out of the van. I'd given her Trent's number earlier that week, but I hadn't realized she'd used it.

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“What are we looking at?” Dom whispered, coming up next to me as he tugged his shirt over his head.

I glanced around, asking instead of answering his question, “The boys?”

“Your dad,” he replied before pausing. “You know we sound like an old married couple.”

“Yes, that thought did occur to me,” I hissed back, not sure what to make of the warm feeling that filled my chest at the thought. I’d always prided myself on being independent and postponing marriage and kids till I was older.

Much older.

Like a decade older.

But Dom and this life had shifted something inside of me. Loosened the knot around my heart as I saw the possibility of another life.

“Anna,” I answered belatedly. “She went with Trent and the others.”

“That’s good,” Dom replied, a hint of a question in his words.

“Yeah,” I drawled slowly and Dom rubbed his hand down my back.

“What’s bothering you?”

“It was Trent’s idea. He wanted to invite her help. Asked for her number,” I admitted and Dom hummed lightly. “I told him I’d give Anna his number and let her decide.”

“So, you’re surprised she called him?”

“A little,” I said with a nod, not mentioning the argument I’d heard them have the night before because I knew Dom would be upset if he found out where Anna had been headed.

“Trent’s a good guy,” Dom said casually. A little too causally, I thought as I glanced up at him.

“I know he is, but why are you telling me this?” I asked suspiciously and he rolled his shoulders, eyes innocent.

“I just didn’t want you to worry about her being around him. That’s all.”

“Uh huh. Sure.” The idea of Trent and Anna? I spared one last glance at them, watching as she flung a roll of paper towels at his head. No way, I thought to myself, never gonna happen.

“Come on, we better go rescue my Dad before Monster sets the motel on fire.”

“It’s cinder block. We should be fine,” Dominic murmured throatily as he backed me against the motel’s cinder block wall. “I have a better idea.”

“You do?” I replied, a smile creasing my cheek as I contemplated what his idea might be. “Tell me all about it,” I flirted, my hands fitting themselves along his washboard abs, the ones currently covered to my disappointment.

“We should go interrogate Wren while the boys and your Dad are distracted,” he

replied, tilting his head to scan the parking lot and I realized he'd backed me against the building, not because he wanted to have his wicked way with me, but so he could keep an eye on the parking lot without being spotted

"Not what I had in mind," I replied with a sigh, ducking my head around his arm so I could see what he was looking at. "But okay."

"Time for that later," he promised me with a wink, skimming his hand up my side, his thumb brushing the side of my breast tantalizingly.

"Or now?" I begged breathlessly, not an ounce of shame in me as he cupped his hand around my hip.

"Later," he replied firmly, right before pressing a hard kiss to my lips and pulling back entirely too soon. Eyes dark he muttered, "Definitely later."

He started walking then and it was a good thing he still had his arm around my waist because I'd forgotten how my legs worked.

Heart thudding a little harder than necessary, we made our way to Wren's door. Dom knocked politely, making me lift my eyebrows and he shrugged. "No need to put her on guard." I acknowledged that with a tilt of my head as I skimmed the parking lot. Most of the women had disappeared back to their rooms but a few remained, helping Sam, Trent, and Anna unload.

Dom knocked again when there was no response, and then eyed me. "What's your stance on breaking and entering?"

"I'm open to it," I answered, leaning around him to make sure the coast was clear. "But is it still breaking and entering when you have the key?" I dangled the massive key ring I'd shoved in my pocket earlier just in case.

“No, actually I don’t think it is,” he replied, a glint of admiration and something else in his eyes. “I have to ask, where were you hiding those?”

I smirked, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I really would,” he echoed, practically stepping on my heels as I slipped through the door I’d just unlocked. The already small motel room shrank by half in his presence and I studiously avoided glancing at the neatly made bed. I would never admit how many fantasies I had that involved Dom and one of the empty motel rooms. It was an embarrassingly high number.

“What are we looking for?” I whispered, taking the room in with one quick sweep. It matched the rest of the motel rooms on this floor, the layouts all the same. Bed, desk, TV, with a bathroom on the left and a small kitchenette on the right.

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“No idea,” he rumbled, walking forward, and inhaling deeply. “She’s definitely the one wandering the woods.”

“I didn’t really need confirmation on that,” I muttered, seeing a dog-eared romance novel on the nightstand, but nothing else. Wren was neat, I’d give her that. I eased open the closet door to find what few clothes she had hung carefully.

“There’s nothing in here,” Dom called from the bathroom, poking his head out. “Don’t women usually have a bunch of stuff?” I lifted my eyebrows and he hastily added, “I mean Sam always did.”

“Mmhmmm,” I hummed, ducking around him to check out the space. “They didn’t have a lot when they came. That could be why.” I shifted to leave the miniscule bathroom, but Dom’s broad chest blocked the door. I went to squeeze past him and wound up wedged between him and the doorway.

A flash of white teeth accompanied his comment, “Stuck?”

I wiggled, my chest rubbing against his, and felt him groan. My nipples puckered at the sensation and I stilled.

“Good idea,” he muttered, his hand coming to my hip as a hard bulge pressed against my stomach. “You’re going to kill me.”

“But what a way to go,” I quipped, trying to lighten the mood before I begged him to throw me on the bed and have his wicked way with me.

“Wicked way?” He repeated carefully and I stared at him as my mouth made a little O.

“I said that out loud?” I asked faintly and he shook his head. “I thought it,” I whimpered, not sure which was worse. He nodded, his hand tightening on my hip as I tried even more desperately to unstick myself.

“Stop,” he ground out, and I reacted to the command in his voice, stilling instantly. He inhaled and exhaled slowly, as I attempted not to twitch. I could feel the bulge against my stomach, bigger and harder than it had been a moment ago, and fought to be a statue. Statue, statue, I chanted to myself internally.

“Statue?” Dom sounded more amused than grumbly so I chanced a glance up to find him staring down at me, eyes glittering.

“Trying to practice not moving,” I answered with a short nod.

“By chanting statue to yourself,” he clarified and I nodded again, placing my hands against the wall behind my back so I wouldn’t be tempted to rub them all over him. “We’re definitely going to have a talk about your fantasies but right now I think we need to leave,” his voice dropped as he lowered his head next to mine, “Before I forget this isn’t the time or place and throw you on that bed and have my wicked way with you.” My knees weakened and only his body and my hands braced on the wall kept me from melting in a puddle.

I exhaled shakily, nodding, and he shifted sideways, back into the bathroom as I practically fell into the motel room, catching myself on the Formica countertop at the last second. I braced myself, giving my knees a chance to remember their job and glanced over my shoulder at Dom. He stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the ceiling as he mouthed something silently.

“Dom?” I questioned hesitantly.

“Go,” he commanded, one hand flickering to the door. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

I didn’t argue, hightailing it out of the room. I stopped a couple doors down, leaning on the wall as I tried to catch my breath.

I’m sorry.

The words brushed softly against my mind, regretful and apologetic.

I don’t have as much control as I think I do, he added and I smiled, tilting my head back against the wall, eyes closing as we conversed.

You have more control than me, I teased and felt him groan mentally.

Not helping.

I’ll be good, I answered contritely. Girl scout’s honor, I tacked on, fingers crossed behind my back.

“Somehow I doubt that,” he murmured next to me, his finger tapping my crossed ones. “Little liar.” He smirked at me through heavily lidded eyes. “Were you even a Girl Scout?”

“Once,” I muttered, and caved under his stare. “Okay, so it was only like one meeting but it still counts.”

He hummed noncommittally and I attempted to change the subject. “So, we didn’t learn anything,” I said, checking the area to make sure no one saw us leave Wren’s room.

“Oh, I learned a few things,” Dom replied and I glanced at him inquiringly. “Nothing about Wren but more than a few things about you,” he teased, winking at me. My cheeks heated and I prayed they weren’t as red as they felt.

“I suggest you forget anything you think you learned,” I retorted, striving for calm as we went around the building. A second later, he’d pressed me against the rough brick, his hand cupping the back of my head as he kissed me thoroughly.

“Nope,” he murmured, lifting his head only far enough to speak. “Not a chance.” He pressed another hard kiss against my lips, pulling back slightly before groaning and kissing me again. Ragged breaths escaped me as he pressed hot kisses along my neck, and I arched, desperate for his mouth to find the throbbing mark.

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He hovered, panting, as I clung to him.

“Dom,” I whispered and he tore himself away. I stared at him stupefied, “Why?”

“We need to be more careful,” he muttered, not looking at me as he fought for control.

“Careful?” My brain felt like mush, incapable of processing thoughts, as my body demanded more, more of Dom’s mouth against my skin.

“The mark...it gets stronger every time,” he rasped, his fingers curled into fists. “Every touch, kiss, it strengthens the connection.”

“That’s good?” I offered, not seeing the problem.

“It’s risky,” he confided, his eyes dark as he stood there, tension radiating from him. “Every time the need gets stronger, and my control slips a little more.” He braced his arms on the wall, caging me in with his body. “I want you. You know that. But you can’t understand how strong the call is to make you mine. Completely mine,” he gritted out, almost growling the last part, and liquid heat flowed through me. He panted and I understood just how close he was to losing all control when he leaned down and inhaled. “I can smell you. Almost taste you on my tongue. It’s intoxicating. It calls to me.” His fingers dug into the bricks above my head and I heard pieces hit the ground as it crumpled under the force.

“What can I do?” I whispered, finally comprehending how precarious my position was as he fought for control. My chest ached at seeing him this way, knowing my

presence caused it, but also not ready to take the next step.

“Be still,” he ground out, jaw hard as he stared at me unblinking. “I don’t want to do anything I’ll regret.” I nodded slowly, keeping my eyes on his nose and not staring directly at him. He’d take it as a challenge right now and that wasn’t what I wanted.

“Dom! Glad I found you. We need some help setting up the tables and I have to say the ladies aren’t cutting it.” Trent’s booming voice washed over us and some of the tension drained from Dom’s body. I chanced a quick glance at Trent, seeing he’d stopped a good distance away, the damn sucker poking out one corner of his mouth as he purposely stared off to one side. “Think you can give me a hand?”

“Yes,” Dom gritted out. “Back up a little more.”

Trent took two large strides backwards, arms loose at his sides, his nose flared slightly and he shot me a startled glance, and took another step back. “Tell me what you want me to do, Dom.”

“Stay there,” he called, uncurling his fingers and releasing more dust as he straightened. He took a few shallow breaths through his mouth and managed to give me a rueful grin. “You’re in heat,” he explained and I nodded.

“Good to know,” I squeaked, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans.

“I think I’ll be okay now,” he added and I dared to look up at him. “Just don’t talk to any shifters tonight,” he ground, easing back a step. “I’m not sure I have that much control.”

“Does it get easier....being around me?” I asked, wondering how it worked, with me being in heat. He shook his head sharply, clearing his throat before he spoke.

“No, the opposite.” He brushed his thumb along my cheek, sending tingles through me. “The need only gets stronger the more we’re together, but it should be over soon.”

“Good,” I said faintly. I’d learned everything I could about ovulation after he’d told me just how strongly his wolf reacted to the signs of my fertility and I knew it lasted roughly twenty-four hours. This was new though. I’d never felt him react so strongly or myself. “It’s the mating bond, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he answered, his lips twitching as he attempted a smile. “I may have to go camping next month.” He forced himself back another step and I felt myself sway toward him, and he froze in place.

“Those tables aren’t going to set themselves up,” Trent called out, rocking on his heels as he stared off into the woods. Dom and I both blinked at the reminder he was still there and I clenched my hands together as Dom eased a little further away.

“This is harder than I thought,” I murmured, watching Dom fight for control with each backwards step. “I want to –”

“Don’t finish that thought,” Dom gritted out, lifting one finger. “Please.”

I nodded, clamping my lips shut as he finally made it to Trent’s side.

“Thanks, man,” Dom said appreciatively, clapping Trent on the back. Trent nodded, still making it a point not to glance at me as he shifted the sucker in his mouth. “I’ll see you later,” Dom called to me and I raised my hand. They disappeared and my knees gave out. I collapsed on the ground, letting the cold earth cool me down as my heart slowed its frantic pulse.

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My breathing evened out as I accepted how close I'd come to being mated against the wall of the motel. The idea wasn't as repulsive as it should have been. In fact, I would have welcomed it if my body had anything to say about it.

And that was what scared me the most.

I wouldn't have told him no.

I wouldn't have even attempted to stop him.

My body had been fully in control and it hadn't cared about consequences at all. As ridiculous as the term was, I understood what it meant when he said I was in heat. We weren't so far removed from animals, and my body wanted what he offered. Wanted to feel him against me and inside of me, wanted to be claimed and declared his. I pressed my thighs together with a whimper, my thoughts not helping as my body realized it wasn't getting what it wanted today. My head thumped against the wall as I wondered how much longer I could hold out against the mating call.

Chapter Eleven

Dusk was falling as we finished the preparations for the party. Someone had rounded up a huge grill and the scent of smoke drifted around the clearing as members of the Pack slipped from the woods. Platters began to fill the long tables as low conversation filled the air and I saw Anna's mom greet some of the braver women. A few hung back nervously, but the kids had no inhibitions. There were a few shrieks and it wasn't long before a game of tag formed.

“Looks like a success to me,” Trent said and I searched for him in the growing darkness. My passable night vision finally found him propped up against the building, chewing on a sucker stick, as he offered me a smile.

I made to move closer and he shifted away from me. “What? Do I have cooties?”

“As good as,” he chuckled, taking the stick from his mouth and pointing it at me. “You stay over there. I don’t need to get on Dom’s bad side tonight.”

I rolled my eyes at the reminder of Dom’s little command but my feet stayed where they were. “He’s in control now,” I told Trent, who laughed.

“No. He’s not,” he replied, shaking his head. “Not that I can blame him. You two are doing something most of us have never seen before.”

I glanced at him sharply. “Most of us?”

“I think he means me, my dear.”

I jumped at the sudden arrival of a newcomer, but was unsurprised when I saw who had spoken. “Gregory.”

“Jess,” he replied, inclining his head slightly.

“You haven’t died yet?” I asked the oldest member of the Navarre Pack, his face wreathed in wrinkled folds of skin.

“I’m afraid not. We’re a long lived bunch,” he answered lightly. “At least when we’re not cut down prematurely.” I sobered at his reminder of the Alpha’s death. “You are doing a good thing here,” he mentioned, waving his hand at the slowly mingling guests. “A lot has happened and our focus may not have been where it should have

been.”

I shrugged. “We all play our part. Everyone here is trying. That’s what’s important.”

“Spoken like a true Alpha’s mate,” Gregory replied and I glanced at him uneasily. “Don’t worry. I’m not one to push an agenda at a get-together,” he informed me quickly and I narrowed my eyes.

“And if you were?” I asked pointedly. “What agenda would you be pushing?”

“Sometimes we don’t know what we want until we’re presented with it,” Gregory answered cryptically, disappearing into the shadows before I could question him further. I growled in frustration as I glanced over to see if Trent had heard, but he had disappeared as well.

“Great turnout! Is there a reason there are no lights?” Leah popped up next to my shoulder, startling me.

It took a second for her question to register and when it did, I jerked my head. “Follow me.”

I headed to the side of the building, stepping lightly over several cords. Leah tripped, muttering about how dark it was, but even with my less than stellar night vision, I could easily pick out the cords in our path. I shrugged it off as I went to the outlet Trent had shown me earlier where I needed to plug the main cord. “I was waiting till it was full dark,” I murmured, plugging in the cord. Tiny white lights winked into existence, crisscrossing the yard as a chorus of “ohhs and ahhs,” filled the air.

“Sam told me they shouldn’t hurt their eyes but it’ll give us enough light to see by,” I commented absently, my attention on the twinkling lights.

“Why would it hurt their eyes?” Leah asked, puzzled, and I cursed myself. It was too easy to slip up when I was used to being around people who knew exactly what being Pack meant.

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“Um, some of them have compromised eyesight and bright light hurts them,” I stumbled through a half-assed explanation but Leah seemed to buy it.

“They’re pretty,” she offered and I nodded gratefully.

“Yeah, they are.”

“I wanted to tell you,” Leah paused, glancing around, and I wondered frantically if someone had said or done something that tipped her off. “I appreciate you inviting me. I know the Pack is super private and they don’t like outsiders, except for you, obviously, but I really appreciate you including me. Like we’re friends,” she finished in a rush, her voice low as she hunched her shoulders.

“We are friends, Leah.” I hugged her awkwardly, quickly releasing her as she tensed. “I’m glad you came. I know it can be overwhelming.” I gestured to the members of the Pack, the party almost exclusively comprised of shifters and those in the know. Even my Dad was one of them, I acknowledged.

Glancing around, it was easy to see there was something different about them. It was how they moved and the way they looked, I added reluctantly, as I saw a few eyes reflect in the darkness, a trait not possessed by normal humans.

I gripped Leah’s arm, suddenly concerned that I’d invited her here with them. “Don’t mention anything you see tonight,” I begged, not sure if I was more concerned for Leah or the Pack. “Just don’t.”

She gave me a startled glance, but nodded. “I won’t,” she promised, easing my mind

slightly as I met her clear gaze.

“Okay,” I answered, my grip relaxing as I pulled her into the party. “Let’s see if any of the food is ready.”

We headed to the tables laden with food and grabbed plates as we inspected what was offered. Someone bumped into me from behind and I tensed as I saw it was Caleb. His nostrils flared as his eyes grew bright and I stilled instinctively.

“Hey, Caleb,” Leah said brightly, smiling, but it slowly faded as he ignored her. “Okaaaay,” she drawled, turning back to the table. “Be that way.”

“You need to step back, Caleb,” I warned him. “Remember what I said.” He twitched, his fingers curling as we stood there in a wary standoff.

“I believe it involved popcorn while I tore you from limb to limb,” Dominic said conversationally as he came up behind Caleb.

Caleb jolted and my eyes closed in relief. Dom smiled tightly and I offered him a weak smile in return. “Let’s take a walk, shall we?” Dom’s voice brooked no argument and Caleb nodded, his head hanging as Dom escorted him away, a firm hand on his shoulder.

“That was weird,” Leah mentioned, looking up from the table. “That’s one of those things I’m not supposed to talk about, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I replied, my expression hard. “That’s exactly what I don’t want you to mention.”

“You should try that,” Leah suggested, completely changing topic as she pointed to a little sausage wrapped with something. “It’s amazing.” I stabbed a couple with a fork,

putting them on my plate as I wondered if anything else was going to happen tonight.

“Is something wrong?” Leah whispered, watching me carefully and I forced myself to smile.

“No,” I told her, fighting my urge to search out Dom. I hoped he didn’t take his frustration on Caleb, even though a small part of me hoped he did knock some sense into Caleb. “It’s been a weird day,” I offered as an excuse to Leah and she glanced around.

“Weirder than normal?” She asked with a grin and my mouth twisted. “Cause I have to say this is weird for me.” She bumped my shoulder. “Hanging out with you and the Pack on a Friday night? Never in a million years would have seen that coming.” I smiled involuntarily at her reference to the fact that I’d turned down pretty much every invite she’d ever issued and yet here we were at my invitation.

“Are you having fun?”

“Hell yeah,” Leah answered, beaming. “I might not be able to tell anyone, but this is awesome.” Her enthusiasm made me laugh and some of my worry eased.

We joined a table with a few other women and I caught Monster stuffing his pockets with cookies from one of the tables. I shot him a warning glare and he backed away from the table of goodies. I scanned the area for Anna, figuring Leah would appreciate a familiar face, but didn’t see her anywhere.

“Hey, Leah,” I waited until she glanced at me before continuing. “Will you be okay for a few minutes? I want to find Anna.”

“Sure,” Leah declared, smiling broadly, not put off at all by the fact that she was surrounded by people who regularly isolated themselves from those who weren’t

Pack. “Go on,” she continued, making a shooing motion. “Don’t hurry on my account.”

I eyed her for a second before slipping from my seat, the need to find Anna overwhelming. I wandered through the guests, polite nods greeting me as the men gave me a wide berth. My usual amusement at the sight was absent as I searched the faces for Anna. After a half hour, I gave up, knowing she wasn’t lost in the crowd.

“Something wrong?”

“Anna,” I answered shortly, my eyes still scanning the area restlessly and missing the way Trent straightened.

“She’s not here?”

“No, I’ve looked everywhere. I can’t find Dom either,” I growled in frustration.

“Dom is over there,” Trent answered, pointing. “Shouldn’t your super mate bond tell you that?”

I glared at him narrowly before admitting, “I’m not very good at initiating the mental link. I have to focus.”

“Which you can’t do when distracted by the fact that Anna is missing,” he concluded with a nod. “Well, how about I go search for her and you go talk to lover boy?”

“I’ve looked everywhere,” I reminded him and he tapped the side of his nose.

“I’m not looking,” he replied with a sharp smile. “Now, go ease your mate’s mind. You may not be able to initiate the bond but he can still feel your worry.” Trent twisted away, disappearing into the darkness within seconds, and it didn’t matter how hard I peered into the shadows I couldn’t spot him.

“No wonder I couldn’t find Anna,” I grumbled under my breath, stomping to where Trent had pointed Dom out, and drawing up short when I saw he wasn’t there.

“Where?”

“Is there a reason you’re talking to yourself?”

“Because everyone I’m talking to keeps disappearing?” I answered as I spun around. Dom smiled but it didn’t quite reach his eyes, which remained watchful, reminding me of a predator stalking his prey.

I stepped closer to him and watched as his chest expanded as he sucked in a lungful of air. “You’re trying to kill me,” he rumbled, taking a backwards step to match my forward one. I stopped, tilting my head, as he grimaced. “I don’t have a lot of control right now, Jess. It’s best if we keep a little distance.”

“Is that why I haven’t seen you all night?” I asked, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice. I didn’t succeed if his groan was anything to go by.

“I’m not avoiding you.”

“You sure? Cause that’s what it looks like from here.”

“Okay, maybe I am avoiding you but its only because you tempt me beyond reason.” He held up his fingers, barely spread apart. “This is how much control I have around you right now.”

I squinted, trying to see his fingers in the dim light. “Dom, there’s no space between your fingers.”

“Exactly, because I have no control,” he replied and I smiled, suddenly feeling better. “I think you enjoy my pain, temptress.”

“I have to admit, I don’t hate it,” I agreed, tucking my hands in my pocket and

rocking on my heels. “Did you kill Caleb?” I asked conversationally and he frowned.

“No. I have no desire to be Alpha,” he retorted, jerking his head toward the party.

“We took a walk and then he went back to the party.”

“And you hid in the woods?” I asked, following his gaze in time to see Caleb talking to Leah.

“I’m not hiding,” he grumbled. “I’m keeping an eye on things.” He crossed his arms over his broad chest, leaning against a convenient tree. “What have you been doing? I thought you were looking for me, but you could have used the mental link.” I flushed slightly and his finger came up, hovering over my pink cheek as if he couldn’t help himself. “Why the blush?”

“I can’t use our link all willy-nilly!”

“Willy nilly?” He echoed, barely suppressing a laugh. I huffed, not wanting to admit my own failing. “What’s going on?”

“It’s hard for me,” I burst out, crossing my arms defensively as his eyebrows lowered. “Trying to open the link.”

“Ahh,” he hummed in realization and with a quick tug pulled me in his arms. I resisted for all of a millisecond before snuggling against his rigid chest. “Sometimes that is an issue between mates.”

“I thought you didn’t have any control,” I reminded him, looping my arms around his trim waist even as I said it.

“That was before you needed comforting,” he responded, tightening his embrace as he rested his chin on the top of my head. “Totally different type of control.”

“So, I’m not the only one who has issues with the mental link?” I asked in a small voice, my feeling of inadequacy easing when he shook his head above me.

“No, Jess. You’re not the only one. It’s much easier for me because I’m used to the Pack bond. I forgot you would not have that knowledge to draw on.” He rocked us gently, his body wide enough to shield us from view.

“Whew, that makes me feel so much better,” I murmured into his chest, wiggling closer until he groaned painfully.

“Only so much control,” he ground out, pushing me away from his body forcefully. “Time out.” He leaned forward, his hands locked on his knees as he breathed in and out slowly. “Could you back up a little further, please?”

I took a big step back, watching him worriedly. “Is this helping?”

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He shook his head tensely. “Not really,” he muttered, lifting his head to give me a tight smile. “Your scent is engrained in me, but at least you’re a little further away. It’ll give me a few seconds longer to regain control should I pounce.”

“Oh,” I replied, incapable of anything more intelligent at his implied threat. “And Trent earlier? When you told him to back away?”

“To keep from ripping him apart for coming to close when you were in heat and I was so close to losing control,” he answered, his eyes watchful as I processed the information. “Can you accept this? What I am?”

He straightened as the silence lengthened. “Jess...if its too much,” he trailed off, unable to complete the thought.

My lips quirked as I raised my eyebrow. “You’ll what? Throw me over your shoulder and carry me away?” I tapped my finger on my lips. “Maybe lock me in my room until I can accept the beastly side of you?” I paused, humming to myself. “Hmmm. That one has possibilities.”

“Funny,” he said tightly as he realized I was teasing him. “Maybe I’ll tie you to the headboard of one of those motel beds,” he growled, sliding his hand around my waist and jerking me closer. “You would like that.” A sharp breath escaped me at the visual and his lips slammed down on mine, his mouth desperate as he devoured mine.

I clung to him, unable to do anything else as he caged my body against the tree, helpless under his onslaught. His mouth found the mark on my neck unerringly and when his lips sealed over it, pleasure exploded through me, eliciting a sharp cry that

only seemed to enflame him.

My hand slid over his chest until I came to the mark I'd placed over his heart and rubbed my fingers against it. He growled against my neck, the sound vibrating through my body as he hoisted me higher, spreading my legs as he nestled between them.

"Dom," I gasped as he rubbed between my legs. He ignored me, nuzzling his way to my breasts as one of his hands caressed my thigh and he rocked against my core. "Dom," I cried again, my voice barely a whimper as sensation shot through me. I wasn't sure if I was begging him to continue or warning him to stop, but it didn't matter as the loud screeching of tires cut through the clearing.

Dom reacted instantly, dropping into a crouch in front of me. He inhaled sharply and spat out, "Hanley."

My heart hammered in my chest as my body attempted to adjust to the sudden change in circumstances. I sucked in air as Dom kept me pinned between him and the tree. Rough bark poked my back as I gazed at the clearing. A couple of trucks had careened into the clearing, scattering people and overturning tables.

Caleb faced the men, head up as he stepped in front of Leah, who stared at the intruders wide-eyed. "You're not welcome here," Caleb shouted and I felt Dom tense. He glanced back at me and then toward Caleb, debating where he needed to be.

I poked him in the back and hissed, "Go protect your Alpha." He nodded, his eyes lingering on me for a second before he sauntered into the clearing, stopping at Caleb's side.

Chapter Twelve

Dom

Caleb shifted to the right, making room for me to stand next to him as we faced the Hanleys together. I fought the urge to look over my shoulder and check on Jess, not wanting to draw their attention to her.

Most of the crowd had moved until they were behind us, fear scenting the air as women gathered their children close. Those that could shift formed a line at our back, protecting the others in the Pack. The only exception was the girl Jess had invited, Leah I thought her name was. She stood frozen behind Caleb, her eyes as wide as saucers as he used his body to shield her from the Hanley pack.

I scanned the field but didn't spot Anna or Trent, and exhaled in relief. Trent knew I wanted to keep Anna as far from the Hanley pack as possible, so all I could hope was he had her distracted elsewhere.

I recognized their unofficial leader and risked opening the mental link to Jess. Find Sam, I ordered, keeping my gaze focused on the guy standing in the back of the pickup, eyeing the women hungrily.

"Is everyone having fun?" He shouted, causing several in the crowd to flinch back. A snarl escaped me, causing him to shift back involuntarily before he caught himself. Satisfaction rolled through me at the small sign of fear and I felt a flicker of amusement come from Caleb through the Pack bond.

"We were," Caleb answered, not bothering to raise his voice. "At least, until you mutts showed up." The insult had several of them snapping and growling until the lead Hanley shouted at them to shut up.

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“They let you play at being Alpha, boy?” He sneered, lip curling as Caleb’s hands fisted. I tensed, ready to intervene if Caleb lost control, but after a second, he relaxed his hands. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Leah lower her hand from Caleb’s back where she must have reminded him of her presence.

“I am Alpha,” Caleb said clearly, the words echoing over the silent yard. “And you are cowards who didn’t have the strength to face a true challenge. Instead, you shot my father in the back.” The wolves behind me shifted restlessly at the reminder, and the Hanley pack members tensed.

Remain calm, I commanded the Pack, infusing my will into the order. I didn’t have the same willpower as an Alpha would or even my father for that matter, but the other shifters ceased, awaiting further orders.

“What’s pathetic is seeing a child lead the once mighty Navarre pack,” Hanley spat. “But don’t worry,” he continued, spreading his arms out as he smiled beatifically. “I’m here to make sure you know what it’s like to have a true Alpha.”

I tensed, suspecting what was coming, as Caleb stood resolute next to me. I’ve got Sam, Jess whispered in my mind and a little of the tension eased from me. I trusted Jess to keep my big sister safe, even from herself. Any chance you want to tell me why I have her? Before I could answer Jess, Hanley spoke again.

“I challenge the Navarre Alpha for control of the pack.”

Gasps filled the air, but I could still pick out the low, keening cry of my sister as her husband challenged Caleb to a fight to the death.

Caleb lifted his head, eyes gleaming in the low glow of the overhead lights. “Challenge accepted,” he declared. Only I knew him well enough to spot the faint tremor in his hands as he curled them into fists.

Sunday, here, I pushed the thought to him urgently. As he challenged, he had the right to choose when and where, and I wanted both to be to our advantage. It would give us a day to strategize and if the fight was held on motel grounds, it fell within the jurisdiction of the sheriff, who now happened to be Hank Navarre.

“Sunday, four o’clock, right here,” Caleb called out, easing some of the tightness in my chest as he took my advice.

“Be there or be square,” a low female voice whispered under her breath, the words vaguely hysterical and I cut my gaze toward Leah to make sure she held it together.

The low whoop-whoop of a siren filled the air as a sheriff car pulled into the parking lot of the motel. Jess’ Dad stepped forward, his expression hard. “You’ve said what you came to say. Now get the hell out of here,” he ordered, apparently the one who’d called the sheriff. A few dirty looks were tossed his way, but Hanley thumped his hand on the hood of the pickup and it fishtailed out of the field and into the parking lot before the sheriff could even step from the car.

“Thank you,” Caleb muttered, sending me a sideways glance.

“Always,” I replied, clapping him on the shoulder.

“What the hell was that?” The girl, Leah, exclaimed, reminding us she was still standing there. Caleb glanced down at her and for a brief second his expression softened and I saw the boy he’d been before the Alpha died. He schooled his face and said sternly, “Nothing you need to worry about.” He paused. “Or mention,” he added hastily and she rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, I signed the NDA when I got here,” she retorted and I disguised my snort as a cough. “But seriously, what were those guys challenging you to? A duel? Are we in the medieval ages and no one thought to mention it?” She hitched a thumb behind her head. “Are all those women wearing chastity belts too?”

Caleb sighed, crossing his arms. “No, but muzzles aren’t unheard of,” he answered her, momentarily stopping her stream of questions. “And it’s need to know, and you don’t need to know,” he concluded, swiping his thumb over her nose as her mouth opened and closed in shock. He glanced at me, sending his next thought through our private link, speak with you later?

I nodded and he cut through the clustered guests easily, since they parted in front of him, eyes lowered in the face of his frown. I could feel the churning emotions fighting inside of him and knew he needed to go for a run before he could begin to plan for the coming fight. The Hanleys had stirred up memories of his father and the inadequacy Caleb couldn’t help but feel as some of the Pack rejected his ascension to Alpha.

“Nicky?” My head turned at the panicked shout, recognizing Sam’s voice as she combed through the crowd, Jess hot on her heels, calling for her son. “Nicky?”

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“He’s here,” Jess soothed, standing in front of Sam, who knocked her out of the way.

“They took him,” she shrieked, glancing around frantically, her expression so lost I knew she wasn’t actually seeing anything. “He took him. He took my baby.”

“No, he didn’t,” Jess promised, reaching for Sam’s shoulders in spite of her jerking away. “I swear, we would have seen it if they had. He’s here. We’ll find him.” Sam struggled a few moments longer before collapsing in Jess’ arms. “We’ll never escape,” she cried brokenly as Jess stared at me helplessly over her head. I shook my head, and scanned the field as Dad came up next to me.

“Nicky’s missing?” He questioned, his own sharp eyesight and height joining mine as we searched the yard for little Nicky.

“He’s here,” I murmured, fighting back a sense of unease when we didn’t quickly spot him. “We would have noticed.” Dad didn’t bother to correct me, continuing to look, but I could almost feel the reprimand. I’d been focused on Caleb and the threat the Hanleys presented. I hadn’t considered they might have an ulterior motive.

“NICKY!” Sam’s shriek was desperate as Jess kept her from falling to the ground. Others joined the search, checking the children grouped around them and studying the edge of the forest.

“He’s here,” a voice called, drawing our attention, as a man strode from around the motel, Nicky propped on his hip. I was unsurprised to see who had him as Sam ran to them, scooping Nicky into her arms.

She stumbled back from Payne, who stood there, arms still outstretched from her grabbing Nicky. She gave a little shake of her head, not speaking as she cuddled her son, and sent him a wary glare. I inhaled sharply, wondering why he'd had Nicky, but there were too many scents in the air to pinpoint Payne's specifically.

Sam clutched Nicky to her chest, backing away from Payne and then running to the motel and her room. Her sudden, fearful absence triggered the rest of the women who had been at the mercy of the Hanleys, as they all scurried to the motel, disappearing into the safety of their rooms.

"Go home," I said, my voice low but it still carried over the yard as those in the Navarre Pack slipped into the woods, following the paths toward home. Leah gave a little salute as she marched past me and I reached out to snag her arm, hauling her to a stop. "Not you," I rumbled, my eyes flicking to Jess. I jerked my head and she sighed, walking over to me.

"Words, Dom. Use your words." She shook her head. "I feel like a dog when you do that shit."

I kept my face neutral, not wanting to show how strong a hold she actually had on me in front of the few who lingered. I'm sorry, I offered mentally instead, and received an exasperated sigh.

Accepted, she grumbled. Why are you holding Leah prisoner?

It's not safe for her to go home tonight, I answered and felt a whisper of fear come from Jess. We're fine here, I reassured her. I just don't want to risk anyone on the road. They may have seen Caleb protect her.

Why did he do that? I could sense her puzzlement at Caleb's odd reaction to Leah. He'd very clearly put himself between Leah and the Hanleys which I would expect

him to do with any member of the Pack, but Leah wasn't Pack.

I don't know, I murmured. Either way, I don't want her out there tonight. It's too dangerous.

"Leah, I thought we could have a sleepover," Jess smiled but it came out more of a grimace. "I'm sure you have questions."

Leah lifted her eyebrow. "Are you going to answer them?"

Jess' breath gusted from her so hard I heard it physically and mentally. "I'll try," she countered and Leah nodded, accepting the compromise. The look Jess shot me said I owed her and I took a chance, leaning down to brush a kiss against her silky brown hair. Inhaling her scent was like a punch to the gut and only the fact that my father, her father, and Leah were standing there kept me from throwing her over my shoulder.

The smirk she threw me told me she knew exactly how she affected me and my narrowed eyes promised retribution. She didn't seem the slightest bit nervous at the sight of my glare, instead her heartbeat jumped and I sensed a shiver of excitement. A growl rumbled from me as she escorted Leah away, and Dad snapped his hand around my arm in a steely grip. I glanced down, knowing I could break his hold with ease, but years of discipline allowed me to take the help he offered. I nodded but he didn't loosen his hold until Jess had disappeared from sight.

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“It may surprise you, but I was like you once,” Dad rumbled, shaking his head. “What you have with her is special, son. Treat it with care.” I gave a short nod, embarrassed he’d seen me lose control so easily. Dad chuckled at my expression. “Trust me, I understand the difficulty,” he said knowingly and I winced, since he was talking about Mom. “But I also promised her dad you would never push his daughter into something she wasn’t ready for.” My gaze shifted involuntarily to Jess’ Dad, who had started to straighten up the overturned tables. I hadn’t forgotten how he’d faced the Hanleys and knew Jess hadn’t just inherited her shifter genes from her father, she’d also inherited his courage. “Don’t make a liar out of me,” Dad advised, giving my chest a hard thump.

I nodded, and Dad went to help Jess’ Dad pick up the party mess. Trent loped out of the woods a few seconds later and I scanned the area behind him, searching for Anna. He skidded to a stop in front of me, shaking his head. “She’s at home,” he answered before I could voice the question. “I followed her, almost to the Hanley border,” he paused as a snarl ripped out of me. “I know, trust me, I know, but she wasn’t in any danger,” Trent assured me. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to her.” I nodded, knowing it was true. Trent had sworn an oath to me that he would watch over Anna and I knew nothing but death would cause him to break it. “She wasn’t alone out there,” he continued and my gaze sharpened. “Yeah, she was following someone else.”

“Wren,” I said and Trent stared at me in surprise. “I noticed her scent the other day when Monster got lost. I verified earlier that it belonged to Wren. She was meeting someone.”

“Yeah, but we don’t know who. They were gone before we got there.”

“Did she see you?” I questioned.

“Wren or Anna?” Trent asked, unwrapping a sucker. “Anna definitely knew I was there. I swear the woman has a sixth sense when it comes to my presence. Wren didn’t notice us, but I was careful to stay downwind.”

“Good. I want to know who she’s meeting and why she’d risk crossing Navarre land to meet them.” I gave Trent a pointed look. “Without her having a chance to come up with a story for why.”

“Understood,” Trent agreed. “What’d I miss? Anna looked mighty upset but she wouldn’t tell me. She shifted and I damn near lost her before I could shift and keep up. She’s a fast little thing.”

“Frank Hanley showed up,” I replied, and Trent’s mouth dropped open and the sucker he had almost fell out.

“Sam’s ex?”

“One and the same,” I answered with a nod. “He issued a challenge.”

“Ohhhh,” Trent drew the word out slowly. “No wonder Anna was upset. Caleb –” Trent didn’t finish the thought but he didn’t need too. We both knew what could happen. “He’s going to fight him?”

“I don’t know yet,” I replied shortly. “He took off right after they left. I haven’t had a chance to talk to him.”

Trent scratched the side of his neck, choosing his next words carefully. “Do you think he can win the challenge?”

“He’s strong,” I answered, not wanting to face the real point of Trent’s question.

“Is he strong enough to kill a man?” Trent said bluntly and I eyed him silently. “He’s seventeen and we know there’s only one way a challenge like this ends.”

“I know,” I replied, the words barely audible. “And to answer your question...I don’t know.”

“You better find out,” Trent said in a low voice, cracking the sucker between his teeth as he stared into the forest where Caleb had disappeared earlier. “You better find out before it’s too late.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jess

I poked my head out the window, verifying Dom was still there before I crawled out. As my legs swung over the ledge I lost my grip and tumbled through the window, landing in a heap on top of Dom. He grunted as I sprawled over his face, his breath exhaling hotly against my thigh.

“You really want me to hump you like a dog in public, don’t you?” He growled, shoving my legs down, and pulling me into a sitting position.

“Well,” I started to speak and he clamped his palm over my mouth.

“Don’t answer that,” he gritted out, and it was only the hint of pleading I heard that had me complying. I nodded and he uncovered his hand from my mouth.

“Kinky,” I told him, smiling when he eyed me narrowly. “You have hidden depths,” I teased him and he let out a snort, resting his head against the wall behind us.

“I don’t actually,” he admitted, rolling his head slightly so he could see me. “What you see is what you get. Flaws and all.”

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“Guess it’s a good thing I admire a man with flaws,” I countered, bumping his shoulder. “Domineering, opinionated, and don’t get me started on the shedding,” I continued, ticking them off as I said them.

He covered my hand as he leaned over and placed a soft kiss on my lips. He pulled back slightly, smiling, as I stared at him dazedly. He leaned in again, pressing more gentle kisses on my mouth and jaw before pulling away with a low groan.

A sigh gusted from me as he moved slightly, putting more space between us. “Good kisser,” I added thoughtfully and he glanced at me.

“Good?”

“Great?”

He raised an eyebrow and I grabbed his face, peppering him with kisses as I said, “Fantastic, magnificent, excellent, toe curling, forget where I am, amazing kisser.”

“Better,” he acknowledged, cupping my jaw as he held me back from continuing to kiss him. “But let’s not push my control past the breaking point today, okay?”

I eyed him for a moment before giving a casual shrug. “Fine by me.”

“Leah still asleep,” he asked, glancing up at the window we sat underneath and I nodded.

“She had questions,” I told him. “A lot of questions.”

“You told her about us,” he stated and I wiggled guiltily before nodding. “I’m not upset. She’s not the first human to know.”

“Like me,” I replied, and grew confused when he shook his head.

“Not like you,” he corrected. “She’s fully human. You have the shifter gene. The ability to bear shifter children. You were never normal.”

“It felt like I was,” I muttered.

“But you weren’t,” Dom pointed out. “She is and because she is, she has no vested interest in keeping our secret.”

“I don’t think she’ll tell anyone,” I offered, wanting to ease some of the stress emanating off him. “She was curious but not in a weird way,” I lifted my hands at my less than helpful explanation.

“I trust you, Jess,” he replied and warmth bloomed in my chest, making me forget for a second that we were sitting in the cold. “If you consider her trustworthy, then so do I.”

“I put her life at risk,” I confessed, the words barely a murmur in the crisp air. “I invited her. They would never even know she existed if I hadn’t brought her here.”

“You couldn’t have known the Hanleys would show up. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time.” I couldn’t meet his eyes and he tilted my chin up. “Don’t hold yourself responsible. They may not have even registered her presence.” He ducked his head, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip as he stared at me solemnly. “Besides, we have bigger concerns.”

I lifted my head at the worry in his voice and he sighed. “No one has seen or heard

from Caleb since last night.” His jaw ticked and I smoothed my finger over the rock hard surface. “He said we’d talk later but I can’t even reach him through the mental link.”

“Is that normal?” I asked hesitantly.

“No,” he said shortly before easing his voice. “It’s not impossible, but he’s never done it to me,” Dom admitted.

“Maybe he just needs to think without interruption?” Dom shot me a glance and I shrugged, “We can hope, right?”

“We can, but he needs to get back online,” Dom grumbled, his expression serious.

“What’s going on?”

“Council meeting,” he answered flatly. “And Caleb has to be there.”

My forehead wrinkled at the news. I’d witnessed a meeting of the elders once before when I’d gone to their small community to warn Dom about the Hanleys, but I wouldn’t consider that a council meeting.

Dom recognized my confusion and explained, “The Pack as a whole will meet in the Pack House to discuss the challenge and how they want to proceed.”

“Caleb accepted the challenge,” I reiterated, my voice a tad desperate. “He’ll fight.”

Dom’s face tightened further if that was even possible and my heart dropped. “If Caleb loses,” he paused, fighting back some strong emotion, “The entire Pack is at risk.”

“Do you think he’ll fail?”

Dom’s eyes closed as he took a deep breath. “It’s a fight to the death, Jess.”

“If Caleb doesn’t fight, then who does?” I asked, trying and failing to keep my voice from trembling. His eyes popped open as he reached for my hands. I curled them into fists, but he just wrapped his palms around my clenched fists.

“That would be decided by the elders, but we both know,” he stopped, glancing down and I completed the sentence.

“It would be you.”

“I’m not going to die,” he promised and a humorless chuckle escaped me. “Jess, I’m a strong fighter.” I tugged my hand from his grip and placed my finger over his lips.

“I know you’re an amazing fighter, but do you think I want you to have to kill a man?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” he replied wearily, acknowledging the two Hanley men he’d killed protecting me.

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“Yeah, but they weren’t Nicky’s father or Sam’s ex,” I reminded him, watching the skin around his eyes tighten minutely. “She may not love him, and she may actually want to kill him herself, but you would have to carry that burden.”

“I will do whatever is necessary to protect you and this Pack,” Dom swore, the steel in his tone sending a flutter through me. “If Caleb –”

“If Caleb what? Won’t fight, can’t do it? Are you going to give him the chance?” I was honestly curious by Dom’s answer. My impression was the elders didn’t want to chance Caleb losing, but it was Dom’s opinion that mattered to me. And to Caleb, I thought.

“I’ve always supported Caleb. This is no different,” Dom said stoutly. “He’s my brother, my Alpha, my friend.” He swallowed thickly. “I believe in him.”

“Then I think everything will be okay,” I said, smiling softly as I leaned forward to kiss Dom’s cheek, watching as Caleb disappeared back into the forest. He’d heard what he needed to hear.

“Do you think it was enough?” Dom whispered against my cheek and I nodded. “I wish,” he broke off and I smoothed my hand through his dark hair.

“We all wish,” I answered, knowing none of us wanted Caleb to go through the challenge but also knowing there was nothing else that could happen. “What time is the meeting?”

“A couple of hours,” Dom replied, lacing his fingers with mine as he helped me up.

“Have you had a chance to check on Sam yet?”

“My next stop,” I commented, tightening my fingers when he attempted to pull away. “I think you should join me.” Dom’s gaze was reluctant but I didn’t relent. “She’s going to dodge you until you force her hand.”

“You think today is the day?”

“Better today than tomorrow.”

“What if she slams the door in my face?”

I patted the large bulge in my pocket. “I have keys. Also, I’ve seen what you’re capable of. I’m pretty sure you could knock the door down if necessary.”

He winced, scrubbing his hand over his head as he replied, “Let’s hope it’s not necessary.”

“Have you seen Trent?” I asked curiously and he shook his head. “He was supposed to find Anna for me last night.”

“He did find her,” Dom answered and I glanced at him curiously. “She was in the forest, tracking Wren.”

“Did she find out who Wren is meeting?”

Dom shook his head, “Trent says they got there too late. He escorted Anna home.”

“I’m sure Anna appreciated that,” I said under my breath.

“She should,” Dom said sharply, his tone surprising me. “She takes too many risks.

The Hanleys know about her now. She's valuable and I won't take the chance of something happening to her." He eased up slightly at my shocked expression. "Trent feels the same way."

"I never meant that she shouldn't be escorted," I tried to explain, "Just that I know she feels she doesn't need the protection, and she takes exception to it."

"I can accept her anger if it means she's safe," Dom rumbled, his overbearingly protective side showing itself.

"Shouldn't Caleb be equally concerned?" I asked lightly and Dom grimaced. His expression forced me to ask, "Is he becoming the Alpha or just playing at it, Dom?"

"It's a heavy burden for any man, much less a grieving teenager," he answered, avoiding the question as we came to a stop at Sam's door. "He needs time and the elder's acceptance."

Dom's words reminded me of Gregory's cryptic remark. "Gregory said something to me last night. Do you know his thoughts on Caleb?"

"My impression is he supports Caleb as Alpha," Dom answered. My forehead crinkled. "Why?" He questioned after seeing my expression.

"I'm not sure. I just feel like Gregory has his own agenda," I replied slowly, as I acknowledged the idea for the first time.

"We can speak with him this afternoon," Dom said quietly as he faced the door his sister hid behind. "You think she'll talk to me?"

"I don't know but its time she listened to you at least," I answered honestly and he rapped on the door.

It took a minute before we heard the shuffle of a shoe against the floor and I knew she had checked the peephole when I heard, “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Yeah, but I want to talk to you,” Dom rumbled, giving two sharp taps to the door. “You owe me that much, Sam.”

“Where’s Jess?”

“Right here,” he answered, shifting so I was in sight.

“You too scared to face me alone?” She taunted through the door, her voice too shaky to be taken seriously.

“She has a key,” Dom said simply. “I’m not going away this time, Sam. You don’t have to explain anything to me. I love you,” his voice thickened and I had to blink a couple of times. “I just want my big sister back.”

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A loud scraping noise preceded the door flying open. “I’m sorry, Dominic,” she cried, throwing herself at him. He rocked back at the force but managed to stay upright as he wrapped his arms around her. “I’m so sorry for all of it.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Sam. I’m just glad you’re home.” He patted her back as I lowered my gaze to my feet, rocking back and forth.

“I’m going to go,” I murmured, pointing to the stairwell. Nicky’s head popped out at that moment and I offered him my hand. “Want to get some breakfast while your Mom and Uncle Dom talk?” He nodded, one finger hooked inside his cheek as he watched his Mom cry all over Dom. “She’s fine,” I reassured him. “Happy tears. You’ll understand when you get older.” He nodded solemnly, popping his finger out of his mouth and placing the damp digit in my hand. “Come on. We’ll wash our hands before we eat.”

Thank you.

The words caressed my mind, more emotion behind them than I could process without bursting into tears of my own.

You’re welcome, I replied, ducking my head so he wouldn’t see the dampness in my eyes as Nicky and I walked past them.

Chapter Fourteen

“We’re going to be late,” I declared, shooing Monster ahead of me as Dad juggled his keys, phone, and the door behind us. Trent nodded to me as we flew past him. He’d

agreed to stay behind and keep an eye on the motel. I thought it was mainly because he wasn't sure he'd be welcome at the Pack House.

"Do you really think we need to be there?" Dad asked again, jogging to catch up to us as I hotfooted it to the path in the woods.

"Yes," I stressed, slowing so he could catch up as we reached the canopy of trees. "I'm with Dominic and Monster is a..." I stuttered to a stop as I realized no one had told Dad.

"A shifter?" He mentioned sardonically, shoving his glasses up his nose as he stuck his hands in his pockets. "Yes, I'm aware."

"How? Who?" My thoughts short-circuited at seeing how calmly he was taking the news.

"Monster told me," Dad answered as we watched him wander down the path ahead of us. "He seemed quite proud of himself." I chuckled, easily imagining Monster strutting like a rooster as he told Dad he was a big bad wolf shifter. "Wren confirmed it." He worried his lip as he strode along side of me and I waited for him to decide what he wanted to say. "I'm the reason. My genes are what make you a...", he paused before clearly saying, "A shifter mate." My laugh interrupted him.

"You can say breeding female, Dad. I've come to terms with it."

"I haven't," he declared, shaking his head. "And Monster is a shifter. Are you sure?" He glanced at me so optimistically that I hated to shatter the hope staring me in the face but there was no point denying it.

"We're sure." I nodded to where Monster had stopped to examine something on the ground. "He knew the moment he met Dom that he was different. He can smell them

and Dom confirmed that he's a shifter."

"It's a good thing your Mom sent him to us then." He frowned. "I still can't believe she sent him via courier."

"Better than the bus," I muttered. "He would have destroyed a bus."

Dad gave me a sideways glance. "Good point."

"It's going to be better for him. Easier," I murmured watching Monster pocket a leaf he'd picked up. "He'll grow up knowing he belongs." Dad wrapped his arm around my shoulder and I leaned into him. "He'll grow up with others like him. Be a part of the Pack."

"And you, Bunny?" I felt his gaze on the top of my head, but I didn't look up. "Do you feel like you belong here?"

"Yeah," I answered thickly. "I do." I squeezed his waist before stepping away. "For the first time in a long time, I'm not biding my time until I leave. I'm not waiting for college or my life to begin. It's here and it's now."

"This fight...is it Caleb's fight or Dominic's?"

"It's the Alpha's," I replied and he hummed. "Caleb," I spit out. "Caleb wants to fight. Dom supports him."

"That should make you feel better," Dad said carefully. "That Caleb is fighting and not Dom."

"If the Council supports the decision." I rubbed my hands together, the temperature low enough I wished I'd remembered gloves. "They don't think Caleb is ready."

“I can’t imagine what’s going through that young man’s mind. He’s grieving for his father, responsible for an entire community, and now he’s expected to defend it without their support.”

“It’s kind of depressing when you put it like that,” I mumbled, stuffing my numb fingers in my back pockets. “Dom supports him.”

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“I doubt it’s the same. Especially if those that don’t support Caleb wish to replace him with Dom. There has to be some animosity there. Intended or not.” Dad stopped speaking as we came to a break in the forest where small wooden houses sat ringed in a large clearing. To our left stood the Pack House, a large community room set up like an amphitheater, where people were milling around outside waiting for the time to enter.

Dom? I pushed the thought out, hoping proximity would help my struggle with initiating the mental link.

Inside with the elders. Aggravation coated the thought but it wasn’t directed at me. They’re being foolish, he continued, his thoughts harsh.

Caleb?

Not here, the words ground out of him and I knew it was part of the reason for his frustration.

I can find him, I offered and felt his hesitation. He wasn’t sure if he should take me up on the offer but didn’t have a better idea. I’ll find him, I promised, taking the decision out of his hands.

Check the treehouse behind my house, he suggested right before our connection broke.

“Dad, I need to go,” I said hurriedly, already a few steps away. “Don’t lose Monster,” I chided and he nodded, having the grace to look slightly chagrined at needing the

reminder.

I headed to the small shotgun house on the outside perimeter of the clearing, easily remembering the place where I'd stayed after Dom had plucked me from the side of the road when I'd escaped the Hanleys. The treehouse I was less certain about but I had to try and find it. Caleb needed to take responsibility before the elders decided to strip him of his Alpha position permanently.

I slowed as I moved around the house searching for a treehouse. Nothing stuck out at me, at least until I found a faint path behind the wood pile. I hesitated, wanting to check in with Dom before I followed the dark and creepy little trail, but I also didn't want to come off as a scared little girl. I took a deep breath and gingerly stepped on what I hoped was an actual path and sent a prayer up that I wasn't about to get hopelessly lost.

"Where you going?"

I shrieked at the unexpected voice, spinning around to see Monster standing behind me. "You're supposed to be with Dad," I hissed, my heart thumping like mad as I bent over, bracing my hands on my knees. "Were you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"No?" Monster gazed at me, his expression saying he wasn't sure if that was the correct answer.

"What are you doing here?"

"Following you," he answered promptly.

"Why?"

“Because it looked like more fun than standing around with a bunch of people that don’t have cookies.” He pointed to the bag over my shoulder as he added, “You have cookies.”

“So, you followed the cookies,” I concluded, nodding sharply, as I grumbled under my breath. “Nice to know what I’m good for. Breeding and cookies.”

I glanced back the way I’d come, quickly deciding it would take too long to take Monster back. “Come on,” I said, stepping forward again. “Be quiet and don’t wander off.”

“What are we doing? Hunting Hanleys?” He whispered, trailing after me. I glanced over my shoulder at him, tempted to tell him we were and he was going to scare them off with his whispering.

“Bloodthirsty, aren’t we?” I said instead, carefully stepping over a tree root. The path was overgrown and I crossed my fingers we were headed in the right direction. I did not want to have to ask for Dom’s help after saying I would find Caleb for him.

“What’s bloodthirsty?” Monster piped up, clambering over the rough ground with ease. “Is it like thirsty except for blood? I don’t have to drink blood when I’m a wolf, do I?”

“I don’t think so,” I murmured, swatting a low branch out of my way. “Last time I promise to tromp through woods to help anybody,” I grumbled to myself. “Monster,” I paused, glancing around frantically when he didn’t answer. “Monster?”

“Right here,” he finally replied as I spun in a circle, still searching.

“Right where?” I asked carefully, trying not to flip out.

“Here!” I jumped as he shouted, the sound coming from above me. His head hung out the opening of what I presumed was the treehouse.

“How did you find that?” I asked wonderingly, staring up at him.

“The ladder,” he answered in a tone that was just shy of ‘duh’ as he rolled out of sight.

“The ladder, of course,” I repeated, finally seeing what he must have spotted. Small wooden planks were nailed directly into the tree, creating a ladder up to the platform.

I said a quick prayer as I grasped the first board, fitting my foot against the bottom one. I hauled myself up to the next one, my fingers barely able to grasp to the semi rotten board. “You can do this,” I muttered to myself fiercely. “Monster did this.” I forced myself to reach for the next board and pull myself up. I clung to the side of the tree, closing my eyes so I wouldn’t look down. “I’ll just stay here,” I whispered. “Caleb isn’t up there.”

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“Sissy,” Monster’s panicked voice cut through my fear as I glanced up to see his terrified face peering down at me. “Hurry.” He gestured for me to climb, glancing over his shoulder in fear and I scampered up that tree like I’d done it a million times.

I heard the voices right as I slid onto the platform. Monster stared at me with wide eyes, no longer so interested in hunting Hanleys as two of them walked below us. I laid on my belly, afraid to twitch with them so close. I knew if they so much as sniffed they would discover us and we had nowhere to run.

“Dude, I don’t think we should be here. We crossed the border some ways back.” Whoever spoke had my full agreement. They shouldn’t be there and they needed to go back.

“Don’t be such a chicken shit. I want to find that hot little she wolf,” the other one said lewdly. I opened my eyes to find a hole in the board and wished I’d kept my eyes closed as he rubbed himself suggestively. “Whoever catches her gets to keep her.”

“Yeah, you do that,” the smart one muttered, staring at him like he was stupid. “Keep the she wolf so she can rip your balls off when you try to mate her.”

The other one slapped him across the head. “I’d make sure she learned her place. Kind of like you need too.” He reached for his zipper and I hastily shut my eyes, not even wanting to know what was about to happen. “Now, quit being a little bitch.” I heard liquid hitting the ground in a stream and couldn’t resist a peek. The idiot was pissing on the ground beneath the tree we hid in. The other guy stared at him resentfully, undoing his zipper slowly as the idiot wandered away still pissing and splashing urine all over everything. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Monster

wrinkle his nose. Thankfully, I couldn't smell it but clearly, he could.

The one that liked to live hunched his shoulders as he peed against a bush, shaking his head and muttering under his breath as he kept an eye on his companion.

"You smell something?" The idiot asked, raising his head and sniffing the air. "Almost like a female in heat."

"I can't smell anything besides your piss," the smart one responded, zipping up as I froze in place.

"You sure you a wolf, boy?" The other one taunted, wandering back underneath the treehouse. I barely breathed, terrified he would realize how close we were to him.

"Better wolf than you," the smart kid retorted cockily. "Smart enough to know when its time to get the hell out of here."

The idiot raised his hand like he was going to smack the kid but shook his head instead, bumping the kid's shoulder as he walked past him. "You're lucky I'm hungry, otherwise, we'd have words."

The kid nodded, his face unconcerned by the threat, when the idiot froze, inhaling deeply. "There's a female here."

He spun around, his expression almost feral as he inhaled again, his gaze zeroing in on the makeshift ladder as my heart shuddered to a stop. I glanced at Monster, who looked as petrified as I felt. I mouthed, "HIDE," to him and he shook his head. I nodded, putting as much force as I could in the silent gesture. He skittered backwards on light feet, disappearing into the gloom until all I could see was the reflection of his eyes until that was gone too.

Laughter taunted me from below as the idiot called up, “Come out, come out, little wolf.”

I was tempted to shout, “Come and get me, asshole,” but didn’t want to make the situation worse. I scrambled for a weapon, cursing myself for forgetting Dom’s rules. Always carry a gun. Shoot first, ask questions if they survive.

I frantically tried to reach Dom through our bond but my mind was so saturated with fear it was like shouting down an empty tunnel. I could hear the words echo back to me but they weren’t reaching him. I wanted to cry in frustration and fear as anger welled up inside of me. I wasn’t a wolf, I wasn’t strong, and I couldn’t stop them. It was the last realization that almost broke me as the idiot Hanley started up the tree.

Movement distracted me as Monster braced himself on the other side of the entrance, an old baseball bat gripped firmly in his hands as he stood guard.

“Wolves can’t climb trees,” he told me matter of fact and I smiled, hope that maybe we could survive springing to life inside of me. “Tell Dom,” he added, preparing to play whack a Hanley as soon as a head popped into view.

I risked a peek through the little hole as I tried to calm down enough to reach Dom. Monster’s plan might buy us time, but if they worked together it wouldn’t be long before they overpowered us.

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I blinked, losing my focus when I didn't see the second Hanley. Only the dumb ass was still climbing the tree and I hoped that meant the other one had left, too scared of the she wolf to stick around.

I breathed in through my nose and then out through my mouth, slow and steady, as I pushed the terror away. You escaped them once, I reminded myself, ignoring the little voice that screamed, you had help!

In and out I breathed, fighting the fear that held me prisoner. A long second later, I felt a flicker of awareness. The sensation of a large room, crowded with people, raised voices echoing. Dom, I cried desperately, hoping he'd heard me as the connection broke when Monster yelled, "Hi-Ya" and drove the bat down on the top of the Hanley's head.

We heard him shout as he wind milled backwards, falling along with the bat as Monster looked up at me and said, "Oops."

We traded a glance and then I stared back through my peephole. The Hanley was sprawled on the ground, rage burning in his eyes as he gasped for air, the bat on the ground next to him.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath when I saw the bat. It was our only weapon and now they had it. Monster crawled over to me, whimpering as he curled next to me. "I'm sorry, Sissy."

"You did a great job," I rushed to reassure him, smoothing the copper hair I'd despised for so long and now couldn't wait to see in the form of fur. "You were so

brave. Braver than me,” I admitted before hardening my voice. I gripped his shoulder, forcing him to look at me. “When he comes back, run. Get Dom. I’ll fight them off.” He blinked at me, his wise eyes telling me he knew better but he nodded, easing one of my fears. He would be okay, I told myself, glancing back through the hole, as I prayed it was true.

Hanley was struggling to roll over into a sitting position and I knew it was only a matter of time before he climbed back up here. A flash of movement caught my attention as a brown wolf crept up behind him, fur matted and greasy, and my heart stuttered once again.

It was the other Hanley. He’d come back.

I tightened my arm around Monster, knowing I could distract one, but if the other was in wolf form there was no way Monster would make it. I prayed, cursing my inability to link to Dom when I needed him most. Dom, Dom, Dom, I chanted his name, hoping something would get through. I didn’t care about myself but if he could save Monster....

A snarl caused my eyes to snap open as the Hanley wolf circled the human Hanley. “What are you doing?” The human Hanley stammered, fear making his voice tremble. “Look, if you want first dibs, man...” he broke off as the other one growled. I pressed closer to the peephole as Monster pushed himself up, finding another hole to peer through. “Shift back, dude, and you can have her. My compliments.” He laughed, the sound high and shaky. I almost pitied him as he shrank back from the wolf steadily creeping closer. “We can go,” he offered, crawling backwards until he bumped against the tree we were in. “I’ll leave. No questions. You can do what you want with her.” He nodded as he spoke and any pity I might have felt disappeared as he offered me like I was his to give.

The wolf paused, cocking his head as if he was considering the offer and I stilled,

wondering if I'd mistaken his intentions.

The motion was so fast it blurred. Only the scream cutting off into a gurgle told me he'd ripped out the throat of his friend.

Monster jumped, a gasp escaping him at the suddenness of the man's death. I curled my hand around his leg, patting him as I stared down at the dirty wolf. He glanced up at us, his eyes a clear grey, intelligence shining from them as he lowered himself to his belly, keeping his head down as he bowed to me. A moment later, he stood and trotted off into the woods.

Monster moved to the ladder and I tightened my grip on his leg. "Wait until Dom gets here," I managed as I rolled onto my back, staring up at the low ceiling as I wondered how in the hell Dom had ever fit inside of this treehouse.

Chapter Fifteen

"You're saying we missed the whole meeting?" I exclaimed, my voice pitched higher than normal as I stopped walking. Dom didn't answer, only pausing his stride long enough to scoop me up and throw me over his shoulder as he strode away from the treehouse and the dead Hanley.

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I grunted as he treated me like a sack of potatoes. “I’m fine,” I declared for the fiftieth time, ignoring the quiver that went through me when I thought about how close I’d actually been to death.

I shuddered, or worse.

My reassurance fell on deaf ears since he didn’t slow or put me down. “What happened at the meeting?” I asked, trying to distract him.

It didn’t work as he remained silent, his long legs making short work of the path. When we reached his cabin, he finally set me down with a thump in the middle of his Spartan living room.

“Stay,” he rumbled, the word barely intelligible as he turned to go back outside.

“I’m not a dog,” I shouted at his back, the helpless terror I’d felt suddenly morphing into rage at his indifference.

He spun around at my shout, his eyes glittering as he roared, “No, you’re my mate.” Power radiated from him, almost overwhelming me as I fought the instinctive desire to cower in the face of it.

I straightened my back, “I am Jess Carter. Daughter, sister, motel owner...well part motel owner, high school senior,” I paused as his expression darkened when I refused to say mate. “I’m smart, resourceful, clever, strong, and I won’t allow anyone to limit me,” my voice rose, “To define me to one thing.”

He stalked towards me and even though my legs felt about as strong as Jello I held my ground, at least until he fell to his knees in front of me. Shock held me immobile as his head bumped my stomach. “Mine. My mate, my Jess, my everything.” His head tilted back enough that he could stare up at me. “Seeing that dead Hanley, knowing how close, do you have any idea what that felt like?”

“Yeah, actually,” I answered faintly, my hands going to the sides of his head, gripping a little tighter than necessary as I muttered, “I was there. I watched him die. Pretty sure I fucking know what it felt like.”

He winced, whether from my words or the fact that I was sandwiching his face between my hands I couldn’t be sure. I finally released him with a frustrated sigh. “You are so –” I cut myself off, unable to find a word that correctly expressed how frustrating his overbearingly protective instincts were to me.

His eyebrow cocked up as he waited and I finally burst out with, “Alpha.” I gave a sharp nod, crossing my arms.

“Beta, actually,” he responded, his tone oh so helpful and my eyes narrowed to slits.

“Not a single ounce of self-preservation either,” I managed, my intention of spinning away in a huff disappearing as he held onto my hips. “You can let go now.”

“No, I can’t,” he answered, his voice contrite. “I’m sorry.”

“Because you can’t let go?” I asked, puzzled, and he shook his head, a grin tugging at the corners of his lips.

“No, I’m not sorry at all for holding you hostage.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m sorry for reacting like I did. For not talking to you. Not listening to you. For being...”

“Yourself?” I said bluntly, uncrossing my arms and letting them settle on his shoulders as he continued to kneel in front of me. “Newsflash, I know this is who you are. It’s a just a little much sometimes.” I skimmed my fingers over his shoulders, his head almost level with mine even on his knees. “I have to say though,” he glanced at me curiously, something in my tone giving me away. “On your knees is a good look for you.”

He stood then, faster than I could register as he lifted me up and my legs went around his waist instinctively. “I’ll remember that,” he rumbled, his eyes holding the promise of retribution right before he leaned in to kiss me. “I never want you to feel that way again.”

“What way?” I cupped his cheek, his tight jaw ticking under my fingertips. “I’m not mad at you, Dom. I just don’t want to get lost in you.”

“You won’t,” he promised fiercely, his gaze burning into me. “I’ll make sure of it.”

I smiled softly. “It’s not really something you can do. It’s something I have to do,” I told him quietly. I felt his jaw rock under my palm. “What were you talking about?” His gaze shifted from mine as he fought for control. “Dom, what feelings?”

“Helpless,” he bit out. “Terrified and helpless. You thought Monster would be killed, and you were desperate.”

“You felt that?” I asked hesitantly, his earlier reaction making a little more sense. Those were not feelings Dom would be used to. “I didn’t know you could feel that.”

“When you called my name....I heard you, but more than that I felt you. Standing in that crowded Pack House, shouts and confusion all around me and all I could feel was this sudden overwhelming terror.” His voice broke and he had to clear his throat, a hint of shame creeping into his voice. “I hadn’t even realized you weren’t there.”

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“Dom,” my voice was barely more than a whisper, the word a breath of forgiveness and he shook his head.

“Caleb was there. I assumed you’d come back with him. It wasn’t until you reached out through the bond that I realized you were in danger. Your emotions –” He pressed his lips together. “I felt what you felt.” He met my eyes. “You will never feel that way again,” he swore.

I patted his rock hard jaw, hoping he didn’t crack a tooth with how hard he had his teeth clenched. “You can’t worry about that. I’m a human female in a world of wolf shifters and bad people. Sometimes, I’m going to get scared.”

“That wasn’t scared,” he argued, shaking his head. “That was petrified.”

I couldn’t really deny his words because even in his arms, remnants of my earlier fear coursed through me. It had been close, too close, and I couldn’t have predicted the affect it would have on either of us.

Somehow, my brush with death had made me less afraid. I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d faced death and won or because one person could only feel so much fear before they cracked.

Dom felt differently. “I’m going to teach you to protect yourself,” he stated and my mouth dropped open. I’d been expecting him to say I was on house arrest or something equally restrictive. “And how to use the mental bond.” His eyes were guilty as he stared at me, my face for once even with his as he held me. “I should have already done it. You would have been more prepared.”

“You’re serious,” I said, dumbfounded. He smiled, his tense expression finally easing.

“I am.”

“Okay, where’s the real Dom?” I looked around, tilting my head to look behind him. “Seriously, what did you do with him? Oh God, did I break you?” My forehead furrowed as the thought that maybe my terror had somehow infected him through our bond.

He chuckled.

Bastard, actually chuckled!

“You didn’t break me,” he assured me. “You just reminded me of a lesson my father taught me a long time ago.”

“Don’t teach your mate how to kill you in your sleep?”

He laughed, the sound vibrating from his chest to mine as I stared at him in disbelief. “Actually, that’s exactly what I’m going to teach you.” He lifted me up so my legs dangled and then set me down. “And no, that wasn’t the lesson.” His hand smoothed down my neck, settling on the mark branded into my skin. “The lesson was that fear is easily conquered by knowledge. Knowing how to defend yourself, how to defeat someone who wants to hurt you, those are things you own, that belong to you and only you. I want you to have the security of knowing you can defend yourself. That you don’t have to rely on me to save you.”

Familiar pressure burned behind my eyes as I stared up at him. “You are such a jackass,” I burst out, surprising both of us. “Then you go and say something like that.” I slapped his chest, ignoring the sting as I barreled into him a second later,

squeezing him around the waist. His arms came up slowly, gingerly resting on my hips until he decided I wasn't angry.

"You confuse me," he admitted and I sniffed, nodding.

"Good, keep you on your toes."

"Always," he rumbled, a hint of laughter in his voice. "I need to go though."

My head dropped back as I squinted at him suspiciously, "Go where?"

"Get rid of the dead body and make sure no other Hanleys are hanging around," he replied, lifting an eyebrow. "Does that meet with your approval?"

"It does." I thought for a second. "But don't hurt a wolf with gray eyes. He saved me."

"Then I owe him a debt of gratitude." Dom's eyes grew cold. "In fact, his entire pack owes him a debt of gratitude."

I gulped at the lethal tone, patting his arm cautiously. "I'm fine. Really. No need to go on a murdering spree."

His jaw worked for a second before his expression eased. "No murdering spree," he agreed before adding, "At least not today."

I opened my mouth to argue but then decided hell with it. "That works," I approved. "I'll just head home then."

He stilled and I gave him a sharp look. "I am going home. I need to wash this day away with some scalding hot water."

“I have a shower,” he mentioned, gesturing to the bathroom. “You can even wear my clothes.”

“I’m sure your wolf would love that,” I retorted. “My dad however...” Dom winced and I bit back a smile.

“Your father is a formidable man,” he acknowledged. “At least let me get someone to walk you home.”

I nodded in agreement. I was independent, not stupid. Dom stepped out the door, surveying who was around as I perched on the edge of his oversize sectional. It was one of the few pieces of furniture in the room, mainly because it took up the entire room. It was sized to fit Dom which didn’t leave much space for anything else. He had a couple of bar stools shoved under the kitchen island and nothing on the countertops. Clutter was not in Dom’s vocabulary.

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I heard him talking to someone before he motioned for me to join them. I wandered out, surprised to see Payne standing there.

“Carter is going to walk you home,” Dom told me and I cocked my head.

“I thought your name was Payne,” I replied, ignoring the fact that Dom was going to let a non-shifter walk me home for the moment.

“Payne Carter Bradshaw,” he introduced himself, sticking his hand out for me to shake. “You must have learned my name from Samantha.”

“I did,” I admitted candidly. “Is there a reason she calls you Payne?”

“Because she knows I loathe it.” He smiled ruefully. “Same reason I call her Samantha.” I gave him an ‘aha’ look and he glanced back at Dom. “I’ll take care of your girl.”

“I trust you will,” Dom answered, his tone leaving no question what would happen if Payne didn’t take care of me. “I have to go. The others are waiting for me.” Dom brushed a kiss against my temple and then hopped over the railing, completely forgoing the stairs, before jogging into the woods.

I eyed my escort, who had the grace to look uncomfortable under my scrutiny. “I have to admit I’m surprised Dom trusts you to walk me home.” I went down the stairs, ready to go home and put the afternoon behind me.

“I’m a good fighter,” Payne offered, clasping his hands behind his back as he walked

next to me. To my amusement, he kept a sizeable gap between us. In fact, everything about him was as nonthreatening as he could manage, which was saying something since he was easily a few inches over six feet and broad. Honestly, I wouldn't have pegged him as Caleb's brother.

"The Council meeting went well?" I asked, since Dom hadn't been forthcoming. Payne faltered for a second, grimacing.

"As well as we could have expected, they are allowing Caleb to fight." He lifted his shoulders. "It's a step in the right direction, at least."

"You support Caleb?" I knew I was being nosy, but so long as he answered, I was taking advantage.

"I do," he replied and I could hear the truth in his statement. "It's what our father wanted, what Caleb has grown up knowing. The timing could be better," he acknowledged and I nodded, glancing around the clearing. We attracted a few curious glances but most of the community ignored us. "But Caleb is trying. It's all anyone can ask."

"You never wanted to be Alpha?" I asked bluntly and he gave a surprised chuckle.

"I can see why you're friends with Samantha," he commented before shaking his head. "And no, I've never wished to be Alpha. Not that I ever could be."

"Cause you don't shift," I clarified and he nodded. "Ever wish you could shift?"

"Inquisitive, aren't you?" I didn't answer, figuring the question was rhetorical. "And yes, of course. Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like?" He questioned, his smile knowing and I tilted my head in acknowledgement. "Knowing about them, it's hard not to wonder, but I can't shift and I've learned to be okay with that."

Something in the way he said it made me wonder if he really had learned to be okay with it. “What’s up with you and Sam?”

He stumbled at the unexpectedness of my question but recovered quickly. “I’m not sure what you mean. We grew up together.”

“Yeah, but that’s not what I meant.” I came to a stop, forcing him to stop as well as I stared at him. “And you know it. So what’s between the two of you?”

“Why does this matter to you?” He asked, studying me. “Are you just satisfying your curiosity?”

“No, I’m trying to figure out why Sam ran off to be with a Hanley and ignored her family for years.”

“Maybe she fell in love,” he said neutrally, striding forward with every expectation I would follow, which I did, cursing.

“You don’t really believe that,” I called to his back, trying to catch up to his suddenly long strides. “You came to see her. You protected Nicky.” He came to a sudden halt, spinning around and for a second, I saw the anguish he’d hidden.

“I would never allow harm to come to her or her child. I owe her that much,” he told me, his tone telling me to drop it, but it felt like I was finally close to an actual answer.

“You owe her or you love her that much?” I responded, no longer having to jog to keep up as he slowed, giving me a sharp glance.

“You’re persistent. Dom definitely deserves you,” he muttered under his breath, squaring his shoulders as he answered my question. “Yes, I loved Samantha. We

were high school sweethearts.”

I stopped once again, shocked, but he kept going. I hurried after him, catching up to him before I asked, “What happened? I don’t think you fell out of love. Did she break up with you?”

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He shook his head, a heavy sigh escaping him as he said, “I broke up with her.”

“Whoa, what?” I was sure I heard him wrong. “Did you want to meet new people at college or something? Why would you do that?”

“It was what was best for both of us,” he answered firmly, the words almost rote.

“That sounds like something a parent would say,” I paused, releasing a breath, “Or an Alpha.”

He glanced at me, looking away quickly and I knew I was on to something. “Is that what happened? Your Alpha, your father, told you to break it off with her?”

He rubbed his hand over his mouth, his gaze flickering over me. “He didn’t have to,” he finally admitted. “Anyone with eyes could see the looks we got when we were together. I might be the Alpha’s son but I was never going to be a shifter.”

“So?”

He smiled bitterly. “Females that can produce shifters are prized –”

“Again, that’s disturbing,” I interrupted with a shudder, “But what does it have to do with you and Sam?”

“I’m getting there,” he said wearily and I mimed zipping my mouth shut. “There’s stigma, maybe prejudice is the better word, I don’t know, but our being together was frowned upon, and I can understand.”

“I don’t,” I burst out and he glanced at me reproachfully. “Well, I don’t!”

“To make the Pack stronger, someone like Samantha needed to be with a shifter. Known bloodlines that would produce a shifter cub.”

“But you could have a shifter child,” I interrupted. “My dad did. He had me and my brother.”

“That’s unusual,” Payne said repressively. “My father had other ideas.”

“Like what?” I asked, my forehead wrinkling as I considered what an ass his dad had been.

Payne shook his arms out, his lips pursed as if what he was about to say left a bad taste in his mouth. “Caleb.”

“And Sam?” I yelled in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding me. They have to be at least six years apart in age and she’s Sam.” I enunciated her name like that could adequately encapsulate all that Sam was and Caleb was not.

Payne gave a pained chuckle. “Yes, well they’re actually ten years apart and no Sam never would have gone for it.” He glanced at me. “She knew. Everyone did. It was almost expected.”

“But she was with you. At least, until you broke up with her,” I reminded him, my voice rising at the end. “Which I still don’t understand why.”

“I loved my father, but he wasn’t an easy man. My being with Samantha went against his wishes.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, his head lowered as he spoke. “He couldn’t command me as he could with the shifters, but if I had continued my relationship with Samantha,” he paused and I leaned forward in anticipation, almost

tipping over, except for his lightening reflexes, which caught me. “He would have thrown us out of the Pack,” he admitted quietly.

“But Sam left anyway,” I whispered and his eyes closed, shuttering the pain reflecting in them. “So, it was all for nothing.”

He swallowed thickly. “Don’t say it like that,” he begged. “Don’t tell me my sacrifice was for nothing.” He smiled painfully, knowing the truth but not wanting to face it.

“Does Sam know that’s why you broke up with her?” I questioned, things clicking into place when he shook his head.

“I couldn’t tell her. I didn’t want to be the reason she chose to leave,” he acknowledged bitterly. “Her father and brother have always been betas. Protectors of the Pack. I didn’t want to cause a rift.”

I sighed, exhausted by his story. “She did that all by herself,” I murmured before pointing at him. “This is why communication is so important. If everyone just took a minute to talk about their feelings so much shit could be prevented.”

He looked abashed but I still couldn’t get over the time they’d wasted. I could see he still loved her and if Sam’s reaction was anything to go by, she still loved him.

The motel came into sight then and I watched as Trent jogged toward us. I rested my hand on Payne’s arm, “We’ll fix this,” I promised, but he didn’t seem very confident in my promise as he nodded, slipping back into the woods as Trent reached us.

“Does he not like me?” Trent questioned, twirling a sucker between his fingers. “Because he disappears every time I come around.”

“What do you mean he disappears? Where have you seen him?” I asked sharply and

Trent raised his eyebrows.

“Caught him prowling around the motel a few times. He always hightails it though when I approach him,” Trent said casually, popping the now unwrapped sucker in his mouth. I wasn’t sure he could go an hour without one.

“And you didn’t consider that suspicious?” I questioned incredulously.

He gave an offhanded shrug. “He’s part of the Navarre Pack. I’m supposed to watch for the Hanley pack.” He rolled the sucker to the other side of his mouth. “Besides, he’s only got eyes for one female.” Trent shifted his gaze to the motel where Sam was just disappearing from view.

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“Ugh, don’t remind me,” I groaned, throwing up my hands. Trent gave me a wary glance, moving a little further away. “So messed up,” I muttered under my breath. “Those two,” I started when he cut me off.

“I didn’t ask,” he interrupted hastily.

“Then why are you here?”

“Dom told me not to let you out of my sight.”

“Of course he did.” I inhaled slowly; releasing the air little by little like that might actually calm me down. “He told you what happened.”

“No, actually. Seemed a little incapable of rational thought. Didn’t want to be on the receiving end of his temper so I didn’t ask.” He pulled the sucker out of his mouth with a small pop, glancing over at me. “I take it you found trouble?” He laughed under his breath, answering himself. “When do you not.”

I sent him a murderous glare but it didn’t faze him in the least.

“Got lost in the woods, maybe? Oh, I know. You interrupted Dom during the Council meeting. Is that it?” Trent shook his head. “He gets a little touchy about image in the Pack.”

My lips twitched at the blatant lie and Trent bumped my shoulder. “Monster got back a little while ago. Looked worse than he did after the whole lost in the woods incident.”

“Hanleys came on Navarre land. Monster and I were forced to hide in an old treehouse.” I paused as a rumble emanated from him. “They sniffed us out.” I growled in disgust, “They sniffed me out.”

“They’re dead,” Trent stated, not doubting for a second Dom had annihilated them. I nodded, then corrected myself and shook my head no. He halted, tension threading through him as he glanced towards the towering trees that made up the huge swath of Navarre land. “I should go help.”

“Wait, no,” I reached for him, my fingers slipping against the black Henley he wore. “There were two Hanleys. One killed the other.”

Trent stuck his finger in his ear and wiggled it. “I must have heard you wrong.” He glanced at me for confirmation. “It almost sounded like you said a Hanley protected you from another Hanley.”

“He did,” I asserted and Trent looked lost. “Look, the guy didn’t seem to want to be there. He also didn’t like what the guy was doing. I figure he must have had it coming.”

“I’m sure he did, but, Jess, pack doesn’t kill pack. Ever.”

“He did,” I said simply, my steps slow as I started back toward the motel. Trent caught up quickly, his gaze scanning the dark edge of the forest as he put himself protectively at my back. I stopped suddenly, reminded of something. “You know, I think they thought I was Anna. The Hanley that came after me...he was interested in the female shifter.” A sharp snarl erupted from Trent at that knowledge and I started in surprise. “The shifter that killed him, he didn’t like it. Didn’t want anything to do with a female shifter,” I hurried to add in case Trent decided to go after the kid anyway.

Trent's glower didn't ease but he also didn't go running into the woods howling either, so I considered it a win. He took a couple of deep breaths, rotating his neck until I heard it crack. "Smart kid."

"He saved my life," I agreed, plucking at Trent's sleeve to get him moving again. "He would have saved Anna's too if it had been her up there."

Trent crunched down on the sucker in his mouth, making quick work of the candy as he started chewing restlessly on the white paper stick. "She has no idea of how dangerous it is that they know. She won't be reasonable."

"Have you tried talking to her instead of, you know, growling at her?" I observed, quirking an eyebrow at him as he glanced away. "Didn't think so."

"She pisses me off when she takes off like that and it's really hard to be rational," he defended himself and I rolled my eyes.

"Why don't you try talking to her before she tries something like that?" I asked sensibly and he nodded grudgingly. "And I'll talk to her too," I added and he looked relieved. "After today, I agree with you."

Chapter Sixteen

Nightmares consumed my sleep, leaving me a sweaty mess when I finally woke up. I groaned as I rolled out of bed, my body aching from the stress of the last two days. I padded over to the window to see if Dom had come to relieve Trent but when I peeked outside, no one was there. I swung the window shut, not bothering to latch it in case Anna showed up later.

I scrubbed my face and yanked my hair up in a messy knot before wandering to the living room. There was no sign of Dad or Monster and a glance at the clock told me

they should be up by now. Worry trickled through me as I went to Dad's bedroom door. I knocked lightly and the door swung open. His bed was neatly made, nothing out of place, but that was normal for him. He was a neat freak, something I hadn't inherited.

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I went back to the living room, scanning to see if I missed something. Like a note, a little voice mocked, or maybe a blood trail after the Hanleys came and kidnapped them away. I winced at the direction my thoughts took, shaking them off quickly before I freaked myself out.

I headed for the front door, hoping they'd gone to pick up breakfast or something. Nope. Dad's Range Rover was in its normal spot, but I heard Monster shriek as I stood in the doorway. I darted toward the sound, my heart racing, as I skidded to a stop in front of the motel office.

Laughter spilled from him as my Dad made a goofy face, the remnants of their breakfast on the floor around them. Dad spotted me first and guiltily tried to hide the evidence of their fast food run.

I raised my eyebrow and said, "You better have saved some for me." He relaxed as Monster jumped up and ran to hug me.

"You're up!" His exuberance almost knocked me off my feet as I rocked back. "I thought you'd never wake up."

"We decided to go get breakfast," Dad confided. "So, you could sleep."

"You're a good man, Mr. Carter," I teased, scooping up my sandwich as I plopped on one of the office chairs. It had wheels so I pushed myself off and went spinning across the room. Monster's eyes lit up and within seconds, we were racing.

After a few near misses and one crash, Dad called a halt to our fun. "You're going to

destroy my office,” he insisted as we whined.

“Can I go see Wren?” Monster chirped, already at the door when Dad nodded his agreement. He raced off before I could stop him and I called after him, “Stay at the motel.”

Dad had a puzzled frown on his face and I sighed, knowing I had to tell him what was going on. “Wren has been meeting someone in the forest,” I told him, and his forehead furrowed. “She’s cutting across Navarre land, avoiding the patrols to meet someone at the Hanley border. We don’t know who, but it’s safe to assume it’s a Hanley.”

“You don’t trust her,” Dad stated and I rolled my neck, not wanting to give a definitive answer. Part of me did trust her and that part was the reason I hadn’t already demanded answers from her. “Help me out here, Bunny. Has she put Monster at risk?”

“We don’t know,” I answered honestly. “We don’t know who she’s meeting but she’s taken Monster with her.”

“That’s not okay,” Dad said firmly, standing up. “You should have come to me as soon as you found this out, Bunny,” he reprimanded and I cringed internally. I hated when he used that tone, especially when I knew he was right.

“In my defense, she hasn’t watched him since I did find out. Plus, we don’t know who she’s meeting or why.”

“But its possible she’s acting as a spy,” he declared and I had no choice but to nod. “Most of the Pack is out there right now surveying the area and making sure the Hanleys don’t have any tricks up their sleeves for tonight. If there’s a possibility Wren is sabotaging,” he paused, his face tight as he faced the reality that someone he

cared for was possibly an enemy.

“Dad, I do trust her,” I interjected, unable to face the look of betrayal on his face. “We need to talk to her, but I don’t think she intends to hurt Monster or put the women here at risk. Not intentionally.”

“Even unintentionally, she’s responsible if something happens because of her actions,” Dad said heavily. “That’s what being an adult means.” I nodded, knowing what he said was intended for me as well.

Monster came running back just then, breathless. “She wasn’t there.” Dad and I traded glances and then he forced a smile.

“I guess that means you’ll just have to hang out with us,” he caroled, swinging Monster off the ground and spinning him in circles. I left as Monster yelled for him to go faster. The motel was eerily quiet as I walked back to the apartment to get dressed. Even knowing the Pack was out there in force preparing for the challenge that night didn’t ease my disquiet.

I shook off my discomfort as I reminded myself that Caleb wouldn’t fail the Pack and neither would Dom.

Nervous energy buzzed in the air as members of the Navarre community appeared, creating a ring around the clearing. Most had come as family units, which surprised me until Dom explained they were stronger together than apart. The shifters would all be here tonight and they were the Pack’s primary source of protection.

“Some of the women left last night,” Sam announced as she came up next to me. Her white knuckles the only indication of her stress, as she clutched Nicky’s hand.

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“What? Where did they go?” My eyes widened as I gasped, “Not back to the Hanleys?”

Sam shook her head jerkily. “No. None of them are that stupid.”

“Then why?”

“They feel the outcome is too uncertain. If Caleb fails, they’d be back in the same situation they were before they left. Worse in fact.” She shot me a quick glance. “When we left, we didn’t anticipate the Alpha being killed. Now, the Navarre Pack can be perceived as weak and some aren’t willing to take that chance.”

“But alone out there...”

“A few were going home. Their packs will take them back in. A couple...well, they were tired of needing to rely on anyone,” Sam explained, a weariness in her tone that hadn’t been there before, as she scanned the field.

“He’s over there,” I pointed helpfully and she jerked my hand back down.

“Don’t point! He’ll see you,” she hissed, ducking her head. “And you don’t even know I was looking for someone,” she blustered, her cheeks flushed as she eyed me.

“I do now. He who?” I asked, like I didn’t already know the answer.

“No one,” she dismissed, but I noticed her gaze stray to where I’d pointed and the disappointment when he wasn’t there any longer.

“Are you staying for the...?” I started and then paused before trying again. “Should you? I mean, why are you here?”

“I’m here to, hopefully, watch my bastard ex get his throat torn out,” Sam said helpfully, her hands over Nicky’s ears as she spoke.

“Oh, well in that case,” I said faintly. “Fingers crossed.” She nodded sharply and I wiggled my fingers at Nicky. “Should he be here to see that?”

Sam gave me a vaguely pitying glance. “He’s seen worse.” I blinked at her tough words and wondered what could be worse than seeing your father’s throat torn out. Sam patted my shoulder awkwardly, seeming to feel bad at her bluntness but it didn’t keep her from explaining, “This world is brutal. Better they learn it now.”

“I guess so,” I admitted, remembering the ease in which Dom had killed the two Hanleys and then how casually the Hanley wolf from the previous day had ripped out his friend’s throat. “It’s just hard to wrap my head around it sometimes.”

“You’ll learn,” she stated, her eyes hard as she glanced at me. “You have to if you want to stay Pack.”

I swallowed, my gaze finding Dom instantly even in the crowded space, as he stood next to Caleb, who wore nothing but shorts as he readied himself for the fight of his life.

“Ladies,” a smooth voice spoke behind us and I turned, noticing Sam sidle sideways at the appearance of the newcomer. When I saw who it was, I understood.

“Payne,” I replied, nodding and ignoring the slight grimace he gave when I used his name. Nicky waved at him as best he could with the stranglehold Sam had on him.

“Come to steal my son again?” Sam asked hostilely, making it a point not to look at him. It didn’t seem to matter as he stared at the side of her face a second longer than what would be considered appropriate. I lowered my gaze to my toes, the moment feeling intimate and my presence unwelcome.

“You know better than that, Samantha.”

Her hands balled into fists and she burst out, “It’s Sam. And I don’t know what you’re capable of...not anymore. I never would have thought you’d break up with me, either, but I guess I was wrong,” she accused, finally focusing her attention on him. He gave her a pained stare but didn’t refute her words.

“I’m gonna go somewhere,” I murmured to no one in particular as they continued to stare at one another. “Not here. Not that you care.” I backed up a few steps but it didn’t disturb their tense standoff. “Cue the sexual tension,” I muttered under my breath.

“Talking to yourself again?” Trent questioned, giving me a sideways glance as he straightened from the tree he’d propped himself against.

“It’s only talking to yourself if no one is listening, and I have you for that,” I retorted, thumping his stomach as I passed. “Who are you stalking today?”

“You and Anna,” he admitted easily. “Mostly Anna since there’s a chance they’ll do a smash and grab while the fight is going on.”

“You didn’t lock her in a closet somewhere?” I joked, except it didn’t really fly when he gave a disappointed shake of his head.

“Wouldn’t work. She’s stronger than she looks, especially in wolf form.”

“That was a joke,” I clarified and his eyes widened as he shook his head.

“Nah, we would never lock her in a closet. We’re not Hanleys,” he tried again, not convincing me at all. “Besides, the more eyes on her the better.” He nodded to the crowd where restless eyes roamed from person to person as the shifters interspersed themselves among their Pack.

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“Reassuring, and why are you keeping an eye on me?” I prodded and he shot me a look.

“You can’t guess?” His gaze shifted over to Dom. “He’s focused on Caleb and the challenge right now, but don’t doubt for a second he’ll leap to your defense if anyone so much as startles you.”

I squinted at him, not sure if he was serious or not, but for once there was no smirk in sight. No sucker either, I noted in surprise. “Keep an eye on Anna,” I told him seriously. “I can reach Dom if I need him,” I reminded him, tapping my temple.

“I heard that method of communication could be unreliable,” he replied, glancing at me with lifted eyebrows. “You telling me different?”

“Yeah, I am. Now, go, protect Anna,” I insisted, shooing him away. He appeared reluctant but finally moved, headed toward Anna, who hovered at the edge of the forest, her gaze firmly focused on Caleb.

“Did I miss it?”

I yelped, reeling around at her question. “What are you doing here?” I shrieked, glancing around frantically. “You shouldn’t be here.”

A whisper brushed across my mind as Dom tried to discern if there was a problem. Fine, fine, I thought hastily, just Leah.

She’s here? I felt the weight of Dom’s gaze from across the field as I answered,

apparently.

Try and keep out of sight, he grumbled. Please.

Our connection dropped to a low-level hum, easily accessible if I needed to reach him, but not enough to distract.

“I had to come,” Leah answered, bringing me back to the problem at hand. She gazed around in awe. “I had to see if it was true.”

“It’s dangerous,” I hissed, grabbing her arm and hauling her further from the milling Pack members. “This isn’t a game, Leah. It’s their lives.”

She gave me a wounded look. “I know that,” she insisted, craning her neck to see around the tree I’d pulled us behind. “But you have to understand how unbelievable this all is, right? Caleb...Caleb, who goes to our high school, is going to fight some guy to the death.”

“Yeah,” I said shortly, before giving a tired sigh. “And he’s going to do it to protect his family, his Pack.” I waved my arm around. “These people, right here.” I grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to look at me. “And you, Leah. He’s protecting you and every other woman who is nothing more than an object to those men.”

“I understand, Jess,” she stressed, her expression earnest. “I’m not here to take pictures and post it on social media.” My face blanched and she sighed. “I’m not, I promise. Look, Caleb protected me when those guys showed up. He didn’t have to do that. I’m not...Pack,” she finally burst out. “I get it. I do. I just needed to see it,” she muttered, her gaze searching mine. I glanced away, understanding exactly what she meant. I’d seen the shift for the first time when Dom had saved my life and even witnessing it I hadn’t wanted to believe. The truth was, it was so far outside the realm of normal, I couldn’t blame Leah for wanting to see it for herself, to know it was real.

“You can’t let them see you, or distract them,” I warned, dragging her further into the crowd. “This is their way of life and we cannot interfere.” Her head bobbed as she followed in my wake, almost bouncing as I brought us back around to where Sam stood silently next to Payne. Neither would glance at the other, meaning they must have argued again, but I figured if Dom trusted Payne to get me home then he was good enough to help me keep Leah safe.

I scanned the clearing for Trent, finally finding him propped against a tree, a clear line of sight to Anna, a frown on his face. When I glanced over at Anna, I could see why. She was standing next to a tense Caleb, her hand resting on his arm as she gazed up at him. I winced sympathetically. The look on her face said it all.

The crowd stirred restlessly, a few heads turning toward the road, hearing something too low for my ears. I grasped Leah’s hand as more heads turned, whispering, “They’re coming.”

Chapter Seventeen

Dom

I inhaled sharply as the faint rumble of tires on concrete reached my ears. Only the faintest scent of Hanley met my nose but I knew it was them. They thrived on making an entrance. Caleb stilled next to me, his earlier nerves disappearing with the Hanley’s arrival.

“Any final words of advice?” Caleb joked, shaking his arms loosely.

“Don’t die,” I replied, far more seriously than he intended. He gulped and Anna gave me a reproachful stare. I rolled my shoulders, unapologetic. “Whatever you have to do to stay alive, do it,” I continued. “Life and death, there are no rules. Take every advantage you’re given.”

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Caleb scoffed, “You wouldn’t do that. You always taught me to fight fair.”

“And in a fair fight that would still be the case, but, Caleb, don’t for one second think this is a fair fight. It’s not. When a man is about to die, you can’t predict what he’ll do.” I inhaled again, but this time it was the sweet scent of Jess that hit my nose and I drew the air deep into my lungs. “And trust me, I would do anything to protect the ones I love.”

“He’s right,” Anna seconded, growing defensive when Caleb stared at her shocked surprise. “Survive, Caleb, any way you have to.” For a second, her face was unguarded and I glanced away from the emotion I could see there. She quickly schooled her expression and I wasn’t sure Caleb even noticed. “Our survival depends on yours,” she continued, her voice brittle as she tried to hide the emotions churning just under the surface.

“No pressure,” Caleb voiced and I glanced at him, gauging his mood. His hands were steady, expression resolute and as I watched, his gaze shuttered, locking away any emotion that might interfere with the challenge.

I clasped his shoulder, leaning in so sensitive ears wouldn’t hear as I told him, “I’m proud to call you Alpha.”

Caleb nodded, his voice too tight for words as he grasped my forearm in a tight hold. He released me as vehicles pulled into the clearing and we stood side by side to face the coming fight.

“Ready to lose?” Frank Hanley called as he sauntered into the loosely formed ring,

his gaze locked on me.

I smiled. The fool thought he was fighting me today.

“I’m going to enjoy watching you die,” I answered him as Caleb stepped forward and Frank stared at him in puzzlement. “Today, you fight the Alpha.”

Frank moved slowly, caught unaware by the news but as he took in Caleb’s smaller build, a grin started to form.

“You’re going to make this easy on me, then?”

“If you consider dying easy,” Caleb said confidently, a relaxed shrug lifting his shoulders. Frank frowned, unsettled by Caleb’s casual demeanor and I knew we’d won the first round. Fighting was ninety percent mental and if you went in with the expectation of losing then you would.

The Hanley Alpha emerged from one of the trucks and Caleb tensed. Rage hummed over the Pack link, not all of it coming from Caleb as we saw the man who’d ordered the death of our Alpha.

Focus, I barked the command down the link, and felt some of the anger bleed away. A hint of gratitude came from Caleb as he held his head up, facing the true challenger to our Pack.

“You’ve come to watch your son die?” He called to his father’s killer and fury flickered over the older man’s face.

“Always the issue with the Navarre Pack, they allow their pups to speak,” he sneered, his gaze darting from face to face, searching.

“At least we don’t allow them to shoot men in the back,” my father drawled as he stepped from the crowd. “Unlike you, Nicholas.”

The Hanley Alpha narrowed his eyes at the sight of my father, taking in his sheriff’s uniform and the gun holstered at his side. “It seems you’ve come out ahead. No longer having to guard the back of a pathetically weak alpha and you got a job promotion.”

Incoherent rage burned through the link I shared with Caleb at the insult to his father. Control, I cautioned him. Use the rage to take away the thing he values most, his son, his heritage, I counseled him. I could feel Caleb grapple for control and I wondered how much more he could take without breaking.

“Strange you should call our previous Alpha weak when you were too scared to challenge him. Instead, you used a weapon to defeat him. Your wolf not up to the challenge any longer?” My father’s gaze slid to Frank and a snarl ripped from the Hanley’s Alpha’s throat.

“You’ll regret this when you are forced to kneel before me,” Nicholas Hanley roared, spittle flying as he glared at my father and then the rest of our Pack gathered around. “All of you will be taught your place when my son rips out the throat of your young Alpha. You will know what a true Alpha is like,” he promised, his eyes gleaming with a fervent light.

“We’ll see,” Caleb spoke then, a small smile playing on his lips as the Hanley Alpha glanced at him, caught off guard by Caleb’s words. “If you’re done posturing?” He held up a hand and when the Hanley Alpha didn’t speak, he nodded. “Good, then let’s do what we came to do. Fight.” A roar met Caleb’s words as the Pack showed their support and the Hanley Alpha took a wary step back.

The Hanley pack formed a semi-circle across from our people, keeping their distance,

but I noticed the Hanley Alpha continued to search the crowd. It wasn't until his gaze found Sam that I realized who he was looking for on our side.

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Jess, I thought urgently, keep Nicky out of sight. I sensed her agreement as I blanked the connection once again. I kept it open in case she needed to reach me, but with the fight about to start I didn't want to be distracted. Normally, I would have closed the link but after the Hanleys attempted attack the day before I wasn't taking the risk.

“For those unfamiliar with the challenge, Frank Hanley has challenged the Navarre Alpha, Caleb Bradshaw, for right to lead the Pack,” my father announced, stepping forward between Caleb and Frank. “No interference will be tolerated during the fight,” he stated, never raising his voice as he listed the rules, and everyone quieted to hear. “No weapons may be used or it will be considered an immediate forfeit.” He paused, his expression solemn. “This is a fight to the death.” He tilted his head respectfully to both men and then stepped from the ring.

Eagerness dripped from the Hanley Alpha as he watched the men strip down and shift. Caleb's sandy blond fur stood in stark contrast to the dark markings on Frank. Caleb was also smaller than Frank, which I knew from experience was an advantage for Caleb. He'd brought me down on more than one occasion because of the agility afforded him by his smaller stature.

I forced my tight muscles to relax as they circled one another, neither making the first move as they sized up their opponent. I scanned the Hanley side, keeping track of them in case one of them tried something while we were distracted by the fight.

A low snarl drew my attention back to the fight as Frank darted toward Caleb, snapping at his foreleg. Caleb danced out of reach, and I nodded. He could do this all day and would eventually tire the bigger wolf out, if he could stay in control.

My gaze followed their movements as Frank tried to get close and Caleb stayed just out of reach of his snapping jaws. Frustrated, Frank lunged and managed to sink his teeth in the fur at Caleb's back. Caleb let out a yelp but quickly recovered, swiping his claws at Frank's underside. Frank released him as he tried to protect his flank and Caleb took advantage, darting forward to snap one of Frank's legs.

Frank predicted the move and scrambled out of the way. A broken leg would be a death knoll, giving Caleb the advantage. Movement along the sidelines shifted my gaze back to the Hanley pack as one of their shifters crept closer to members of the Navarre Pack. I followed his path as he sniffed the air, tensing when I saw his gaze lock on Jess.

Trent, I pushed the mental thought down the link I wasn't technically supposed to share with Trent since he wasn't part of my Pack. You have eyes on Jess?

I can see her, he answered carefully. I'm not close.

Why, I growled, my eyes locked on the young shifter inching closer to my mate.

She told me to keep an eye on Anna, he replied hesitantly, flinching at my instinctive snarl. You told me to keep an eye on both of them, he defended himself. That would be a lot easier if they were together, but they're not.

No, Anna is standing next to me so you should be standing next to my mate, I reminded him, fighting back the urge to force his obedience. I refused to dominate him, fighting the inherent desire to stake my position.

Going, he acquiesced, his easy acceptance calming my wolf. I kept my gaze locked on the Hanley shifter taking such an interest in my mate until Anna gasped.

"Caleb," she murmured, her hand reaching out as he fell, and my attention snapped

back to the fight. Frank had managed to use his size against Caleb, his brute force catching Caleb unaware as he locked his teeth on Caleb's leg. We all heard the snap as Caleb tore his leg loose from the cage of Frank's jaws and limped back. Frank lost no time as he took full advantage of Caleb's weakened state, charging at him as Caleb braced himself.

"Die, you fucking bastard!"

The scream broke Frank's focus as he faltered, his head swinging toward the sound of my sister's voice and Caleb reacted instantly. He used the moment of distraction to launch himself at Frank's unprotected throat, latching on as his weight rolled Frank on his back. Caleb clamped down, shaking his head as he held Frank immobile, blood soaking through fur and into the ground below them.

Silence cloaked the clearing as Caleb finally released Frank's throat, dropping his dead body as he backed away limping.

"NO," Nicholas Hanley roared, grief transforming his face as he realized his son had fallen. He charged toward Caleb, rage and revenge filling his eyes, as Caleb stilled, standing his ground against the Hanley Alpha. "You will pay for taking my son's life," the Hanley Alpha promised, about to shift into his wolf when the sound of a gun being cocked froze him in his tracks.

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“What part of fight to the death didn’t you understand?” My father strolled between the wolf and the man, his hands loose at his sides. My forehead wrinkled as I looked for the gun I’d heard cocked, and my gaze landed on Jess’ father, seeing a rifle braced against his shoulder, the muzzle pointed unwaveringly at the Hanley Alpha. “Also, there is the rule of no interference.”

“Yet, you have a weapon pointed at me,” Nicholas Hanley snarled. “I thought there were no weapons.”

“There aren’t.... between the challengers. That is just to make sure you abide by the outcome. Your son knew the risk. He accepted it,” my father declared, his tone brooking no arguments. “Take your son and go home.”

He kept himself between Caleb and the Hanley Alpha as I walked up next to Caleb. My presence seemed to remind the Hanley Alpha he was outnumbered and he jerked his head. A couple of Hanley men came forward and carefully picked up the dead wolf as a low keening cry came from the Hanley pack.

“This isn’t over,” the Hanley Alpha swore, red-rimmed eyes burning with retribution. “This will never be over.”

I waited until they’d piled in their trucks, pulling out as Jess’ Dad stood guard with his rifle, before kneeling down next to Caleb. “Can you shift back?” I asked him, checking him over. He had a few cuts but the worst was his leg. Most of the damage would heal with the shift, I hoped. Caleb whined, nosing my hand wrapped around his injured hind leg. Broken, he whispered along the link we shared, a red haze of pain accompanying the thought.

“We’ll need to set the leg before he can shift back,” I called and several shifters hurried forward to help me lift him. “Get a travois set up. I don’t want to risk jostling him.” Anna knelt at his head, smoothing the thick blonde scruff that had protected him from a killing bite.

“He’s bleeding,” she warned, her hands coming back red. “He needs to shift.”

“Not before we get this leg straight,” I barked, not willing to take the chance of laming him if he shifted back with unset break.

“I can help,” a voice interrupted and I stared in shock as Leah stood there resolutely, only her fingers wringing together indicating her nerves. “My dad’s a vet.”

“Are you kidding me?” Anna scoffed. “Do you think we’re going to bring him to your dad?” She added scornfully and Leah took a deep breath.

“NO, I think you’re going to let me set the leg so he can shift back and not bleed out,” she responded calmly and silencing Anna.

“Can you do it?” I asked bluntly. I didn’t have the first clue how to set a broken bone at least not one in wolf form.

“Yes,” she answered, crouching down next to me. “But you’re gonna have to hold him down because it’s going to hurt.”

“Dom, you trust her to do this?” Anna interjected in disbelief. “They’re going to get my mom. She can set the bone.”

“How long, Anna? How long does he have before he’s lost too much blood?” Red coated almost everything now and I could sense through the link he was growing weak. If he lost too much blood, he wouldn’t be able to shift back and the magic of

the shift couldn't heal him. "Why wasn't your mom here anyway? Why wasn't she at the fight in case she was needed?" My voice was sharp as I asked questions she didn't want to answer and she bowed her head.

Take it easy, Trent warned via our link as he jogged up. You know exactly what her mother was doing.

I lowered my head for a second, blowing air out of my lungs as I forced myself to apologize. "I'm sorry, Anna. That was uncalled for."

"Do you want me to set it?" Leah's question interrupted us but Anna gave a short nod, accepting my apology. "He's getting worse."

Let her, the words were groggy and laced with pain, but Caleb lifted his head enough for our eyes to meet. Let her, he said again before his head thudded back to the ground.

"Go ahead," I told her, shifting around so I could pin Caleb down and give her room to set the bone. Her fingers moved delicately over the hind leg, gingerly prodding where teeth had dug in, tearing ligaments. She glanced up at me and nodded right before rotating the leg. I braced my weight against Caleb right as he twisted up, jerking against the pain.

"Got it," she whispered, her fingers gliding over the leg to make sure the bone was aligned. "He needs to shift now," she added hastily as more blood soaked into the ground from his sudden movements.

"You heard her, Caleb? You need to shift." I prodded him, shaking his shoulder, but it looked like he might have passed out from the pain. "I'm sorry," I muttered as I shoved my thumb into a deep cut on his side. A pained whimper escaped him as his eyes shot open and I said quickly, "Shift."

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A shimmer filled the air around his body and a moment later, Caleb laid naked in my arms. Leah still had a hold on his leg, her hand wrapped around his thigh, as the majority of his wounds healed from the shift. The effort took what little energy Caleb had left though as he passed out again.

“Whoa, that was cool,” Leah whispered, staring down at Caleb’s now human body. “So cool.”

“You can quit gawking,” Anna snapped, throwing a towel someone had found over Caleb’s naked body. Leah looked up, startled. A flicker of understanding flashed across her face and she pushed herself up. Trent steadied her when she stumbled and she flashed him a smile of thanks.

“We need to get him home,” I stated and she gave a jerky nod. “Someone will escort you home,” I ordered, giving Trent a pointed look. He huffed, tugging a sucker out of his pocket as he nodded grudgingly. “Thank you. We owe you yet another debt of gratitude,” I informed Leah and she bobbed her head, not replying as she watched me lift Caleb onto the stretcher some of the Pack had brought to get him home. Several of us grabbed the sides, holding it steady as we headed toward the path to home.

Chapter Eighteen

“You can let me go now,” Sam growled, jerking out of Payne’s hold and reeling on him. “What did you think you were doing anyway?”

“Keeping you from interfering and having it declared a forfeit,” he responded hotly, running his hand through his hair. Probably so he wouldn’t be tempted to strangle

her, I mused as I watched them argue.

When Sam had shouted for her ex to die, I'd stood there in disbelief. It was only Payne's quick action that had kept her from lunging into the middle of the ring and killing him herself. I wasn't sure what had happened between her and Frank Hanley but from the brutal satisfaction I'd witnessed on her face when she saw him dead, I'd have to say he deserved what he got.

"That wouldn't have happened," Sam spouted off, chest heaving as she stared him down. "Probably wouldn't have happened," she concluded after another minute of calming down. She looked down and saw Nicky clinging to my hand watching her. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry." He shrugged, two fingers hooked inside of his chubby cheeks, seeming unaffected by his mom screaming for his dad to die. It made me wonder what else he may have witnessed in his short life to make that seem commonplace.

Payne met my eyes, then flicked his gaze down to where I still had a stranglehold on Nicky's hand and arched a single eyebrow. I shrugged, mouthing, "Dom," as if that answered everything. Payne nodded slightly, his gaze wandering around the clearing and I figured he'd get his answers later.

"Nicky, you want a candy bar?" Payne asked, holding out his hand and Nicky eagerly took it as Sam bit back whatever scathing remark she was about to give. "Let's hit up the vending machine and then go watch cartoons." Sam opened her mouth, to protest no doubt, but he shook his head warningly. She conceded, nodding as she took Nicky's other hand.

"Chocolate sounds good right now," she admitted, her eyes straying back to the blood-soaked ground for a moment before she straightened and followed Payne and her son back to the motel.

"Apparently, I'm now an Uber driver," Trent drawled, appearing next to me with

Leah in tow.

“It was only a matter of time before you were forced to find gainful employment,” I responded, having to force a smile after I saw Leah’s hands. They were covered in blood. “Caleb?” I asked worriedly, checking the connection to Dom. It was there, a low hum that didn’t speak of death.

“Fine,” Trent assured me with a lift of his eyebrows. “It appears Leah here is a vet in training.”

She ducked her head, rubbing her fingers together as she tried to flake the blood off. “I’ve helped my dad a few times,” she said dismissively. “Setting a leg isn’t a big deal. His shift did all the work.”

“Yeah, but he couldn’t shift with a broken leg and was losing a lot of blood. Your quick action saved him,” Trent explained for my benefit.

“Wow, that’s impressive, Leah. I know the Pack appreciated it.”

“Not all of them,” she muttered under her breath and I pretended not to hear. “Can I clean up before I get ‘escorted’ home?” She used air quotes, telling us exactly how she felt about being escorted.

“Of course, you can use my room.” I let her inside the apartment, quickly closing the door behind her as I hissed to Trent, “He’s okay?”

“Yeah, no joke, she saved the day.” Trent eyed the door Leah was behind as he yanked the sucker out of his mouth. “Caleb owes her his life.”

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“It was that bad?”

“The break wasn’t and if he’d shifted sooner it wouldn’t have been a big deal, but shifting with a bone that isn’t set....” Trent shook his head. “It would have healed as it was and probably left him with a limp.”

“So, she set the bone and he was able to shift, healing everything.”

“Yeah basically,” Trent agreed, lowering himself to the bench by the door. “Anna’s mom would normally be the one to doctor an injured wolf so he could shift back but she wasn’t there.”

“Why wasn’t she there?” I asked, baffled by that information. It seems like Anna’s mom would have been front and center, knowing the Alpha could potentially be hurt and her daughter at risk.

“She was doing something else,” Trent said evasively, his expression saying he was sorry he’d said anything. I narrowed my eyes but before I could say a word, Leah came out. She’d washed the blood off and straightened her ponytail.

“I’m ready,” she said to no one in particular, her stare unfocused.

“Great, let’s go,” Trent said hurriedly, taking her arm and steering her to the parking lot and away from my questioning gaze.

“I’ll talk to you later, Trent,” I called to his back and he waved behind him, not bothering to turn around.

I sighed, turning to go back into the apartment when I saw my Dad and Wren arguing. I moseyed closer, their intensity keeping them from noticing me.

“You put my son at risk,” Dad accused. “You put my entire family at risk and this Pack. These women. How do you think I can trust you with my son after that?”

“It’s not what you think,” Wren pleaded. “Please understand I would never let Theodore get hurt.” It took me a second since she used Monster’s given name but I couldn’t doubt her sincerity.

“Did you take him into the woods, intentionally avoiding the patrols put in place to keep you safe?” Dad asked, each word precise and cutting.

“Yes,” she admitted, her voice shaking. “I did, but he was never in danger.”

“Did you go to the Hanley border and met someone there?”

“Yes,” she cried, tears streaking down her face as my Dad stared at her coldly. I was actually starting to feel sympathetic toward her. It was rare for my Dad to get angry but finding out Wren had endangered Monster and possibly the rest of us had been too much for him.

“Then I don’t need to know anything else,” Dad informed her. “Your services are no longer needed and it might be best if you look for other lodging.” Dad spun on his heel, long strides taking him to his office and probably the bottle of whiskey he’d taken to stashing in his bottom drawer.

Wren stood there for a moment, sniffing, and right when I was about to offer a shoulder to cry on, she ran. Straight into the forest, disappearing within seconds as I stood watching.

“Why was Dad so mean to Wren?” Monster slipped his hand inside of mine as we stared at the edge of the dark forest.

“She shouldn’t have taken you into the woods without permission,” I explained to him. “It’s dangerous because of the Hanleys.”

“That wolf died just like the other Hanley person yesterday,” Monster said and I squeezed his hand. I wasn’t sure how to explain the violent deaths he’d witnessed but before I could try Monster added, “I’m glad I’m not a Hanley.” He glanced up at me. “They’re on the wrong team.”

I opened my mouth but I couldn’t refute his logic. “Yeah, they are,” I finally sighed as I guided him back to the little apartment. “It’s not a good day to be a Hanley.”

The next few days settled into a semi-normal routine except for the fact that I thought my Dad was going to go nuts with Monster at his side while I was at school. At one point, I thought he was going to cave on the Wren situation but he held strong.

I knew I needed to find out more, who she’d been meeting and why, but school was taking most of my focus. Finals were coming up and Anna had been distracted and snappish. Caleb hadn’t returned to school yet and I wondered if he’d have to repeat most of the semesters’ classes. Leah waved when she saw me but most of the time she appeared lost in thought and I couldn’t blame her. She’d witnessed something most people never would and it had to be messing with her view of the world.

Dom was the only stable thing I could rely on but that was mainly through the bond since he hadn’t returned to school either. He was determined to stay by Caleb’s side while he recovered and while I couldn’t blame him, I also missed him.

“Dad, Monster, I’m home,” I called, dropping my backpack on the counter as I went to the fridge. “Dad?” I called again, surprised there was no answer. Usually, he was waiting at the door for me to get home and take over Monster duty. I walked backwards, checking the parking lot and seeing the Range Rover was missing. “Huh,” I said to myself. “He must have taken him to the city.” I checked the message board I’d instituted, and actually found a note scrawled there in Dad’s terrible hand.

Ran out of cookies. Went to the store.

“Ahh,” I hummed to myself. “That makes sense.” I glanced around the empty apartment, empty except for me, something that had become a rarity in my world. I ran to the couch and flopped down, grabbing the remote so I could turn the television to something I wanted to watch, no arguments, when a knock at the door stopped me. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” I groaned, my head thudding against the arm of the sofa. “Maybe they’ll go away.”

Instead, the knocking got louder and I grumbled, but finally hauled myself up and went to the door. A frantic Wren met my gaze through the peephole and I hurriedly opened the door.

“What is it?”

“I need your help, please,” she begged, her hands twisting. “It’s my brother.”

Brother, I echoed to myself, but seeing her panic, I found myself nodding instead of asking questions. “Okay, we’ll help him,” I promised, reaching for a jacket and sending Dom an SOS through the bond link. “Where is he?” I finally asked as we rounded the building. She pointed to the woods and I pressed my lips together. Of course. “That’s who you’ve been meeting, isn’t it?” She nodded, looking ashamed, and I rested my hand on her shoulder. “Wren,” I pulled her to a stop. “This isn’t a trap, is it?”

“No,” she shook her head desperately. “No, I swear. I meet him in the woods to make sure he’s okay. I would have brought him with me, but I was afraid the Pack would

kill him.”

“The Navarre Pack?” I asked in disbelief and she nodded dejectedly. “You still think they’d kill him after everything they’ve done for you?” She shrugged, unwilling to answer, and I sighed. “Is he bad?”

“No, he’s sweet. Just different,” she admitted, wincing. Okay, now I’m intrigued.

Jess? Dom was fully in my head after my SOS and I knew I needed to do something to calm him down before he showed up furry in the yard.

Mouse, I answered and felt his puzzlement. I saw a mouse, I continued. Panicked, but it ran outside. All good.

Uh huh, he answered doubtfully. Take Trent if you’re about to do something that would upset me. Please. My mouth twisted and it was only because of the please that I grudgingly nodded.

I don’t like how well you read me, I answered him.

I just want you to be safe, he replied the bond going back to its unobtrusive presence in my mind.

“Quick stop,” I told Wren, as we made a detour to the room on the end. I banged on the door and after a second it opened, Trent standing there, bleary eyed, a navy Henley in his hands as he gave a jaw cracking yawn.

“I saw your tonsils,” I remarked and gestured to his bare chest. “Cover up, pretty boy, places to go.” I made a chopping motion with my hand and he stared at me for a full second.

“Wolf or man?” He asked, pulling the door shut behind him as he padded out on bare feet. I chanced a glance at Wren but her worried gaze was focused on the forest.

“Let’s go with man for now. Not crossing wolf off the list though,” I answered and he nodded, still looking half asleep as he tugged the fitted Henley over his head. “Do you need shoes?” I asked, glancing down again at his bare feet.

He shook his head, seeming unconcerned and I let it go. Wren urged us to the forest and Trent sent me a questioning glance.

“Brother,” I mouthed, pointing to her back and he looked surprised and more alert as he followed us. We walked for a while, Wren confident in where she was going, only slowing when the sound of a patrol met our ears. Trent had a cautious expression but not overly concerned as we made our way closer to the Hanley border.

“He’ll be here soon,” Wren promised, her hands shaking. “He needs help. He can’t stay there any longer. Not since....” She trailed off, her expression reluctant.

So, I finished helpfully, “Not since Caleb killed the Hanley Alpha’s son.”

She nodded and Trent slumped against a tree. I eyed him and he grimaced. “Night patrol,” he answered, not needing me to ask. He patted his pockets and his stomach before cursing. “Damn it.” He felt his back pockets and again came up empty and kicked a stick on the ground. Wren reached into the bag she had strapped across her body and fished out a sucker, handing it over without even glancing at him.

We both raised our eyebrows at her unexpected action even as he accepted the sucker, unwrapping and popping it into his mouth in one smooth motion. “Thank you,” he mumbled around the candy, settling more comfortably against the tree as we waited. Wren waved her hand dismissively at his thanks, more focused on her brother than him.

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“What do you think?” I mouthed to Trent and he shrugged. “Dangerous?” I pressed and he tilted his head, motioning for me to move closer to him, which I did. He popped the sucker out of his mouth, leaning down next to my ear as he said, “No clue.”

I deflated, resisting the urge to smack him as I made myself comfortable. “You’re a jerk. It’s no wonder Anna doesn’t like you.”

“Anna doesn’t like me because she’s still mooning over that boy child Alpha,” Trent retorted, rolling the sucker from cheek to cheek. “She has no idea what she’s capable of.”

I glanced at him, silenced by the bitterness I heard in his voice. Trent was normally charming and relaxed but any mention of Anna had the ability to turn him into a snarling male. A rustle from the Hanley side of the border had him tensing, a movement so slight I never would have noticed had I not been standing so close. To anyone observing, he would appear to still be relaxed against the tree, unaware of someone approaching. I had a new appreciation for his skills and understood why Dom wanted him to stick around.

“Easy, killer,” Trent said out of the side of his mouth when I started at the noise. “Don’t give away the game.”

“Game? What game,” I hissed. “No one mentioned a game.”

He grinned, crunching down on his sucker to break it up and stashing the white sucker stick in his pocket. “You’d make a terrible hunter,” he informed me.

“I can accept that,” I replied tartly as Wren stepped forward eagerly. “Should she...” I pointed at Wren, who’d apparently forgotten about us in her desire to see her brother. Trent shifted forward, somehow managing to position me between his back and the tree.

“You’re my priority,” he answered, any of his seemingly carelessness disappearing as an unknown approached.

“But Wren....”

“Made her choices.”

“Wren?” A voice called hesitantly, the sound almost childish except for the deep tone. “Wren!” He called again, singsong.

“I’m here.” Wren clapped her hands softly and I peered around Trent’s shoulder as her brother came into view.

“Oooooohhh,” I drew the sound out as I saw him clomp through the bushes, the wide smile on his face when he spotted his sister almost disguising the bruises.

“Jesus,” Trent cursed, clamping his arm around me when I went to go around. “He might be dangerous.”

“He’s not,” I assured him, recognizing the round eyes and friendly demeanor. “His name is Dylan.”

Trent relaxed his arm but the tension didn’t leave him. “You know him?”

“We met,” I said awkwardly. “He brought me to Sam when I was kidnaped by the Hanleys.”

“He helped Sam?” Trent’s voice was doubtful and I poked him in the back.

“Yes, he helped them,” I hissed as Wren hugged her brother and fussed over the bruises. “He isn’t bound by the alpha.”

Trent’s breath shuddered out of him. “His alpha doesn’t know that.”

“Of course not,” I stated, barely resisting rolling my eyes.

“I can’t believe they didn’t kill him when he was born.”

“Trent,” I exclaimed, shocked by his response. “Why would you say that?”

“It’s not unusual for the pack to destroy a child that isn’t.... normal,” he replied, his tone matter of fact as he glanced at me apologetically. “The Hanley pack kill children who aren’t shifters. He wouldn’t be any different –” he broke off, staring at me in horrified wonder. “He can shift?” He asked, the words stilted and awkward as if he couldn’t believe he was asking them. I nodded silently, my eyes wide as Trent tightened his arm, holding me in place as he backed away.

“What are you doing?” I whispered, trying to get around him but he wasn’t having it.

“Protecting you,” he answered fiercely and I stilled. “I can see why Wren kept him a secret.”

“We have to help him,” I declared, waving my hand at Dylan and his bruised face. “He’s in danger from the Hanley pack.”

“He’s in danger from any pack,” Trent ground out, his expression sympathetic but resolute. “He has Down Syndrome?” I nodded because he clearly did, there was no hiding it. “And he can shift.” Again, I nodded, not understanding where he was

going. “And he doesn’t have to obey the Alpha.” I shook my head slowly, not liking his questions. “Jess, he could easily hurt someone and not truly understand the consequences of his actions. That could happen even if he was only human, but he’s a shifter. Which means he could do so much more damage.”

“What are you saying, Trent?” The question sounded hollow even to me and he swallowed hard.

“Most don’t survive long enough to shift the first time,” he answered and I stared at him in shock.

“Is that why Wren was afraid to bring him to the Navarre Pack? They might kill him,” I said and he nodded reluctantly. “They wouldn’t,” I stated baldly and Trent just stared at me. “They wouldn’t,” I said more firmly, desperately hoping it was true.

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“Dylan, I want you to meet some people. They’re nice people,” Wren cautioned him, gesturing for us to come over. I moved to go toward them but Trent’s arm was a rigid barrier stopping me.

“Trent,” I said in a low voice. “You go with me or I go through you,” I threatened, not entirely certain how I was going to back up my claim, but he lowered his arm, yielding to my command.

He dogged my feet as I went closer and Dylan’s eyes lit up when he saw me. “I know you,” he cried happily and I smiled, nodding, as I took in the damage to his face. I hid a wince at the condition of his face. Upon closer inspection, I could see the bruising was in shades of green, yellow, and purple; indicating multiple beatings.

When he spotted Trent though, his expression changed. I flinched as his eyes flashed, the wolf showing through, and almost stumbled back into Trent.

“Easy, guy, I mean no harm,” Trent held his hands up, keeping his body loose as he stopped. Wren patted Dylan’s shoulder, reminding him she was there.

“It’s okay, Dylan, they’re friends. I invited them. They’re going to help us,” she soothed, calming him down, and I could suddenly see what Trent had been trying to tell me. Dylan saw things simply. Friend or foe, and he could be extremely dangerous if he didn’t know the difference. “He wouldn’t hurt you,” Wren defended him. “He’s just protective of me.” I waited for Trent to argue, but he simply nodded, crossing his arms.

Wren glanced at me, her eyes beseeching me. “Help us, please. He can’t stay there.”

She gestured to his face as she said, “They use him as a punching bag.”

“He doesn’t shift?” Trent asked curiously. “Instinct would force a shift.”

“The Alpha forbade him to shift,” Wren said bitterly and Trent glanced at me questioningly.

“I thought he didn’t have to obey Alpha orders?” Trent mentioned and Wren looked away, exhaling.

“He doesn’t. He can resist them when he wants to and has many times to help me, but I told him he needs to obey this one. It would be too obvious if he didn’t.”

“He has that much control?” Trent asked doubtfully. “That even being beaten he can keep from shifting and hurting them?”

Wren bobbed her head quickly and Trent rubbed his neck restlessly.

“I listen to Wren,” Dylan chimed in, glancing at us and I smiled. I could understand now why Monster had taken such a liking to Wren.

“If that’s true,” Trent said carefully, pausing when Wren interrupted.

“It is, I swear. He listens to me. I raised him,” she said eagerly.

“We can’t leave him here,” I muttered to Trent and he looked torn.

“Taking him with us would be tantamount to a declaration of war,” he said repressively, trying to avoid Wren’s hopeful face. “We don’t have that kind of sway.”

“Caleb may consider allowing him into the Pack,” I offered. “If Dom supports it.”

“It’s not Caleb’s decision,” Trent informed me.

“It’s the Council’s,” another voice interjected and I let out a muffled shriek as Anna materialized from the trees.

“Your stalking needs work,” Trent told her. “I heard you a mile away.”

“Only because I didn’t shift,” she sneered. “If I was in wolf form you wouldn’t have had time to realize who’d torn your throat out.”

“We’ll have to put that to the test one day,” he promised, a glint in his eyes that only brightened when her cheeks flushed.

“I’d be happy to put you in your place,” she declared haughtily.

“Okay,” I interrupted, taking on the role of referee. “Back to the problem at hand, what do you mean it’s the Council’s decision? I thought the Alpha could make the decision.”

“Depends on the decision. Offering asylum to a member of another pack requires more than just Alpha approval.”

“Asylum?” I questioned, glancing between Wren and her brother.

Trent exhaled. “Might work.”

“That’s the only option,” Anna admitted.

“Sam and the other women didn’t ask for asylum,” I reminded her.

“And they’re not technically allowed on Pack land,” she mentioned, intentionally

avoiding looking at Wren. “They’re not Pack and if they want to join the Navarre Pack, they’ll need to formally request admittance to the Pack or mate with an existing member of the Pack,” she added, glancing at me quickly.

“Wait, I’m a member of the Pack?”

Anna nodded as Trent chuckled. “You didn’t know that?”

“Well, I didn’t really give it a lot of thought to be honest,” I admitted, embarrassed at being caught ignorant of something yet again.

“Either way, that won’t work in his case,” Anna said, pointing to Dylan. “He’s a member of an enemy pack. Asylum is the best option.”

“So, Trent could ask to join the Navarre Pack?” I questioned, wondering why he hadn’t already. Anna got a shifty look on her face and I set my hands on my hips. “What is it?”

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“Its doubtful Trent would be allowed to join,” Anna answered, not looking at him. Trent nodded and my mouth dropped open.

“You knew this?”

“I’m an unmated male. Unpredictable and competition to any other male.”

“Caleb,” Anna confirmed.

“But Dylan,” I trailed off because it sounded like there was no chance for him either.

“Asylum is different. It’s done in times of emergency. Life or death,” Anna explained.

“And it is life or death,” Wren interrupted. “They will eventually kill him, especially if they catch him coming here to see me.”

“We can broach the subject at the next Council meeting,” Anna offered. “Ease them into the idea.”

“We don’t have time for that,” Wren pleaded desperately and Dylan hugged her awkwardly, patting her shoulder as he told her it would be okay.

“I can have my mom call a meeting today, maybe we can get them to agree in a few days,” Anna said apologetically. “Caleb is almost completely healed and if he agrees it will go a long way.”

“He can’t go back.” The male stepped from the shadows, his hands casually crossed in front of his privates as he stood there completely nude. I dropped my gaze to the ground as Trent bristled next to us. “I was told to follow him by the Alpha and report back. His life is forfeit if he returns.”

“Liam,” Dylan said happily, running over to the other male and hugging him. Liam raised one arm to return the hug and I jerked my eyes to his face as some of his parts were put on display.

“Dylan,” Liam acknowledged, a genuine smile on his face. “You’re going home with Wren today.”

“You come?” Dylan asked innocently and Liam’s smile tightened minutely.

“Not today,” he replied, shaking his head.

“Can’t he just stay at the motel like the other women?” I asked and Trent shook his head.

“No, he’d have to be accepted into the Navarre Pack for his own protection,” Anna answered. “Otherwise, Nicholas Hanley could show up at the motel and tear it apart to get to him. Probably kill him when he did.”

“She’s right,” Liam replied, nodding respectfully to Anna. “Dylan needs to be protected.” He glanced around guardedly. “He knows too much for the Alpha to ever let him live.”

“Why are you helping him?” Trent spoke up, asking the question I’d been wondering.

“We’re not all like them,” Liam sneered in disgust. “Some of us respect women. We want to be free.” His eyes met mine for a second and I gasped.

“You,” I breathed, stepping forward to get a closer look at his eyes. He stepped back warily and Trent grabbed my arm. “You saved me.”

Liam sniffed and then gave a jerky nod. “I thought I recognized that scent.” He glanced between me and Anna. “You’re not the female wolf.” I shook my head, wondering if that was the only reason he’d saved me. “Wouldn’t have mattered, that asshole got what was coming to him,” he muttered, shrugging, as he unintentionally answered my question.

He gazed at Trent and the grip he had on my arm. “He’s not your mate,” he said confidently, his eyes narrowing as his stare switched from Trent to Anna. “Interesting.” He glanced back at me. “Not all Hanleys are bad,” he informed me and I nodded as he jerked his head to Dylan and said, “Take care of him.”

He started to turn away and I shouted after him, “What about you?” After what he’d said, I was afraid the Hanley Alpha would kill him too.

His lip curled in a twisted smile. “I’ll be fine,” he promised right as he shimmered and a dirty brown wolf took his place. We watched him trot off as Trent scrubbed his hand over his face, sighing.

“This day just gets better and better.”

“You’ll help him,” Wren cried, her gaze shifting between the three of us. “You’ll protect my brother?”

I closed my eyes and Trent muttered, “Don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t –”

“We’ll protect him,” I promised her.

“And she said it,” he grumbled, glaring at me. I shrugged, what else was I supposed

to do?

“I need to talk to my mom,” Anna mentioned, sliding past Trent.

“You’re not going anywhere by yourself,” he warned, grasping her arm. She twisted but he didn’t release her. “There’s a wolf out there that knows exactly what you are. You’re not leaving my sight.”

“Anna, he’s right,” I echoed, ignoring the flash of betrayal on her face. “I think the guy has good intentions but we’re too close to the Hanley border. Let’s go back to the motel together. See if Dom and Caleb will meet us. Create a plan.”

Anna nodded shortly, tugging on her arm until Trent let go. She went to take the lead when Trent stopped her, this time touching her shoulder, and she jerked away from him with a gasp. He gestured for Wren and Dylan to go ahead, with Anna and I falling in the middle as he took the rear.

Chapter Nineteen

“This is insane,” Caleb burst out. He paced the living room, keeping a wary eye on Dylan, who looked scared and uncomfortable around so many unfamiliar males. Every once in a while, I saw the reappearance of his wolf and felt Dom’s arm tighten around me as he sensed it too. Wren sat next to him, patting his arm gently as she tried to remain calm for his sake.

“Maybe Dylan should go to Wren’s room while we discuss things,” I mentioned carefully when Caleb got a little too close to Wren and Dylan growled.

“You want to play with my trucks in Jess’ room?” Monster offered, fascinated by Dylan’s presence. Dylan nodded shyly, but he jumped when Dom snarled. I stared at him in shock, my eyes saying, “What the hell,” when he didn’t speak.

I don’t want his scent in your room, Dom admitted through our mental bond and the mark on my neck burned white hot. He cracked his neck, the sound loud in the room as he turned to Dylan. “I’m sorry. I would prefer you didn’t go into Jess’ room.”

“I’ll go get the trucks,” Monster said, hurrying into my room. Dad stirred from the spot where he’d been staring at Wren, and reached into the cabinet to grab a pack of cookies.

“I’ll keep an eye on them. They can play in my office,” he said to no one in particular. Monster came running back, his arms full of toy trucks and Dylan stood up, causing Caleb to take a cautious step back. Dylan looked to Wren for permission and when she nodded, he lumbered after Monster.

“You like cookies, Dylan?” My dad asked as he opened the apartment door.

“I love cookies,” Dylan answered my dad and I heard Dad chuckle.

“You’ll fit right in.”

We watched them walk out of the apartment, no one speaking until the door shut behind them. “Do you really expect me to support allowing him into my Pack? He’s retarded.”

“Caleb,” Anna cried in shock. Dom squeezed my fingers before letting go of my hand as he stood. “Caleb,” he rumbled and Caleb threw his hands up.

“I’m only stating the truth.” Caleb wheeled around, pinning Wren with an accusing stare. “How was he even allowed to be born?”

“My mother hid the pregnancy,” Wren answered, her expression defiant as she faced Caleb. “And he’s not retarded. He’s special. Unique. Loving. And a better man than you could ever hope to be.” Tears glistened in her eyes but she refused to let them fall. “I had hope when Sam told us the Navarre pack would take us in. I had hope that maybe my brother could find acceptance instead of ignorant stupidity. I took a chance and you’ve done nothing but disappoint.”

Caleb glanced down as Wren spoke, having the grace to appear chastened by her words. “He’s dangerous though,” he said, struggling against the combined weight of our disapproval.

“He’s not dangerous,” Wren corrected. “He’s gentle. He doesn’t want to hurt people. Even after everything his father has done to him.”

“His father?” Trent stepped closer and Dom stiffened next to me. “Who is his

father?”

Wren froze, her gaze darting around the room.

“There’s only one man it could be. Only one who would have the power to insure his child’s survival,” Anna stated, staring hard at Wren. “We just stole the Alpha’s son.”

Wren pressed her lips together, a tear escaping down her cheek as she shook her head, unable to deny Anna’s words.

“And I thought this day couldn’t get any worse,” Trent groaned, rubbing his tired eyes.

“Wren, can you tell us about your brother?” I asked gently, going over to her and easing her back into her seat. I indicated the others should back up a little. Four shifters could be a little overwhelming.

“The Alpha took whoever he wanted,” Wren began, her voice hollow. “He wanted as many shifters as he could have but he didn’t have very many sons. Only two, in fact.” I rubbed her arm as she faltered. “My mother was older, but still able to have babies. She got pregnant and when they realized the baby had Down syndrome, they forced her to have an abortion.” Wren reached for my hand, squeezing tightly. “That didn’t stop the Alpha from trying again. This time when my mother realized she was pregnant, she hid it. Just in case. Dylan was born early. She delivered him at home and we knew as soon as we saw him.” The room was silent as we listened. Caleb sank down next to Anna on the couch as Dom stood next to them. “She would only speak to the Alpha. She knew what they’d do. She convinced him that this son would be his most faithful follower. His most loyal soldier.” Wren swallowed, tears threatening to overcome her. “He agreed not to kill Dylan but said she was useless to him since all she could produce were retards.”

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Caleb let out a shaky breath and I bit my lip as she continued. “He snapped her neck as she held his son.” Wren let out a choked sob. “He kept his word, he never killed Dylan but it might have been kinder if he had.” She glanced up, blinded by tears. “I’ve spent my whole life protecting him the best I could. I knew he would never be accepted by a pack, but I hoped...” she stopped, too choked to speak any longer.

Caleb traded a glance with Dom and then Anna, and finally sighed. “My father would never have agreed to allow him in the Pack. He would have spoken of tradition, of protecting the Pack from a dangerous unknown,” he paused before continuing, “And he would have been wrong.” He cleared his throat. “I offer your brother, Dylan Hanley, asylum.” Caleb’s voice changed then, his words almost echoing as he said, “He has the full protection and loyalty of the Navarre Pack.”

Wren lifted her head, a fragile hope on her face as Anna and Dom lowered their heads at the Alpha’s command. Trent glanced at her as he added, “He’s got mine too if it makes a difference.” She nodded, too emotional to speak.

“Now, let’s go make this official,” Caleb grunted, pushing himself up. “We have school tomorrow, after all.”

“I was thinking,” Dad started, not meeting my eyes as he poured a cup of coffee.

“That you’d let Wren watch Monster today?” I finished, eyeing him. He gave me a sheepish smile.

“That obvious?”

“You are a little transparent, Dad.”

“She’s trying to get Dylan settled and he seems to have struck up a friendship with Monster,” he hedged, drumming his fingers on the countertop.

“And it’d get Monster out of your hair while you work?”

“That too,” he agreed. “What do you think?”

“That we owe Wren an apology and yes, I agree that she should watch Monster,” I answered, stuffing a notebook into my backpack while trying to cram the last bite of my bagel in my mouth.

“I will apologize when I bring Monster over,” he declared. “But she shouldn’t have put him at risk in the first place. If she’d trusted us...” He trailed off and I knew he meant if she’d trusted him.

“You were harsh, admit it, Dad. She betrayed you and it hurt like a son of a bitch.” I gave up on the notebook and the bagel as I spoke. “She was afraid for her brother’s life and I can’t blame her. I’d do the same thing if it was Monster.” I picked up the notebook, sliding it in just as I heard the rumble of the Jeep in the parking lot. “Also, you should quit pussyfooting around and ask her out.” I snatched the last bite of bagel off the plate and waved as I waltzed out the door.

Caleb jumped out of the passenger side so I could haul myself into the back of the Jeep next to Anna. “Wow, total flashback to the days when I was just an ignorant human girl,” I joked, buckling up as Anna grinned at me. “You look happy.”

Her eyes sparkled and she nodded as she said, “I’ll tell you later.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Dom grumbled, shifting the Jeep into gear as Caleb hopped back in. We exchanged a secretive grin as we said in unison, “Nothing.”

“Yeah, right,” he mumbled, but dropped the subject. I spotted Trent outside of his motel room and wiggled my fingers at him in a little wave. He lifted his hand in response and I saw Anna duck her head out of the corner of my eye. My eyes met Dom’s in the rearview mirror as I arched an eyebrow. He shook his head silently and I resigned myself to waiting till we got to school to find out Anna’s news.

“Well?” I burst out, unable to contain my curiosity by the time we reached our lockers. Caleb and Dom had gone in different directions when we’d arrived but Anna had remained stubbornly silent.

“Caleb asked me out,” she squealed and the smile I’d felt forming died. Somehow that wasn’t what I’d expected her to say. I forced my lips up as she bounced in excitement and chattered about how he’d asked after they’d gotten the Council to agree to accept Caleb’s offer of asylum to Dylan. Luckily, her happiness was so great that she didn’t notice my own smile was a little dim.

The same thought kept looping through my mind as she talked and it was how Payne had broken up with Sam because his father had forced him too. I wondered if somehow Caleb was also doing what his father would have expected by dating Anna.

“Okay, class,” Anna said, breaking off her minute by minute description of Caleb asking her out. “Finals’ week! Yay!”

“Good luck,” I called as she disappeared into her first period class. I hated the uncertainty I felt about Caleb’s intentions but couldn’t push the seed of doubt away. Why had he asked her now? After everything else that had happened it was almost as if he was trying to fit into the mold his father had created.

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I pushed my thoughts away as I entered the classroom, needing my focus for the final I planned to ace.

My stomach grumbled as I hurried toward the lunchroom. The final in my last class had been more difficult than I'd thought and made me late for lunch as I'd spent extra time double checking my answers. The halls were empty for once since everyone was already in the cafeteria.

I slowed at the sound of voices, my head tilting at the familiar tones, as I came to a stop at the corner.

"Hey," Leah said, "I'm surprised you're not already in the cafeteria. Shouldn't you be at the cool kid's table?" She teased, her voice happier than it had been in a while I was startled to realize.

"Yeah, I'm supposed to be there," Caleb answered, his voice lower than normal.

"You don't sound too enthusiastic," Leah noted and I peeked around the corner. She stood by her locker, head tilted up as Caleb propped himself against an adjoining locker.

He gave her a tight grin, more pained than happy, and I eased back around the corner, deciding not to interrupt them by walking by. "I'm not sure I belong there," he admitted, startling me.

She glanced at him in surprise. “What do you mean? Aren’t you leader of the pack?” She zipped up her bag but when he didn’t speak, she paused. “You belong there,” she told him confidently, brushing her hand against his arm. He glanced down at where her hand rested lightly on his forearm, rotating his wrist so the palm of his hand touched her skin.

“You’re the first person to reach out to touch me since I killed him,” he admitted, staring down at their hands resting against one another. “It feels like that decision separated me from them.”

“It was the only decision you could have made,” Leah murmured, pressing the tips of her fingers into his skin. “They know that.”

“Knowing and feeling are two different things.” He glanced at her, a shaky breath escaping him. “Going in there...I don’t know what to do,” he confessed. “I’m not their friend anymore. I’m their Alpha.”

“You sit with them,” she said, her eyes pained as she studied him. “Until it feels normal again.”

Caleb’s head bumped against the locker but he kept their hands connected. “My father always sat at the head of the table.” He shook his head. “I never thought twice about it.” Leah waited patiently for him to continue as I rested my head against the wall, my heart breaking. “Now, I’m supposed to sit at the head of the table. His spot. His place. And I’m supposed to be the man he was.”

“Caleb, no one expects you to be your father,” Leah responded and he gave her a doubtful look. “They don’t,” she insisted. “They expect you to be Alpha, to lead them, to protect them, but you can choose how you do it. You don’t have to sit at the head of the table, Caleb. You can sit next to them.” She squeezed his arm, her hand slipping away and he let her, straightening up as she stepped back. “You’re one of

them, you know that, right?”

He smiled bitterly as he corrected her. “I’m not one of them, Leah, I’m all of them.” A mask came over his face then as he nodded to her. “I also owe you a thank you for saving my life.” He ignored the shake of her head, his smile brittle as he said, “Thank you,” before striding away. Her worried gaze followed him down the hall, and she bit her lip when he walked straight past the cafeteria doors.

The clang of her locker door shutting startled me and I watched as she shrugged her backpack over her shoulders and headed to the cafeteria. I let out a sigh, not sure who I felt worse for as I followed them down the hall.

Chapter Twenty

The intercom buzzed as I reviewed my notes during sixth period. The substitute who’d replaced Ms. Nichols wasn’t coming back next semester and she’d allowed us to treat the class as a study hall when finals started.

“Jess Carter to the office.”

A few oohs erupted and Anna gave me a worried glance. I shrugged, not sure why I was going to the office this time, but also equally positive I would fight kicking and screaming if someone tried to kidnap me again. I shoved my notebook into my backpack and lifted it to my shoulder, deciding to take it with me. Class was almost over anyway.

When I entered the office, there was no one behind the counter. I shifted awkwardly, my stance growing wary as I glanced around the empty area.

“Jess, thank you for coming,” Principal Davis said, exiting his office as he smiled at me. The smile was fake, not reaching his eyes and I knew whatever he was about to

say wasn't good news.

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“Didn’t think I had a choice,” I replied, following him into his office as I cast a lingering stare back at the empty reception area. He chuckled, choosing to ignore my tone as he gestured to a chair.

“Jess, have a seat.” Principal Davis refused to meet my eyes as I entered and I took a moment to settle into my seat. “It’s come to my attention,” he began and my body froze as my mind frantically ran through every argument I could come up with to defend my relationship with Dom. “That you have enough credits to graduate.” It took a moment for my mind to catch up to his words and I know my mouth dropped open. He smiled narrowly. “Not what you thought I was going to say?”

I shook my head mutely.

“You can graduate a semester early. This semester,” he said, crossing his arms on his desk as he leaned forward. “Good news, yes?”

“I knew I had enough credits,” I replied carefully. “I intend to take additional classes next semester for college credit.”

“An admirable goal,” he said, nodding. “But one I’m afraid you won’t be doing here. You can always take some classes at the community college.”

“But, Principal,” I halted when he raised his hand, his stare gimlet.

“Don’t mistake this as an offer or a request. You will be graduating this semester.”

I glanced down, licking my lip as I tried to come up with a response. I heard him

sigh.

“I don’t want to be the bad guy here, but there are rumors.” My head came up and he gave me a tight smile. “No accusations. Nothing brought to my attention that I would have to respond to. I’d like to keep it that way.” He raised his eyebrow as he added, “I trust you know what I’m referring too?” I nodded automatically, knowing exactly what he meant. “Then you understand why it would be best for you to graduate this semester.”

When I tried to respond, my throat seized and I had to clear it. “Of course.” My own smile was brittle as he relaxed. “I welcome the chance to graduate early.”

“I owe the Navarre family,” he added carefully. “They do a great many things for the school and I look the other way when necessary.” I blinked at him as his voice took on an ingratiating quality. “I was happy to hear that Hank Navarre was made sheriff. Dominic Navarre is a fine coach and Caleb is a great student.”

“What are you saying?”

“That I’m doing this as much for their protection as your own.”

“The only one you’re protecting is yourself, Principal Davis. I remember you letting Sheriff Hanley walk me out of the school without contacting my father. You were protecting yourself then too.” I stood up, forcing him to look up at me. “But I won’t make a fuss since in this instance we are both protecting the same person.” I leaned forward and he flinched back. “But do both of us a favor and quit pretending you give a damn about anyone but yourself and your position here.”

I marched out of the office, back straight, forcing back unwanted tears.

Jess, his voice soothed my turmoil and I felt my lips twitch into a smile.

I'm fine, I rushed to reassure him. Got good news! I attempted to keep my voice perky, but he didn't buy it.

What happened, Jess?

I spoke with Principal Davis and I'm graduating early. This semester.

You wanted to take advanced classes next semester for college, he reminded me and I wished for just a second that he didn't always pay such close attention when I spoke.

I can take them at the community college.

Yeah, but you wanted to graduate with Leah and Anna. Go to prom.

It's better this way, I gritted out and if it was possible I felt him go still in my mind.

Did Principal Davis force you into this? He asked, his voice frighteningly calm.

He didn't force me. He reminded me why it's the best choice.

I'll speak with him, Dom replied dangerously.

You know you say speak in the same tone other people say execute.

I'm on my way.

NO! You're not. It's done. I graduate this semester and no matter what you say or do to him, it's not going to change my mind.

Jess, I heard his exasperation and his worry. You've given up too much.

I don't feel like I've given up anything, I replied, swallowing hard as I admitted the truth. I've sacrificed nothing to be with you, but I've gained so much.

He appeared around the corner then, slowing as he approached me. His hand cupped my cheek, thumb rubbing my jaw as he stared at me. "I don't deserve you," he murmured.

"Definitely not," I answered, my smile a little damp as I tilted my head back to meet his eyes. "But you can keep trying until you do."

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He nodded silently, lowering his head until his lips skimmed mine.

“Dom,” I protested. “We’re standing in the middle of the hallway.”

“What are they going to do? Kick you out?” He retorted, brushing his lips back and forth against mine.

A smile hovered over my mouth as I said, “No, they already did that. But they could fire you and that would piss me off.”

He blew air out through his nose as he straightened. “Best not to piss you off.”

I nodded, my smile flickering as I stood there, my backpack hanging off one shoulder. My body felt equal parts hot and cold as I contemplated what had just happened. Yes, I had enough credits to graduate early but I’d essentially been kicked out and I wasn’t sure how to respond to that fact.

“I have to go lock up the field house,” Dom said and I gave him a jerky nod, letting him know I heard him. He pressed keys in my hand and my fingers wrapped around them automatically. “Go wait in the Jeep, okay?” Again, my head bobbed in an automatic response and for a minute we just stood there until he gently pushed me toward the front entrance. I started walking, chancing one last glance over my shoulder to see him staring after me.

Don’t kill anybody, I thought distractedly, the thought meant for Dom as I made my way to his Jeep in the teacher’s lot.

No death, he promised, but a dark undercurrent in his thoughts warned me he intended to do something.

Or mayhem, I added firmly. This is for the best. The words sounded hollow even to me and I felt a flash of his anger before he could hide it. Dom, its just high school. It's not important.

It is important. You had plans and now they're gone.

They changed, I corrected him, stopping in front of his Jeep as I huddled inside the thick coat I'd been forced to buy when the cold became too much for me. Life changes and how you react is the key to happiness.

You're serious, he stated, his surprise coming through our bond and I was equally surprised to realize I was serious. Yeah, what had just happened was unexpected and I was upset, but really, I should have seen it coming. Dom and I played a dangerous game. A relationship between a student and teacher was taboo and flaunting it shouldn't be encouraged.

I have you. The rest is just stuff, I replied, unlocking the Jeep and hopping to get myself inside.

Doesn't mean he shouldn't get the shit scared out of him, Dom rumbled and I thought about protesting but finally decided it wasn't worth it.

Just don't get fired, I replied tiredly, my head dropping back against the seat as I tried to decide how I was going to tell Dad.

A scraping sound caused my eyes to pop open in time to see the passenger door wrenched open. I sucked in a lungful of air, prepared to scream, when Trent's face came into view. I let out several choked breaths as he reached up and yanked me out

of the Jeep.

“What?”

“No time. Where’s Anna?” He spoke quickly, glancing over his shoulder repeatedly.
“We’re exposed out here.”

“Who?” I tried to gather my thoughts as they skittered everywhere. “Hanleys?”

“Yes. The answer is always Hanleys,” he confirmed, his grip tight as he hauled me back toward the school.

“I’m not really welcome there,” I muttered as he pushed open the doors.

“Don’t really care. Anna?” He asked again, staring down at me.

“Sixth period,” I pointed down the hallway. “Four hundred hall.”

“Okay, now would be a nice time to use that nifty link you have with Dom,” he muttered, hustling us down the hall.

“Why don’t you?” I asked in confusion. “You have a link with him.”

“Shhh, let’s not bandy that information around, okay?” Trent said with a grimace.
“And he’s not tuning into my channel at the moment which is why I hauled ass over here when I got the info.”

“What info?”

“That the Hanleys planned an abduction attempt on you and Anna,” he said shortly.

“Then who’s at the motel?” I pushed at him frantically. “Trent, who’s at the motel?”

“I pressed Payne into service,” he answered and then mumbled under his breath, “Also Dylan and Liam.”

“Liam? As in Hanley? You don’t think this might be a trap?” I shrieked, no longer worried if anyone heard us as I considered the fact that my dad and Monster could be in danger. “And you somehow think Dylan can help?” The words came out more caustic than I intended as I panicked.

“Look, what was I supposed to do? I couldn’t risk you or Anna getting captured. It would start a war that would end in a lot of bloodshed.” He clenched his jaw, still moving us down the hall, scanning for the room number I gave him. “I thought about it, but I couldn’t exactly send Dylan or Liam with a message. Dom wouldn’t have reacted well to Liam,” he gritted out, before pulling us to a stop. “Finally.”

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He pushed open the door and scanned the room, glancing back at me. “She’s not here.” I shoved past him and saw he spoke the truth.

I looked at the substitute and asked, “Where’s Anna?”

“She was called to the field house right after you were called to the office,” she responded, automatically reacting to the command in my voice.

“Shit,” I cursed, running past Trent and toward the back doors. I sent a call out to Dom over our bond, hoping he wasn’t ignoring all links. Trent was hot on my heels as we raced across the back lawn to the field house. Right as I was about to yank open the doors, Trent stopped me.

“Me first,” he said, not even out of breath as I stood there panting. I managed to nod, waving my hand for him to go ahead. I was no hero.

Jess? Relief trickled through me at Dom’s worried voice as I sucked in lungfuls of air.

Field house, hurry, I told him and felt his concern. I shored up my courage and followed behind Trent, ignoring his angry glare. I wasn’t going to stay behind if there was a chance I could help Anna.

We wandered through the darkened building, listening for the sound of anyone. Trent paused, inhaling deeply, his forehead wrinkling, as he directed us toward the weight room. A giggle broke the silence and I glanced at Trent as I said, “That’s Anna.”

Anger contorted his face for a moment, and then he slammed through the doors. I chased after him in time to see Caleb with his arm around Anna, his face close enough to hers to make me realize we may have interrupted something, when Trent snatched Anna away from him.

“Trent,” I called, clapping my hand over my mouth as Anna struggled against him.

“What the hell, man?” Caleb yelled and Trent released Anna, swinging around to punch Caleb.

“Stop! What are you doing?” Anna shrieked, grabbing Trent’s arm as he went to swing again. She must have used her shifter strength because she was able to stop him.

“I thought,” Trent stopped, wiping the back of his mouth as he shook his head.

“Thought what?” Anna blasted. “What could you possibly have thought?”

“That you’d been lured out here by a Hanley so they could kidnap you,” he burst out. “Instead, you’re in here playing kissy face with the child Alpha.”

“Watch it,” Caleb growled and Trent scoffed.

“Or what? You’re not my Alpha.”

“Anna,” I interjected before they got in a pissing match. “We thought you’d been kidnapped. The teacher said you’d been called out here.”

Anna blushed, not making eye contact as she mumbled, “I told you I had date with Caleb.”

“This is the date?” I asked in disbelief and she nodded. “FYI, making out in the field house is not a date. It’s a hookup.” I pointed a finger at Caleb. “And you, sir, know better.”

He flushed, ducking his head, and I traded a glance with Trent right before the doors burst open again and Dom came barreling in. “What the hell is going on?” He shouted, glaring wildly around the room.

“Trent, the motel,” I gasped, my brain connecting the dots and he stared at me in horror.

“Oh, God,” he muttered right before slapping his hand against Dom’s chest and giving him a pointed stare. “We need to go.”

Dom’s eyes widened with awareness and he jerked his head to Caleb. “Now, we’ll discuss this later.” He must have told them what was happening through the Pack bond because they both reacted instantly.

They all dashed back toward the parking lot by unspoken agreement. Dom scooped me up as their superior speed outpaced me. He threw me in the back with Anna, Trent standing behind us as Caleb and Dom slid into the front seat. He gunned the engine, tires squealing as we peeled out of the parking lot.

Tension held me immobile as the drive stretched out for what seemed like forever, when in reality it was less than two minutes before gravel sprayed as Dom careened into the motel parking lot.

My heart jumped when I saw Dad standing outside the motel office, Monster nowhere in sight. Sirens screamed as Dom’s father came spinning into the parking lot right after us.

“Sam,” Dom whispered and I saw her fighting Payne as he struggled to hold on to her. “Jesus, they have Nicky.”

He slammed to a stop with those words and I sprinted from the Jeep, for once faster than the others, as I headed straight for my Dad. “Monster?” I cried frantically and he shook his head. My knees gave out and I crashed toward the concrete sidewalk as Dad lunged for me.

“This is your fault. You bastard, you let them take him,” Sam screamed, pounding her fists against Payne as he stood still, taking her abuse.

“Samantha,” Hank Navarre rumbled and her hands dropped from Payne as she turned to face her father for the first time in years.

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“Dad?” Her voice wobbled as she stared at him, the crisp uniform snug on his large frame. “Daddy,” she cried, launching herself at him and he accepted her with open arms. “They have my baby.”

“Not for long,” Hank answered, patting her back as he nodded at Payne. “Not for long.”

Dad cradled me against him as I whispered, “They took him?” He nodded his head as his chest shook.

“They took Monster and Nicky. We managed to hide the other children and women, but their focus was Nicky,” Dad spoke up, drawing their attention. “They came for Nicky.”

“This is my fault,” Trent said hollowly. “I left. I trusted Liam.”

“This is not your fault, son,” Dad denied. “We all trusted Liam, but he was under orders from his Alpha. He tried to warn us,” Dad explained, frowning. “He fought the compulsion. He saved Dylan.” Under his breath, he muttered, “Possibly at the cost of his own life. The Alpha attacked Dylan.”

“Dad?” I questioned and he jerked his head.

“Come on, he’s with Wren.”

Dom went to his sister and father, and his Dad wrapped his arm around him, enfolding both of his children into a massive hug.

Sam hiccupped, rubbing her face against her Dad's uniform. "I can't lose him," she sobbed, shaking her head as she pleaded with her brother. "I can't."

Dom exhaled, patting her back, as he said, "We'll get him back, I promise." He met Payne's eyes as he spoke and Payne nodded.

Trent was standing there, guilt and self-loathing on his face and I grabbed his arm, forcing him to come with me as I followed my Dad. Maybe we could get answers from Dylan.

Dad led us to Wren's room, but it was unnecessary since blood smeared the ground, guiding us. "How badly is he injured?" I asked, wondering how Dylan could survive that much blood loss.

"It's bad. I'm not sure he's going to make it," Dad replied, his eyes downcast. He opened the door and I instantly recognized the dirty brown fur of the wolf sprawled on the motel mattress

"Liam?" I gasped and Trent pushed past me.

"Holy shit," he cursed as Wren held her hands to Liam's stomach. "He's been gutted."

"He leapt in front of Dylan," Wren told us, her words thick as she nodded to her brother, who sat in the corner rocking back and forth, as he wrung his hands. "The Alpha intended to kill Dylan, who was trying to protect Theodore. Liam...I don't know how he did it, but he took the blow meant for Dylan."

I gave Trent a confused stare and he explained. "He would have had to disobey a direct order from the Alpha to do that. Not an easy thing." Trent sank to his knees in front of the bed, his hands hovering as if he didn't know where to look first. "This is

bad. We need more help.”

“Let me see.” I spun around at the sound of Leah’s voice, even more shocked when I saw the bag in her hands. She shooed Trent out of her way and knelt on the bed, her hands steady as she started examining Liam. “Exactly how much can a shift heal?” She asked after a minute. “Keep pressure there,” she told Wren, pointing to a spot where blood oozed.

“Almost anything,” Caleb answered, hovering by the door. “The shift is magic. It puts our bodies back like they were before, human or wolf. Severe injuries.... life threatening injuries, the shift can repair them to the point that we won’t die.”

“Okay, his guts are basically spilling out of his abdominal cavity. I’m not sure he would survive shifting right now. I can put everything back and stitch him up. Then see if he can shift and hope for the best,” Leah answered, glancing around the room. “He’s a Hanley, I take it. Do you want him to die?”

“No, he saved my brother,” Wren pleaded. “He didn’t have to do that. He tried to warn us.”

“He shouldn’t die just because he’s a Hanley,” Trent stated and I shook my head.

“He saved my life. He’s a good guy,” I spoke up, pinning Caleb with my stare. “He deserves to live.”

Caleb’s face took on a hunted expression as he realized we expected him to make the call. Until he glanced at Leah, and at the sight of her understanding smile, he relaxed. “Try,” he agreed, nodding before he turned to leave. “If nothing else maybe he can give us intel.”

“Do you need help?” Trent asked doggedly, though his face was paler than I’d ever

seen and he looked seconds from puking his guts up.

Leah spared him a split-second glance. “Nope. I don’t need you vomiting all over everything. She can help me,” she answered, nodding to Wren.

“Wren, my name is Wren,” she whispered softly, not in the least bit phased by the fact that she was literally holding Liam’s life in her hands.

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Leah nodded in acknowledgement and then jerked her head toward Dylan. “Maybe someone can take him out of here.”

“I can do that,” Trent volunteered eagerly, hand raised as he swallowed hard. “Come on, Dylan, let’s go see what they’ve got planned.”

Dylan shook his head violently, rocking harder. “I lost Monster. I let them take him,” he cried over and over and I almost burst into tears right there.

“Dylan, go with Trent. Now,” Wren snapped, making all of us jump. I’d never heard Wren use that tone before but it worked as Dylan stood up and shuffled toward the door. Trent followed him as I hovered by the bed.

“Go,” Leah said softly. “We’ve got this. Really, there’s not a lot I can do for him. I’m not a doctor,” she hesitated, glancing down at the furry, four-legged wolf, “Or a veterinarian.”

“You’re his best chance at the moment,” I told her, moving to leave. “No pressure,” I added and she smiled wryly.

“No pressure,” she echoed.

When I walked outside it was chaos. Most of the Navarre Pack were milling around the parking lot, waiting for orders. My Dad stood to the side, his face a hard mask as he listened to them argue.

“We need to go now. They have my son. You don’t know what they’re like,” Sam

cried passionately, glancing between the men desperately. “He’s a little boy.”

“Sam,” Dom spoke, his voice unusually calm considering the circumstances. “Do you think Nicholas Hanley is going to hurt his only grandson?” She stared at him resentfully, but finally shook her head no. “Then we have time to come up with a plan.”

“Direct attack. Wipe them out, once and for all,” Caleb concluded and there were more than a few nods of agreement. My Dad wasn’t one of them.

“And if innocents get caught in the crossfire?” Dad asked, his face drawn and looking older than I’d ever seen. “Like my son,” he bit out angrily. “I’m not willing to take that chance.”

“We need to end this,” Dom replied, his voice weary. “We can’t keep doing this back and forth dance with them anymore.”

“What if I challenge Hanley? For Alpha?” Caleb offered resolutely.

“That won’t get my son back,” Sam interjected. “It’ll only give him time to hide him away.”

“He’ll avoid the fight,” Sheriff Navarre said knowingly. “Sam’s right in this instance. We can’t afford to wait too long. If they initiate those boys into the pack,” he broke off, shaking his head.

“What does that mean?” I asked, interrupting them. “Initiating?”

“Basically, it’s how you become part of the Pack. Its when the mental bond is formed with your pack mates. Normally, it’s done when the shifter is old enough to decide and agrees they want to be part of the pack,” Sheriff Navarre answered.

“But what exactly does it entail?” I pushed, needing facts. “And why would they do it to the boys?” No one answered at first, and I didn’t know if it was because they didn’t want to upset me, but I wasn’t having it. “Tell me,” I snapped.

“The bond is formed through a blood exchange,” Dom answered. “It’s not painful,” he paused and then added, “Usually.”

“It’s easier to control them when they’re young, easier to indoctrinate them,” Sam finished flatly. “It’s why I ran with Nicky when I did. They started talking about initiating the Pack bond on him. Breaking that bond –” she stopped, her lips clamped shut as she blinked rapidly. Payne wrapped his arm around her and she allowed it, pressing her head into his shoulder.

“It’s bad,” I concluded and Dom nodded. “Monster, they’ll do this to him?” I asked, already knowing the answer but needing to hear it.

“Yes,” Dom answered. “They will.”

“But Dylan,” I pointed to the tall man with the childlike expression. “He’s okay. He’s not part of the Hanley pack anymore.”

Trent shifted, drawing my attention, “What is it, Trent?”

“Dylan, from what I understand, was never compelled to obey the Alpha’s orders,” he said carefully. “Which means the bond wasn’t fully there and I don’t know why. Maybe it’s because he has Down syndrome and his brain is wired differently. But I have lived through having the bond forcibly removed.” His expression was enough to send a chill through me. “I was a teenager when it happened. It was like ripping my brain to shreds.” He shook his head. “I’m not sure a child could survive that.”

“We need to do something,” I choked out, reeling around, my eyes pleading with

Dom. "I can't lose...not Monster."

"If we go now, surprise them," Payne suggested, his body supporting Sam as she sagged against him. "It may be enough. The shifters can fight while we send other guys to retrieve the boys."

"We have enough guys here. We know where they're at," Caleb declared and Dom nodded slowly.

"No," the single word was sharp and concise, freezing everyone in their tracks as they stared at the girl who'd spoken. Anna's eyes burned as she stepped forward, spinning in a slow circle to make sure everyone was listening. "That's exactly what they want. What they expect. We'll be playing into their hands. Reacting instead of working for the best possible outcome."

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We all stood there, listening, as she spoke, her words determined and more than that...she spoke with authority, I realized. Trent's eyes glowed with pride as he watched her and none of the men questioned her right to speak.

"What do you suggest?" Caleb asked, his tone curious instead of dismissive.

"We can go after the Hanleys later," she replied, glancing around the group. "Right now, our priority are the boys. We need to get them back sooner rather than later. They'll expect us to go charging in. Instead, we sneak in and steal them back."

Chapter Twenty-One

Dead silence met her suggestion until Trent said, "And how do you suggest we do that? I'm not familiar with the Hanley lands." Again, there was no hint of mockery in his questioning.

"I am," Sam replied, her gaze focused. "I got us out of there. I can get us back in."

"And I'm not saying we won't need you, Sam, but I was actually thinking about him," Anna replied, pointing to Dylan. "He's been going back and forth from the Hanley land to our border without being caught. He can show us the way."

"We don't know how many men or women they have or what may have changed since you've been gone," Dom mentioned, nodding to Sam. The skin around his eyes crinkled in concern as he studied Dylan. "I'm not sure if Dylan will be able to get us where we need to go," he said carefully.

“Liam,” I said suddenly and they all glanced toward me. “They left him for dead, but he’s not dead. He would know. He could get us there. He followed Dylan.”

Dom nodded, “It’s worth a shot.”

“When do we go?” Trent directed his question at Anna, and I saw a flash of gratitude in her eyes as she answered.

“Tonight. We can’t wait any longer than that and the darkness will give us an advantage.” She scanned the group, relaxing as nods met her suggestion. “We need to talk to Liam.” Her gaze shifted behind me and she asked, “How is he?”

“Alive,” Leah answered, and I turned to see her standing there, wiping her bloody hands on a towel. “But he needs blood if he’s going to make it.” She eyed the group. “I can do a blood transfusion if we have any volunteers.”

The men exchanged glances and Trent said, “I’d do it, but – ”

“No,” Dom cut him off instantly as they traded a glance. “That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Am I missing something?” I asked and Leah nodded in agreement, clearly as lost as I was.

“Remember, what we said about initiation involving a blood exchange?” Trent answered and I nodded. “Well, that’s exactly what this is. Normally, if a shifter needs blood it would come from one of his pack mates.” He spread his hands. “No Hanleys to give him any though.”

My gaze darted to Dylan but Leah shook her head. “No, it would be better from someone else,” she said.

“I can do it,” Dom decided, stepping forward. “Will it be enough?”

“Dom,” Caleb put his hand out, stopping him. “It’ll form a link between the two of you.”

“Better me than you,” Dom replied. He caught my confusion and explained, “The Alpha is the one that links us all together. If Caleb gave him blood, it would link him to the entire Pack. That could potentially be dangerous for all of us. It would also overwhelm him mentally and emotionally as the Pack bond took over.”

“But you’ll just form a mental link with him?” I asked, wanting to be sure I understood. When he nodded, my gaze skated to Trent as curiosity once again rose at their connection.

“If that’s been decided, follow me,” Leah said abruptly, nodding to Dom. “We need to get blood in him, especially if you want his help.” She marched back to the room and as Dom passed, he squeezed my hand gently.

“We’ll get him back.”

I nodded automatically, my brain a jumbled mess from everything that had happened so far. Trent’s weighted stare drew my attention and I glanced at him, raising my eyebrow in question. He jerked his head and I followed him to the breezeway where Dad had installed vending machines.

“You can’t mention the fact that I have a Pack link with Dom,” he said immediately, his voice low enough even a shifter’s sensitive hearing couldn’t pick up his words.

“I wasn’t planning to,” I replied, confused by his sudden need to state that fact.

“No, you don’t understand,” he responded fiercely. “Dom saved my life and I would

do anything for him. Protect him; die for him, whatever is necessary. That's why he trusts me to guard you."

"I get that, Trent. I've never questioned your loyalty to Dom," I answered, caught off guard by his adamant tone.

"Exactly my point. You don't question my loyalty. You should. Lone wolves don't do the bidding of Pack wolves," Trent explained, his eyes begging me to understand what he was saying, but I was lost. He scrubbed his hands over his jeans, for once a sucker nowhere in sight. "A link, a bond, like the one I share with Dom. It's like creating a little bitty Pack," he continued, his fingers forming a tiny gap. "Now, Dom goes in there and gives blood to that Hanley pup and he's linked to two wolves outside his Pack."

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My forehead furrowed as I thought about what he said. “How many does it take to form a separate Pack?” I asked slowly and he rocked back, bracing himself against the cinder block wall.

“Now, you’re getting it,” he muttered, tugging a sucker out of one of his pockets. “Technically, two wolves can make a Pack. Three, well, that’s definitely something.”

“Why didn’t you give Liam blood?”

Trent cocked his eyebrow, “Because that would have been like me declaring I’m forming a Pack on Navarre lands. I’m supposed to be a lone wolf, and bonding another wolf...” He trailed off as I put it together.

“Two wolves make a Pack. But why did Dom?” I asked, gazing toward the room where his blood was no doubt saving the life of a Hanley pup, as Trent called him.

“Because he’s a good guy,” Trent answered and then shrugged, “And because admitting he’d done the same with me and never informed his Alpha wouldn’t exactly go over well.”

“Okay, so Dom has a separate link to you and after he gives his blood to Liam, he’ll have a separate link to him, right? It’s not like the three of you will be linked together like the Pack is with Caleb, right?” The last part came out as a squeak and Trent’s worried expression didn’t help. “Trent?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Honestly, we’ll find out when Liam wakes up after the transfusion.” He sucked hard on the candy in his mouth, his face tight. “What a

fucked up day,” he added under his breath.

“Its not your fault,” I told him, patting his arm and he gave me a look.

“We’ll agree to disagree,” he replied shortly, pushing off from the wall and leaving me in the dim corridor.

This is a stupid risk, I shouted mentally over the bond to Dom.

Trent explained, he answered and I rolled my eyes.

Yes, your errand boy explained. Do you really think this is the best course of action? I asked in exasperation.

I can’t let him die. He saved your life. I owe him, Dom replied as if that made perfect sense.

Actually, if anyone owes him it’s me. I should be giving him blood, I responded tartly.

You’re not compatible, he replied, distracting me.

What do you mean?

Shifters have a specific antigen in their blood. After the first shift, shifters can only get blood from other shifters, he explained.

That would have been nice to know, I fussed angrily. Anger was easier than the fear I could feel pressing in on me. Do you think...what do you think will happen when Liam wakes up?

I think there will be a Pack bond, Dom said heavily. And that knowledge will be dangerous if we can't trust Liam to keep it a secret.

There's not another option?

If Caleb is willing to allow him in the Pack, that bond would override the one I have with him, Dom said, but after a long pause added, in theory.

"Great," I whispered out loud before being distracted by raised voices. I followed the yelling to find Sam and Anna at an impasse, arms crossed as they glared at one another.

"What's going on?" I asked tiredly.

"Anna says I can't go with them, but she's not the Alpha," Sam snapped. "Caleb thinks I should go."

"No, he doesn't think you should go, he's just too scared to tell you no," Anna retorted. "Besides, he's not going either."

"I'm right here and I'm not scared," Caleb blustered, but he quickly shrank back when Anna shot him a hard stare. "And what do you mean I'm not going? I'm the Alpha."

"Exactly, you need to stay here and lead the Pack if something goes wrong," Anna told him, before pointing at Sam. "And you, you're too invested. Too emotional. You could put us all at risk if you go off halfcocked while we're rescuing them."

Sam opened her mouth and then closed it, glancing away from Anna's knowing gaze.

"What about me?" Payne spoke up then. "What if I come?" Sam glanced at him in

surprise, shifting slightly to gauge Anna's reaction to this request.

"We don't want too many people," Anna started to say, about to deny him, but at Sam's crestfallen expression, she relented. "But Nicky trusts you and you're a good fighter."

Sam exhaled in relief at the small victory as Payne nodded in acceptance. Sam poked Payne in the chest, drawing his attention as she gave him a narrow glare, "Don't fuck this up. You bring my son back to me or I will make your life a living hell." She spun away from him before he could respond, missing his rueful expression.

"And that would be new?" He muttered under his breath and I felt a completely inappropriate chuckle bubble up inside of me. I pressed my knuckles against my lips to contain the laughter, afraid if I started, I might not stop, and this was no time for hysteria.

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“I’m going,” I said abruptly, cutting whatever Anna was about to say off. She opened her mouth and I shook my head. “I’m going,” I repeated. “So are Dom and Trent.” She looked like she wanted to argue when I said Trent, but finally nodded.

“So, that’s five of us,” she concluded, exhaling.

“Six,” I corrected. “We need a guide.”

“Do you really think it’s the best idea for you to waltz onto Hanley territory?” Trent questioned, coming to stand next to Anna, who tensed but didn’t move away.

“I don’t see a problem,” she retorted and he raised an eyebrow.

“You wouldn’t but that doesn’t mean you won’t be a distraction,” he replied and she crossed her arms.

“A distraction to who? You? If so, you can stay here and guard the motel,” she paused, her eyes glittering. “If you think you can manage it this time.”

A growl reverberated through the air at the insult and Anna took a step back. “Maybe you should go,” he snarled. “Maybe they can teach you some manners.” His glare was cold as he shoved past her roughly, and headed toward the motel.

Anna looked stunned by Trent’s anger and I patted her arm awkwardly as I sidled by her, following Trent. I noticed Dad speaking quietly to Dylan near his office, and that Dylan had calmed down.

Trent paced in front of Wren's motel room, running his hands agitatedly through his hair. "I don't want to talk about it," he warned me and I mimed zipping my lips. "She's infuriating. Reckless. Careless with her own life," he ranted and I pressed my lips together as he clenched and unclenched his fists. "She has no idea how important –" he stopped speaking suddenly, seeming to realize I was standing there.

"Please continue," I said brightly. "I'm dying of curiosity."

The motel door opened and Leah looked taken aback at our presence. "He's still alive," she said, eyeing us.

"Yeah, I know," Trent muttered, glancing at me pointedly and I closed my eyes for a second as I realized what Trent meant. Liam was awake and connected to both Dom and Trent through a Pack link. A link none of them shared with the Navarre Pack.

"You okay?" Leah asked me, concerned by my sudden pallor.

I forced a smile. "I'm fine. How are you?"

She stepped outside, her smile tired and Trent gestured to the door, asking if he could go inside. She nodded in permission, saying, "Dom is talking to him now." Trent stepped around her and went inside, leaving us standing in the breezeway.

"You saved the day," I told her, adding with a rueful smile, "Again."

She laughed, glancing up. "Luck," she answered, shaking her head lightly. "And nosiness."

It was my turn to chuckle and she grinned, her eyes straying to the parking lot where Caleb stood next to Anna. Her smile lost some of its luster and she glanced back at me. "I saw you leave. It looked like you were in a hurry." She bit her lip before

admitting, “I was curious so I followed the Jeep.”

“I’m glad you did. I doubt Liam would be alive if you hadn’t,” I replied gratefully. I wasn’t sure when it had begun to matter to me that Liam lived, but I knew he deserved a chance. An opportunity to live a life outside of the toxic Hanley pack.

Leah snorted. “I wasn’t expecting that, that’s for sure.” She glanced at me as she continued, “I happened to have my Dad’s car today. He keeps his bag in there in case of emergencies.” She shrugged. “I guess all those years tagging along after him paid off.”

I nodded, giving her a shrewd smile. “I bet you could get a job around here if you decide to become a veterinarian,” I told her and she gave me a startled stare.

The door opened behind us before she could respond and when she saw Liam swaying between Dom and Trent, she barked, “Put him back! Right now.”

“They need me,” Liam answered his voice shaky and Leah shook her head firmly.

“Nope,” she replied, arms crossed as she faced the three shifters down. “I did not just stitch your guts up and perform a highly unorthodox blood transfusion so you could die in the woods. Back in the bed.” She made a shooing motion and Dom gave me a pleading glance. I shook my head, in complete agreement with Leah. There was no way Liam was going anywhere. His skin had a thin film of sweat over it and I was pretty sure ghosts had more color than he did at the moment.

“We need him to guide us to the Hanley compound,” Dom said and I frowned. We did need the help but it was also clear Liam couldn’t provide it.

“He can’t help through the link?” I asked carefully, watching as Trent and Dom traded a glance. They shook their heads simultaneously and I narrowed my eyes.

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“We need eyes on the ground,” Dom explained. “Or better yet, a nose on the ground.”

I turned my head, thinking, and saw Dylan. I glanced back at Dom, tilting my head toward Dylan, and watched him tense as his gaze followed where I indicated. “He’s our best option,” I declared, and then gave Liam a sympathetic glance. “No offense.”

Liam grimaced, waving off my apology and then almost collapsing from the effort. Dom adjusted his hold on him and with a glance at Trent; they started to haul him back to the bed. “I can do this,” Liam protested. “I just need a minute.”

“More like a few days,” Leah chided, keeping a close eye as they lowered him back to the bed.

“Liam, our other option is Dylan,” Dom stated, crouching next to the bed where Liam sprawled, his breathing ragged. “Do you think he can get us to the Hanley compound without issue?”

Liam studied us for a second before nodding. “Yeah, I think he can. It took weeks for anyone to notice he was slipping away. When I followed him, I almost lost him a few times.”

“Does anyone know the path he took?” Trent interjected, skating around the real question of whether Liam had told the Hanley pack what Dylan had been up to.

Liam shook his head, “No. I lied and said I lost him.”

“You lied to your Alpha?” Dom questioned, his voice hard, and Liam stared at him

cautiously.

“I told him a half-truth. He didn’t push very hard,” Liam replied defensively. “I didn’t want him to come at me.” He jerked his head toward Trent. “I also didn’t want to lead them back to him or the little she-wolf.”

Trent nodded his head, accepting Liam’s claim at face value. Dom eyed them both before standing and saying, “Alright, I believe you. But no more lies,” he commanded and Liam bobbed his head. “Let’s go. We need to prepare and talk to Dylan. Liam, get some rest and tell no one about this conversation.” The words held a strange cadence and Liam bowed his head in reply.

When we stepped outside the room, Dom waited until I’d drawn the door closed before speaking. “Do you think Wren is going to allow us to take her brother back to Hanley lands?”

I opened my mouth to answer when the person in question growled, “What?”

“No?” I answered, my mouth twisting, as Wren appeared from behind Dom.

“You want to use Dylan?” She accused her lip curling into a sneer as she stared at Dom. “I thought you were better than the others.”

“It was my idea,” I stated, stepping between her and Dom. “Dylan is our best hope of getting onto Hanley land unnoticed. He’s been sneaking back and forth for weeks.”

She stared at me, betrayal written across her face, and I sighed.

“Look, we both know he can. The question is do you trust us to keep him safe?”

“He’s my brother,” she replied.

“And they have my brother,” I reminded her harshly. “Trust me, I don’t want to see Dylan hurt, but I will also do whatever it takes to get my brother back. I’m sure you can understand that feeling?”

She crossed her arms protectively over her stomach, finally nodding, as she looked toward Dylan. “He’s all I have,” she whispered, her eyes pleading when she looked at me. “Protect him for me.”

I nodded, holding her gaze as I said, “I promise.” I ignored the low groan that came from Trent and the heavy exhale I heard from Dom. I would do everything in my power to bring Dylan back safely. I owed her that much.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Are we sure about this?” Trent questioned, eyeing us. “Because I have reservations.” I blew out the breath I’d been holding, not wanting to admit my own reservations but as we stood at the edge of the Hanley border, I couldn’t deny my concern. Dom was about to shift and Dylan stood near us, trembling as we prepared to cross the line. He kept glancing over his shoulder back the way we’d come and I kept waiting for him to bolt back to his sister.

“Dylan, we need your help,” I said for the umpteenth time. “Remember, they have Monster and you can help us get him back.”

Dylan’s gaze came back to me and he bobbed his head nervously. I smiled at him encouragingly as Anna told Dom, “I should shift. I’m faster than both of you.”

“You’re also a hell of a lot more noticeable,” Trent answered before Dom could. “You have light fur. We’re trying to sneak in, remember?”

She glared at him and when Dom replied, “He’s right,” she turned her glare to him.

He held up his hands. “You know it’s true, Anna.” She frowned but didn’t argue. We were dressed in black, my dark hair pulled back, while Anna’s lighter hair was hidden underneath a black beanie Trent had provided. Dylan stood still, waiting for us as he remained in human form. Wren had warned us that he was unpredictable and uncommunicative when he shifted, so it was my job to make sure he didn’t shift.

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Trent peeled his shirt off without hesitation and I glanced away, still not accustomed to the easy nudity the shifters displayed. I caught Anna checking him out and when Trent winked, she flushed, ducking her head.

“Dylan will take the lead. Trent and I will flank you. Payne, you bring up the rear,” Dom ordered, his eyes sweeping over us to make sure we obeyed. I nodded easily, Anna grimaced but nodded, and Payne moved to the rear.

I brushed my hand over Dylan’s arm and asked him in a low voice, “Are you ready?” He nodded jerkily, his hands knotted together and I smiled softly. “You’re brave to do this. I know Monster will be happy to see you.” The mention of Monster cheered him and his hands relaxed. When I turned back, both men had shifted and stood ready. “Let’s go get Monster,” I told Dylan and he started forward. Within seconds, the two wolves had disappeared into the shadows, leaving me, Anna, and Payne to follow Dylan.

We remained silent as we entered Hanley lands, none of us wanting to alert any potential patrols of our presence. Liam had revealed that the Hanley Alpha had been planning this attack since before his son’s death. He’d wanted his grandson back and used the challenge as a way to assess the situation. He hadn’t expected his son to lose though and that fact had made him even more volatile. He’d increased patrols but the Hanley pack’s reduced numbers meant most of them were doing double duty patrolling and they had become careless.

We used that fact to our advantage as we approached their compound from the rear. We skirted a sleeping guard and I felt Dylan tremble. I assumed it was fear until one of the security lights revealed his expression. Anger contorted his face, the sight

startling me enough that I hesitated to touch him. I wiggled my fingers, catching his attention, and when he glanced at me, I mouthed, “Monster,” to him. Slowly, his expression eased back into a more relaxed one and I heaved a sigh of relief.

Dom brushed against me, his enormous size bringing him even with my chest. He’d assured me that he could track Monster and Nicky’s scents once we were close enough, and once he had my attention, he trotted off. This way, he pushed through the bond and as Anna followed him, I figured he must have sent it to through the Pack bond as well.

Dylan lumbered after him and I moved quickly to keep up. I hadn’t spotted Trent since he’d shifted but knew he had to be around somewhere. Our goal was to get Monster and Nicky and get out before our presence was noted. It would be hard enough getting the boys back home without having to add running for our lives to the equation.

Loud voices had me glancing around for a place to hide. Payne jerked me toward a building, gesturing for me to crouch down next to some garbage cans. My nose wrinkled at the stench but I remained still as they passed us. Clearly, they didn’t expect us to sneak on to their land because the two men didn’t even glance around.

Once we left the protection of the garbage, Dom chuffed, shaking his head as he attempted to get the scent of garbage out of his nose. He started moving, his head swinging back to check I was still with them as he guided us further into the Hanley compound.

Only a few security lights lit up the area making it difficult for me to see. Payne didn’t seem to have the same problem as he glided silently along while I stumbled after them. Finally, we came to a stop as Dom sniffed one of the buildings. This one, he told us and Payne checked the windows, nodding in confirmation when he came to one in the back.

My heart leapt at the knowledge the boys were actually there and safe and I moved forward to see for myself. When I went to glance through the window though, I saw the door open inside. I ducked my head, my heart thumping as I prayed they hadn't seen me. If they raised the alarm now, we were screwed.

A door slammed, and we heard someone say, "They're fine. Don't know why we have to babysit them though. No one is going to risk coming on to our land."

"Better than night patrol," another voice answered. "Wouldn't want to be Blaine tonight."

Payne squatted next to me but when he heard them, he slowly stood, making sure he was out of sight of the window. Dylan growled next to me, a low continuous rumble that made me nervous. I laid my hand on his arm, trying to smile soothingly, as I patted his arm. His growling finally ceased, but he remained tense.

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A TV turned on, drowning out any noise and giving Payne an opportunity to ease the window open. Anna came over then and used Payne's thigh to boost herself up and through the window. I pushed aside a spurt of envy at how easy she made it look as she ducked inside. She treaded lightly over to a bed where the boys huddled together sleeping. She woke Monster first, a gentle shake as she held her fingers to her lips. He immediately glanced around, searching, and I waved at him from the window. A huge smile creased his face when he saw me, and I had to swallow the lump that formed in my throat.

She gestured for him to remain and then carefully picked up a still sleeping Nicky. She carried him to the window and handed him off to Payne, who cradled him to his chest. When she turned to go back for Monster though, she found him standing behind her, his own movements so stealthily she hadn't heard him approach. She shot me a wary glance and I shrugged. He wasn't exactly known for obeying.

He clambered over the windowsill and before I could decide if I was strong enough to catch him, Dylan plucked him from the window and hugged him like a doll.

Anna swung her leg over the window and lithely jumped down, her landing a barely noticeable thump. Dom's head swung over us, his yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness. He padded past, leading us back the way we had come. Anna followed him, Payne next with Nicky, then me with Dylan taking the rear, Monster clinging to his back like a monkey.

The continued silence grated on my nerves as I kept glancing over my shoulder to make sure Dylan and Monster were there. We only had to hide once as a Hanley crossed our path and then we were back under the cover of the forest.

I took my first deep breath since we'd started and reached for Monster. He came to me, wrapping spindly legs around my hips as I hugged him tightly. Dom came around, bumping me as he indicated we should continue moving. I nodded, squeezing Monster again before setting him down.

Dom took the lead as Monster held my hand, guiding me through the underbrush. A flicker of movement caught my eye and my heart jolted until I recognized Trent's multihued fur. He kept pace beside us for a minute before disappearing again. Dylan trailed behind us, his steps surprisingly silent considering his size and I had to check often to make sure he kept pace.

We'd spread out, moving slower with the addition of the boys, and I couldn't see Dom at all, his black fur blending into the shadows completely. A sharp rustle in the underbrush was the only warning we had as a lean wolf darted out, his entire focus on Anna and her defenseless back. I opened my mouth to cry out a warning when another wolf leapt into view, snarling as he crashed into the wolf targeting Anna. I recognized Trent as Nicky woke up at the sudden noise and started to cry. Payne quickly shushed him but it was too late.

Another wolf stalked into view and I put myself in front of Monster, missing the man coming up behind us. Monster's hand slipped from mine and I reached for it frantically, my gaze glued to the approaching wolf. Snapping jaws forced me to spin around and I stumbled back as Dom lunged on the man who'd snuck up behind us. My distraction was all the other wolf needed as he prepared to attack.

Payne had dragged Anna out of the way, as Trent continued to fight the wolf who'd initially scented her. Some of her hair had spilled from the beanie and I saw the air shimmer around her right before a howl drew my attention back to the wolf targeting me. Fear coursed through me, both at the fact that he was about to come in for the kill and because he'd warned the rest of the Hanley pack of our presence. Dom was busy with the human who'd tried to attack me, dodging a knife as he went for the man's

legs.

I scrambled backwards, away from the wolf who watched me with hungry eyes, as I tried to grab the gun I'd brought with me. I couldn't feel it though as I checked the waistband of my jeans where I'd tucked it when we'd left the motel. I patted the ground frantically, wondering if it had fallen out when I'd hit the ground. My fingertips brushed cold metal right as Monster shouted, "Dylan!"

I froze as a wolf rivaling the size of Dom appeared. It took my mind a minute to catch up as the wolf's rounded eyes focused on Monster a second before he attacked. I rocked back as he lunged, my arm hitting Monster and bringing him to the ground as we fell on top of the gun I'd been searching for.

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The giant wolf wasn't after us though as he locked his heavy jaws on the Hanley wolf about to attack me. I stared in awe as he shook the smaller wolf, slinging him into a tree and then darting after him.

"Is that?" I gasped, glancing at Monster for confirmation. He nodded, looking impressed as Dylan ripped into the Hanley wolf. "Whoa, okay, I see why Wren didn't want him to shift." I dropped back onto the ground, the gun securely in my hand now, as wolves continued to fight around us. I dragged Monster next to me, protecting him with my body as we crawled to Payne and Nicky.

A wet nose nudged me and I barely kept myself from shrieking as Dom mentally pushed, It's me.

"Next time, mention that before you sneak up," I told him, my voice shaky.

We have to move, he continued, ignoring my words as he pushed his heavy head against my back.

Dylan, I protested as I got to my feet. Anna and Trent.

They can take care of themselves, Dom answered harshly. The Hanleys know we're here. We have to cross back over to Navarre land.

I urged Monster to move but he fought me, his eyes locked on Dylan. "Dylan," he cried and the massive wolf with the unusually rounded eyes swung his head toward him. The other wolf used the opening to attack Dylan and Monster gave a sharp cry. "Follow us," he shouted desperately as I lifted him in my arms, almost running to

keep up with Dom and Payne as they jogged through the tangled undergrowth of forest.

My lungs burned as I pushed my body past its limits, Monster's tears soaking my shirt as we left Dylan and the others behind to fend for themselves. I spared a single glance over my shoulder but couldn't see anything in the dark woods. I stumbled over tree roots, almost hitting the ground once but Payne's quick reflexes saved me. Dom was a shadow next to us, constantly urging us forward, and I trusted him to get us home.

Finally, he stopped, placing himself behind us as I collapsed against a tree, my stomach rolling as I tried to get air into my burning lungs. Monster dropped to the ground, his fingers curling into Dom's dense fur as he stared back the way we'd come. I could only assume we were back on Navarre land and that was why Dom had risked stopping.

The others? I questioned, taking advantage of the mental bond Dom kept open.

They're coming, he replied tersely and relief shot through me. But Hanleys are chasing them, he continued and terror replaced my relief. They won't come onto our land, he promised.

How can you be sure? I asked desperately, my fingers clutching the back of Monster's shirt as if I held him tightly enough then no one could ever take him again.

The others are coming, he answered right as several long howls pierced the air from all around us, the sound almost bringing me to my knees as tears leaked from my eyes. Trent and Anna just need to cross the border.

Dylan? I asked frantically, not missing the fact that Dom hadn't mentioned him.

He was hurt, Dom replied tersely. I can't hear him anymore.

He's dead? I could barely think the words but Dom picked up on them and I felt his uncertainty.

Not necessarily. He's a powerful wolf, Dom admitted with wary surprise. He could be blocking the Pack link.

Wren admitted he doesn't communicate in wolf form, I mentioned, desperately hoping that was the case and Dylan would follow us back. I didn't want to face Wren if he didn't come home.

Maybe, Dom's single word reply wasn't encouraging and I clung to Monster as we waited. Dom's ears swiveled forward and a moment later, I heard something moving fast through the trees. Incoming, he shouted and I jerked Monster back as Dom took a defensive position in front of us.

Two wolves flew over us, one multicolored, the other a lighter blonde, before slamming to a halt and spinning around. They took up position next to Dom as snarls met our ears.

"Dylan," Monster whispered brokenly, and all I could do was shake my head. I'd left him behind when I promised to protect him, and I wasn't sure I could live with that knowledge. I stood up, not entirely sure what I planned to do, when Monster tore away from me, screaming, "Dylan," as he headed straight for the Hanley line.

Dom reacted before I could even move, his teeth catching the back of Monster's shirt before he'd gone two feet. Monster struggled, still screaming Dylan's name, as I locked my arms around him. Tears ran down my cheeks as I met Dom's golden gaze.

Hold him, Dom ordered, right before he raced to the Hanley border. Anna moved to

go after him but Trent knocked her sideways, his stance clearly stating he wasn't going to let her follow. She snapped at him, growling deep in her throat but he didn't budge, using his larger size to his advantage.

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I stared into the dark where Dom had disappeared, my heart thumping heavily as sick fear poured through me. Monster was still screaming so I gave him a hard shake, whispering in his ear, “Dom went to get him.”

His screams abruptly cut off and the silence that followed would haunt my nightmares. We waited, all of us frozen in the silent forest, for Dom to appear. Minutes ticked by with not a single sound, and it was as if the entire world had disappeared. The earlier howls were gone, not even a rustle to indicate where they might be. As each minute stretched, it became harder to breathe as fear consumed me.

Trent’s head swiveled, his ears up as he stared at a spot that looked just like every other dark space in this hellish forest, at least to me. Anna followed his lead a moment later, shoving him so she could see, and he let her. Some of the icy fear encasing me thawed at their movements. They were alert but not worried. I reached for the bond I shared with Dom, the one that had disconnected the second he decided to go after Dylan, and after a few seconds, I was able to feel him. Relief made my knees weak and I plopped down on my butt, my hands loosening around Monster as a cacophony of noise erupted around us.

Monster rushed forward as an enormous wolf skidded into the clearing, an even larger black wolf on his heels. He flung his arms around the sable colored wolf without hesitation, burying his face in the thick fur. Dom limped over to me, his wet nose nudging my ear right before his tongue swiped across my cheek, licking up the tears.

“Eww,” I mumbled no heat in my voice as I wrapped my arms around him. “Don’t ever do that again,” I commanded as his hot breath washed over the mark on my

neck. I felt his wordless agreement through the bond and pressed my head more firmly against his neck. “Let’s go home.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was long walk back to the motel as exhaustion weighed me down. Monster rode on Dylan’s back and Payne carried Nicky. Trent and Anna remained in wolf form but kept a wary distance from each other. I stumbled along, using Dom as a crutch at times as he led us home.

Three people stood at the edge of the motel, their eyes glued to the forest and as we appeared, one of them broke away, running straight for Payne and the little boy in his arms. She crashed straight into them as Nicky cried, “Mommy.” Payne wrapped his free arm around Sam as she hugged them both, her tears drenching them.

The other two figures started toward us and Dylan started to growl when Dad approached. Monster patted his head, telling him it was okay and Dylan let Dad lift him off his back.

“Dylan,” Wren said hesitantly, her hand held out cautiously. He sniffed it and after a minute, head-butted her hand, allowing her to smooth his ruffled fur.

“He’s injured,” I told her as Dom leaned against me. We used the weight of our bodies to hold one another up. I knew Dom was hurt and needed to shift to heal, but I wasn’t ready to let him go yet. “Is Leah still here?”

Wren nodded, sniffing as she wiped her eyes, and my Dad laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. She turned her head toward him slightly and a smile tugged on her mouth when she saw Monster, his copper hair sticking up everywhere. She smoothed her hand over his head, the motion jerky and quick as if she was afraid of our reaction.

“Come on, let’s get them inside,” Dad said, his tone comforting as he indicated she should follow him. “Leah is waiting.”

They walked off, Monster in Dad’s arms as Dylan walked between him and Wren. Sam and Payne had taken Nicky to the motel already, checking him over carefully. I sank down to the ground, almost too tired to stand and murmured, “Shift,” against Dom’s fur. I kept my eyes closed as warm skin replaced coarse fur and his arms wrapped around me.

“I came too close to losing you tonight,” he rumbled, his head buried against my neck.

“Ditto,” I managed to mutter, my fingers curling into his back, my nails biting into his skin. He didn’t seem to mind as he tightened his arms around me.

“Hate to interrupt but we have other issues,” Trent mentioned casually, his voice right above us. I carefully opened my eyes just in case he was standing there naked but he had on loose shorts, another pair in his hand that he offered to Dom. I turned my head as Dom accepted them, standing easily now that he’d shifted and his injuries had healed.

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“What now?” Dom asked wearily and Trent jerked his head to the motel where Liam stood hunched over, his hand braced against the wall as he watched us. Dom cursed under his breath as Anna trotted up next to me.

“You need clothes?” I asked her and she nodded, pointedly not looking at Trent or Dom, her snout in the air.

“All I had were shorts,” Trent said defensively, holding his arms up. “Not my fault it’s not good enough for you.” Anna turned her head, ignoring him, and he stomped toward the motel.

I eyed her but she wouldn’t meet my gaze and I sighed. “Let’s get you some clothes so we can talk.” Her reluctance was clear but she finally followed me with a shake of her head.

Once Anna was dressed, she refused to talk, stating there was nothing to talk about. When I disagreed, she claimed she was tired and wanted to sleep. I left her in my room, deciding to check on Dom and his newly formed Pack. Even thinking the words made hysterical laughter bubble inside of me and I firmly pushed it down before I lost it completely.

The three men were arguing and didn’t hear me walk up, at least two of them didn’t, Dom snaked his arm around me without even glancing down. “Caleb is offering you a place in the Navarre Pack,” he stated quietly. In fact, all of them were exceptionally quiet as they spoke. Even standing among them, I had to listen carefully to piece together what they were saying.

“I’m part of the Navarre Pack,” Liam argued, thrusting his finger at Dom. “Your Pack.”

Dom swallowed and reminded him, “I don’t have a pack. I’m the beta of Caleb’s Pack. The Navarre Pack.”

Liam stared at the men mutinously, refusing to budge and Trent scrubbed his hand over his face. “It’s late and you’re still weak from blood loss,” Trent said reasonably, the only indication he wasn’t as calm as he sounded were his white knuckles as he clutched the sucker in his hand.

“I’m not changing my mind,” Liam warned, his hand splayed over the jagged eight inch cut bisecting his stomach. He wore an open button down shirt, the loose fit and pattern telling me it was one of my Dad’s shirts. “I’ve been told what to do every day of my life. For once, I have a choice.”

“You don’t want to choose wrong,” Trent advised, his eyes flashing a warning. Liam gave him a wide berth but didn’t back down until finally Dom flicked his hand.

“Get some sleep, kid,” he told him tiredly. “We’ll talk again in the morning.” Liam nodded, turning to leave when Dom added, “And don’t breathe a word of this to anyone.” I shivered at the command in his words, the sound echoing down to my bones and as Liam’s head lowered I knew he’d felt it even more.

“Yes, sir,” he answered, shuffling to the room next to Trent’s.

“That’s a problem we don’t need,” Trent said, staring after him.

“One at a time,” Dom counseled, exhaustion weighing his words. “Caleb is going to escort Sam and Nicky back to the village. Where’s Anna?” He glanced down at me for an answer.

“She laid down, said she was tired. I think she was trying to avoid me,” I replied, unable to hide the hint of hurt in my voice.

“She’s confused,” Dom comforted. “And conflicted.”

“She needs to quit pretending,” Trent muttered cryptically and my eyes shot to him. He shoved the sucker in his mouth, avoiding my gaze and I frowned.

“Why are Sam and Nicky leaving?” I asked, strumming my fingers against Dom’s bare stomach. “Why isn’t Payne escorting them?”

“The motel isn’t safe for them anymore,” Dom said, his tone apologetic. “The Hanleys will think twice before attacking our village. It’s the safest place for them right now.”

“Monster?” I questioned, glancing between them. “Liam? Dylan?”

“They can protect themselves,” Dom said before correcting himself. “Not Monster, but I’ll be here. Sam is staying at my cabin. Payne is staying in their motel room here. If someone shows up looking for them, they’re going to get a rude awakening.”

I nodded, my eyes gritty as I tried to keep them open.

Dom noticed and said, “You need sleep.”

“You too,” I murmured, not arguing the fact.

“Go get some sleep,” Trent said to us, lifting his sucker up. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Is Dylan okay?” I asked as my gaze wandered to Wren’s room.

“Yeah, Leah stitched him up. He had a couple of good size gashes,” Trent replied, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts as he sucked on the candy in his mouth. He still didn’t have a shirt on and I wondered for a second about where the sucker had come from.

My forehead wrinkled in confusion, “He didn’t shift?”

Trent and Dom traded glances and then shook their heads. “He’s not communicating,” Dom said carefully. “We tried the Pack link. Caleb tried to order him and nothing. For the moment, he’s staying in wolf form.”

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“He ignored Caleb’s order?” I asked, knowing that could become an issue.

“Yeah,” Dom replied heavily as Trent studied the ground. “He definitely doesn’t have to obey an Alpha’s command.”

Trent stepped back, his fingers making walking motions as he told us, “I’m going to patrol the perimeter. Make sure none of those assholes show up unexpectedly.”

We nodded, watching him walk off before Dom steered me back toward the apartment. I pushed my hand against his chest once we came to the door, stopping him from opening it.

“Dom,” I said quietly and he glanced down at me. I looked up, swallowing as I considered what I was about to ask him. “We got lucky today,” I started, and he nodded cautiously, not sure where I was going with this. “But Monster is at risk as long as he’s not initiated into a pack,” I continued, arching my eyebrow for confirmation and he nodded reluctantly. “So, I want him to be initiated,” I concluded and his jaw worked for a second.

“There’s no rush,” he stated and I shook my head tightly.

“I disagree. What happened today was all the warning I need,” I replied, my eyes begging him to listen. “Initiation will provide a link, a way for him to communicate if he’s in danger.”

“Yes,” Dom said with a heavy exhale. “But it’s a commitment, one that shouldn’t be taken lightly. It’ll affect him for the rest of his life.” I nodded, having figured that

much out. When I didn't back down, he placed his thumbs on either side of my face, stroking my cheekbones. "It's been a long, emotional day. We can decide tomorrow. We'll talk to Caleb together, bring it up to your Dad," he promised and I smiled, knowing he would do exactly what he said and also knowing he'd misunderstood what I was asking for.

"I don't want you to talk to Caleb," I replied and the slow stroke of his thumbs stilled against my cheek. "I don't want to initiate him into the Navarre Pack, at least not that Navarre Pack," I said carefully as his eyes burned into mine. I didn't lower my gaze even as his thumbs pressed into my skin as he absorbed what I was saying.

"Jess," he said, my name barely louder than a sigh as his head dropped to mine, our foreheads pressed together as he kissed the skin next to my eyes. He took a deep breath and I wondered what he was about to say when the door opened next to us.

"There you are," Dad said, sounding relieved as we turned our heads toward him. "It's late," he added, staring at Dom, specifically Dom's hands on my body.

"It is," Dom replied respectfully, lowering his hands quickly at Dad's pointed look.. "I'd like to request your permission to stay here tonight," he added and I blinked at him in shock. Dad opened his mouth, no doubt to immediately tell him no, or better yet, hell no, when Dom raised his hand and spoke again. "On the couch, otherwise I'll just sleep propped up against your door."

His expression was steadfast and as Dad glanced between my hopeful face and Dom's determined one, he sighed, waving his hand at the couch. "Be my guest. It's really not that comfortable."

"Better than concrete," Dom replied instantly and Dad barely suppressed an eye roll.

"Thanks," I added, reaching up to kiss Dad's cheek. "Monster?"

“Curled up in the middle of my bed surrounded by cookie crumbs,” Dad answered ruefully. I lifted my eyebrows and he shrugged. “Kid deserved a few cookies.”

“Not going to argue that,” I replied, hugging him. I released Dad and then hugged Dom, letting go when Dad cleared his throat. “I’m going to go to bed,” I said, pointing to my room. “Anna is staying with me,” I added and Dad’s grim expression eased slightly.

Dom padded over to the couch barefoot and Dad scanned him head to foot before saying, “Do you own a shirt, son?” I bit back a smile, walking backwards to my room as Dom squirmed under Dad’s scrutiny, his cheeks tinged red as he nodded.

“I do. The shifting. I lost my shirt,” Dom fumbled through an explanation as I tried not to laugh.

“You go through a lot of shirts, I bet,” Dad replied, his expression inscrutable as Dom gave him a pained nod. “I don’t like you wandering around half naked. Might give Bunny ideas. What size do you wear? I’ll pick up a few shirts when I go to the store.”

Dom stared at him incredulously but when Dad didn’t budge he finally stuttered, “2x. Big and tall.”

Dad nodded sharply, murmuring to himself, “Didn’t think anything I had would fit you.”

“No, sir,” Dom replied. “Thank you, sir.”

“Anytime, and you better not do any nighttime wandering,” Dad warned, giving him a squinty glare. “Understand, Domin..o?”

Dominic nodded hastily, not missing my Dad’s play on his name as he reminded him

he wouldn't be fooled by a dog in my room. I scurried out the room before I busted out laughing, but any amusement I might have felt quickly died when I saw the open window and empty bed. I scanned the room and bathroom but I knew she was gone.

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I thought about getting Dom and doing a search but as raised voices reached me through the open window, I decided to follow them instead. I scrambled out the window and tiptoed toward the voices as they drifted from the breezeway where the vending machines were.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Trent had his hand wrapped around Anna’s arm, holding her still.

“None of your business,” she bit out caustically.

“I’m on patrol,” he informed her. “Anybody wandering around is my business.”

“I need to debrief my Alpha,” she finally said when he didn’t let go.

Trent snorted, “You wouldn’t need to debrief him if he’d been there.”

“He was here protecting the Pack,” Anna defended. “Something you couldn’t manage,” she added scornfully, her words intended to cut. He hauled her closer to him and I had to lean forward to hear them.

“When are you going to quit following him around like a lovesick puppy?” He growled, shaking her lightly. “Do you even know where he is?”

“Taking Sam and Nicky to Dom’s house,” she answered confidently, but some of her confidence slipped at the appearance of his slow smile.

“He was,” Trent agreed readily. “He came back though.” Anna’s head jerked in

surprise and as she glanced around, I ducked out of sight. “Not for you,” Trent said mockingly. “He came back to escort the little human girl home. I think her name is Leah?” Anna flinched at his words and he gave a mirthless chuckle. “You’re better than this. You can do better than that boy,” he scathed.

“What? You mean you,” she taunted, not backing down as he got in her face. “A pack less wolf with nothing to his name but a chip on his shoulder?”

“Better me than a boy that won’t take responsibility for his Pack,” Trent snarled, breathing heavily as he faced off with Anna.

“You don’t know him,” she protested, her head tilted back as she challenged him. “You don’t know me.”

“Wrong,” he muttered before his lips crashed down on hers. The kiss only lasted a few seconds before she jerked away, stunned as she stared at him.

“You’re not...” she broke off, shaking her head.

“I’m not him,” Trent finished for her and she yanked her arm from his hold, running straight for the forest as he stared after her.

I was contemplating backing away when Trent glanced over at me, “I know you’re there, Jess. I can smell you.”

“Should I be offended by that?” I asked, shuffling toward him, my arms crossed over my chest.

“No,” he replied, his gaze haunted as he stared at the spot where Anna had disappeared. “The eavesdropping though,” he glanced at me and I shrugged.

“No one tells me anything,” I defended myself and he smiled bitterly.

“Maybe so,” he finally murmured his hands moving restlessly.

I scuffed my toe against the concrete, ducking my head as I offered him a sucker I’d stashed in my pocket. He took it with a muttered thanks as I cast a sideways glance at him.

“Spit it out,” he grumbled, unwrapping the sucker.

“You told me once before that Anna was special. Rare.” I stared at where she’d run. “I don’t think I understood.” I glanced at him. “Can you explain?”

The sucker rolled from one cheek to the other before he nodded. “I was fifteen when I was cast out of my Pack. I wandered all over the country. Met a lot of wolves. Visited a lot of packs.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Only met one female shifter though.” He popped the sucker out of his mouth, pointing it in the direction Anna had gone. “At least, until her.”

“Maybe the other packs hid their female shifters?” I offered, lifting one shoulder and he shook his head.

“Nah, they’re rare. Special,” he confided, his eyes cutting toward me. “The one I met was kind. She offered me a place in her pack.”

I stilled at his words, my gaze jerking to his face and he smiled.

“Yeah, you heard me right. The only female shifter I’ve ever come across was the Alpha of her pack.”

The words echoed in my head as I stared at him, his persistence that Anna was more,

that she was better, taking on a new meaning.

“She’s not meant to be an Alpha’s mate,” Trent stated, his expression almost reverent. “She’s meant to rule.”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, the night air suddenly chilly, and Trent nudged me back toward my room. I spun around as I came to the corner and declared, “She doesn’t know.”

Trent shook his head, his gaze straying back to the forest. “None of them know, except for Dom.”

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I nodded, my head bowed as I made my way back to my room, thoughts spinning. I climbed back through the window, stopping short at the sight of the huge black wolf lounging in the middle of my bed, his golden eyes watchful as they pierced the darkness.

I padded over, curling next to him, my fingers digging into his fur as I warned, “You better be gone before he wakes up.” He chuffed as I wiggled closer. “I’m serious. He keeps the rifle loaded over his bed.” He whined, nuzzling me, and I closed my eyes with a sigh. He relaxed, his head propped against mine as I considered everything that had happened and the possibilities of what tomorrow would bring as I drifted into an exhausted sleep.