



The Dire Legacy

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Suspense

Description: After the virus ravaged the earth, it left a wake of men and terrifying monsters, vying for power. But, sometimes, the monsters were not the ones with fur. Sometimes, they look like you and I. Michael fled the only home he knew before his truth was revealed. Was he a monster like his father? Or did the world around him change so much he no longer fit in? When he meets Hope, everything he thought he knew shifts. She redefines this new world, and reveals the true evil that still walks among us.

*Please note this portrays dark themes and has incredibly graphic scenes that may be shocking or disturbing for some readers – for a complete list of potential triggers, please visit the author's IG

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Chapter 1

Michael

My mother killed my father before I was born.

At least, that's what I've been told.

But, I think a piece of him still lives in me.

The stares I learn to avoid. The comments are harder, they don't realize I can hear better than them.

I am a monster, as far as they're concerned.

Being born with toxic blood alienates everyone. When you have the ability to hurt someone with just a touch, they tend to give you a wide berth.

"Michael, I have to go check on one of the dairy cows. She's supposed to calve soon. Want to come with me?" Angie gives me a lopsided grin as she walks past me in the commons.

Her blonde ponytail bounces with each step and slides over her shoulder as she looks back at me. "Well?"

She's the only one who lets me near.

“Yea, sure. I’ll watch.” My fingers close into fists out of habit to make sure my gloves are still firmly on.

Purposefully letting her lead, I enjoy the show of watching her round ass cheeks as they move in her jeans. It makes the trip to the barn seem too short and my pants too tight.

“My dad said there’s a supply plane coming in next week, so they need volunteers to clear the runway. Want to get out of prison for a while?” Her blue eyes flicker my way as she raises an eyebrow.

I hate this prison. Hell yea, I’ll take any chance to get outside I can.

“Will your dad be there?” Sam is a hard ass. He’s the closest thing I have to a dad myself, but it doesn’t mean I like him much. I always feel like he’s watching me too closely.

“Not this time. Mom’s getting ready to pop again, so he’s staying home.” Angie sheds her denim jacket and sits on a bale of straw. A snug green button up shirt hugs her curves, offering a sneaking glimpse of the white of her bra through a fold in the fabric.

The urge to tear her shirt off and taste what she hides gnaws at me.

Trying to distract myself, I wander to the gate and glance in on the animal we came to check on.

With a heaving belch of acrid breath, the cow settles into her bedding and resumes chewing her cud. It doesn’t look like she’s having a calf anytime soon.

“How many kids does that make? Your mom is like one of those queen ants in a

colony.” I try to dodge the handful of chaff she slings at me, but it still lodges in my hair and itches down my collar.

“Ha. Ha. This makes eighteen. Dad says they have to do their part to repopulate this corner of the world. I guess it helps that they aren’t aging as quickly as normies.” Her petulant pink lip sticks out in a pout, but her blue eyes sparkle as she fights a smile.

My fingers twitch wanting to squeeze her cheeks and pull her face to mine, but I ruffle the short hairs on the back of my head instead.

The damned burrs from the straw she threw are working their way down my neck. Tossing my jacket near hers over the fence panel, I start billowing my tee shirt trying to work the irritating flakes away from my skin.

“Aw, are you sensitive?” Her laugh is throaty and she hops up to stand next to me, reaching her hand out.

I can’t let her touch me.

“No, I got it. I’m supposed to be on guard duty soon though. I just don’t want to be scratching all night.” As badly as I want her to help, I don’t want to risk hurting her.

“Mikey, come on. I’m sorry. Please? Let me help?” She’s the only one allowed to call me that since we’ve grown up together.

It melts me every time. Fine. Just this once.

So, I freeze and let her grab the bottom of my shirt and pull it over my head.

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The cool spring air hitting my bare chest raises goosebumps and the rapid rate of her heartbeat becomes almost deafening.

“You shouldn’t touch me.” I feel like I don’t have enough air in my lungs. The words barely escape as a whisper before her fingers feather over my neck.

“Do you remember that time—” Her breath teases across my shoulder as she wipes a piece of grass from the tip of my too-pointy ear. “—when we were about twelve and we were playing house?” When her nails push through my short hair, blood rushes to my cock.

“Kinda.” I remember it vividly. But, I want to hear what she has to say. Anything to keep her close to me.

“I made you play the big, bad wolf.” The corner of her mouth turns up and her teeth grab her bottom lip between them. Her finger is like a raw current of electricity tracing the long tip of my ear.

I’ve always hated them, but she’s changing my mind.

“Uh huh. But I made you cry.” It was too easy to get rough with her. Even at that age I was strong, more than most of the other kids our age.

“Do you know why I cried? You had me pinned down. You were sitting on me and had my arms flat on the ground.” Her palms sweep slowly across my shoulders. The scalding heat is almost too much to bear.

“I hurt you when I knocked you down?” The frenzy I felt at that moment was one I dreamed about. Every boy has that one fantasy, and mine was forever having her trapped under me since that day. The way her hips twisted beneath me, she was rubbing me in a way I’ve never experienced.

Fuck. I’m aching right now thinking about it.

“No, you didn’t hurt me.” Her thumb traces my jaw and almost touches my lips. Never have I wanted to break my own rules more than this moment. Wanting Angie has been the only thing that has kept me waking up every morning.

But, I know it can never be.

“I cried—” She takes a deep breath, her big blue eyes only inches from mine. The smell of her lavender soap has me bound with its heavenly scent. “—because I wanted you to kiss me.”

“Fuck. Angie, you know I can’t do that.” No matter how badly I want to.

“Come on. I know you want to. We aren’t kids anymore.” Her hands still on my chest. I know she isn’t wiping sweat away any more.

It’s good it’s chilly out. If it was hot, my sweat would sting her touch away.

Maybe I should whisk her away to Alaska.

“I’ll hurt you.” Damn the virus that made me this way. Why can’t I just be a normal person?

“I doubt it.” Her nose moves nearer my chin. She’s so close I can see the slivers of gold and green in her eyes. Getting lost in them, I don’t notice her hands moving to

my waist until her hips bump against my upper thighs.

Embarrassment surges through me and I step back. I don't want her to feel how hard I am for her. How my cock is leaking just at her proximity.

"Mikey, a lot of people that changed after the Dire Virus... their symptoms got less. My parents are starting to age a little. They don't look like they're twenty anymore. Heck, my dad got his first gray hair!" Her cheeks puff with her grin and she steps closer. "That might mean you don't sting as hard."

"We both know my mom was the only one I could touch, and even then it was hard for her. You don't have hyper healing like she does."

I still can't believe she left me here, alone.

I miss her. Why'd she have to go to Chicago? Just because the soldiers came and requested her help, doesn't mean she should have chosen to leave me. Who cares that she could be helping thousands of people?

"I heal fast enough. When I broke my leg when I was six, it healed in a week." Her pink lower lip sticks out in a pout. My teeth click together longing to take it between them.

I let my tongue wrap around one of my longer canines instead. My whole body is like that, just a little different. There's a chance I'd pass as almost normal to most people. Well, at first glance.

It's the inside that's even more strange.

"A week isn't long enough." Peeling her hands off of me, I'm glad I left my gloves on. She's getting harder to resist. "Besides, by your own reasoning, maybe your

healing slowed down too?”

The image of pressing her to the ground while she writhes beneath me dominates my thoughts. She makes my breathing grow rapid as I struggle to resist the urge. Maybe she’s right and I’m needlessly tormenting myself by keeping her at bay.

When she backs away and drops her hands, my victory is bittersweet.

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“Fine.” The small muscles around her eyes tighten and her lips thin. “I guess you don’t want me.” Turning on her boot heel, she grabs her coat from the bale and stomps through the door.

Listening to the steps fade away feels like a punch to guts.

“I want you more than anything,” I whisper after her.

Chapter 2

Angie

“Are you sure you want to go to the airfield, honey?” My mom rests her hand on my shoulder as she lowers herself slowly to her seat at the table.

“Are you sure you aren’t having twins this time?” She’s huge. I’ve seen my mom pregnant a lot, and this has to be the biggest belly I can remember.

“I hope not. Your father won’t stop bragging for a year if I do.” Pushing a blonde strand of hair behind her ear, she starts cutting up food for one of my youngest brothers. Or, maybe it’s for my littlest sister. They’re both waiting patiently with their matching clothes and messy blonde hair, they look identical.

Huh. I guess they are Irish twins.

“I wouldn’t stop bragging about what, Dani?” Dad fills the door frame when he steps through.

“Oh, Sam. If I had more than one baby in here.” Her small hand rubs over her extended abdomen, a teasing smile plays over her lips as she looks up at him.

Moving behind her, he covers her hand with his and kisses the top of her head. “Well, if it’s just one, we’ll try for more nexttime.” He folds his lanky frame into the chair next to her and starts doling out servings to more of the kids.

My parents fawning over each other isn’t new. They do it constantly. It’s nauseating.

As one of the oldest, I should be used to it.

But, after yesterday in the barn with Michael, I’m a little jealous of it. Watching my mom rest her hand on Dad’s arm, his idle kiss on the temple when all the plates have been given, it’s those little gestures that I can’t have that drive me crazy.

“Angie, what is going on?” My mom fixes her blue eyes on me. How did I think she looked like she’s getting older? We could pass for the same age of twenty-two. But, in reality she’s over fifty.

Not everyone is as lucky as her.

“Do you think the effects of the mutations will lessen over time for those born with them?” I know better than to try and divert the subject from what’s bugging me. She’s like a bulldog once she senses a problem.

Her eyes don’t even crinkle when she squints them at me. “Is this about Michael?”

Dad makes a growling sound in his chest, but other than his brows dropping, he continues helping cut up food for the younger kids.

“Of course it is. Do you think his stinging stuff will lessen?” I should be embarrassed,

but Mom has been studying this virus since day zero. She's never told the full story, but she said that her and Dad have been in the middle of it ever since it devastated the world before I was born.

“Well, honey. You know I've been researching this for almost twenty five years. Many of the ones who were initially infected have had some lessening of effects. But the major mutations seem to have persisted. The F-one generation doesn't seem to have much of a reduction in symptoms after birth.” Her voice trails off.

It's not the answer I was hoping for. “So, he's destined to never be able to touch anyone?”

Even over the chaos of a room full of her children, she reaches out towards me. “I'm sorry. I know that's not the answer you were looking for. The fact that his mutation favors the jellyfish DNA means there might be others out there like him. There's been so many strange ones.”

I can't fight the crazy laugh that erupts from my chest. “Like the dire wolf?” It's why everyone calls it the Dire Virus. Millions of people transformed into giant dogs almost overnight.

I'm glad I missed that party. It sounded terrifying. Thankfully, there aren't as many of them now, but it's why we live in a prison. Safety.

“Yes.” Mom glances at Dad and reaches down to rest her palm on his leg. “Axolotl is the last strand of DNA used in the virus. It's what helps us heal quicker and not age as fast. Michael's mom favored this the most, which is why she could handle him touching her when no one else can.”

“Is there a way to amp that up? So I could...” The words trail off. It's not like I want to admit to my mom how badly I want to touch him, but I think she's figured it out.

Probably when I was twelve.

She leans back with a soft groan and pushes down on her taut baby bump, a brief grimace of pain flashing over her features.

“Dani?” Dad rubs her thigh with long strokes and watches her intently. His jaw clenches and I notice he does have a couple of gray hairs over his ears.

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He said he used to have them before he caught the bug, but they disappeared shortly afterwards.

And now they're back.

"I'm fine, babe. Just the little one rolling around a bit." She gives a tight smile to my dad before looking back at me. "Angie, I'm afraid the only way to pump up the healing factor is with a blood transfusion from someone with hyper healing. And Jenny is the only one I know of. That's why they took her to Chicago."

A rock settles in the pit of my chest.

Dad leans back and stretches his arm behind Mom's chair. "Have you let him touch you?" Small lines appear at the corners of his eyes when he peers at me.

"Um. No. But he wouldn't even if I asked him." My cheeks heat up under his scrutiny. He's staring at me like I'm ten and just got caught stealing a cookie.

"Come with me." Standing abruptly, he walks out of the room towards their bedroom.

When I look at Mom, her face is pale, but she gives a slight nod before turning to the toddlers to her right.

Why do I feel like I'm in trouble? A heavy weight of doubt drags my footsteps behind him. He pushes the steel door closed behind me as I step through. It used to be a staff lounge before the virus, but today I feel like I'm being locked away in a cell like a convict.

“I need to show you something. There’s a reason why everyone is so adamant about the rules with him.” Dad runs his hand through his dark blonde hair as he sits down at his laptop.

“Yea, I know about that one time when we were kids. Tommy Porter screamed for an hour after stealing one of Mikey’s gloves and putting it on.” That’s when the rule went in that Michael or his mom were the only ones who took care of his stuff. He has his own completely self contained living quarters because of it. No cross contamination.

“Sweetie, it’s worse than that.” He flips his computer around to show me the screen. On it are two kids, one dark haired and one blonde. They look like they’re around three years old.

Stepping closer, I can see the tips of the brown headed boy’s ears. Pointed, just like Michael’s.

“Is that him? He was so cute! Who is the other boy?” He looks like he could be one of my siblings, but I’m the oldest, and Michael is a couple of years older than me.

Silence answers me.

He leans with his elbows on his knees and his jaw tight. Rubbing his callused hands together, he looks at me with a pained expression.

Wait, are those tears in his eyes?

“Dad?”

“That’s your older brother.” The words sound like they were stuck in his throat as he chokes them out. “His name was Liam.”

All the air is sucked from my lungs. Collapsing back to sit on the foot of their bed, it takes me a moment to regain my breath.

“I have an older brother?” A million questions fight in my head to be asked.

Dad’s chin drops to his chest. “Had.”

“What the fuck?” It just slips out. I don’t think he even noticed.

Still with his eyes on his hands, he begins quietly. “When they were three, you were just a baby. Everyone tried so hard to keep an eye on him. We’d all been stung by him when he would touch us. Jenny was especially diligent. I think she knew the dangers.”

He wipes his face and leans back until his head is tilted all the way to look at the ceiling.

I’m trying to remember a time where I’ve ever seen him struggle so much.

There isn’t.

“Michael has those pores on his hands that seep out that stinging shit.” His fists clench like it’s his own hands that are toxic. “And, well, it can be hard to keep gloves on a three year old.”

A pain between my eyes draws me to pinch the bridge of my nose. Why do I have a feeling I know where he’s going with this?

“They got in some sort of childhood squabble. Before any of us could stop them, they were wrapped up wrestling around on the floor.” When he looks at me, his blue eyes shine with tears. “I’ll never forget Liam’s scream before he died, Angie. It still haunts

me.”

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“Dad. Are you, um, are you saying that Michael killed my older brother?” Everything I thought I knew just slid sideways.

Michael killed someone?

“Yea. I am.” He pushes the laptop lid closed, sealing away the only proof I’ve ever seen of another brother.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Why haven’t I heard about this?” Frantically, I try searching every early memory I have, but I keep coming up empty.

His sigh is so heavy, it drifts across the room. “Michael didn’t deserve the stigma. He was too young to know what he was doing. But, he’s old enough now.”

The wheels of his chair squeak as he rolls closer. Taking my hand off my lap, he holds it between his large palms.

“Promise me you’ll be careful.”

Captain Russo leads the convoy of trucks from the prison to the runway. Aunt Elly sits next to him carrying a short rifle. Everyone is armed in preparation of a potential attack from the dogs. A pack of three hundred pound beasts the size of small horses can strike fast with deadly accuracy.

“There was a half-breed spotted near here two weeks ago. So everyone be extra watchful.” He stands behind the roof mounted fifty caliber as he yells.

We're all gathered in the center of the airfield with wide open views in every direction.

"What's a half-breed?" One of the younger men in the back steps forward. He looks like he's barely sixteen. This must be his first trip outside of the walls of the prison.

"Half dog, half human. They're as smart as us but can direct the dogs. If you see one, haul ass back here. They usually walk upright, but can also be on all fours." Captain Russo points at him. "I'm serious Ben, don't fuck with them."

I've never seen one, but I've heard the stories. My mom was ambushed by one and taken captive before I was born. They told me I was named after the lady that sacrificed herself to save her.

"We should kill them all," Michael grumbles and kicks at a rock near his feet.

Shit, I forgot his dad was one. And a particularly smart guy to start with, before he mutated.

"What did your dad do again before the virus?" I try to keep my tone down, sometimes talking about his past makes him uncomfortable. From what I've heard, Mikey's father wasn't exactly a nice person.

"Besides kidnap girls and torture them?" He spits in the dirt like the words themselves are sour. "He was a judge or something. At least, that's what Sam told me. He didn't change much after he grew fur though, he kidnapped my mom. Maybe that's why I'm a fucking monster. Like him." Turning abruptly, he takes his hand saw and heads towards a new outcropping of saplings that are springing up in the cracks in the asphalt.

No one talks about the circumstances that brought him about. Jenny told me once she

had been taken captive right after the virus outbreak, but never talked about it again.

She refused to leave the prison, right up until the day she went with the team of soldiers to Chicago.

I wonder if she was afraid there were more like Mikey's dad?

"Hey!" My feet follow him like we're tethered. "We're supposed to stay together." Gathering the trees he's cut down into a pile, I grab them up to carry to the ditch away from where the plane will land. We work in silence for a long time before we take a quick break for a drink.

"Here, there's more water in the truck if you need it." Aunt Elly hands me a small canteen. She looks like my dad, maybe with a little darker hair.

"Zoey and Glenn didn't come out today?" I looked earlier, but didn't see any signs of my cousins. It's weird to see her and Cap here without them.

"No, they stayed back. Glenn is working on shuffling supplies to make room for this shipment." Her blue eyes drop and she traces her hand over the panel of the truck. "Zoey has her projects that keep her busy."

That doesn't surprise me. Zoey is so much more like her dad, Cap. Stoic, silent, watchful and a bit reclusive.

Captain Russo might be in charge of the camp, but he rarely is in the forefront except for missions outside of the walls.

Like Michael. He always volunteers to be away.

"I don't think you're a monster, Mikey." The water is lukewarm after sitting on the

floorboard of the pickup for most of the morning.

Even after what my dad told me yesterday, I can't believe he'd ever hurt someone intentionally.

"Yea. Well, maybe I'm this way because I'm not supposed to get close to anyone." His jaw clenches and I watch his Adam's apple bob with every swallow.

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If it wasn't for his ears, he'd look like anyone else.

My fingers tingle wanting to run them through his short brown hair again. And the way he looked at me with his gray eyes, like he wanted to eat me.

He looks better than normal, and I want to touch him over and over. To trail my fingers down his broad chest and hug his lean waist against mine. Feeling him hard against my belly was enough to keep me up late. Conflict over his past, but obsession with trying to figure out a way to be a part of his future, kept me up all night with my own hands down my panties trying to relieve the pressure.

There has to be a way.

"Mikey?" I toss the empty canteen into the backseat and dig through the supply box to pull out some latrine rags. Toilet paper is a luxury.

When the population of the earth dropped to only ten percent of what it used to be before the virus, it isn't exactly a priority any more for production.

He grunts at me.

I'll take that as encouragement.

"I have to go. Can you watch my back?" There isn't exactly a bathroom out here on the tarmac with us. Catching Aunt Elly's eyes, I gesture to her with the rags and turn back to him.

He narrows his eyes and his ears flatten minutely against his head. “Yea, of course.” Pulling one of the shotguns off of the back of the truck, he slings it over his shoulder as he follows me away from everyone towards the terminal building.

I haven’t been alone with him since the barn.

Fear and longing war within me, both make my heart beat a little too fast.

Abandoned planes still sit at the gates, left in the same place for two and half decades. Knots of sagebrush and garbage cluster around the wheels and baggage carts.

A stark reminder that civilization was brought to its knees not long before I was born.

It’s hard to find a place that isn’t riddled with broken glass. Why did they build them out of so much? Doesn’t seem very safe. Living in a time before monsters would have been nice.

“This spot will work. I won’t be long.” Giving Mikey my best bored look, I gesture for him to stay as I step around a brick dividing wall. The glass panel has been shattered, but behind it is a wide room littered with wide chairs, benches and tables.

“Huh. Must have been some kind of break room or lounge.” Trailing my fingers through the heavy dust, I wander deeper into the musty time capsule. There isn’t a lot of evidence of the dogs here. Some places I’ve seen have been completely destroyed and filled with dried layers of shit.

This just looks, well, empty.

The magazines strewn around are still in readable shape. I’m tempted to grab a few to take back to the prison.

Wait. What is that?

A white box with a red cross on it hangs in the back of the room.

First Aid supplies are always needed. I bet there's still stuff in there that is usable.

Stepping gingerly over some strewn papers, my fingers tighten around the cool metal as I try and pry it from the wall.

Shit. It's really stuck.

Trying one more time, I brace my foot against the wall and tug. The box breaks free and I go hurtling backwards until I land hard against a hollow counter nearby.

It knocked the wind out of me and made a bunch of noise, but I have my prize.

Now, let's see what's inside.

"Are you okay?" Michael's face is red as he runs into the room with his shotgun up and sweeping ahead of him.

"Um, yea. Besides my pride and my ass, I think I'm okay." I try to flash him my best grin, but he scowls in return. Holding my arm up, I hope he reaches out to help me up.

A little surge of tingling works its way between my thighs at the thought.

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His nose flares and his gray eyes narrow before he lowers his gun and reaches out to grab my palm with his gloved hand.

I can't resist giving a tug and pulling him down over me.

His knee lands between my legs and his arms frame me where I sit, his weapon clatters to the floor behind us.

"Angie, what the fuck?" The heat of his breath pours over my neck as he stops just inches away.

Abandoning whatever inhibition I had, my hands cup his cheeks and I pull his lips to mine.

He stiffens, holding his mouth firmly closed. But, I don't stop. I want to taste him. To see if it hurts. To take every chance that there may be some way that I can touch him.

A groan rumbles through his chest as I nibble on his bottom lip then sweep my tongue across the seam of his mouth.

The rough leather of his glove wraps behind my neck and he pulls me tighter. He presses against me as his lips move over mine, but he keeps them locked, blocking my attempts to get him to open.

My frustration blooms as my hands move over his shoulders. A frantic need in me grows as I want more of him. I need to feel him over me, every inch of him. This unrequited ache inside of me wants to cling to him in a fervor as my childhood

dreams crash into reality.

I almost scream when he pulls away.

Panting, he drops his head, resting his forehead against my shoulder. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to resist you?” When he rocks back, the bulge in the front of his jeans is a beacon calling for me to reach out and open the zipper.

Just as my fingers rub down the taut fabric, his gloved hand seizes around my wrist with bruising force.

“Then don’t resist me. I want to know for myself just how much of you I can have.” My voice is husky as I try to push past his grasp to touch the obvious desire he has for me.

“You don’t understand.” His hips twitch as my fingers barely stroke over his belt. He pushes my hand over my head, pinning it against the smooth wood of the counter behind me. “If I start, I won’t stop no matter how loudly you scream.” The rumble of the words sink in between the rampant obsession of what he’s hiding from me.

A chill vibrates down my spine. But, heat spreads between my thighs.

“I can smell how badly you want me, Angie.” His nose is a pinpoint of heat as he traces my neck.

“Do you really think you can handle me?” With a shift of his weight, both of his knees now sit between mine.

When he rolls forward, his hard bulge presses against the apex of my thighs. The tickle of his groan rubs against my nipples. Raw electricity sparks within my belly. My body is starving for him to fill me and sate this emptiness I’ve felt since we were

young.

Begging him with my heels, I do my best to coax him closer. Wrapping my thighs around his waist, I tug on the hem of his shirt.

A hiss of his rapid inhale lures my fingers to run up the fine hairs of his stomach. “Please.” I’ve waited forever for him. It’s always been him.

I don’t even care I’m laying on a pile of old papers in an abandoned airport lounge. This minute is the closest I’ve ever been to getting him to give in. Shoving the thought of my older brother away, I know Michael won’t hurt me.

The pinch of his teeth on my neck blends into a dull, burning sting as the first touch of his saliva soaks into my skin.

“Does it hurt?” A pink flash of his tongue covers one of his long teeth as he stares at my face.

“It feels a little like a sunburn. No, it doesn’t hurt.” Well, it does a little, but not enough to be uncomfortable.

His mouth rushes to mine. No sooner have our lips touched before he’s pushing his tongue between my teeth and ravages me with his fiery kiss.

Spicy. Like jalapenos and cayenne and he plunges into me with a manic attack as his hands work down to the button of my jeans.

My own fumble to free him from his zipper. I want to do this while he’s willing. The crazy hot burning in my lips be damned.

Kicking my shoes off, he rips my jeans as he pulls his molten mouth away from me

just long enough to bare one of my legs.

Breathing through my nose, my tongue feels fat and numb. But, I'm distracted by the weight of his hard cock springing against my stomach as he unzips himself.

“You want it?” His lips find my collar as he takes my hand and guides me to touch him. A shudder runs through him as his hips jerk, stroking himself into my hand.

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Nerves ball in my chest as I trace over the throbbing head. Biting my swollen lip between my teeth, all I can breathe out is a moan as the hot drop of pre-cum scalds my finger.

I can't jerk from the pain. The last thing I want to do is make him stop. Even if his every lick on my skin makes my throat tighten a little more.

His leather glove skims over my stomach before he tugs at my panties, tearing the side and pushing them down my thighs. Carrying my knee to my chest, he spreads me wide as he slides the length of his hard cock down to rub against my clit with his shaft.

Fuck, it feels good, despite the slight wheeze of my breathing. Squeezing my eyes shut, a trill of panic flutters through me.

How bad will the pain be the first time?

As if he's reading my mind, Michael's lips hover over my ear. "I'll make it fast so it won't hurt." He lands light kisses along my jaw as I feel his hips roll.

With a ball of pressure, he slips the head in and stops. I can't hold back the gasp as my body stretches around him.

Our bodies quiver as he takes a deep breath with his forehead resting on my shoulder.

A cry escapes me when he sinks into me, ripping through my last vestige of youth with a piercing twinge.

“You’re so fucking tight.” he groans as both of his hands work themselves under my ass. Raising me to meet his rapid thrusts, his nose buries against me before I feel the hard pinch of his teeth breaking through my skin. Fire rips beneath the surface. My chest feels like it’s blistering under a bath of acid.

The pain I first felt in my belly dulls into a deep burn that gets hotter as his pace quickens.

It hurts.

Panic starts to flood through me as his breathing becomes more rapid.

“Mi—” Only half of a syllable escapes my fat lips. I don’t know if I can close my mouth around my tongue. It feels like it’s blocking my throat. “No, no, no.” They’re barely discernible grunts to my own ears. There’s no way he can understand me.

Pain.

As he tenses above me, I can feel the first spurt of agony as he erupts.

My heart races as a wave of constricting torment rips through me.

I can’t breathe.

Twitching muscles knot within my abdomen as spasms seize my lungs.

His hips jerk against me as his molten cum destroys my womb. Uncontrollable cramping shreds me. It’s like a red hot poker is being forced into me, tearing and burning from the inside out. I can’t stop my back rising from the floor in a torturous arch as if my spine is trying to climb through me and burst from my chest. My fingers claw the discarded papers as I gasp emptily. Airless, a silent scream stretches my jaw

until it cracks and darkness bubbles from the stars bursting before my eyes.

Chapter 3

Michael

She feels fucking amazing. Being able to touch and taste someone, it's like a floodgate has been opened. The soft little moans she makes and the way her fingers dig into my back, has me coming so much faster than I ever thought I would.

When she squeezes me so hard, it feels like she's pinching my cock right off. It rockets me into a blinding oblivion as I loose my load deep within her clenching pussy.

Her body goes limp beneath me as I pant into her neck.

“Angie, that was unbelievable. I'm glad I didn't—”

She's so still.

As my eyes creep up, a wave of nausea rolls a cold sweat over my body. Her jaw is open unimaginably wide and seems to be locked there.

Fear and panic rampage in my throat as I choke out a cry.

Her eyes. They're flared open and nearly popping from her face.

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Unblinking. Fixed on a hidden terror some ominous distance above her.

“No. No, no, no, no, no.” Scraping my knees under me, I pull my softening cock from her and make the mistake of glancing down.

A dark purple stain blemishes her lower belly.

What the fuck?

No. Oh, no. It was me. It’s not just my hands. Or my spit.

I can’t even believe this. I did this to her.

Terror and pain wash over me. She’s gone. The only person in the world who thought there was any good in me, and I killed her.

Damned gloves. They didn’t save her. Ripping them off, I can feel her for the first time.

The smooth skin of her temple as I brush a strand of hair. The soft lashes of her eyes that are slowly glossing with the murky film of death.

Her hand fits so naturally in mine. If only I had been able to hold it like this before. Skin to skin. Warmth is fading from her fingers so quickly, I press them to my chest. Perhaps if I share my own heat, she’ll come back to me?

Tears burn my face at the futility of it. She’s gone. Her lips are turning blue and the

color in her cheeks is fading to a sallow pale. My stomach twists and bile scalds its way up my throat. Heaving up the water that has turned vile, my traitorous cock sticks to my naked thigh, still slick with her arousal.

There's no way in hell I can go back home.

I am the monster.

A grievous roar erupts from my chest

“Angie? Michael? We need to bug out. I hope I’m not disturbing any—” Elly steps over the broken glass and stops. Her eyes grow big as she looks at us.

At me.

My poor Angie, half naked, contorted. And it's my fault.

“What did you do?” Her eyes pinch as she rushes forward. “What the fuck did you do?” The shrill question barely leaves her lips as she tries to push me away. Her face turns red and she balls her fists and starts flailing at me.

“I didn't mean to!” Her nails scratch at my shirt and neck as she swings her hands haphazardly at me. When she goes for my face, I grab her wrists to keep her from clawing my eyes.

Her scream could shatter glass.

I let go as fast as I can, but blisters form on her wrists as I watch.

My God. I didn't know someone's eyes could open that wide.

She throws her arms above her as she collapses to the floor, just feet away from Angie. Digging her heels, she kicks manically, twisting and rolling as the scream continues to deafen me.

Angry red marks surge up her arms and disappear under her sleeves.

At least the screaming stops. Her mouth opens and closes soundlessly while her fingers dig furrows into her neck.

Thrashing, her foot almost connects with my knee.

My cock is still hanging out when I stand up quickly and back away, watching her chest spasm and her hips jerk towards the ceiling before she collapses limp on the ground.

Her eyes. Jesus, she's staring at me as her pupils broaden and fill the blue.

I have to get the fuck out of here. If Cap sees this, I'm dead. I knew touching Angie was a bad idea. Why did I let her talk me into it?

Because it felt so damned good I couldn't stop.

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Where's the shotgun?

Once I find it, I zip up my pants, grab my gloves and duck out through the back. There's no way I can go home now. I've killed three people.

It feels like my chest is crushing itself as reality sets in. Three. People.

I barely remember the first, but Sam and my mom never let me forget it. Liam. He was my friend, even if I can't seem to picture exactly what he looked like.

It's just the scream that haunted my nightmares for years afterwards.

My mother tried to prevent it, but I am apparently walking on a path of darkness already predestined for me.

Why fight it?

Chapter 4

Hope

I miss the times when they are blurry. Now, they stand in vivid contrast. Thin, brutal, they vein from my arms and snake into obscurity beyond my view.

It doesn't matter if I can see them or not. When the world is blurry, the pain isn't as intense. They stopped being vague so long ago, they're burned as a relief into my mind.

Like a recital, it's a predictable pulse. Something that they swear is nutrition pumps into my left arm, while my body pushes blood from the right.

Cyclic. Eternal. I've been in this chair, this room, with its maddening rhythmic noises, my entire life.

Forever.

Except the days I'm not. Those are worse.

When the melon shaped head of the acne laced tech appears by one of the sinuous lines, I know what it means.

Agony awaits me.

"It looks like we need kidneys and a cornea today, Hope. I asked Dr. Falen to up your dose again, but she said she's worried about toxicity." He scratches at his chin nervously. A fresh bead of blood streaks down his thin stubble as he tears the scab from one of the pustules.

"You know, Paul—" My fingers tingle after he removes the tight restraint. "—you shouldn't pick at those. You'll leave a scar."

What would it be like to have a scar? Do they hurt? Maybe a little itch because it didn't heal?

I want one. Someday.

A deep and jagged one on both of my arms, so I can look at them every moment and be thankful they exist.

Yes, a roadmap over my body. Bumps and ridges I can touch. I'd love them. My marks. Memories.

Paul keeps his sleeves down around me, I've noticed. Since my nails left furrows on his arms once. He has proof. Reminders.

Permanent and unhealing.

Maybe I should spit on him? Bite my finger off and shove it down his quivering mouth?

Next time. It would help.

Temporary perfection. If only I liked him more.

Disconnected and upright, I follow the familiar path through the white halls. Paul and his fleet of faceless men herd me. They don't walk too closely, but the clodding steps their boots make lull me. His fear ripples through the chain that wraps my waist and clamps my wrists.

All for me. Little ol' me. Half their size, a third their weight and they parade me like a prized bull. Stallion? Huh, I would say broodmare, but they know better now.

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“Don’t worry boys, I’m playing nice today.” If I had hair to toss, I’d swirl my head in the way the girls did in the old movies. They keep me bald, so swishing my hips in bare feet is the best I can do.

Heavy steel security doors impede my march. One of the wire laced windows has a piece of metal bolted over it.

Forty-three. And a wrist with an elbow. They had to break after forty-three hits before I could reach through the gap.

What number was that? I’ve lost count.

The failed attempts just keep breeding, growing and adding layers like an onion. A pearl. Yes, I’m an oyster, one after another. Each one more valuable than the last.

Ah, the doors spread like wings into my sanctum. My throne awaits. I am their idol, reveling in their worship.

I detest their covetous nature. There are days I wish I could withhold my virtues.

But, they’re taken. Stolen. Cut and sliced, pried and snipped.

Like the vultures they are, they hover in the wings. Eyes wide as they watch my hands.

“Oh, Roger. Is today for you?” I’d recognize him through his surgeon’s smock just by his size. The dark patch that covers the side of his face is the latest benevolent gift

I've bestowed.

Funny how his shoulders jerk when he takes a step backwards. It's almost like I was clawing at him again.

Silly, I'm across the room.

"This will be it for a while, Hope. After we're done, you'll get a few days off." Dr. Falen isn't very big, either. Her narrow brown eyes don't match the deep southern drawl of her words.

"Like, a real vacation? Can I go to the beach? Get my hair done?" The harness around my waist jingles as I bounce up and down.

Too bad it isn't just her and I. I've kept track of our every visit. One day, when we're alone, I'll help her remember them all.

"Not exactly. But, you might get to see the beach. You're being transferred to Los Angeles early next week." She deftly threads the chains into the locks on either side of the upright gurney. No, my magical perch. Where they spread me like a phoenix to pluck their feathers.

I'm used to the pinch as the tube with the liquid food is plunged into my elbow. Such a minor twinge, I don't even glance.

It's beneath me. That's it.

The room shifts as the ceiling rolls into view. There are sixty-four tiles on it. Twelve lights. Six cabinets hover below the edge.

I don't need to count them again. It's boring. I want to count my heartbeats today. If I

really concentrate, can I make it stop?

A heavy velcro strap snugs against my forehead, and I hear the familiar ripping sound as they fasten my legs.

“Eighteen cc’s.” Dr. Falen’s voice drifts across me, but she’s imaginary. The unseen. She’ll be back.

“We can do twenty, doctor.” A deep male voice is on the other side of me. It’s the drug side. The useless side.

Isn’t that sweet?

“Roger, I didn’t think you cared? This must be how kids go a-courtin’ nowadays?” I nail the southern drawl. “Letting me sit on your face and then beggin’ to drug me up? Who knew you were such a romantic?”

A silver glint moves into sight and is followed by Dr. Falen’s masked face. “Hope, maybe this means your heart grew back even larger?” She raises a slim black eyebrow as small crinkles appear in the corners of her eyes.

What a bitch.

Warmth rolls through my body and a heavy feeling settles in my limbs. Good.

“Just hurry up while Roger pumps me full of his good stuff over there.” I’d turn my head to him if I could. “Pump me Roger! Give me all of it!” My voice rises as the silver glint blurs and her head starts to look fuzzy.

Her small gloved fingers press the lids of my eye apart and the sharp edge of a stainless steel scoop materializes from the hazy mess that is forming around me.

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There's this odd moment as the edge slides along my eye where I can still see her out of it, but it's warped and misshapen as the pain sets in.

Stabbing, searing fire burns into my orbit as I watch her remove my eyeball and stretch it away from my face, the root of it still clinging within my head. It's always a shock when I can still see out of it as she holds it in her hand.

Oh, there's Roger. He's wispy. The syringe he's pushing into my arm makes it hard to see through the fog.

There's a clang and a soft tap sound and the scalpel appears. A fast cut with a new lance of agony and my vision of him disappears.

"Do you want cauterization?" Dr. Falen's face rematerializes.

"Fuck no. That shit hurts." A warm ribbon of liquid works its way down my cheek. I'd rather the bleeding than that damned hot poker being driven into my socket again.

It only took once to learn that lesson.

How old was I? Do I even remember my first eye?

Turning her down every time has become a routine. She offers. I refuse. It's our dance. Pirouette. Bow. Burn. Cut. Repeat.

The table flips over. They've given up being gentle for the sake of time. Swell. Only a tiny bit of nausea until I'm staring at the floor watching a string of blood reach

down and pool first in tiny drops that melt into a unified congealing puddle.

If I really try to focus, I can almost catch the reflection of the hole in my face in the growing pond.

Loch-eye. Sounds Scottish. If only a clot monster would rise from its depths and swallow me whole.

My back gets cold as the panel on my mighty throne is opened.

They stopped swabbing me with iodine years ago. I'm glad. That shit was cold. It's not like I ever get an infection. If only.

The blood hazes just a little. "Thank you Roger. I promise not to go for the eyes next time." Saliva drips from my mouth, racing the last few drops of blood to the white tiled floor.

Spit won!

My momentary celebration erupts in a scream, squeezing my eyelids shut as the bite of the scalpel runs into the soft flesh above my hip. One long cut goes from my left, across my spine, and to the right.

"Roger! I'm clawing your other eye out!" Digging my nails into my palms does little to distract me.

A new surge of heat runs into my arm and the edge of the searing pain dulls with the onrush of drugs. I can hear a dopey giggle break from my lips and my words slur. "See? That wasn't so hard."

There's a heavy pressure on my back. Squishing noises. A slowly sharpening ache as

the meds wear off.

Blinking, I can see in three dimensions again and clarity sets in. My missing eye grew back while I was screaming.

Shoes shuffle in and out of view. I wonder who my kidneys are being rushed to?

No, I really don't. I'm just glad it isn't another heart.

Those fuckers hurt.

They used to try and lie to me, telling me I was helping injured and children. I know better. The real recipients show their faces sometimes.

Old. Rich. The air of importance. But, who do they worship?

That's right. Me.

They'd all be dead without me.

When the table flips over, I search the observatory as soon as my head is free.

Yep. At least four of them are watching today. With their pressed shirts rolled up as my blood is pumped into their veins.

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“Ancient assholes! I hope your dicks shrivel!” My mouth. It gets me in all kinds of bad situations. Like now, I have four big guys holding me down because of one little comment.

“My, my, Jared, have you been working out? Or are you Benjamin? I can’t tell you thugs apart in those suits.” Stretching my neck, I’m just able to lick the jawline of the heavy helmet that presses against my chest.

“You taste like bad decisions, Alfred. Are you Batman?” Heavy hands force my wrists into the sheathed restraints and fasten them to the leather belt they’ve wrestled onto my waist.

All he does is grunt.

“Come on, big boy. Ever been with a girl you can break? Just give me five minutes in the geriatric room, and I’ll let you skull fuck me. Wanna try that?” The repetition is the torture. It’s always the same. If I can break up the monotony by ridding the world of a couple of the leeches that feed off of me, all the better.

The cold concrete sends a little chill through me as the faceless brutes set me on my feet. But, there’s a bounce in my step as they follow me back to my cell.

I’m going on a trip and I can’t wait for the change.

Chapter 5

Michael

The buildings wander by as I weave aimlessly deeper into the heart of what used to be Boise. Rubble and skeletons of structures and homes are losing their battle with nature. Who knows how many places were destroyed when the bombers hit.

Mom told me how they narrowly escaped before the city was destroyed to try and tamp down the wolves. But, it was Sam that slipped and told me it was because my father saved her that I'm even here.

The only glimmer of kindness I've heard about. All the rest was pitch black.

It's a fitting backdrop for the misery in my heart.

What a fucking hand I've been dealt. Doesn't matter what I do, shit always goes south.

Elly's screams blend with the silent look of agony forever etched on Angie's face. Why did I give in?

I knew better.

Her brother couldn't handle me even touching him. What made me think she could?

The streets are identical in their destruction. It's just a variety of how the debris is strewn. I have a pretty good idea where I am, having participated in scavenging crews since I was twelve. No one gave a shit if I was too young. My mom wasn't even overly worried.

It's like they were all just hoping something would remove me so it wouldn't be they're fault.

Bitterness churns in my stomach and finally erupts in a spray of bile infused water.

Screw living with people. If I'm destined to be alone, so be it. I've been learning my whole life how to survive. The yearning to live away from the crowds that stare and avoid me has festered in me since I was small.

There's one place in this city I haven't been. It's the lure, the dark secret I've always tried to deny. I don't want to go, but my feet have other plans.

Maybe I need to see it for myself.

It was Captain Russo that pointed it out. I think everyone else was hoping it would fade into obscurity with time. Nature has taken over so much of the city, if I hadn't burned it into my memory, I may have forgotten the way.

But, not this.

Moss and ivy clings to the scorched cinder block walls, still green from the spring rains.

This building is huge. It could have passed for a factory or maybe an automotive garage nestled amongst the other industrial businesses in the area. Craters dot the wide area that leads to one crumbled side.

That must be the propane tank. Sam told me once it blew up during the rescue and is probably the only way Mom and Dan survived. Jagged steel still pokes through the debris like giant claws reaching for the sky.

I can't believe most of the roof survived. Actually, besides the burn marks in the main room, the cool interior is, for the most part, intact.

My fingers trace the rough mortar. The same walls my father once touched. Small hairs on the back of my neck raise as my eyes adjust to the dim recesses.

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What the fuck is that? A bench? On a dias?

Nausea rolls through me. There's bindings on the sides. Perfectly positioned for hands and feet to be arranged in several different ways.

I wonder if the dark stains on the floor are what I think they are. No, I don't want to know.

Dry heaves take me and bile burns up my throat. My mother was likely strapped to that very bench. The hollow look in her eyes told me the story. She lost herself, right here. On this cracked leather and worn wood. How many others died here?

A pen across one end houses bones and dried remains. Dog and human skeletons are mixed in scattered piles. I don't want to go any closer to the harsh reality of the toll.

Maybe they went quickly with the bombs. There seems to be charring on most of them. The sulfurous smell still lingers lightly in the still damp air, at least, to my sensitive nose.

A dark hallway calls to me. The first door stands ajar and faded pastels still hold their bright glare when I push in.

What are these piles? Clothes, trinkets, bags of old chocolates. A bed with a frilly pink blanket sits at one end.

Fuck. My mother's room.

I can't slam the door behind me quick enough. The fact she was trapped in that garish collage probably drove her crazy.

No wonder she said she didn't like the color pink.

The next two rooms look empty. Nothing but broken beds and old dog shit piled around the edges.

But a wide arch makes a darker blemish in the gloom. It takes time for my vision to adjust. I wish I had brought my bag with my flashlight. It's still in the truck at the airport.

Squeezing my eyes shut doesn't hide the reawakened image of Angie. Her frozen scream will haunt me forever.

Shapes form from the shadows. Why does that back wall look, well, fuzzy? Long tendrils hang off of it in bunches. They're stiff, coarse even. It's patchy, like they're all in different lengths.

A cold shiver runs up my spine and my stomach threatens to spasm again.

It's hair. Holy fuck. From my waist to as tall as I can reach, the entire surface is covered with it, and it's still attached to sections of skin.

It feels like spiders are crawling on my skin as I jerk my hand away. How many girls would it take to have a solid covering of scalps?

"What was wrong with you?" My throat burns with the shrill volume that erupts out of me, my voice cracking like I'm a teenager again as I stumble away.

A hard rolling sound surprises me when I bump into a wooden shelf. Several hard

cracks punctuate the dim silence.

Another step and something hard crumbles under my foot.

Empty eye sockets stare up at me around the toe of my boot.

That's it. I'm done.

My legs pump and my lungs burn as I run as fast as I can from the dark depths of the room. The rapid beating of my frenzied heart drowns out my feet hitting the ground.

It's several blocks before the rush of adrenaline wanes and I slow back to a walk. Glancing around, I recognize one of the old grocery stores.

North. It's as good as any direction. I need to get away from Boise.

And Sam.

I've taken his son, his daughter and his sister. Captain Russo will be on the warpath, too.

I'll never be able to return.

Lush grass covers the streets with small trees already towering over my head. Nature is reclaiming the remains of the city. How long will it take for the evidence of humans to completely disappear?

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Deer flit between the buildings. Birds and squirrels startle as I walk through the low brush.

My ears perk on their own. A strange noise comes from ahead of me. Heavier steps ricochet from a brick wall, obscuring the direction.

The low growl that follows pinpoints the source as a clawed hand curls around the edge of the crumbling building.

It's higher than I could reach. Whatever it is, it's big.

Taking a faltering step backwards, cold dread spreads through me when I bring up my empty hands.

The shotgun. I must have dropped it at the warehouse.

A brown furred creature appears. I'm pretty sure my head would fit in its massive jaws. Caught somewhere between dog and man, the half-breed stands on powerful legs and I watch it flare its nostrils as it spots me.

Shit.

Canines as long as my fingers appear as it pulls its lips back in a predatory grin.

The voice is deep and gravelly that erupts from its cavernous chest. "I can smell him on you."

Chapter 6

Hope

It always burns the first time I pee after new kidneys. Not badly, more like a piss-shiver. Maybe it's because I'm already giddy.

Leaving. New sights. New sounds.

And, another opportunity to escape. The new moments are the best to take advantage of. Routine breeds efficiency and I hate it. Same, same, same. It always means I'm stuck and caught and sliced.

Different is what I crave. A revolutionary day would be one I stay whole. All my piggies and squiggles in one spot: me.

A scream echoes off the smooth white walls, comforting me. If it's her, it's not my turn. I don't know which her it is, but she's my best friend today.

I think there's at least five or six hers and that many hims that all get the pleasure of being tied and dissected. There's kids, too. They all sound the same, so I have no idea how many there are.

Little frogs in a lab, one piece at a time.

Jump rabbit, into your warming pot. Hotter and hotter, they care less and less. How long before they go past the line and take too much? Have they?

Another piercing cry snuggles me into my pillow.

If I escaped, would I be able to sleep without those calming sounds?

Agony of others is the soothing lullaby.

There might be something wrong with me, but I've never met someone normal enough to compare to.

Closing my eyes makes the time pass, I'm not sure if it's daytime or dark. Without windows, time seems to curve into an illusion.

The guard standing at my cell door seems to be paying attention to it. He's yelled at me twice now that it's important for me to get up.

I was just getting comfy.

"Back up to the door." Don't stick my arms through and grab him by the balls. They just cut my hands off now. Bruno and his machete at the ready.

"Yes, daddy." Flounce is a good word. I try to do it as the faceless helmet peers through the window at me. They've stopped being distracted when I get naked. I might save that trick for the next place. But, I can do my best to try and stick out my tits in this shapeless set of scrubs.

Good practice.

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Snap and twist. Raise my bound wrists above my head so they can secure them at the window. Belt goes on.

Every time. Tied like a good pet to get the cell to open.

The funny thing? I never did anything wrong to end up here. An animal in a cage. Being born like this is my only crime.

Special. That's the lie they feed me.

Harvestable. An asset.

Well. This is unique. A hall I haven't walked. It looks the same, but fewer locks. Taking a chance to run too soon might ruin a better opportunity. Better to wait and see what lies beyond.

Thing one and thing two open the double doors to a rush of blinding light and humid heat.

Outside.

"Oh my god! I get to see the sky? What benevolent slavers you are!" I skip past the steel barricades until my chain pulls tight and rips me backwards off my feet.

The dizzying hit to the back of the head when I land is worth it.

White puffy clouds. A bird calling. The soft tickle of the damp air draws tears from

my eyes. Even with the heat of the asphalt scalding into my shoulders, I want to stay here and stare at the vastness of the empty space above me.

Three helmeted heads lean over me.

“Y’all are ruining my view. Like a damned goon trilogy.” Heavily gloved hands haul me to my feet, but they can’t stop my gaze returning upwards. It’s only been on television and in books I’ve envisioned it.

So much better.

Broken skyscrapers dot the horizon past the small airfield we’re walking to. “Okay, stooges. What happened to the buildings?”

Their neck protectors creak as they look at each other.

“They bombed it after the outbreak.” The babysitter behind me is the one to break the silence.

“Was it really that bad?” I’ve heard stories about the dire day. “Doggies gone wild too much for everyone to handle?”

One of the half-breeds came through the lab. I think I was ten or twelve. Fifteen? Time flies when you’re repeatedly disemboweled.

I just remember thinking how cool it would be if I got close enough for those big ass claws to rip my head off. There’s no way I could survive that.

Fuck, I’d hope not. That would hurt for days.

“Bad enough they destroyed most major cities to try and get rid of a big chunk of the

wolves.” This from the walking brick shit house to my right.

“Poor puppies. Bet all they wanted was belly rubs.” A three hundred pound pooch could play fetch with a redwood. How would I even throw it? I’d need some sort of catapult. A giant slingshot.

“It was a scary time.” The deep voice of the third guy rumbles next to me.

At least the dogs wouldn’t strap me down to harvest me over and over. Nope, that completely monstrous activity is saved for humans.

“Maybe for you. There’s worse things than wolves.” I wish he’d look at me so he could see me sticking my tongue out at him.

One day, I’ll bust out and find my own pack of creatures. The worst that could happen is they eat me.

It’d still be better than this.

“My, my grandma. What a small plane you have.” This isn’t quite the jet I was expecting like I’ve seen in old movies. I have to stoop to go through the door.

“Big enough for you. Sit there.” A big hand points in front of my face to the second row.

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“Oh, I like it when you’re bossy.” Smile big. Pretend to be nice.

The door to the cockpit is open and I can see dark pants covering a pair of legs stretched out. They shift and stand, revealing a guy with nearly white hair.

His pale blue eyes glance at the straps on my wrist before giving me a sad smile.

Yeah. Be sorry for me. Will you fix it? Doubtful. No one who’s ever felt bad for me did a thing.

They all just do their parts.

A big, complacent machine. Moving parts and I’m the gasoline.

It should all burn.

He disappears as the door is latched shut.

Can’t see the sun unless I lean over. No sudden movements.

Might spook the herd.

What a strange feeling when the engines engage and I’m pushed into the seat. It makes me feel heavy and my stomach does flip flops.

“Ring around the rosie.” Another endearing grin to the helmeted babysitter in the next row. Don’t look at me if I’m off key. These aren’t the vocal chords I was born with.

“A tisket, a tasket.” Puffy white clouds scatter the light as we plane levels out.

Sprocket one and sprocket two are leaning back in their seats. It must be a long flight ahead of us.

Good.

They can’t see my hands. I’ve broken them so many times it barely hurts anymore. If I pull hard enough on my thumb, it breaks free from its little socket. The pop isn’t loud. But, okay, it still hurts.

Damn water in my eyes. Blink it away and jerk on the other one. Whoo boy. Breathe through it. It doesn’t take a hard tug to pull my arms free from the restraints when my thumbs dangle like a cat toy.

Can’t let them think anything is up. I wonder if these are my regular guards?

I’m going to pretend they aren’t. They’re virgins to me. Unpopped cherries who haven’t fought an escape.

That’s too bad.

If I roll my hips just a little bit, it hides my fingers while they heal.

The last of the tune spills a sweet flavor over my lips. “And they all. Fall. Down.”

Chapter 7

Michael

I’ve never seen one so close. It’s always been a fleeting glimpse as we’ve been

running from our lives.

There's nowhere to go. I'm trapped in the middle of the street with the hulking creature leisurely growing closer.

"I knew him." The deep voice rumbles from the massive furred chest past impossibly large teeth.

"Who?" I pull off my gloves and stuff them into the back pocket of my jeans. My hands are my only weapons. Unless he can heal quickly.

His heavy steps stop just a few feet away. If he leaned out, I'm sure he could rake me with his claws.

Human looking amber eyes scrutinize me as his whiskered nostrils flare before he lowers his head to my level.

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One lip turns up revealing a yellowed top to a long canine. His breath reeks of rot with each exhale.

“Your father, pup.” He drops so one of his hands rests on the ground. His haunches are gathered beneath him. It’s like he’s ready to leap.

“Whatever he did to you, I’m not him.” Readying my palms towards him, I hope they’re enough to stop him if he decides to attack.

The half-breed sits back, raises his dark nose to the sky and laughs. A deep, rich, rasping sound.

I don’t understand what is happening.

His dark nose twitches as his gaze falls back to me. “He saved me, all of us. Taught us how to survive in this new world.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Everyone always told me he was a monster.

But, to others, he was a hero?

His massive head leans forward, close enough I can see the graying around his muzzle. Air shifts around my hands with his inhale, making the thick skin around his nose wrinkle.

“You aren’t like the others, either.” He tilts his furry head. One pointed ear flops as he stands.

He must be eight feet tall. I'm not exactly short, almost six-one. But, he towers over me.

"Dumber than the rest. You're lucky it was me that found you. Didn't they teach you not to wander alone outside the lunchbox?" He turns with a gesture for me to follow.

I don't know what the fuck to do. He's right, I would be dinner for a pack of dogs.

Dammit.

"What's the 'lunchbox'?" My feet may have been rooted to the ground, but I find myself falling into stride next to him.

"That prison you all hide in. We just wait to see what treat escapes next." He doesn't walk quite like a human or a wolf. More like a gorilla. The muscles of his shoulders ripple and flex with each step.

I bet he could hand a gorilla its ass. My stomach rolls. I'm puny compared to him. Where in the hell is he leading me? Am I going to be dinner?

"Are you going to eat me?" My legs lock up. I'm not going to walk into my own demise.

Another deep rumble of a laugh emanates from the depths of his chest. "The way you smell, you'll make us sick if we did."

"Oh. Well, I guess I have that going for me." Apparently I'm fucking toxic to everyone. Man and monster. "I never knew your kind could talk." My voice drops. All those times we were shooting first, before there was a chance for them to get too close.

A different sound vibrates out of him, dark and menacing. It makes my ears prick and the little hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“I used to look like you, too. Then I changed and people tried to kill me.” His head turns as he side eyes me. “So, now, I kill them first.” A long tongue languidly runs over one of his canines before he turns away.

I’m going to be sick. A simple roll of the genetic dice made him this way.

Just like me.

His claws click on the ground as we walk in a hypnotic cadence.

“What can I call you?” Do they even use names?

“Haven’t had a need for a long time. I’d rather not remember that life.” His ears flatten briefly and he turns so I can’t see his head.

Weaving through the destroyed remnants of the city, I’m almost finding it easy to be near him. Mom would be freaking out if she saw me. She told me stories about how animalistic they became after the change. More beasts than men.

Was everything I was told a lie?

“Why are you taking me with you?” I just can’t wrap my head around this. Why isn’t he attacking me? I’m not my father. I never want to be.

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The beast slows and swings his body to fully see me. “Your father was my pack. You’re part of it now.”

That stops me. I’m accepted? Just like that?

I’ve never been a part of anything, always the outcast.

He pulls further away, but I hustle to catch up. This might be my only lifeline to survival outside of the walls.

“Stay close, pup.” He raises his head and lets loose a long, mournful sounding howl. The sound washes over me, raising goosebumps along my arms and elicits a shiver down my spine.

Some primal part of me kicks a surge of adrenaline that rushes my heartbeat to pound in my ears.

The large guard hairs down his spine stick up in a mohawk of tans and grays as he stands on his hind legs, shadowing me from the afternoon sun.

Movement flickers on the edge of my vision.

Then again to my left.

A brown flash darts between two buildings to my right.

My ears strain until I can begin to pick up a step here and there, a grunt, a scrape.

Like a mist, silent dogs emerge from the crevasses, surrounding us.

They sling low to the ground as they circle, their bellies almost brushing the grass.

Most of them aren't fully changed. They're all in some sort of part animal, part human configuration. Some lean stronger towards one end than the other. A few even appear walking on their hind legs like my companion.

Who's huge in comparison to them.

Exposed teeth glimmer as their narrowed eyes all focus on me.

The intruder.

A cavernous growl radiates from him. It's so deep and loud, it reverberates through my chest. I swear it changes the rhythm of my pulse, it's so overpowering.

His heavy paw with his long claws wraps around the back of my neck, weighing me down as the rough pads dig into my skin.

"One of us." His words are like boulders in a raging flood of echoing sound. It tempers to a trickle as it drops only loud enough for me to hear. "Stay still, hold your head up."

Slinking brown bodies begin weaving closer to me, their bodies still low as they skirt closer. Tilting heads flash pale necks as they sniff my legs and hands.

One tentatively reaches out a human-ish finger to touch my wrist, but flees with a small cry when I jerk my arm away.

The way they avoid him, he must be the alpha. There's one in every pack. Mom told

me my father was the top dog and had hundreds of loyal followers.

An army.

I might need one if Sam or Cap come looking for me.

A few stragglers make their way past me and leave.

“What was that all about?” I’m glad to be rid of his claws around my neck.

“They needed to learn your scent.” He drops to all fours and begins walking towards an old parking garage. It’s still mostly intact.

There’s a flash of a reflection on the upper level. Eyes watching from the shadows.

Nausea rolls through me. These were my enemies this morning. Now, they stand guard over me.

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All because of my father.

Chapter 8

Hope

“Kiss it.” Did I say that out loud? Keep it simple, stupid. I’ve weighed all the options. The most obvious is the easiest.

No, it’s not opening the door. The plane can still fly that way.

I don’t want them seeing where I land.

It would mean search parties and dogs.

They all have to die.

I do it every day. Let’s see if any of these are cats with nine lives. I bet they aren’t, or they’d be strapped in next to me.

No dissection buddies for me. This is a solo act and I’m leaving stage right. Down. As fast as possible.

Houdini would be proud of me. Did he have joint issues where he could just dislocate at will? It would be a handy skill in his line of work.

I can take a punch better than him. It’s happened. One over zealous guard hit me so

hard it drove my nose into my brain. All I remember is the pretty lights when I woke up. They said I died that day, but I don't believe them.

People treated me differently after that day. That's when the tubes hooked up and never disappeared again.

A snore overtakes the drone of the engines.

Tweedle Dee is asleep. That just leaves Tweedle Dum and the third Stooge. They're further back.

What number would this be? I've lost count. The game of escape has been so prevalent for so long, I'm not really sure what I'd do if I won.

I want to find out.

Besides a magazine, there's not really any kind of weapon, except for me.

Long chainsaw sound, then exhale.

Shoving my right hand between the seats, I wedge the lowered steel arm as tightly against it as I can.

"The finger bone's connected to the...wrist bone." A little hum fills the gap until the rumble from his gaping mouth fills the cabin again.

A hard push and twist breaks the twin bones of my forearm. His loud sounds cover my grunt and the snap.

Goddamn that hurts.

Blinking back the stars in my eyes, I twist my limp hand with my left until the fractured white ends protrude through the skin and extend past my wrist.

A few deep breaths seem to hold the lightheaded woozy feeling at bay.

Pokey bits acquired, Captain.

I'd salute myself, but my palm falls flush with the underside of my elbow.

"Buck it up, soldier." Time for attempt number twenty two thousand. Give or take.

The three Musketeers are still laid back in their chairs. I can see the leg of the pilot stretched out from his seat in the cockpit.

Four. I wish I could crash this into the facility in Chicago and take them all out.

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My heart races until the blood in my ears deafens even the thunderous snores from the guard.

An itchy feeling creeps into my bicep of my wounded limb. No. Not yet. It signals the beginning of the reknitting.

Here I go. I might get lucky and this whole scheme kills me.

Win. Win.

Staying low, I spring from my seat and bee line for the pilot. He's leaning back in his chair with a tablet holding his gaze.

The broken bones lodge in the pulsing artery of his neck and he lets out a gurgled cry. Blood surges down my arm and sprays across my chest as I rip my makeshift dagger backwards and stab again.

They're coming. A muffled yell erupts from one of the guards and I catch a glimpse of him working his way out of his seatbelt.

Freeing myself from the pilot in another wave of hot liquid squirting over me, I throw myself on the joystick of the plane, wedging myself between the twitching legs of the dying man and the yoke.

The nose drops quickly making my stomach roll. Thumping and cursing from the aisle tells me that they lost their footing and are struggling to make it to me.

A high pitched squeal comes from the control panel.

It's like the whack-a-mole game I saw on old game shows. Every light I see, I try and flip it off.

Turning dials and pressing buttons, I can hear grinding through the wings that makes us shudder.

Oh, old man lost enough. He slumps over me and congealing blood drips down his chin onto my face.

It's creepy how his eyes stay open. Like a giant doll, the shine in them fades until they're muted.

G forces press me painfully against the hard bars near the floor.

I have a feeling I'm setting myself up for a lot more hurt.

The goons in the back are yelling obscenities, but I can't discern the words.

"Make sure your tray tables are in their upright and locked position." I could have totally rocked this job in the old world.

The pedals move on their own, pushing against my back.

Interestingly, my arm is now fully healed. Just in time for us to crash and burn.

Fingers wrap around the shoulder of the dead pilot, pulling him off the yoke.

"What have you done?" It's the oldest guy. I wonder if he was younger or older than the pilot? His helmet still covers his face so it's hard to tell. He grabs the controls and

heaves them backwards.

The change of direction makes my insides want to rip through my belly.

A weird sound echoes through the fuselage. Tapping that turns to thumping then crashing.

With a violent rending, metal screams as it's torn and crushed. Frantic pressure rips through me into an explosion of agony. Darkness covers my vision as I'm tossed around. I can feel myself being stretched and impaled.

Black bursts swim in front of my eyes.

A cushion of warmth covers me and I fall into an abyss.

Chapter 9

Michael

Sam is persistent. As the weeks pass, my pack is forced to consider moving north out of the city. Increased patrols from the prison have taken out six members just this week.

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Alpha agrees. It's time to leave the remains of Boise. In the smaller towns, it might be easier to find safety.

The first time they brought in a person for food, I was disgusted. But, the reality of their survival hinged on it.

Eat or be eaten.

When I lived in the prison, I was ostracized and forced to live with only what I could scavenge on the trips I volunteered for.

They've been more accepting of me than the normal humans ever did. Most of my pack are bringing back items for me to be more comfortable. I have packs, tents, sleeping bags and more. Every vestige of luxury.

I seem to have found a special place in the hierarchy as well. I'm the only one who can use a gun. Their mutated forms struggle to hold and fire any sort of weapon. Finding them is easy. The city is still littered with them and the wolves have gathered a significant stockpile.

"It's easier to keep them away from the humans if we get them first. The fewer they have, the less of us die." Alpha's lip turns up in a snarl, exposing his yellowing canines.

"Why is it that I was raised with a 'shoot first, ask questions later' way of thinking? Didn't anyone try to talk to you?" The arsenal is impressive, though many have fallen into disrepair after twenty five years.

There are more than enough still in their cases to make up for it.

“It took me years to relearn how to talk. By then, the lines were drawn. When the virus changed us, the wolf was very hard to fight.” The large ears that frame his head flatten. “The only one I tried to talk to shot me.” He gestures his muzzle to a puckered mark on his shoulder.

“You talked to me.” We load a makeshift wagon with heavy boxes of ammunition. His large, muscular size makes the hundred pound crates seem like they’re filled with feathers.

“I couldn’t smell gunpowder. And, you were by yourself. No one sane does that.” He gives a low bark. Two of the dogs slink over and slide into the harnesses attached to the front.

Easier than horses.

My ears perk on their own to distant howls. They’re alerts.

Intruders from the south.

“It’s time to move.” He stands on his hind legs and paces through a darkened hall that leads to the belly of the parking garage.

Whimpers precede his return. Flanked by his mate and their four pups, he loads the juvenile dogs onto the ammo boxes.

“Will the rest catch up?” The wagon creaks as I sit near the back. As heavy as it is, the two giant beasts pulling it make it move with nimble ease.

“We’re splitting the pack. There’s too many to feed.” His long legs keep stride

through the rubble strewn streets.

My feet barely touch the ground, occasionally brushing grass clumps as the wheels bog over obstacles. “So, half a dozen and the pups? Does that mean the rest will stay here and starve?” I’ve grown to care for most of the dogs. They’ve accepted me, even sharing their heat in the chill of the night in tousled piles of fur and legs.

I belong. But, I don’t want anything to happen to the stragglers.

“They’ll join us as we find more fertile grounds.” His nose rises into the dusk sky in a long inhale, then drops a small grunt.

He must not smell danger anywhere close.

I thought my sense of smell was acute, but he far surpasses it. And, I’ve learned to trust him.

The silhouette of the buildings against the starry sky fall further apart as the rocking of the cart lulls me in and out of sleep.

Heat awakens me. It must be late in the morning, judging by the position of the sun overhead.

“So, where are we heading?” A small furry foot is splayed across my shoulder. One of the napping pups feathers tiny breaths against my cheek as he twitches in his sleep.

Ugh, I have to piss. Gently moving the little limb, I hop off the cart onto a soft carpet of pine needles blanketing the ground.

Trees. Not a man made structure in sight.

I like it here. The towering ponderosas are much nicer to look at than the ruined remains of a civilization that fell before I was born.

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“Scouts reported that there is a human town that’s grown soft. Should make for some easy meals for a while.” Alpha has been joined by two others during the night. Both half-breeds in some stage of partial change.

One of them I’ve dubbed ‘Lucky’ since he’s missing an eye. According to Alpha, he was shot in the face a few years ago, but survived. He’s nearly all dog that can slip out a guttural word every now and then.

“Food.” He turns his head so his singular gaze can find me.

“Yea, I know. Want some of these MRE’s?” My pack is loaded with them. Some of the expiration dates have passed, but they still taste fine. It’d be nice if they could eat them instead of people.

Lucky’s long muzzle wrinkles and he paces ahead of the cart, his lean tan body writhing between the trees until he fades into the backdrop of the tree trunks.

There’s one package that says it’s beef stew.

Maybe the pups would want a few snacks. Pulling the bag open, I dig out a few of the powdery squares of meat.

Aw, the sleeping one tries to suck on my gloved fingers without opening his eyes. Crap, I shouldn’t have started. Now, all four of them are jumping and whining. Their little bellies are sunken in hunger.

A low rumble rolls through the trees. The sound grows louder into crashing and the

rending sound of metal being torn.

“What the fuck?” I can’t see anything. It came from the east.

My feet shift beneath me making me stumble and the breeze shifts carrying a pungent smell of something burning.

Alpha’s chest vibrates with a deep growl.

My stomach shifts as my heart begins to race. One of my mom’s favorite sayings was that summers in Idaho are as dry as a popcorn fart. A wildfire had licked the walls of the prison once when I was younger. The memories of that fear spur me to find the source.

With a stinging nose, I run with Alpha through the woods. It’s ten of my strides to every one of his.

The smoke thickens as we top a rise overlooking a bowl shaped valley on the edge of an expansive lake.

At first, all I can see is the blinding reflection of the sun in the rolling waves. But, on the far bank the wreckage of a flame-engulfed plane is strewn along the hillface.

“Holy shit.” The scope of the broken path of carnage behind it brings me to a full stop.

Sections of the fuselage are still intact and the cockpit is laying on the beach amongst some weather-worn logs.

“Let’s see if there’s food.” Alpha leaves before me to begin skirting around the broad expanse of the lake.

Dammit. The dry pine needles are slick as I try to keep my footing and follow him down the hill.

God, it stinks. It has to be the fuel or hydraulic fluids. But, it's also mixed with overtones of charred flesh.

Alpha reappears with what looks like a lower chunk of leg hanging from his jaws. Is that a combat boot?

"Do you think this was military?" Picking my way past a broken section of seats, a helmet lies on the floor.

Oh, it isn't empty. The severed end of a neck protrudes from the bottom, slick with freshly congealing blood.

I bet the pups would like this as a treat. There's even a little lip on the visor that works as a handle so it doesn't drip on me.

My companion rises onto his hind legs and grips the dismembered limb in one hand so he can sling a torso over his shoulder. The low howl he looses makes the little hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Red slurries down his brown fur, but he ignores it.

"Not many passengers for a military flight. What's this symbol?" His claws rend a badge from a lanyard that has melted itself into the pale chest.

It's still warm enough to feel the heat through my gloves. I can't quite make out the name and face, but part of the company logo survived. "Something, something Regenerative Institute."

His grunt rumbles into my bones as I toss the ID onto the tilted floor.

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Lucky appears, takes the leg from Alpha, then disappears back into the smokey haze.

A hand and a part of a ribcage lay in a mangled pile of twisted metal. Hanging wires tug at my shoulders as I step carefully forward into the carcass of the plane.

There might be a first aid kit. They're always handy.

Pain grips my chest. The last time I saw one was when I found Angie with that triumphant look on her face as it sat on her lap.

That was before I killed her.

Weird, there's a pair of handcuffs and some sort of restraint still attached to this harness. Was this some sort of prison transport?

Blood paints the walls of the cockpit where the mutilated body of the pilot is propped. His gray bearded face is contorted in a frozen scream and is forever locked staring at the ceiling.

Some sort of instrument panel has shifted and cut off his lower legs, the messy stumps are pushed against his abdomen.

"Got another body here." I don't have to be loud, I know Alpha can hear me a half a mile away, even over the screaming of metal from him tossing chunks aside.

I can dig the legs out. It might be easier for Lucky to get them on his next trip.

There has to be something wrong with me. Not even a twinge of disgust as I yank on the booted foot.

It lands behind me with a thud.

My eyes must be deceiving me. Are there three more legs under the panel? One has the matching shoe of the first, but the other two are pale, smaller and wearing slim slippers.

And, completely perfect.

What?

Squatting down, I lean closer and focus my hearing. It's hard to ignore the giant beast lumbering behind me.

There it is. A soft heartbeat.

A survivor!

Chapter 10

Hope

My bed is lumpy. If I shift my hips, it relieves some of the stabbing pressure on my spine.

I don't remember my mattress having hard spots.

Fuck, am I back on the operating table? Is it my kidneys again?

Swimming through the darkness behind my eyes, a burning smell tickles my nose.

Did that bitch cauterize me?

One day, I'm going to kill—

Something grabs my foot. Both feet. The pokey thing rakes up my ribs and my eyes fly open.

Wires, rods and some sort of panel is directly above me where I'm wedged against the bars that wield a seat cushion.

Oh, shit. The plane.

My world moves again and the view expands. Light fills the back where the seats used to be in a blurry mixture of parts and pieces.

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What is pulling me?

Bursting from under the console, I roll onto my side enough to see.

Gray eyes the color of the morning fog gaze down at me. A dark beard and a wild muss of hair frame them as they furrow over a straight nose.

“Are you okay?” His deep voice strokes a little wild tremble in my belly. A flare of panic blossoms from it.

He can’t find out. He’ll send me back.

“I-I hid when it started dropping from the sky.” Did he blink just a tiny bit longer? Does he believe me? “I heard the safest place is in the cockpit, so I dove forward.”

Yea. Bat those eyelashes. I wish I had hair, I’d twirl my head to distract him.

The wrong color on my clothes pulls a glance and I can feel his distractingly sexy eyes follow.

My shirt is caked in blood.

Well. That’s unfortunate.

“Are you sure you aren’t hurt?” His jaw clenches, the muscle starbursting up to his temple.

Now, to nonchalantly pull my legs out of the heat of his grip.

“It’s not mine.” It doesn’t come off when I try to brush it away. Like warm tar, it’s a sticky layer that’s coating my whole front.

A very un-quiet voice in my head is frantically crying out to get out of here. Crap, I almost forgot that I had folded my arm in half to kill the pilot.

Whew. It’s in one piece.

This guy has me flustered. I didn’t expect a welcome wagon to my shenanigans.

But, his jeans fill out nicely as he rolls back to sit on his heels, squatting over my feet so I could almost brush against his crotch with my toes.

“What happened? Where are you from?” Those freaking eyes, man. His face is still tilted down, so he looks at me through his lashes. Almost like a predator.

A crash comes from behind the cockpit.

No, no, no. They’re still alive?

Steps rattle through the floor directly into my asscheeks and fires little rockets into that get-the-fuck-out-of-dodge voice that is already so loud it’s almost hoarse.

Something big is getting closer and this guy is just staring at me like he’s going to eat me.

Hmm, well, there’s worse ways to die.

I should be so lucky.

Trying to watch him and the door of the cockpit at the same time, I almost wish I could pop my eyeball out of my socket.

That would be sure to impress my guests.

“I’m just from around. No need to worry about me.” Where can I be from? I don’t want to say Chicago.

Um. Words fail me as I fixate on a large claw wrapping around the door frame and a huge muzzle with a set of jaws that could swallow my entire head enters the small space I’m sharing with my rescuer.

The creature’s bloody teeth protrude as his lips curl. A wash of nasty hot breath cascades over me.

I feel dirtier.

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“I’ll grab the other leg.” Gray eyes calmly reaches behind himself and drags out the severed appendage lying on the floor.

“Her too?” The deep rumble from the furry chest vibrates into my bones.

Sweet baby Jesus, the half-breed can talk.

“Not yet.” My rescuer is staring so intensely I can feel the weight of it hovering on my skin.

Does that mean they might eat me? Why is a human running with one of the dogs? Are there more?

Question and no answers. I feel like I skydived from the frying pan into a fire.

With a low growl, the beast grabs the body and leg like they’re weightless and disappears.

“Can I go?” My heart is pounding in my ears. But, it’s almost thrilling. This is different from the lab. No tubes hang out of my arms. And my body isn’t being stripped for parts.

The tantalizing lure of freedom is intoxicating. This is the closest I’ve ever been.

I won’t let anyone stand in my way.

“Where are you headed?” As he straightens, he just gets taller and taller. All I can see

is his crotch and his beard.

Not a bad view, I suppose.

A leather gloved hand reaches down, palm side up as he watches me.

Yea, okay, fine.

They're worn smooth enough my fingers slide into his hand easily.

In an instant, I'm on my feet and standing inches away from a broad chest covered in a dark blue tee shirt.

Close enough to smell him. Earth and something else. Sweet, like almonds.

Interesting.

I resist the urge to lick him. I'm not sure why, but I want to see if he tastes like them.

Or, maybe if his nuts taste like nuts.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"You have blood on your head, is there a wound?" He leans closer, his nose above my forehead as he peers across my scalp.

My little buzz cut won't hide an injury, but my fingers fly up just in case and sweep over my skull.

He could be watching a scratch heal. My secret would be out.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you though.” Reflexively, I reach out to touch his shoulder and try to step past him.

He locks my wrist in a death grip before my fingers can brush the fabric of his sleeve. “Please do not touch me.” His voice drops to a growl and his chin tilts down so he can meet my eyes with his.

Shit. What just moved on the side of his head?

His ears. They’re pointy and pinned low.

Like a dog.

“Well, damn. Are you one of them?” I am too, but there’s no way I’ll tell him.

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His lips draw into a lopsided smile, revealing an oversized white canine.

“Fuck a duck.” That’s a new one for me.

I don’t even notice I’m reaching forward to touch it when my other wrist is grappled in his snug grip.

His smile fades and the corner of his mouth falls into a frown. “No touching.”

I can feel my eyes squint. “Wait, you’re planning on eating me, but I’m not allowed to touch the utensils? Seems a little uneven on this deal.” Tippy toes raise me until my nose almost kisses his and one of his whiskers tickles my chin.

The pale silver of his eyes have shards of opal dancing on the edges.

At least, I think I see that before he squeezes them shut and pushes me away.

“Can you walk?” His knuckles dig into my shoulders as he folds my arms against my chest.

Stumbling back a step, I twist out of his reach. “I’m good, Scooby. I’ve been trying to leave this whole time.” Jerking my wrists free, I turn on my heel and hope I run into that beast again.

He was nicer.

Beyond the shattered cockpit, sun filters through a smoky haze over ribbons of

sparkling water.

Holy shit. I've never seen a lake. I was barely old enough to know what the sky looked like when I was taken to the institute.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Backed by tall pines, there isn't a single man-made shape to be seen.

I didn't know this existed. I always thought it was made up, like dragons and magic.

This is better than any fantasy. Even with the sooty burn of the air, it smells like freedom.

The earth raises to meet each rapid footfall as I run down to the edge of the bank. An icy grip hugs first my ankles then my calves with each step deeper into the clear water.

I can't believe it. Tears sting my eyes and drip from my nose to mingle with the swirling surface.

Goosebumps raise on my arms, but the need to be enveloped by the cold depths drives me further.

I want to feel it, to immerse myself in the embrace of the chilling waves.

The shock of it covering my head pushes the breath from my lungs, but I don't even notice the bubbles fleeing me.

Fish, bright pebbles, logs and plants. All foreign to anything I've ever witnessed. I want to touch everything.

Slimy? I didn't expect the wood to feel this way. A minnow nibbles on my knuckle as I freeze near the bottom. In slow motion it dives its tiny body back into a dark recess of a boulder.

It's so amazing. Peace settles over me. I'm melting into the slow ebb.

Something hot wraps around my arm and I'm thrust to the surface.

"What are you doing?" The hot man with the sexy eyes holds me so my toes can't reach the bottom. "You could drown. Are you sure you didn't hit your head harder?"

Does he actually look angry with me? "I'm fine. I told you! I've never seen a lake before, Pluto. I'm just taking a second."

His brows furrow and one eye squints at me as he drags me back to shore. "What? How can you have never seen a lake?" His grip is like granite under my armpit.

"Us sheltered city kids, ya know?" I can't help but notice how tightly his shirt hugs against his body, revealing the definition of his abs with every step.

Why am I noticing? It's like I'm giddy with wanting to explore everything new around me, including him. I've never even had sex before. Well, I've used it as a lure many times to try and escape. One of the goons even managed to get me off with his fingers before I broke his neck.

What was his name?

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Eh, I don't care. He was keeping me a prisoner like all of the rest of them. They all deserved to die. None of them earned my body, they just took it.

It should be mine to give. I think he's the first person I've ever met who doesn't want me.

Yet he's dragging me back to safety, again.

"Why are you saving me? I didn't ask you to." When my feet sink into the squishy mud, I arch my back and pull against him.

Fuck, those eyes hit me. "Are you trying to die? My pack would love a snack." He makes a big show of raking his gaze up and down me. "Might be enough to feed the pups." One of his large canines appears as his lips turn into a tilted smirk.

"Wait. Are you saying I'm not even a meal? Buddy, I'm a whole ten course. A buffet." I find my finger pointing at his broad chest. "You'd never go hungry again with me around."

Shit, me and my mouth.

He tugs me again and I lose my footing on the slick bottom. Landing against him, he looks down at me clinging to his wet shirt. "Now you're begging to be eaten?" His voice drops and I feel the words rumble directly into my ribcage. "That can be arranged."

Damn. Why am I tempted? My finger splay over the heat of his chest and I can feel

the hard ridges of muscle hidden by the thin fabric.

Before I can explore further, he steps away, pulling me behind him at arm's length.

“What are you really going to do with me? You should just let me go.” The water falls from my thin torn pants in rivulets that tickle my calves.

At least my shirt is cleaner.

“Sure. Do you know where you are? Or, where you're going?” He doesn't turn his head, but his ears swivel towards me.

I kinda want to touch one.

The chill of the air is distracting. A shiver runs through me as goosebumps erupt all over my body. And, I didn't notice before, but the sun is starting to set. It'll be dark soon and the only heat is the smoldering fires from the crash.

I've only ever been cold in the operating room. This is a new kind of icy tendril that seeps into my bones.

My teeth start chattering. Clenching my jaw doesn't help.

“I don't know where I am. I don't know where to go. But, I do know, I don't want to go back to where I came from.” I suppose a little honesty won't hurt.

Someplace warm would be nice.

Large brown shapes appear out of the dusk in the trees. Two dogs the size of horses are pulling a small cart, but shed their harnesses once they've pulled into the clearing around the lake.

“Perfect timing.” My rescuer mutters as he glances at me.

He drops my hand and my fingers grow cool without his gloved hand wrapping around them.

Shoving my palms under my armpits seems to help as I watch him take long strides towards the wagon, leaving me shivering by the bank.

A grizzled beast with only one eye focuses on me and a low growl erupts from his chest. His shoulders drop and he takes a slow, slinking step in my direction.

The half-breed I encountered earlier sticks his head out of the fuselage, a dismembered arm hanging from his jaw. He drops the limb onto the pile and sits on his haunches, his amber eyes fixed on the creature that is stalking closer to me.

He isn't stopping.

“Good doggie.” Holding my hands in front of me, my fingers pale as they go numb.

They'll grow back if they freeze off. I don't know if I'd survive getting completely eaten.

“Lucky! No!” The man's deep voice echoes across the water.

I can feel it reverberate through me.

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The menacing lips of the encroaching animal raise. “Food.” It lets out in a guttural grunt.

That’s not creepy.

“No. Mine.” My gray eyed savior jogs between me and the huge dog.

Three times. I might owe him.

Soft lapping of the waves near my feet is the only sound as they stare each other down. It’s three solid breaths before the tan fur flashes around the silhouette of the man and the hulking form of the one eyed dog backs away.

I think the half-breed is laughing as he moves into the recesses of the plane.

Pretty sure I died in the crash and this is some sort of fucked up afterlife.

It’s the only explanation.

Gray eyes turns to me and his jaw is tight. But, he’s holding a blanket. Letting the bottom drop away from his hands, he holds it out unfurled for me to curl into.

“My hero. What was with the stand-off?” The wool is itchy on my neck and I don’t care. It feels good to have a barrier against the looming night.

He shakes his head. “Pack dynamics are strange. You’re either in it, or not. Welcome, you’re officially our newest member.”

I can't stop the giggle that erupts. "Was that the initiation? Do I have duties? I really can't stay, ya know." This is as good as anywhere, for the moment.

Until he finds out what I am and how much I'm worth. All those old leeches won't like that I'm off the supply line. They'll pay dearly to get me back.

His lips purse as he looks down at me. "My name is Michael. When you figure out where you're going, I'll see what I can do."

"Hi, Mikey." Why does he wince as I stick my hand out?

He twists his mouth and chews on the inside of his cheek while his brows furrow into a knot above those eyes. "I don't really like that nickname."

Well, this is awkward. I tuck my hand back beneath the blanket. "My name is Hope. In civilization, people shake hands. They don't do that in the woods?" Dropping to squat on my heels, I manage to overlap the edges of my wrap so I'm in a little burrito.

At least I can feel my fingers again.

Michael looses a long sigh. "Most people do, but I don't. I'll get a fire going, you'll be safe now."

From this angle, I get a perfect view of his toned ass walking away from me into the woods.

Chapter 11

Michael

My boots squish with every step. Who's never seen a lake before? I can't believe that

crazy girl dove right into the water. She was down there forever.

She must have bumped her head harder than she realized in the crash.

It's pretty remarkable she managed to survive that without a scratch.

Tossing another small branch into my arms, one of the jagged points from a broken twig rakes across my forearm, breaking the skin.

Damn. Good thing I heal fast. Not as fast as my mom, but—

My gathered bunch of wood tumbles to the ground and bounces off of my feet.

She can heal like my mother.

Maybe faster. I heard the crash. We didn't take long to get to the wreckage. She was already completely whole. Perfect.

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Even Mom would have taken hours to heal from broken bones.

No. She really could have moderate healing rates like me if she wasn't badly hurt during the crash.

Fuck. How would I find out? It's not like I can hurt her on purpose.

But, I might be able to actually touch someone?

My hands shake as I pick the kindling back up. With my head in turmoil, I work my way back through the trees to the lakeside where only the reflection of the rising moon offers any light.

She's still huddled beneath the blanket, her shaved head is barely poking out.

I make the fire without talking, focusing on the task at hand. It isn't until the flames dance in her green eyes that the silence is broken by anything other than the gnawing of bones by my pack.

"It's weird hearing them eating people and thinking that I'm hungry." Her voice is muffled by the thick fabric of the wool wrapped around her.

"I have real food. Okay, it's freeze dried shit from twenty five years ago, but better than what they're eating." The cart has several large totes full of it. "Spaghetti with meat sauce? How about stroganoff?" I toss each to the side as I call them out.

"I've never had a choice before." She's so quiet, I don't think she intended for me to

hear her.

Was she the one that the restraints were for?

“Spaghetti,” she says loud enough for her words to carry across the water and echo back from the far hill.

“That’s a good one. I’d worry if you held out for chili.” I try to add some levity to my words as my guts churn.

Is she a convict?

The blanket ruffles around her neck as she shakes her head. “I’ve never had it.”

“Really? I thought it was a staple at every prison.” I dip a pot into the lake to fill with water, but I can hear her catch her breath.

“Why would you think I was in jail?” Her toe fidgets in the sand and she stares into the base of the fire.

Raking coals into a hollow, I put the pan on them to boil before rolling back onto my heels.

“I saw the cuffs on the plane. The rest of the bodies were dressed like guards except for the pilot.” My palms raise to face her. “No judgment. I grew up locked behind walls, too.” I don’t think she’s quite ready to hear why I was kept away from everyone as a child.

She hugs her knees tighter to her chest. “Not everyone in chains did something wrong.” Her face turns to look out over the water.

The tired gaze gives me the impression she's done talking about it. Maybe another day she'll open up.

How long will she be with us? Would anyone sane really want to stay with a pack of monsters?

"Well, tomorrow I'll send some scouts out to find the nearest town so you can get to where you're going." Steam rolls out of the bag as I hand it to her with a fork. "You're in the middle of the Idaho forests, in case you were wondering."

Her hand darts out from the confines of her blanket and takes the package carefully by the corner. "Thank you. Idaho, huh? I thought it would be all potato fields or something." A hint of a smile dances over the corner of her lips before she purses them and blows across her hot food.

"Ah, yea. I think we lost some farming status a while back. There's not many besides just subsistence at the moment. Most of the big ag is closer to the Mississippi. Less manpower needed." I sweep my arm towards the heavy trees behind us. "Too many places here for critters to hide." Grinning, I know my teeth stick out and let my ears perk erect. She needs to know I'm one too.

A creature of the shadows. Not fit for humanity.

To my surprise, she mirrors my expression. "Hiding isn't a bad thing. It'd be nice to disappear."

I let out a low chuckle as I wiggle a more comfortable seat in the sand. "I'd say falling out of the sky is a good way to do that." Toeing my soggy boots off, I drape them so they can dry by the fire. My socks follow and I push my feet into the earth that still holds warmth from the sun.

I might as well take off these wet gloves, too. They make it hard to eat with.

She just needs to keep her distance and not try to die anymore today. I can't save her if I have to touch her.

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A breeze stokes the flames sending sparks drifting through the night sky to merge with the stars. This isn't so bad, relaxing on a beach with someone to talk to.

If only it wasn't broken by the rhythmic grunting of Alpha and his mate somewhere rutting in the dark.

When his howl merges with hers, I can hear Hope giggle around the last bite of her food. "I guess we are really in the wild now."

"You kinda get used to it." With the dogs, it's all about marking their territory. Which includes each other.

"It isn't, um, distracting?" The blanket drops around her slender neck.

I can see the flush of pink that runs up to color her cheeks.

Tossing my empty pouch into the blaze, I fixate on the purple hue that dances from the melting plastic before giving a small shrug. "It's good to know there's some form of happiness in this world."

"Aw. Girl break your heart?" She crumples her spaghetti container and it lands next to the ashes of mine.

My stomach clenches and a hard knot forms in my throat.

Angie's face flashes behind my eyes. Her mouth frozen in a soundless scream.

I've jacked off to thoughts of her since I was old enough to know what my dick was for. I don't know if I'll ever get hard again with that image rooted in my head.

"Something like that." Poking the embers lets me sear the white hot coals into my vision for a moment.

I wish I could burn the memories away.

"Wow, Snoopy. She did you raw." Hope shifts the blanket and stretches out on her side, tucking her hands under her head as she yawns.

The iridescent emeralds of her eyes disappear when they fall closed. It doesn't take long for her breathing to deepen and her heartbeat to slow.

Flickering light teases over her curves as she sleeps. It's hard not to look at her, the tease of her pink tongue moving along her bottom lip keeps me riveted. Small twitches in her cheeks flicker smiles and frowns over her face as she falls further into sleep.

She's beautiful in the smoldering glow. I wonder how long it will be before she wears terror when she looks at me.

Chapter 12

Hope

I fucked up.

Why is that the first thought when I wake up?

Oh, yea. Someone who got in a plane wreck would be sore.

Dumbass.

Act tender. Not like someone with super healing. That's conspicuous. The last thing I want is to draw attention to that.

If he knows, he might turn me in. I'm sure even living with the dogs means he could use some niceties.

Like what?

The slow warmth of the sun feels glorious as I unfold from my blanket burrito.

Something soft and furry is wedged against me. And, it's breathing.

"A puppy!" I can't keep the excited squeal out of my voice as my fingers burrow into thick brown fur.

Startled amber eyes fly open as it pulls its small head back to look at me before pushing closer and licking my cheek.

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I'm in love. Totally worth crashing the plane.

"You're so darn cute!" My fingers find its ears and my forehead feels amazing rubbing against it as it nuzzles playfully into my neck.

"Sleep okay?" Michael's voice rumbles from behind me.

I'm halfway through turning around before I remember I'm supposed to be hurting.

"Yea, just a little stiff." Slow down, don't move too quickly.

Kicking the blanket off, I stand up slowly and make an exaggerated show of stretching my back and groaning.

My snuggle buddy jumps up and bounds away. When I see him again, he's chewing on a long bone with a small wag in his tail.

A thigh from one of the guards.

Huh. It doesn't even weird me out. The asshole deserved it. They all do.

I wonder how many furry friends I can talk into coming with me to Chicago to tear all of those old geezers apart. They're the ones who kept me drained. I doubt any of my blood left that building, but went right into the arms of those rich fucks who liked to beat their meat while watching me get sliced and diced.

Being thousands of miles away doesn't offer the comfort I was hoping it would.

“Heya, Mikey?” I saunter behind him and try not to let too much of a bounce in my step escape.

When he turns to look at me I almost stop in my tracks as the gray storm clouds of his eyes meet mine.

“Are you hungry? I was going to make some tea and biscuits.” He flashes me a grin, the white of his canines catching the sun.

A laugh leaves my lips of its own accord. “You sound like you should be British from one of the old Sherlock movies. No coffee?”

“I don’t even remember what coffee tastes like. I’d rather have bacon and pancakes, but we’re lacking on both at the moment.” He turns up his gloved palms and shrugs before resuming his digging into the cart. “There is more freeze dried stuff. I haven’t looked through all of it, so there might be a hidden gem or two.”

When he bends over, the back of his jeans tighten around his butt and thighs. It’s quite an impressive view.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt this giddy little flutter in my belly before. All of the people I’ve been surrounded by have wanted to use me.

Trying to seduce someone to kill them is a whole different feeling.

“You don’t know what’s there? Who packed it?” Duffel bags and plastic totes are stacked in neat rows. Unzipping one reveals a spill of plastic pouches like the ones we had last night.

“They did.” His forehead tips in the direction of a couple of the dogs sleeping in a pile near the back of the plane.

“That’s handy. I never knew some of them could talk.” Is that what I think it is? Perfect. “I found some! Want some of the nectar of the gods?” I wave around two small packages of freeze dried coffee while dancing in a circle.

His laughter is like dark chocolate, rich and layered. “They’re pretty amazing at finding things.” The veins on his forearms push through his tanned skin when he leans against the rails of the trailer.

“That reminds me.” I can feel my eyebrows drop with my mood. “Do planes still have those tracker boxes?”

This taste of freedom could come to a cutting halt if the Institute comes looking for me.

Screeching metal and a banging sound erupt from the cockpit.

Alpha emerges from the darkened hollow of the plane with a black box in one giant hand. “It did.” His teeth bare in a sinister smile as he tosses the crumpled container to the ground with a flip of his paw.

“Holy crap.” How thick were the walls of that thing for him to rip right through it?

I’m glad he’s on my side.

“I was military once.” His growling voice feels like it changes the rhythm of my heart beat, it’s so deep.

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“Well. That answers that question. Thanks, big guy.” It quiets some of the nervousness, but not all of it.

Michael pushes a few sticks into the ashes of the campfire to rekindle a small flame. It doesn't take long before I have a hot cup of joe between my palms.

Delicious.

His ears swivel toward me, then flatten.

“What? You don't like it? I'll take it.” I savor another scalding sip. So good.

He shakes his head, his dark hair falling across his eyes as he stares at his cup. “No, it's good. That noise you made just caught me off guard.”

It takes me a second to get what he's referring to.

“You've never heard a girl moan before? You poor, deprived boy.” I guess growing up in a prison wasn't a lie. I wouldn't have guessed he's not been with someone though.

Tall, good looking, and those eyes? He'd have anyone tripping over themselves to crawl up his muscular body.

I'm having a hard time not stumbling.

His jaw clenches and he starts kicking dirt into the fire. “The food here is about gone

for the pack, so it's time to get moving. Have you decided where you're going?" He doesn't look at me, but his face is pale.

Did I make him mad? This guy is a puzzle.

And, I'm intrigued.

"No plans. Just not back to where I came from. What's your destination?" Damn, my cup is almost empty.

"Lucky scouted out a place a while back that could be set up to be pretty self-sufficient. It's on the far side of this lake." He puts the lids back on the totes in the trailer and starts zipping up the duffle bags.

Um. This is awkward. I don't really know what to do. My only thoughts were ever to just get away from my captors. "So, you're just gonna live in the woods forever?"

"It's a good spot for me," he grumbles, almost to himself.

His glance pauses on me before he looks out over the water. "You're welcome to travel with us until you find greener pastures. You'll be safe with the pack until you decide what you want to do."

Alpha is so freaking tall when he's on his hind legs like that. It's a bit disconcerting.

The armful of dismembered body parts should be more off putting than it is.

It seems fitting they'll end up as dog shit.

I never want to go back there.

“So, you don’t want bigger and better things? What would you want, Mikey, if you could have anything?” I need to know if he’s going to sell me out.

His hands tighten into fists, the leather of his gloves squeaking with tension.

The cords of his neck stand out at the strain and I can see his pulse frantically beating beneath the skin.

A visual metronome of the moments as they tick by. Flickers of rage and agony pass fleetingly until he drops his palms to his sides. His sigh raises and lowers his knotted shoulders and he looks to the treetops.

I could watch his Adam’s apple work in his throat all day.

“If I could have anything, it would be to not hurt the people I care about.” He rearranges a lower leg to sit in a neat stack before letting out a low whistle.

Two of the dogs appear from the trees and dive into the harnesses attached to the front of the cart.

I’m still perplexed by his answer. It doesn’t sound like material things.

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Would he sell me back to the Institute? Or, better yet, would he help me hide from them?

He's so frustrating. One big, hunky, mystery.

Some of the shows I grew up watching on TV had a woman getting secrets from men in bed. Maybe if I slept with him, he'd protect me.

I've almost bedded loads of guys, until I tried to stab them for their keys.

A little wormy labrat jerk even came in my hand once before I could get his lanyard.

He was so embarrassed he ran and left me with a sticky hand and no escape route.

When the wagon tops the hill overlooking the lake, I get a true look at the expanse of wilderness we're in.

Trees. Miles of them.

Freedom. I can run in any direction if I want to.

Where would I go? Anywhere with people is a bad idea. One small slip and my abilities are discovered. I'll be back on a plane in no time.

A wide open world and my eyes keep zeroing in on the tight jeans and flexing ass directly in front of me.

Try it. You'll like it. The fluttery feeling in my belly needs to shut up. It's obvious this guy has some issues.

He's a new game. A different challenge.

I won the escape battle. But, to win the war, I need an ally.

And, I really, really, want to touch that butt.

Chapter 13

Michael

She hasn't talked much since this morning when she ripped open old wounds with her questions. I wonder if she realized she was digging into a festering abscess.

It hurts too much to dwell on it. I'm not ready to share with a stranger who I am or what I've done.

But, when I do glance her way, she wears a beaming smile that lightens my step. Mainly, she just asks about the different trees and plants like she's on a wilderness hike on vacation.

As the morning dew burns from the pines and the chill of the morning fades into the heat of midday, my coffee wears off and makes my stomach rumble.

We still have a couple of days of walking. No sense in killing ourselves.

The body parts in the wagon have filled up any sitting room. Despite the fact that the pups have no issue with sleeping on the rotting limbs doesn't mean I want to. Hope made it very clear by the wrinkle in her nose when I asked that she has no interest in it

either.

She was cute with her face all scrunched up.

Fuck, she still is. Whatever material the scrubs are that she's wearing doesn't offer much wiggle room. It hugs her lithe body like a second skin.

She flits around like a wood elf in and out of the timber, or a child seeing the world for the first time.

Where the hell was she that all of this is so new to her?

Part of me wants to know. A bigger portion wants to keep her at arm's length and find a safe place to leave her.

I'm too dangerous to be around, and being with the pack means that every human we encounter is a potential enemy.

Her giggles break through my sour thoughts. One of the pups is chasing her in a lazy game of tag.

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It's a foreign feeling having my cheek tug up into a smile watching her.

Normal.

Is this what it feels like?

No. Not for me.

My chest aches. I'll never have that.

Cold sweat prickles over my skin under the heat of the sun. When it's just me and the dogs, I can almost fool myself into thinking I'm alone by choice.

The truth hurts so much more.

My stomach growls in harmony with my poisoned heart.

A low whistle and the beasts pulling the cart slip out of their harnesses and bound for the shimmering lake beside us.

"We're stopping?" Her voice dances on the breeze as she wanders closer.

The top of her head is pink from the sun. Small freckles dot her flushed cheeks as she looks up at me.

I never noticed them before.

“Yea. I didn’t think we should push too hard. Figured you might still be sore and could use a break.”

Her hands brace on her slim hips and she arches her back with a low groan, pushing the round edges of her breasts to the limits of the torn collar of her faded blue shirt. A bead of sweat rolls down her throat to follow the ‘V’ and disappears beneath the hem.

Stop looking. I’m just torturing myself.

“I guess I’m still a little stiff.” The tilt of her full lips teases a smile.

Did she see me staring? I’m an idiot.

I’ll see if I can find some snacks instead. There’s a stash of granola bars in one of these bags.

The beating of her heart gets closer until I can feel the heat of her body sizzling next to mine. “There wouldn’t happen to be any toothbrushes and soap in there? I’d love to go for a swim and I think my shirt can stand up on its own if I let it.”

An image of her naked with her clothes looming nearby rattles me.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry, I have some extra clothes in here. I should have offered.” My elbow grazes the bare skin of her upper arm. A current of raw panic runs through me and I jerk away.

“Easy, Benji. I don’t think my stink is contagious.” She squints as she looks up at me, precariously close, but not touching. “As jumpy as you are, I bet the dirt can’t stay on you.”

“I’m not used to having company.” How can I tell her I’ll kill her with a touch?

There's a part of me that's dragging my feet on revealing the truth. It will forever change how she looks at me. Next time, it would be a reversal of our roles. A random brush would have her jumping away in fear.

She tucks her shoulder and bumps me purposefully in the ribs. "Well, get used to it." Grabbing the soap from my hand before I can say a word, she bounces her way down the same path the dogs took to the lake.

Heavy footsteps crackle the dried pine needles as Alpha approaches. I can tell it's him from the smell of decomposing meat that rides his long fur.

"You should mark her." His chest rumbles. One of the rotting arms is hoisted by his clawed hand and he takes a bite from the meat of the bicep.

"I can't do that." I'll never repeat my mistake with Angie. Reliving that nightmare with someone else is something I don't think I'll survive.

His teeth grind before he gulps the putrid flesh. "If you don't do it before the rest of the pack gets here, you know one of them will."

An image of one of the dogs mounting her from behind makes my stomach roll. "That's not gonna work, man. I'll take her to a town. She'll be able to go where she wants to then."

He sits on his haunches and tilts his head, reminding me of Sam's heeler. His amber eyes burn into me as he bares one of his long canines before raising his meal back to his bloody mouth.

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“Ask her what she wants. Maybe she wants to be tied by a knot to one of the young males.” He makes a chuffing sound as he laughs.

But, it still pisses me off. “Hell, no. It’s not funny. I’ll take care of her.” The rest of the pack is supposed to join us after we get the house set up. I get to enjoy her company for only a few more days. It’s kind of nice to have another human around for a little while.

Well, a whole one and not just bits and pieces.

Alpha stands and slides the upper arm from his mouth, stripping the flesh from the bone as if it’s a skewer. “We fight to the death over unclaimed females. Remember that.” He lumbers off, a swarm of flies following him.

Fuck.

Armed with a handful of snacks, I follow the sounds of splashing and giggling coming from the lake’s edge.

Hope is locked into a playful game of tug-o-war with two of the puppies. Her poor shirt is the helpless victim between them.

But, I don’t care about the ruined clothes.

Her pale, bare back stretches and turns as she wrestles. The smooth contours of her spine fade into the low slung pants that stick out just above the frothing waters.

A flash of her rounded breast and a tight pink nipple has my cock filling and tightening my jeans.

Shit. I didn't expect that.

My dick needs to cool it. I'm not letting it lure me into a bad situation again.

She startles when I clear my throat, but she doesn't move to cover herself.

Instead she fully faces me and drops her hands. "Coming for a swim, too? Watch your clothes, they're liable to be torn right off." Her green eyes sparkle mischievously as she smiles up at me.

She's the devil.

I'm convinced of it.

Wading closer to the bank, she wins the battle over her top and wrings it out before tossing it over her shoulder. Her soaked pants hang heavily revealing a teasing tuft of dark hair at the base of her belly.

I wonder if it's brown or black. It's hard to tell at this distance.

No, I don't care. Seeing more is a dangerous path I'll never be able to venture down.

"I'm good. Just wasn't sure if you were hungry." It's too late to turn back.

One foot crests the rocky shore, then the other. Her sodden bottoms cling to the contours of her legs like a second skin as she slowly walks closer. Each agonizing footfall is measured as her eyes dig into me. Glimmering droplets catch the prism of the sun reflecting iridescent rainbows that halo around her.

Heavenly.

The sly smile she wears betrays any doubts of her intentions. She knows exactly what she's doing to me and the effect she has.

"This must be your love language." Her thin fingers pluck a bar from my clenched glove before continuing up the bank.

I nearly choke as I sputter a reply. "My what?"

"Don't act surprised." She doesn't turn, but pushes towards the wagon at her leisurely, hip swaying pace.

Not that the view is bad from this angle as I follow her up the small incline. The wet fabric hugs under each of her ass cheeks. There's a dimple that sits at the crest on either side that plays hide and seek with me as she walks.

"I don't even know what that means." My eyes are exactly at her hip level. Too soon the ground flattens and I'm towering over her bald head again. This close, I can just see a fuzz of new growth.

"You like to take care of people, be a provider. That isn't the only way to show you care, but you're obviously not a physical touch kinda person." The smile she tosses my way is emphasized with one of her brows climbing. "Which one of these had clothes?" Raising onto her tiptoes, she reaches into the wagon.

She grabs one of the heavy zippers of the canvas bags and starts pulling it down before I can stop her.

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The oiled barrels of several rifles poke from the hole.

“Well, that’s different.” Her voice cools and her gaze narrows as she glances back at me.

If she wasn’t half naked while doing all of that, it’d be a lot easier for me to explain.

“When you’re friends with the wolves, it can make a lot of enemies.” Holding my ground, my palms raise. “We’re just trying to find a safe place to call home.”

The tension in her shoulders wanes and a broad smile gifts me a flash of her teeth.

“See? I was right about you.” One eye squints into a wink before she puts one of her feet onto the wheel and hoists herself into the back of the cart.

Waving her hand at the incessant flies, she closes the first bag and opens another. “This one?”

I guess they didn’t bother her as much as I worried they would.

“Um, the one behind it.” Gesturing with the lone candy bar still in my hand, I point to a plastic tote near the front.

I’m not hungry anymore.

The elevation of the trailer gives me a full frontal view as she slides on one of my faded red tee shirts. There’s no way I’ll be able to wear it again without imagining

her naked under the same fabric.

My cock aches in unfulfilled need against my zipper. How can I be so divided? Part of me wishes I'd never found the plane that's putting me through so much pain. The lower half is quite happy about this situation and wants more than I'll ever be able to have.

It doesn't hurt to enjoy the view.

Her new top hangs off of her, interrupted only by the twin hard peaks of her breasts jutting against the illegible logo.

"You wouldn't happen to have any panties in here?" When she leans over, I get an unobscured glimpse of the round heart shape of her ass.

"Um. No. I think there's some sweat pants. Maybe some shorts?" I need to find her one of the heavy parkas so I can't see any part of her. A snowsuit would be ideal.

"Perfect!" Her squeal of delight sends a zap into my nuts.

As her thumbs dig into her waistband and she starts to lower her damp bottoms, I turn away. There's only so much torment a guy can take.

From the woods I hear Alpha give a low bark signaling that it's time to move.

Four very wet puppies dash up the hill and jump onto the back of the wagon, clamoring over the shrinking pile of rotting limbs. Two new adult dogs slide into the harnesses.

Hope jumps over the side, landing lightly on her feet. Pale legs have appeared beneath a dark pair of shorts.

They're regular mid-thigh length on me. On her they look like a skirt.

"Thanks for the duds. How do they look?" She curtsies demurely, batting her eyelashes as if she was a guest at a regal ball.

Scratching the back of my head buys me a minute while I pretend to contemplate. "I think you'd look amazing in anything."

Her hands ball at her chest, pressing the red shirt against her body that matches the blush working over her cheeks. "Oh, Cujo, you say the sweetest things." She turns on the balls of her feet and follows the disappearing wagon.

I have to adjust myself before I can walk again.

Chapter 14

Hope

I've given all of our furry companions names. It remains to be seen how many of them will stick, but it helps me to keep track of who is who.

Alpha and his mate Trixie are the only two that have any indication of humanity left. Hers is just longer toes and fingers so she can kind of grasp things. The puppies all look like regular dogs, same as the other four adults.

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By the end of the day, all of them were friendly with me.

Even the scary looking one relented to me helping him with a shoulder itch when I saw him rubbing against a tree.

It's funny seeing such a big animal thump his leg as I scratch.

What a wonderful feeling to be around others without them wanting something from me.

Well, I've seen the glances Michael has tossed at me. I'm getting to him. There may not be a long term future with him, or the pack, but they're the safest bet on survival I have.

And the only way to make sure I can stay is to win him over.

The sunlight fades faster today, hidden by dark clouds that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

"I think we're going to get some rain." Michael calls for the wagon to stop and starts rifling in the back of it.

He's pulling a heavy tarp from one of the boxes when the first drop hits me on the top of the head. "How can I help?" I've never had a job before. My whole life I've just had to exist.

A smile tugs up one side of his dark beard. "Grab that side. We need to cover the

load.”

The crinkling sound of the plastic almost covers the low rumble that pushes through the trees.

“What was that?” It sounds huge, like it’s coming from every direction.

“Huh?” He pulls the cover tight and ties it before coming around to me. “Let me get the camp box.” His biceps bulge in his shirt as he picks up the large wooden crate and moves it effortlessly onto the ground.

I know that thing is heavy, I stubbed my toe on it earlier.

Another deep sound rolls over us. It’s almost as if the very air is shaking.

“What the fuck is that?” It just kinda slips out before I can stop it.

His gray eyes match the skies under his raised brows. “You’ve never heard thunder?”

When he leans back and looks at me down his nose, I feel like I’m being judged.

“I’ve been sheltered.” I feel like an idiot. I’ve watched enough television through my years at the institute to know better. It’s so different experiencing it in real life.

“Like a bomb shelter? Were you in a bunker?” He snugs up the last corner, his face still all screwed up like he is dumbfounded.

“Something like that.” Three tries to get my knot to hold. He made it look so easy.

Like carrying that box. He hoists it to a small clearing between some heavy pines.

“Well, have you ever been in a storm?” Flipping back the lid reveals a sleeping bag,

pad and tent. The pots and pans I recognize, but not the other metal stuff.

Leaves kick up around our feet as the wind gets stronger. The raindrops are falling fast enough to start soaking through my thin shirt.

“No. I’ve never been camping either, but want to learn.” Another peal of thunder is loud enough to make me jump.

Reaching down, he pulls out the bagged tent and looks up at me with a grin. “You’re going to learn high speed tent skills, or we’re gonna get wet.”

“I already am.” Rivulets of water are running down my bare head and dripping off my fingers.

His nostrils flare as he pauses, looking me up and down. “Not yet.” His voice drops low before he turns away.

What does that mean?

Lightning crackles across the dusk sky, flashing across his broad back unrolling the tent onto the damp ground. “Get the other side. We need to be quick.”

Stretching out the shapeless material doesn’t take long. Threading the poles through the wet holes is quite a bit harder as it keeps trying to bunch and pull. The gusts get strong enough for Alpha to step forward and use his large paw to hold one edge down until Michael can pound in the stakes.

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“Okay, last step is to take these ropes and tie them off to the trees. It will keep the top from bowing.” He has to raise his voice over the wind.

My teeth are chattering as I take the nylon cord and run to the nearest trunk. I have to run all the way around the tree because it is so wide. There isn’t quite enough to tie it. Bracing myself, I try to pull as hard as I can.

Come on donuts, don’t fail me now.

With numb fingers, I wrap the short tail around my palm and try to gain another inch or two. I just need it to reach the other part.

Digging both heels into the trunk of the tree, I lean back and heave. It’s almost slow motion as my frozen hand slips and I fall backwards.

Until I’m caught by two strong gloved hands.

“I got you.” The heat of his breath pours over me before the chilly gale rips it away. I catch just a whiff of his earthy scent before he plants me firmly on my feet and steps away.

Fetching the dangling end of the rope, he pulls it around and knots it.

“Get in the tent.” He glances down my body. “You look cold.”

“You’re always saving me, aren’t you?” I do as he requested, fumbling for the zipper before crouching in through the small door.

“Seems that someone has to keep an eye on you,” he chuckles as he drags the wooden box under the small eave over the door.

This tent is painfully small. Barely enough room for both of us. As he unfurls the sleeping mat and bag, I have to squeeze into the corner to avoid stepping on it.

Damn, I’m cold. I can’t stop shivering.

“Go ahead and crawl in. You need to warm up.” He unfurls the top layer and holds it up for me.

“That’s your sleeping bag. I can’t take it.” There’s no heat in my arms wrapped around my stomach.

He shakes his head. “It’s fine. I run hot. Just save me some room on the mat.” His lips and ears flatten and his eyes narrow. “I won’t touch you.”

I swear he almost looks like he’s going to be sick. Do I disgust him?

This is a bit of a change. I think he’s the first person I’ve ever been around who legitimately doesn’t want any part of me.

Not even a kidney or an eyeball.

It feels weird and liberating as I tuck myself into the silky smooth fabric of the heavy covers.

Curling into a ball, there’s a logical part of my brain that tells me that the purpose of the insulation is to reflect my own heat back at me.

The problem is, I have none to give.

My clothes are soaked and create a chilling barrier.

Screw it, he's already seen me.

"What are you doing?" He raises his brows while his hands freeze holding more of those little food packets.

"I gotta get these off." As I'm pulling the clinging shirt over my head, he holds a bag of lasagna in front of his face to block his view.

Really? He doesn't even want to look? I thought seducing guys was supposed to be easy. I need to win him over before he dumps me off at the next town. It isn't going to happen with my knot tying skills.

"Am I that ugly?" Maybe I am? It's not like anyone who was cutting me open cared what I looked like.

Those gray eyes peek over the top of the silver pouch. "Far from it, Hope." His words come out husky as he turns them to the fluttering top of the tent. "I'm just trying not to be an ass."

"Yea, well, you're kinda cute when you blush, Clifford." I slide back between the layers and immediately regret that decision.

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The inside of this bag is wet. I messed up by crawling in it in the first place.

Pulling my knees up to my chest might help me warm up faster.

With my head tucked against my chest, I hear the zipper door open then shut.

Great, I ran him off. He really will dump me off as fast as he can.

I can't even feel my feet rubbing together. This reminds me of when they'd drop me in an ice bath at the institute to take my heart. Doc said the anesthesia wouldn't work well enough to slow me down, so instead I was sunk like the Titanic with a big hole in my ribs.

If I had hair, I'd pull it to take the memories away.

I never want to go back. I'd beg Alpha to eat my head first. Add that to my to-do list for tomorrow.

The tent opens again. Poking my nose over the top of the frigid cocoon, Michael has something balled up at his chest.

"I got the other blanket. It's dry, just thin." He drops it on top of the empty bottom half of the sleeping bag, then leans back on his heels to pull off his own wet shirt.

The view of rugged abs and dark hair across his chest has me warming up in my belly in a way I'm not used to.

Following the narrow ‘V’ of his hips makes me forget the rest of the alphabet.

“Um.” Words. I have no words.

“You’re shivering enough to shake the ground apart. I brought us some more dry clothes then you can wrap up in this. I don’t want you getting sick.” He unfolds the thin blanket and holds it up in front of him like a wall.

Silly boy, I can’t get sick. I heal too fast. But, he doesn’t know that. And that’s a little secret I am definitely keeping to myself.

The wet nylon sticks to me as I peel out and kneel in front of him. His arms move around me, but he keeps them inches away from my body.

What a fucking gentleman. When all I really want is for him to pull me in.

All those movies of people ending up in bed on the first dates are lies. Just once I’d like to feel that passion before he knows what I really am and how much I’m worth.

I hope I don’t have to kill him after he learns the truth.

He might need a little nudge. I let myself lean against him so he has no choice.

The heat of his chest bakes through the thin wool and his muscular arms fold around me as he rocks back on his heels.

“You’re warm.” Burying my nose into the scratchy fabric puts it squarely into the hollow of his neck.

All I can smell is him as his hot exhale cascades over me. My knees are between his thighs and I can feel every bit of the bulge in his jeans pressing against my lower

belly.

He does want me. Why is he holding back? I'm literally naked in his arms.

When he rocks me back upright, it makes me want to pout.

“Here, put on some of these dry clothes. They'll help.” A grinding sound resonates from his jaw as he clenches his teeth.

I don't know why he's fighting this, but it's obvious he is.

Fine.

With the most pathetic motions I can muster, I pull on an oversized hoodie and sweatpants. The feeling of rejection is a hard lump in my stomach that is soon soothed by the lukewarm, pasty lasagna he hands me.

Draping the blanket over my shoulders, he pulls his own sweatshirt over his head.

Bye bare chest. It was nice to meet you.

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He shifts onto his butt and toes off his boots while watching me warily.

What am I going to do? Maul him? I tried that already.

“Is it, okay?” He frowns at his own fork. “This would taste better hot. Some of them came with these warming pods, but I haven’t found any that worked anymore.” He turns the pouch over and studies the back.

I’m glad it’s more entertaining than what I was offering.

“Oh, yea. Expired three years ago.” One of his canines pokes free of his lip when he gives me a wry smile. “At least they’re still edible.”

I’m contemplating breaking my arm and stabbing him through the neck. “What is your deal?” Finishing my cold food, I set the empty baggy against the wall and curl up in my blanket of solitude.

Other people would be less frustrating. Their intentions are obvious with me.

He crumples his own and tosses it next to mine before stretching out on the mat near me. “Let’s just say, I hurt everyone I know.” Letting out a long breath, he folds his arms behind his head. “It’s better for both of us if I drop you off at the town on the north side of the lake.”

So melodramatic.

“I’m not asking you to marry me, just warm my ass up, Peanut.” Wiggling in my

burrito, I back my freezing rear against his hip letting the heat of his body radiate into my back.

I'm just starting to doze off when he places his gloved hand on my waist and starts to lightly snore.

It's a comforting distraction.

Two more days of being near him but no touching. And, he still wears those stupid gloves. He won't tell me why.

Maybe his hands are furry? He grew up jacking off so much they got hairy.

"What are you giggling at?" Michael grins at me as he follows the wagon.

I let my feet drift over the weeds while they hang off the back. The pile of body parts is small enough they fit in the middle so there's room to sit.

"I've figured out why you wear those gloves all the time." Warm sun kisses the top of my head between the shade of the trees. Running my fingers over it, I can feel the tiny growth getting fuzzier.

It's been so long, I can't remember if I was a brunette or a blonde. Staying shaved made it easier for all of the procedures they'd do on me.

His gray eyes narrow and the corner of his lower lip folds between his teeth making his beard puff. "Really. What's your guess this time?"

This is the only game we know. Cat and mouse trying to learn more about each other, but neither wants to spill.

How do you spend four days with someone, sleep next to them at night, and know so little?

“Well, you’ve already said it wasn’t burns or scars. You have all of your fingers and they aren’t claws.” My shoulders go back as I raise my chin triumphantly. “That leaves only one option. They’re hairy from playing with yourself too much as a kid.”

He coughs as a laugh overtakes him.

I like how deep and rich it is. It makes my belly feel lighter and my heart take a double beat.

“Yep. That’s it. You have discovered my secret.” He holds his palms up in a sign of surrender.

I let myself slip off the back of the moving cart and wait as he steps closer. “Show me.”

His body moves within inches of mine before he stops. I have to tilt my face to look up at him.

He smells so much better than the last of the rotting guards.

The worn leather of his gloves appear between us, his mischievous smile framed by them. “No.”

With a side-step, he’s past me at a slow stride behind the rolling trailer.

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“What? Too shy to show me the proof of your insatiable libido?” I’d be happy if he gave in to it. Being this close to him with only the briefest of touches between us is driving me crazy.

I know my time is limited before I have to leave. Today we’re supposed to reach the cabin.

Tomorrow he’s taking me to the town without the dogs.

I don’t know how to convince him to let me stay. He keeps so many secrets, would he be safe with mine? Or will I turn into a commodity for him to barter for the well being of his pack?

Why would he want me to stay with him? I don’t know anything about survival, making a tent, or gathering food.

But, I can learn.

“Is that why you were locked up on the plane? The nympho attacking everyone that needed to be brought to the boonies where there’s no men for you to ravage?” His tone is light and floats on the warm breeze over his shoulder to me.

Maybe I’ll throw him a little bone.

“I wouldn’t know.” There. A tiny truth hidden in levity.

His head drops below his broad shoulders and his pace slows. “Of course you’re a

virgin.” He’s almost so quiet I can barely hear him.

I don’t think he meant me to.

“Is there something wrong with that?” Defiance flares in my chest.

When his fingers run through his hair and it ripples over his pointed ears, I’m tempted to throw a rock at him.

He has averted my every attempt to feel them. The lure of how soft they are is a tease like a tune I have stuck in my head that I can’t name.

I catch his subtle shake of his head before my gaze moves past him to thinning in the trees.

Alpha’s single bark makes the wolves pulling the cart drop from their harnesses and run into the dense forest, blending with the dried grasses.

Michael leans against the back of the cart in the same spot I was sitting just a moment ago.

“What’s going on?” I can’t see any of the adult dogs. Only the pups hang near us.

“They’re making sure it’s safe.” He crosses his arms and stares at his boots. The muscles in his jaws tighten and flex.

A long mournful howl is joined by yipping barks in the distance.

“That a good sound?” I don’t speak Dire.

He gives a curt nod without looking at me, but doesn’t make any motion to stand up.

My toes find the tips of his boots and I squat so I'm in his line of sight. "I thought you'd be happy you're at your new home." Propping my elbows on my knees, I have to concentrate not to glance at the growing bulge in the crotch of his jeans.

When he drops his hands, red marks flare on his biceps in the shape of his grip. Pulling his feet away, he moves to the side of the wagon, leaving me crouching in the dirt.

His forearms prop on the rails and he idly waves a fly away. "I am, and I'm not. It will be a lot of hard work to make it work."

I pick a pebble the size of a pea as my weapon and toss it lightly through the air.

It bounces off his forearm making him glance up. "You're a big, strong puppy. I'm sure you'll do fine. I'd offer to stay and help, but you seem to want to get rid of me as fast as possible."

The next rock is a little bigger that ricochets off of his thigh to hit the side of the cart with a small pop.

"Fuck, Hope. You know that's not true. But, it's safer for you with other humans. This isn't an easy life. The pack will be hunted wherever it is." His gloved hands tighten into fists as his voice drops. "I don't want you to get hurt."

If only he knew how little of a threat that is for me. "I'm tougher than I look." I better leave the rest of the stones alone before I start putting my anger into the throws.

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Alpha materializes flanked by his mate and another of the males. “I think you’ll be pleased.” He lopez ahead of the moving wagon.

He’s always so cryptic. A furry Confucius.

I wish the others could talk. Well, Lucky can drop a syllable here and there, but he’s kind of creepy.

It’d make it easier to distract myself from Michael’s brooding silence when I try to talk to him about sticking around. Or his past.

He won’t even tell me why he chooses to live with the wolves. Not that they’re bad company. I’d prefer to stay with them, too.

At least I know if they’re pulling body parts off of me, it’s just because they’re hungry. That’s a motivation I can live with.

“Oh! This place is perfect!” It really is. A cute little house, a barn, a garden.

My god. It even has a white picket fence. Someone tear out my heart, it hurts that this is so much like a story book.

“Yea, Lucky said it hasn’t been empty long. Supposedly there’s still some chickens and whatnot around.” Michael takes off for the barn leaving me free to explore the house.

The door sticks a little when I push it open. Besides being a bit musty inside, it looks

untouched and move in ready. Furniture and all.

There's even food in the pantry.

Holy crap, water comes out of the spigot. After only a few seconds, the darker color fades to crystal clear and cold.

Just past the small living room, complete with woodstove, there's a few doors.

"Duck, duck, goose!" A bathroom.

"Eenie meenie miney moe!" Damn. It's a bedroom fit with a crib and toys. Someone had children out here?

What would that be like?

My hands wrap around my lower belly, dark memories clouding my thoughts. Shaking them away helps.

That isn't my future.

But, this room? Yea, I could have fun in here. A big king bed with a huge headboard and posts on every corner.

Just the type of place I'd need to convince ol' Mikey to let me hang around for a while.

Funny how confident I am I'd be good at it. Or, how amazing he would be.

He's the first person to ever look out for me as a person and not a product. The little horny voice inside of me says he'd "take care of me" in the best kind of way.

Wink, wink. Nudge, nudge.

My sigh disturbs the dust on the bathroom mirror.

“Hope?” Michael’s voice carries through the house with a weight of comfort. It belongs here.

“Yes, dear?” Doing my best Donna Reed twirl into the main room, I end with a flourished curtsy. “Welcome home. How was work today?”

His ears poke forward as one eyebrow raises, matching the slow curl of one corner of his lip. “Where’d you find the dress? It—” He clears his throat. “—it looks good on you.”

“This old thing?” My speech slows into a deep southern drawl as I spin in a slow circle. “Why, I’ve got an entire closet full of these.” There is a whole wardrobe in the bedroom. I’d have enough clothes to wear for a year without changing.

If I lived here.

“Green is a nice color on you. Matches your eyes.” Red tinges his cheeks as he runs his gloved hand through the dark locks of his hair. “There’s some chickens in the barn still running around. And the back pen is showing signs of hogs. Alpha is taking the dogs out to see if they can find them and bring them back.”

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“Bacon and eggs. There’s flour for biscuits!” My facade drops into a pout. “If I knew how to make them, there would be.”

His hand lands lightly on my shoulder as he brushes past sending fire into my chest with his touch. “I’m sure there’s a cookbook around somewhere.” His back stretches and flexes as he opens the cupboards above the oven. “Hey, there’s a bunch of canned stuff up here. Looks like chicken soup. Want some?”

Him and food. When I’m not actively needing to heal, I don’t get as hungry. “I’m fine. Too bad the stove doesn’t work.”

He gives me a marvelous view of his ass as he bends over to inspect it. “This is wood fired. Shit, this place is so perfect.”

The lump that forms in my throat makes it hard to swallow.

I have to leave tomorrow.

Wandering back to the master bedroom, I find the bookshelf filled with how-to’s. If I’m going to be on my own soon, I might as well study. It keeps me from having to pretend I’m in a happy mood.

Light fades from the windows, but I read until I can’t make out the words anymore. I’ve just slapped the cover closed when Michael appears in the doorway, a flickering candle in his hand. “Thought you could use this.”

I hate him for being so nice.

“Explain to me like I’m stupid. Why do I have to leave when there’s plenty of room here? I can learn to cook and I’m getting better at tying knots.” I’m tempted to make him drag me out of this chair kicking and screaming. “I get the fact you aren’t interested in me, but we could be roomies.”

His long exhale makes the flame jump as he sets it on the shelf next to me. Shadows cover his face when he sits on the edge of the bed.

I can’t see his expression, but he’s quiet for a long time.

“It isn’t like that.” His hands tighten on his knees. “The rest of the pack will be arriving soon. There are—” A long inhale. “—rules they have. Instincts I think is the easiest way to put it. You won’t be safe.”

“What the fuck does that mean, Fido? A doggie law is why I have to go?” The wolves have all respected me. I think they even like me.

His elbows rest on his thighs as he leans forward just far enough a little of the weak light reveals the furrow in his brow. “I don’t know how to say this.”

The pause is killing me.

“English, Michael. That’s a good way. Sheesh, just spit it out. I’m a big girl, but very confused right now.” He brings out these violent urges in me. I don’t know if I want to kick him or jump on him.

“Fine. You’re a single woman. Unattached females aren’t allowed in the pack. They’re either claimed by one, or...” As he trails off, the intent is clear.

Used.

“Then just tell them I’m yours.” Simple fix.

The silhouette of his head shakes. “It isn’t by words, Hope. It’s by scent.”

I almost choke, I’m laughing so hard. “So, I just gotta rub up on a guy and I’m good? Wanna dance?” My feet unfold from the chair as I stand, moving between him and the candle so we’re both bathed in darkness.

For a moment, his low laugh matches mine. But, he doesn’t take my hand. “I’d gladly do-si-do if that’s all it took. It’s the smell that exudes from the woman after she’s been, um. Well,mated.” He props himself away from me, leaning back on the bed. Only his eyes catch the glow with a feral reflection.

That rocks me back on my heels. “So, the only way I can stay is if I get fucked. And... you don’t want me. Do you have someone already?” That has to be the explanation why he has fended off all of my obvious advances.

“There’s no one else.” His words sting. “I’m just, well. It’s too dangerous to be with me.”

I feel like an idiot.

The recliner is still warm from where I left it. Wrapping my arms around my legs doesn’t ease the pain of his refusal. Cutting off my foot would heal faster than this ache that grips my chest.

People are dangerous. There was a possibility here, with him.

Shoving my knuckles into my eyes doesn’t stave the tears that sneak down my wrists. They just send stars into the void behind my lids that explode with my hope of safety.

Happiness. Freedom.

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“I can’t go back to people. I’ll find a place myself, off in the woods.” The heat of each syllable reflects back to my chest.

His gloved hand wraps around my foot. “That won’t be safe. No one can live alone.”

Slapping his touch away, my anger spits out. “You’re alone, you’re safe here. I can find that, too.”

“How do you think Lucky found this place? He came through months ago and emptied it. It’s been left alone long enough for the suspicion of the surrounding people to wane before we moved in.”

Wait. What?

“He—he killed everyone here?” Children’s toys are in the next room. A toddler bed in the adjoining. “Why?”

“It’s a strategic location. There’s a big cave system not far from here where the pack will be safe. And, this place is set up for sustainability. With enough wild game around to keep them fed for years.” He leans away, sitting on the floor with his back against the bed. “It wasn’t my call.”

He tilts his head against the mattress, exposing the pale skin of his throat beneath his dark beard. “This world is so messed up.”

I know what it’s like to kill to get what you want. A small sacrifice to make for a chance at happiness.

“It is. It always will be. What pisses me off is you’re forcing me back into it. Because of what? A vow of chastity? You have no idea what I came from.” The book I was reading falls from the armrest when I stand, but I don’t care. I let it lay, grab the candle, and go to the living room.

Tomorrow, once we’re far enough where the dogs can’t track me, I’m heading out on my own.

Chapter 15

Michael

A heavy mist turns into a drizzling rain as we walk.

It matches my mood.

Gray.

Soggy.

Miserable.

Every piece of me wishes I could pull her against me and keep her close forever. It isn’t fair for either of us.

Look, but can’t touch.

How long will it be before she tries something like Angie? It’s been so hard lying next to her those nights in the tent, feeling the heat of her body.

Last night I couldn’t sleep without her by my side. Many times I woke and stood at

the door to watch her soft features in the moonlight.

Wishing I could trace her porcelain skin, I long to taste the fire in her. I saw the pain in her eyes when I rejected her and it hurt.

It rivals the stabbing agony of losing Angie.

“It’s been a wild few days, huh?” I’ve been trying to get her to talk to me all morning. The stubborn set of her jaw hasn’t wavered.

“I mean, falling out of the sky to being taken into a pack of wolves. Must be a regular August for you now.”

Her green eyes flick toward me under the wide brim of her hat, but she doesn’t reply.

“Ever going to tell me why they had you locked up? I’m probably never going to see you again.” The last sentence causes a knife to twist in my guts. This sucks.

“We all have our secrets, Mikey. You’re good at keeping yours, too.” A tear mingles with a raindrop trailing down her cheek.

She has a point. But, I’d rather her last look at me not be one of fear, knowing I can kill her with a touch. I’ve grown up with it. A lifetime of people avoiding stepping near me. Panic would send them running if I so much as raised my hand to them in passing.

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Nausea rolls through me. She's the only one besides Angie who's ever looked at me differently.

And, probably the last. I'd rather my final memory of her be sadness than terror.

"You're right. We all have our demons." The leaves squish under my boots.

It's the only noise between us for a long time.

Early afternoon marks the halfway point with a break in the rain.

"Michael?" She breaks the silence. My name sounds like a song from her lips.

"Yea?"

"What if I don't go? Would you make me?" Her hands burrow into the pockets of her jacket as she drops her chin.

"You'd die, Hope. There isn't another pack that would take you in, they'd just kill you. There's protection in numbers." I get a twinge in my temples at the thought of her getting attacked. "I'd rather you be angry at me, but be able to live to do it." Would I force her? Carry her over my shoulder all the way to town?

Probably.

Hell, I'd lock her in a cage back at the house if I knew it would keep the dogs at bay. But, what kind of life is that?

“How fast can you heal?” She doesn’t turn, still plodding ahead of me.

“Faster than a lot.” Not as fast as my mom. I’ve never seen someone heal as fast as her. She broke her hand once when I was around six. It was healed by the next morning.

“Good.” She turns to me and extends her arm.

A pistol is in her grip.

It stops me mid-stride as she points it at me. “Whoa! What are you doing?”

Her eyes are pools of emeralds in a sea of pink as tears stream down her face. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t go back to a town.” The barrel drops before she pulls the trigger.

A fire poker breaks through my shin as the sounds deafens me. The ground rushes up to meet me as my hands cling to my leg.

Blood oozes between my gloved fingers.

“Why the fuck did you shoot me?” I’m not even mad. Just in shock.

“I can’t have you chasing me. I’m so sorry!” The gun disappears into her jacket and she stumbles over to me. “It should heal back. I didn’t want to hurt you.” Her palms cup my jaw before I can protest and she presses her lips to mine.

She tastes like honey and cinnamon. As crazy as it is, I want more. Her salty tears run between us as her mouth moves in warm velvet strokes.

When she pulls away, I’ve forgotten about my leg. I’m transfixed by the tiny pink triangle of her tongue darting over her pout.

“You’re the first person who ever saw me as a human. Thank you.” She wipes her eyes and stands, then backs away slowly. Her chin trembles and that perfect lower lip rolls between her teeth before she turns and begins to run.

Fuck. I wish she had shot me through the heart. It would have hurt less.

The bandana around my leg is tight enough to make my toes tingle, but the bleeding has stopped.

Bark digs into my shoulder and the back of my skull, but it isn’t enough to dull the woeful look she had when she pointed her pistol at me.

I get it. I just wish she would have told me what terrified her so much that she would rather take me down then leave.

What could I have done differently?

Beating my head against this tree isn’t providing any answers.

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That kiss will be forever burned into me, long after the scar has faded on my leg.

Sweet. Salty. So full of want it leaves me hollow.

I'm glad I got to touch her. Even if it was just once.

These bloodstained gloves have done nothing for me. They haven't shielded her from pain. If anything, they made it worse. A thin buffer for me to deflect her with. But, it didn't protect me from feeling as if my soul was being torn from my body to try and follow her through the trees.

She chose me, over and over. Just to have me hold her at bay.

It's what I've done my entire life. Stood aside. Waited on the outskirts. Let everyone else go first so I could regulate the distance.

Angie pushed through. Look what happened.

I lost control. Need overwhelmed me.

But, with Hope, I kept it. I maintained the distance that shattered us.

I'm never wearing these damned things again. It's satisfying cutting them into narrow leather strips and spreading them on the wet ground.

The next person I touch will either live, or die.

A high pitched noise makes my ears perk. What was that?

Turning my head, I hear it again.

Shit. A scream.

It came from the direction she ran.

No!

My leg is still nearly useless, but it doesn't stop me from dragging myself up the rough tree.

Again, another cry. Long and wailing.

Hope.

The ember of pain in my shin explodes into a live current of fire pulsing up through my knee with every step.

Each hurried footfall is an agony ignored as my heart races.

Why is she making that sound? Is it humans? Other wolves?

Panic fuels me faster when I can't hear her.

Choking back her name, I don't want to call out in case I need to surprise whoever is attacking her.

They'd hear my grunting like a rutting bull with each landing of my wounded foot.

How far has it been? A mile? Ten? All I know, my leg is almost numb, it hurts so bad. Stars battle to take over my vision.

Where is she?

Panting, I struggle to hold a breath long enough to listen. My own heartbeat makes it almost impossible.

A whimper.

It's faint, and to the right.

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My pace slows as I scan the brush. There's no sign of anyone. I can't catch a scent of anything else but her.

And blood.

The metallic smell is heavy, cloying in my nose so pungent I can almost taste it.

“Hope?” I know she's close, but where?

A hollow dips in front of me, and the pale curve of her neck and exposed head comes further into view with every step.

It's only as I crest the small knoll do I see it.

Her eyes are closed and her cheeks are pallid.

Tiny hands frame a massive set of metal jaws that envelope her left leg.

Is that...a bear trap?

Huge jagged teeth dig into her just below her knee, but I can't see past the smears of crimson that covers her pants and the rusty edges.

“Jesus. Hope?” Her rain jacket crinkles under my touch.

Fuck. My gloves. Dammit.

A soft moan breaks through her lips and her head thrashes from side to side. “Cut it...off.” Her hoarse voice is almost a whisper.

“I can’t cut the trap off. I’m going to try and pry it, can you pull your leg out?” The cold steel is slick with rain and bits of flesh.

My arms shake with strain as I try to open the giant sides.

They don’t move.

Sharp edges dig into my hands and I bleed with her, the pain adding more fervor to my efforts. Frantic frustration has me pulling so hard I can feel muscles tearing.

“Please, Michael—” Her hand lands on my forearm. “—cut off my leg.”

“I can get it, I just need to find a branch.” But, there aren’t any within sight.

Her palm finds my cheek and turns me so I can look into her eyes. “I’ll be fine. Cut it off.”

The confidence in her quiet tone unlocks something within me.

Shedoes have hyper-healing. Why would she hide that from me? All those mentions of how sore she was, she was pretending.

I’d have never pushed her away if I knew.

She pushes her bag closer to me before her head drops weakly against the wet earth.

There’s a folded hand saw tucked just inside the zipper. I don’t remember her packing this. Or, the emergency blanket and firestarter.

She knew she was leaving.

It's hard to breathe as I slide my belt free from the loops and tighten the buckle around her thigh. This feels so strange to not have the leather of my gloves dampening the sensations. The truth of what she can do makes my hands shake, but doubt still keeps me wary from touching her with my palms.

“Do you need anything to bite down on?” Poising the serrated blade against her knee, I pause to give her a chance to speak.

“No, I've had worse.” Her elbow folds over her face, but her other hand squeezes my wrist.

“What the hell does that mean?” What kind of suffering has she had?

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With the first slice, she cries out and it pierces through me. As each rending cut digs deeper through the meat of her leg, it's the tiny whimpers she loses that rip me apart.

Her hot blood pours over my hand when I hit the bone. Cinching the belt tighter to stave the flow, I try to use rapid strokes to cut through.

When the last tether of flesh is severed, the gorey saw falls from my hands and I pull her tightly against me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" My lips move the soft words against her temple. The tiny hairs tickle against my nose, something I've longed for.

She shivers, her arm threading around my waist. "It changes everything."

"You're right. You're probably the only person in the world I can touch." My palm turns up on her lap, exposing the tiny pores that seep poisons from my body.

"Your hands. I thought they'd be furry." Her giggle buries itself into my chest.

I want to scream at how close I came to losing her.

With a feathering brush, she traces the lines of my hand, then rubs her fingers together. "It tingles."

"Hope, I've killed people by grabbing them. Please understand, I never wanted you to be afraid of me. It's why I couldn't..." I just want to hold her. To memorize the feel of her against me.

“Why didn’t you tell me that’s how you survived the crash?” I pull her right leg up so it rests against my ribs.

She’s so cold. The misty rain isn’t helping.

Please heal faster than me. Blood is still dripping from the stump below her knee, but it’s slowed.

“Do you have any idea how much I’m worth to them?” Her exploration of my hand sends little bolts of electricity through me. Her fingers weave in and out of mine before she presses her palm flush.

Jerking my hand away is a reflex.

“Don’t. I want to feel what it’s like.” She reaches for me again, marrying my hand with hers. “Oh, God,” she moans.

I hate that it makes my cock twitch beneath her. Pulling my arm away, she actually laughs.

“It makes me feel hot inside. Like eating too much curry.” She turns her face up to mine, tears shimmering in her eyes. “You’ve really never been able to touch anyone?” Her cool fingers find my cheek. “You can do anything you want to me. Just please don’t make me go to where there’s people.”

“Tell me what you’re running from.” The back of my knuckle skirts up the shell of her ear.

I want to melt her into me so I can feel her forever.

“I was taken when I was small. There’s a place in Chicago where they harvest people

like me.” She reaches down and pushes the belt off of her leg. Fresh pink skin is budding below where I cut it off.

Cold sweat breaks out across my scalp.

I’m going to be sick. My mother was taken there.

“Our blood is regenerative. Just imagine the possibilities when they have an unlimited supply of organs...” A blink frees the tears to run down her nose.

Bile churns in my guts. “And, you couldn’t leave?” My fist clenches as her past becomes more clear. It’s a deep breath and a slow exhale before gently cupping her head to nestle her beneath my jaw.

She sniffs back a sob before burying her nose in the hollow of my throat. “I tried to escape every day. It’s why they kept me cuffed.” Shifting her hips, her left leg comes into view.

Long and tapered, her shin ends in a nub at her ankle.

It’s only been minutes.

“You crashed the plane.” It makes so much sense now. Why I found her in the cockpit, the restraints, the guards. “I get why you shot me. That hurt, by the way.” I try to scowl, but my mouth won’t cooperate.

“You cut off my leg, I think we’re even.” She lifts her foot and wiggles her fresh toes. “Can I come back with you now that you know my secret?”

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“There’s no way I’m letting you go. But, you know that means I have to...” I don’t want to spell it out. It’s taking all of my restraint to not show her.

Her full pink lips part as her hooded eyes look up. Reaching her delicate thumb up, she slowly traces my ear sending a jolting current of need into my crotch. “Michael, I’d rather die in your arms than ever go back.”

That’s the bucket of cold water I wasn’t expecting. Angie’s tortured face resurfaces.

This time it’s fleeting and fades away when Hope presses her lips to mine.

Fire runs through my veins as her arms curve around my neck and her fingers weave into my hair. Her soft mouth nibbles timidly, tickling my whiskers with her movements.

A groan erupts from my chest when she shifts to straddle me.

She sharply inhales when I push my tongue between her inviting lips.

I don’t want to repeat past mistakes, so I pull back, resting my forehead against hers. Our heart beats are thunder in my ears, my panting draws her scent of arousal to me like a heady perfume.

When her stomach growls it’s as if a lion is erupting from her belly.

The pink blush that tinges her cheeks beckons me to kiss them.

“I’m sorry. Limbs take up so much energy.” She slumps against me, but her nails run through my short beard leaving lightning trails along my jaw.

My aching cock will have to suffer just a little longer. “Let me take you back to the house.”

It’s only when I move my leg does the lance of pain remind me, I don’t heal as quickly as she does.

“My poor Old Yeller, I did that to you.” Her petulant bottom lip sticks out in a pout.

I don’t pass up the opportunity this time, but take it between my teeth and taste it as I’ve been craving for days. She gives to my exploration, dancing her tongue with mine in a sultry tango.

When she gifts me another moan, a surge runs through me like I have the strength to run twenty miles. Sprinting on shattered legs would be such a small price to have her making that luscious sound as my reward.

To feel her skin, the velvety stroke of her fingers, the sweet succulence of her kiss and to have her begging me for more?

My life is complete in this moment.

Her stomach sends another growl through the air between us. It rocks her back, a pale look on her face.

“In a few hours, I can carry you. It looked like you had food in your bag, will that be enough?” I can just reach the straps from where I had tossed it.

Rifling through it, all I can find is a couple more MREs and some ancient jerky that

was stockpiled at the house. “Here. This might help.” The little vacuum bag opens with a hiss when I pull out a piece of dried meat. Without water, the freeze dried stuff will be hard to eat.

“Mikey, I want you to bring out your inner puppy and bite me.” A playful smile trembles over her lips.

My brows tighten on my forehead. “That can wait until I have you tied down in our bed.” That image demands attention, I’ve seen her naked enough to have a very vivid idea of how intoxicating that will be.

Damn, my nuts hurt.

“No. Bite me and you’ll heal faster.” She tilts her head, exposing her smooth throat.

I’m barely managing to wrap myself with the idea that I can touch her. There’s an anvil of doubt weighing on my shoulders as I watch her rapid pulse.

Conflict rages in me. The animalistic urge to mark her skin, claim her to the world as mine is at war with how far can I go without losing her. “Hope, I—”

Her finger rests on my protest, silencing the words before they escape. That same delectable digit traces her own lips before it disappears between them.

She gives me a brief wink before she winces. Too fast to see, her hands fly around my neck and she pushes her hungry lips against mine.

When I open to her onslaught, her tongue forces its way past my sharp canines with an unexpected cargo. The metallic taste of blood floods my senses.

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A jagged edge along the soft morsel betrays itself. Her fingertip, complete with nail, is rolling in the midst of our battling kiss.

She pulls away, a defiant and satisfied look on her face. “Swallow me, baby.”

I nearly choke as I try to obey and laugh at the same time. “Not many guys get to hear that from their women.”

“I’m not like most women.” She nestles back beneath my jaw, idly stroking the length of my ear.

Pulling her close, I try to take some of the pinch out of my throbbing cock. It doesn’t help. If anything, I can feel myself leaking against my zipper.

My heart beats faster and a blaze works its way through my limbs. The gnawing torment that was in my shin fades as a wave of energy flows into me.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. Leave your bag, we’re going home.” Cradling her, I’m able to stand easily.

The miles go by in a blink. My legs never tire until I top the last hill and see the farmhouse appear through the trees.

Lucky slinks from the shadows. His nostrils flare before he drops his head and winds his way behind the trunks.

It’s reassuring knowing we’re guarded. How determined will her captors be trying to

get her back? Goosebumps erupt on my arms at the idea that we may have been tracked from the airplane.

No wonder she was worried about the black box.

Tomorrow is a better time to think about it. The door of the house is a beacon to the tip of my cock pulling me closer.

At the end of this journey lies her.

Her rapid heart betrays her cool demeanor. It's the drum beat my steps mimic as I race her up the steps across the covered porch.

Easy. I need to slow down. Every fiber of my being is screaming to rip her clothes from her supple body and take what she has offered.

It's not exertion causing my heavy breathing as I set her gingerly on the couch.

"I'm not broken, Mikey. Just tired." Her arms stretch languidly over her head as she stretches out the length of the sofa.

"Well, rest up. Because later tonight I'm going to find out how far I can break you." I toss her a big grin and pull a pan down from the rack above the stove.

It only takes me a moment to start the fire to get it hot enough to cook. A handful of eggs and some of the canned applesauce I found in the cupboard quickly makes a heaping plate. The skillet is replaced with a big pot of water.

We're both filthy and covered with dried blood.

"I might need to turn these pants into shorts now." She raises her bare leg where the

saw severed the fabric. “Maybe I’ll keep them this way. A reminder of our first kiss.” Her teasing smile closes over her fork.

I can’t stop thinking about how good she tastes. “I’ll never forget it.” It’s permanently etched. I think my boot will remember, too. The gunshot left a divot in the top of the leather.

Her gaze wanders to the window where the rain pelts from the darkness. “Sriracha almonds.”

“Huh?” Shit, I’m going to have to patch my jeans. I might have to spank her for that one later.

Fuck, I’m torturing myself with that thought.

“There was a tech that worked there for a while when I was a teenager. She used to sneak me those because one of the heavy handed guards had an allergy.” Hope glances at me after another bite. “It became my favorite treat. It’s what you taste like.”

I’m not sure if I should be angry at the fact one of the men was rough with her, or take it as a compliment I’m her flavor of choice.

“What happened to your friend?” Ten gallons of steaming water should be enough for us to cut the grime.

It’s all I have the patience for. Another night may be better suited for a long soak. Tonight I want to be just clean enough to get dirty.

Filthy.

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It's hard to walk with an aching dick and a big pot of scalding water.

"She never came back after I stole her ID to try and escape." Her plate slides onto the coffee table and she bounces up to follow me into the bathroom.

A cloud of hot mist fills the small room. It mellows once I turn the tap on and let some cooler water into the tub.

It doesn't temper the heat coursing through my body when I turn to where she leans in the frame. "Is it selfish to say, I'm glad you didn't succeed until I was close enough to find you?" I watch her face as I slide my hands beneath her shirt, lightly following the curve of her hips to tug the grimy fabric over her head.

She has teased me with her bared breasts for days. My thumb flicks over her hardened nipple before cupping it in my palm, making her breath catch.

Her heavy lidded eyes close as a blissful smile plays over her full lips. "Your hands feel like the first time I felt the Atlanta sun on a summer day."

I need to feel her skin pressed against mine. My shirt joins hers before I crush her against my chest, seeking her lips with my own.

The sensation of touch is so foreign. It's always been with a barrier. But now, every molecule in my body is reaching to join hers.

Her hands are twin trails of fire up and down my back as I taste every corner of her sweet mouth. The round swell of her ass fits my palms perfectly as I hoist her to wrap

her legs around my waist.

It's only when I feel the change from her chopped off pants to her leg that I remember why we're in here.

Nibbling down her chin elicits a moan that vibrates deep within her throat. Her hips rock over the swell in my jeans, grinding her wet pussy so hard over me I swear I'm pushing the taut fabric into her.

"Let's get you out of these." Unlocking her heels, I reluctantly let her slide down the length of me. My dick is a rough obstacle pressing into her belly through my zipper.

When her hand works its way down and she threads her fingers around the button, the volcano brewing within me nearly erupts.

"I want to taste you," she whispers against my chest. One hand pushes her ruined pants down to her knees while the other deftly opens the tenuous dam of the denim holding me in.

My engorged cock springs free, already purple and leaking. "Fuck, Hope. I might not last long if you do that."

When she flattens her tongue against me, a shiver runs through my body and I can feel the tightening in my nuts warning me of the impending explosion.

A fever overtakes me when she sucks me into her hot mouth. Tremors rattle my limbs, I can barely grasp the frame as my thighs shake.

She releases me with a smack of her lips. "You taste spicy, baby. I want you to burn me from the inside." Without a pause, she sinks me into the back of her torrid throat and hastens her strokes.

When her fingers wrap around my twitching nuts, I lose control. Pumping into her ravenous suction, I spurt into her until I'm just a husk floating on the wind.

Her moans spasm around my shaft and a flush of red works its way up her cheeks. Nails dig into the back of my leg as she shudders beneath me.

Jesus, fuck. She came, too.

I can't even fathom the extraordinary odds that landed her within my arms. I don't care. Just the fact that she's here with me, is unbelievable.

My pants need to go. Now that she's swallowed some of my urgency, I want to make her feel incredible.

Because she is.

"Come on, my naughty girl. Let's get cleaned up. I want to taste and touch every inch of you." Lifting her easily over my shoulder as she squeals, I can tug off the last of her clothes and step into the tepid bathtub.

It's cooler than I was hoping as my tender bits sink below the surface, but it does little to dull the inferno rushing through me. I've never been the addictive type, but I think that may be changing. I don't know if I'll ever want to let go of her.

The silky movement of her skin as she leans against me stirs my drained cock. As her hands work over my legs with the sudsy washcloth, mine work up and down her back in long strokes. I love to see the red blush from my palms tighten into goosebumps as I make each slow pass.

"This must be what heaven feels like." My lips follow my words to lick the nape of her slender neck.

She tilts her head to rest on my shoulder, opening herself to my exploring fingers. “Today is the first time I’ve ever been grateful for my ability.” She gasps as I pinch one of her alluring nipples before I lower my seeking touch to between her thighs.

“Spread your knees.” Her pelvis tilts as she opens herself to me.

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White caps crest against the edge of the tub when I find her clit for the first time. “Oh, God!” Her throaty cry buries itself into my beard as she writhes against me.

Every gyration is rubbing life into my hardening length. Our slick bodies move over each other in a hastening dance. The tiny pants she makes with every circular flick of her swollen clit get shorter, louder as her nails dig into my arm.

Pulling her thigh to her chest lets me plunge my soaked finger into her tight cunt and she screams. Arching her beautiful breasts to the ceiling, her contracting pussy clamps onto me in a grip so firm I can barely move.

“That’s it. Come for me.” My teeth scrape against the hollow of her shoulder. “Show me how much you like me touching you.”

Her spasms slow and she pants as I continue flicking her with my thumb. “Don’t ever—” She gasps as I push a second finger into her.

“Don’t ever, what? Tell me.” Increasing my thrusts, splashes of water spray between us as her hips rock against my hand.

“Don’t...ever... stop...touching.” Her glistening body levitates, held only by her heels and her poised neck against my collar as she screams through another climax.

I swear I almost come again with the rush of cool air that meets the tip of my exposed cock.

The need to be inside of her is too much. Freeing my hand from the heat of her body,

I lift myself from behind her and pull her to follow. “It’s time to break in our bed, baby.”

She giggles as I push her backwards onto the mattress. “You didn’t want me in it last night. I even offered.” Her flushed lower lip curls between her teeth.

“I didn’t know you could handle me.” Prowling over her, I cage her with my body and tug her arms over her head. “Now, I know you’re my perfect match.” My firm erection tucks between her cloistered thighs. How do I mark her so the world knows she’s mine?

Nipping my way down the thin skin of her underarm, every pucker fades before I can make another.

Her full breasts roll against my chest as I move my way down her. Every brush of her hands sends a blaze through me.

I’ve dreamt of what her nipples would feel like between my lips. From the first moment she turned at the lake, I’ve been transfixed with the thought of having one of her pink buds pinched between my canines.

Giving in to the point of temptation that tickles its firm tip along my nose, her soft sigh is the song of encouragement I long for. Swirling the puckered flesh before sucking her in pulls a moan from her that tells me she’s enjoying this just as much as I am.

As I move down, she sneaks her feet from beneath me to wrap them around my ribs. “Please,” she begs, tugging me with her heels.

Her wet heat radiates against my belly. A molten siren calling to me. My fingers answer the call, drawn to the pulse of her pussy.

Who am I to deny this pleading cunt, dripping with her ready juices that smother my hand when I slide it along the length of her.

My mouth follows the path of my hand, the bite marks fading before the skin has flattened back into place.

When she rubs my ear against her palm, a potent spark fires through me, ripping a groan from my chest.

An entire lifetime I've spent to get to this moment. Years of being avoided, removed, ostracized. All to culminate in this, her total acceptance and surrender to me.

Nestled between her luxurious thighs, I get my first taste of her.

It was all worth it. The agony of my isolation, the loneliness of not even a hand to hold. I pour out every moment of want into the rich velvet of her divine pussy.

Her mewling sounds that buffet me erase the memories of solitude. They shatter the shell I've built with each resonance. She wants me for who I am and only asks for me to see her as she is.

Mine.

As she falls back to the bed from another screaming orgasm, I relent to the urgency of my throbbing cock. Her shaking knees hug my waist as I move up her sweaty body.

"That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." I bury my mouth into the hollow of her ear, teasing the lobe with my tongue as I just teased her clit a moment ago.

"Me screaming?" Her breathless laugh caresses across my back.

The head of my stiff length presses at her dripping entrance. “The pleasure you get when I touch you. It’s amazing. I’m afraid you may have created a monster.”

Her fingers knot in my hair and she pulls me in for a fierce kiss. “Then scare me from the inside, out.” She sucks my bottom lip between her teeth as her hips buck, sinking my tip into her.

So fucking tight.

Hot.

Wet.

My thighs shake in restraint. A thread of doubt holds me back.

What if the same thing happens with her that happened last time?

“You won’t hurt me, Beethoven. In fact, I dare you to break me.” A mischievous smile flirts across her lips before she arches her back, her breasts two pinpoints of embers scalding into my chest.

Relenting to the moment, I drive through her thin barrier with a single stroke. Framing her face with my palms, I want to watch her. To see the bliss that glows behind her gaze as I pull back and thrust into her again.

Her body squeezes harder with each clap of our bellies. Like a boa constrictor pulling me deeper, I can barely withdraw. Her pussy is trying to take me prisoner.

Well then, lock me up.

Rocking back on my knees, I pull her ankles to my shoulders, leveraging myself so I can pummel her with my cock.

The entire bed creaks with the force of me rutting her, yet her fingers claw at my

arms and her toes cross behind my head.

“Harder.”

One word ruins me. A primal cry breaks from my lips as I grab her thighs. My clenching nuts slap against her ass as I work my thumb between the drumbeat of our bodies.

When I touch her clit, it triggers her hips to jerk and her chin to rise to the heavens. The ‘O’ of her lips broadens into a chant of my name before her cunt anchors me to her cervix, shredding ribbons of burning cum from me.

Stars burst behind my eyes as I collapse over her, only my elbow holding some of my weight to keep from crushing her.

We’re both gulping air.

She’s the first to move, snaking one delicate finger up to run it the length of my ear.

“Good boy.”

Chapter 16

Hope

Is this what happiness is? Waking up with the sun streaming over our tousled bed, his hot hand resting on my hip, his breath tickling down my back, this is it. I know it.

He only makes a small noise when I slip out of bed, carefully dropping his arm back to the warm mattress.

The bathroom looks like a warzone. Our clothes are strewn around the floor. The tub is still filled with the cold, bloody water from last night.

It's a nice change, picking things up. I never had to clean up my own messes at the Institute. There was always someone to do it, no matter what kind of havoc I caused.

I like that it's just us.

There's laundry baskets in the back room, but when I start walking down the hall, I can't help but stop at the child's room.

What would it be like if I could?

Michael's warm arms encircle my waist. "When I woke up alone, I was almost afraid yesterday was a dream." His beard tickles the short hairs on the top of my head as he pulls me against his chest.

His hard-on presses against the small of my back and his palms stoke the fire in my belly. "Have you ever thought about it?"

Turning in his arms, I drape my own around his broad shoulders. "Thought about what?" I was hoping to avoid this conversation for a little while, but here we are.

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“Kids.” He slips a lopsided grin before his lips touch my forehead.

“Oh, you want puppies? I’ve only known you a couple of days, are you sure I’m the right girl?” I need to change the subject.

His wrists lock behind me and he squeezes our naked bodies together. “You’re my one in a billion, Hope. You’re not going anywhere. I never thought it was in the cards for me to ever meet anyone in the world I could touch. So, before this moment, I never thought about children. You can be honest with me.”

My lip trembles despite my best efforts to fight it. “I don’t know if I can.”

One of his canines appears as he gives me a confused look.

I make a valid attempt to kiss it away.

His large hands cup my thighs and he lifts me up. “You’re going to tell me all about it.” Carrying me into the living room he sits on the couch with me straddling his lap.

His dick against my ass is distracting.

“No, no. First—” He raises my hips and sinks his cock into me. “—that’s a good girl. Now, explain.”

I can’t concentrate at all. He’s so big it’s like he’s tapping the back of my brain with the tip.

“Come on, tell me.” He flexes his butt, driving himself deeper and tossing me forward enough I have to brace myself on his chest.

“Mikey, I...fuck.” One hundred percent of my focus is between my legs. “What were we talking about?”

His burning palms grasp my waist and he bounces me. “All the babies I’m going to put in you while I wait.”

That’s right.

“They need more like me.” I lift myself and drop quickly making his eyes roll back and a grunt escape.

Two can play at this game.

“So after I hit puberty, they gave me some shots because they were going to harvest some of my eggs.” Up I go, but this time he guides me down with a roll.

Holy hell. The head of him rubs against a place inside that starts my legs quivering.

His gray eyes are half closed as he smirks at me. “Go on.”

Did he just flex his dick? I swear he got bigger.

“I know what they do to the kids. Even the babies.” I’ve had to cover my ears from their screams my whole life.

His movements stop and he fixes me with a stare. “Oh, man. Those people are messed up.”

“Yea, well, they try and play it off like they’re helping people. But all they’re really doing is keeping the old rich guys alive.” I wish I could have crashed the plane into their observatory.

Neither of us move, only his thumbs work slow circles above my knees.

A few heartbeats go by before he grinds into me again. “Keep talking or I’m going to make you come.”

I don’t think it’s going to take much for that to happen. My belly is tightening with every movement.

“There’s no way I’d willingly let anyone be born into that.” I want him touching me, to know that he still accepts me after what I say next.

My hands cover his as I pull them up to my breasts. The heat that emanates into my body from the contact makes my thoughts fuzzy.

“What did they make you do?” He tips me to him, his sharp teeth teasing over one nipple while he lifts my hips so he can thrust into me again.

I’m on overload. I can’t stop my back from arching above him as my muscles spasm around him.

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When he groans and grabs my waist, forcing himself within me, the burning of his release skyrockets me. The scorch of him binds up my insides into a crushing detonation that leaves me trembling against his chest.

I rise and fall with his heavy breathing.

“Damn. I lost at my own game of torture.” His lips turn up as he kisses my temple. The fire in his hands work their way up and down my back in a slow, hypnotic rhythm.

Curling my heels behind his knees, I let myself sink into him. This might be easier to say when I’m not looking in his eyes.

“I cut out my ovaries.”

There. I said it.

His long exhale over my sweaty skin makes my shiver. Or, maybe it’s the weight of his rejection I’m afraid to bear.

Michael cups my head into his throat, pressing my forehead against his Adam’s apple that bobs when he talks. “I think they’re fucking evil for doing that to you.” The rich timbre of his voice vibrates into my skull.

It’s so soothing, it frees the tears.

“I don’t know if my eggs will grow back. The doctors never tried again. But, I know

they were successful with others. I just don't know how many are born like me." It's a fate I wouldn't wish on anyone.

"You know, it's funny—" He runs his thumb under my jaw leaving a trail of heat. "—they worked so hard to bomb the shitout of the dogs, but the real monsters are the ones pushing the buttons."

The hard length of his cock softens and he withdraws. Pulling my leg alongside of his, he rolls onto the couch so I'm laying on top of him.

"Hope, I'm happy here. Now. With or without kids." He wraps his calf over mine, firmly cocooning me with his body.

A heavy thump against the door interrupts the peace. It's followed by a low bark.

"Alpha." Michael twists himself so I slide off of his hairy chest before he strides naked to the door.

I like this view.

Cool morning air pours in when he opens it to the half-breed blocking the light with his size.

"The rest of the pack is arriving. We need to introduce her." His broad nostrils flare and his large canines appear as his lips pull back in a grin. "Good, you've marked her."

My nose isn't as good as theirs, but even I can smell all the sex in the air.

The giggle comes out of me against my will. "I tried to mark him with a bullet, but I don't think he liked that part."

Michael glances at me over his shoulder and smiles. “Worth it.” His muscles lengthen as he scratches his head. “We’ll be out in a bit.”

Sun flashes into view as Alpha steps away. Man, he’s huge.

Michael turns back to me, his dick lifting as it fills with every step closer. “Well, you’re going to see the full scope of your new family. But, in the meantime, let’s go ahead and mark you a few more times.”

I’ve lost count of how many dogs there are. There’s an unending line of grays and browns. My hands are covered in slime from the noses touching me.

The puppies definitely made more than one pass. Even though Alpha growled at me for kneeling down and playing with them, they kept coming back.

“I think that’s the brunt of them. There’s enough now that know you’re part of the pack, any stragglers will be taught quickly.” Michael puts his hand in the small of my back as he leads me back to the house.

I love that he touches me constantly. And that his ears are always swiveled in my direction. Even when he isn’t close, I know he’s watching.

“There had to be thirty or forty. Where will all that food come from?” The chickens and the pigs are clearly off limits until we can build their number up. It’d be nice if the wolves ate grain. There are two very full silos here that could feed them for years.

Six adults ate four humans in a week.

“Alpha assured me that with the cave network, they’ll be able to spread out enough to not put pressure on any one area.” The door latches behind him. “With the exception of the half-breeds, the rest don’t live nearly as long.”

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His gray eyes narrow when he glances at me. “Don’t pout like that or I’ll bite that lip. It’s a good thing or the world would be overrun like Dire Day.”

“But, the puppies!” I just can’t imagine the little puff balls I saw today dying in only two or three years. That seems so fast.

Especially when there’s freaks like me that don’t even age.

“There will be tons. You’ll have your fill of babies.” He pulls me against him and I can feel how hard he is. “Or, maybe we’ll just have to keep practicing for our own.”

My stomach knots. I’d like that. “But, what if they’re like me?”

His lips skim over the fuzz growing on my head. “Then they’d be perfect like you.”

“Michael. They’d be hunted like me.” The thought that the institute is searching for me hasn’t lightened. “They’ll find the plane. What if they find me?”

“They’d have to kill me.” His growl sends a hot shiver through me. “If they don’t, I’ll be bringing all the hounds of hell with me to get you.”

Chapter 17

Michael

It took a week, but her dark hair is long enough to lay flat on her head in an adorable pixie look.

I can't wait until it's long enough I can thread my fingers in it.

Leverage.

The thought of tangling my hand in her long locks while I pound into her from behind makes me so hard it's difficult to walk.

Maybe one day, our children will outnumber the wolves. If Sam can do it, why not me? Hope and I will outlive him and Dani. Probably even their kids. I'll make my own army.

I get a twinge in my gut when I think of Angie. She was never right for me. I tried to warn her.

All she did was make me appreciate what I have now even more.

The morning crisp of late September is lasting longer into the day before it finally warms. It makes for good wood splitting weather. Not cold enough to freeze, but easy to work in.

Whoever was here before us built a masonry heater in the greenhouse, but didn't get a chance to stockpile enough fuel before Lucky got to them. I'd like to fill the shed before it snows.

Alpha has been working the fish wheel at the lake, and showing some of the other half-breeds that are capable.

We're like a regular Swiss Family Robinson, making a living in the wild.

I don't bother bringing the ax in, but leave it stuck in the chopping block for tomorrow.

My ears prick when I hear a high pitched whine, but I can't place it. The sound seems far away, but the little hairs on the back of my neck stick up like it's close.

What the hell is that?

It's fading. Maybe it's just in my head.

"Well, hello my sexy man." Hope steps around the kitchen counter by the window and wraps her arms around me, burying her nose against my sweaty chest. "I love how you smell after splitting wood. Like spicy pine nuts."

"How about—" I hoist her so her legs circle my waist. "—I split you with my wood, and show you what I've got saved in my nuts?" It's hard to kiss her when I'm smiling this wide, so I snarl and nip her bottom lip between my teeth instead.

Her shrieking giggle makes my cock stiffen almost immediately. "It's been like an hour since the last time. How could you get any stacked?"

"I work better with empty balls." Carrying her over to the island, I'm just touching the hem of her shirt when the sound returns. "Can you hear that?"

Her brows squirrel together over those big green eyes. "What? You have better ears than me." As if to prove her point, she feathers a finger along the length of one sending a ripple of electricity through me.

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The pitch rises and lowers. I can't figure out if it's getting closer or revving up.

It's distracting with how foreign it is.

"You know..." Her voice drops to a whisper. "I usually like it when you growl at me, but when you're agitated, you can be intimidating." Her hands slide into the back pockets of my jeans and her head tilts against me as we both hold our breath so I can listen.

I didn't know I was making a noise. She brings it out in me.

"Hold that position. I'll be right back." I have to readjust my cock to walk, but I need to investigate.

Heading to the barn, the hogs and the chickens drown any chance of hearing. I give them a cursory glance before starting a wide circle around the house. When I pass the greenhouse, it gets so quiet I can't discern it from the normal outdoors.

If Alpha was here, I'd ask him. The rest of the wolves stay back in the caves during the day since they do most of their hunting at night.

Damn. I wish I had better ears.

Why is it so high frequency?

I can't figure it out, but it has me on edge.

After a full perimeter check, there's nothing.

When I push the door open, she's still perched on the counter with the sun beaming through the window across her like a halo.

"Oh, you're such a good girl staying right where I told you to." My hands slide up her thighs as I push between her knees.

"I guess I've been hanging around with all you dogs so long, I've picked up a couple of tricks." Her bottom lip pinches between the whites of her teeth in a teasing grin.

"Mmm, then let me teach you how to lie down next." My mouth seeks hers as I grab her hips, yanking her tightly against me.

She has me hard again. Always.

"I think I need another helping of breakfast." Rolling her back, I lift her knees over my shoulders and nuzzle my nose into the thin khakis covering the small mound of her cunt. "There needs to be a rule about you wearing any pants."

She gasps when I sink my teeth hard enough to pinch her tender skin.

"Yes, a law. No more covering my pussy. Violators will be spanked." I roll her ankles further so she's nearly bent in half on the granite.

It lets me grab the back of her pants and unfurl them from her legs. I'm too impatient to free them from her feet, but drape her knotted heels back over my head.

Her giggle turns into a moan when my tongue presses against her hard little clit.

So wet for me already.

A loud knock on the door rattles us both.

Alpha doesn't knock, he kicks.

"What the fuck?" I untangle myself from her legs while she scrambles to pull her pants up.

"Who is it?" Her whisper is just enough that I can hear it.

"I don't know. Go into the bedroom and get the shotgun from under the mattress." The pistol she used to shoot me is sitting nearby, so I hold it behind the door as I pull it open.

"Howdy. Found this in the woods and wondered if it was yours?" A squatty man with a scruffy gray beard is dangling Hope's backpack in his fingers.

Behind him is an armored truck covered in spikes with three more men poking from the top with rifles.

How did I not hear the engine?

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“No. Not mine.” I don’t like this one bit.

His tongue rolls through his fat bottom lip and he spits a brown string of tobacco on the ground. “See, son. The thing is, this bag says ‘Philips’ on it. The only folks by that name lived here, but died a while back. So, this came from here.” He tosses the limp pack on the porch before pushing the bill of his cap back on his forehead.

“Okay.” I wish Alpha wasn’t at the lake today.

His thick arms push his jacket back, revealing a holstered gun on his hip as he shoves his hands into his pockets. “How long y’all been here? Pretty sad what happened to the last owners. Wolves got ‘em.” He narrows his dark eyes that flick to the center of the door.

Pretty good bet he knows I have a gun, too.

“Just a little while. Too bad about the Philips. Thanks for stopping by, but I’ve got things to do.” I back out and push the door closed.

Sausage fingers grip the edge before it clicks. “Well, I wasn’t quite done.”

My stomach tightens. I’m tempted to touch his hand to get him to pull away. “What do you want?” The words grit through my clenched teeth.

“Oh, don’t be like that, son. We did you a favor, returning your property. Now we just have a little one of our own.” Brown spittle leaks over his stubble as he pushes his worn boot through the gap.

“I didn’t ask you to return anything. But, I am gonna ask you to leave.” Catching a glimpse of Hope standing in the hall, her eyes wide with fear, puts a rod of iron into my back. “If you don’t go now, you won’t like the consequences.”

His fingers tighten on the door. “We saw her on the game cam. We just need her for a little while. She’ll be brought back fine and dandy.”

What? Shit. They must have put a camera over the trap.

Of course they did. I’m such an idiot. We did the same back at the prison. Eyes everyone outside the walls with regular drone patrols even further.

The noise.

Goddammit. I messed up. I should have known that whine I heard earlier was a drone.

The regret of not leaving at the first sound is like a stone in my guts.

“You can fuck off.” Pulling the hammer back on my gun makes an audible click. Even a regular human without heightened senses would hear it.

“Son, you’re about to make a big mistake. We have some mighty sick people and just need her help for a bit. Think about this. She’s gonna want someone to come back to.” His voice is low and even. Scarily unshaken.

Movement catches my eye. Two small red dots weave on the back of the door next to my head then make circles around the shadow I’m casting.

Snipers.

How is it with all the dogs around us, none of them alerted to the trespassers?

“Mikey. I’ll go.” Tears pour silently down her face.

“No! Go back!” I jut my chin towards the bedroom. “Alpha will be back any time.”

The stubby man’s weight shifts against the door, knocking me off balance slightly. “If it’s your puppies you’re waiting on, they had a big meal this morning. I’m guessing they’re all pretty sleepy about now.” A wet smack from the porch marks more spit landing on my step.

The sickly sweet smell of his breath pushes through the open crack. “You have ten seconds to decide.”

“Not happening.” I’d rather die than lose her.

“Hey, I got away once to find you. I’ll do it again.” She props the shotgun against the wall and walks purposefully to me. Her cool hands rest against my cheeks before she touches her lips to mine. “I always knew it was fleeting. I’m glad I got a taste of freedom. You made it all worth it.”

My chest locks up. I can’t breathe. “I’m keeping my promise.”

Her fingers tangle in the hairs on the nape of my neck. “I couldn’t go on knowing you’re gone. Please, I’ll be fine.” Her jaw sets, but her chin trembles with her salty tears. “I’ll come back.”

One of the red dots flicker across her temple. It matches the color pressing in on my vision.

Raw anger builds in me.

“Time’s up, kids.” The short man steps away from the door.

Hope grasps the knob and pulls it open. “I’m coming with you.”

He glances down at her leg and shakes his head. “We’ve been desperate to find someone like you. You’ll be doing a good thing.” Sweat prickles across his brow and he readjusts his hat. “Glad we could come to an arrangement.”

“Fuck you.” My pistol hangs uselessly in my hand. What good am I? Maybe I should take this arrogant asshole out before I go. At least I’d feel like I did something.

“Oh, son. Don’t be like that. We’re just gonna borrow your pretty little gal. Once everyone is better, she can come back.” He has the audacity to put his swollen hand on the small of her back as he walks her to the truck.

“When?” My voice cracks as I call out.

Hope disappears into the vehicle. It feels like my heart is being ripped out.

“Shouldn’t be more than a couple of weeks.” He spits again before rolling himself up into the passenger seat.

“Weeks? There’s no way—” I run down the short stairs, raising my weapon. I’m going to kill him.

My knees give out beneath me.

How the hell am I looking at the sky?

The pain hits as the retort from the gunshot echoes over me.

My chest erupts in agony. I curl onto my side in time to see the SUV pulling away soundlessly.

Electric. Dammit.

Crunching gravel and rattling in my lungs are the only things I can hear as my soul disappears through the trees.

Chapter 18

Hope

I was barely holding my composure when I crawled into the cab of the sweaty smelling truck. But, when I see Michael fall with blood blooming across his chest, it takes three grown men to pin me down.

“Easy, sweetheart. He was no good for you.” The man who has his arm around my neck talks against my ear.

Left side asshole pinning my arm and left leg makes it even worse. “Did you see his teeth? He’s got dog in him, I bet.”

The short, bearded man shakes his head in the front. He has my right foot wedged under his hefty elbow. “You’re going to be helping a lot of people. It’s a waste having you just holed up here in the woods.” He has to turn his whole torso around to

look at me. “Them wolves will turn on you, mark my words. You’ll be safer with us.”

His seat squeaks when he shifts to face out the windshield. “We’ve been looking for someone like you for a long time. Was starting to think it was a myth. Imagine my surprise when ol’Billy brought in the footage and your leg grew back before our eyes.” He sniffs and looks out the side window. “It’s the miracle we’ve been hoping for.”

“Yea. Much better than the kid.” My new scarf shifts behind me, tightening his arm around my throat.

What I would give for the ability to kill with a touch like Michael.

The sob comes on its own. Tears soak the sleeve under my chin.

He’s gone. It hurts so fucking bad. A piece of me is lying in the dirt with him.

All of me. Every happy memory I own is wrapped up in him.

I’m shattered. Broken. All the years of being cut apart and used, pale to the pain in my heart. I wish I could just slice it out, but I know even that is a different ache.

This has destroyed me. My very being.

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I'd gladly cut my leg off daily to know he's okay.

"Please, is he alive?" I need the truth.

The bearded bastard pats my foot like he cares. "You don't need to worry about him anymore."

I'll show you who to worry about. Me. My new life goal is going to be to kill every last fucking one of you.

A dull roar slowly grows louder. We've been following the lake for a while when we break out of the forest to see a wide dam hedging along one side.

Walls tower on each end with cabins and trailers parked between them.

It's a whole town barricaded on the top of the broad concrete barrier.

Smart way to keep the dogs at bay.

A giant double paneled door opens that we drive through. The lake is huge from this perspective, stretching miles back up through the hills.

The drop on the other side looks like it's hundreds of feet down.

If I knew I would die, I'd contemplate trying to make them drive over the edge. But, I crashed a plane and survived.

Michael rescued me.

Stabbing pain returns to my chest.

He won't now.

Lefty pulls a pair of handcuffs out and fastens my wrists together.

I know this game. They don't know how patient I can be.

"Hey, JD?" Neck guy calls to the bearded one as he releases me and steps out into the cool afternoon sun. "Are we taking her to a cell, or straight to the infirmary?"

"Infirmary. Kyle, get Doctor Parker to meet us there." JD loops his arm through mine while Scarfy grabs my other elbow.

Kyle was my lefty, but now he jogs away like he has a load in his pants.

What can I do that would make them all shit themselves? Maybe blow this thing to the moon?

That's a nice thought. The earth opening up and this entire trailer park being washed downstream.

Better than this dingy room they're walking me through.

JD pushes me ahead of him through a steel door.

At least this one is a little cleaner. Smells like bleach.

What in the hell is that?

A stretcher with a tiny form on it. It has tubes going in, but none coming out except a catheter bag hanging from the side.

An older lady in a faded hoodie is standing next to it with an oversized needle.

When she pulls a tiny arm from beneath the blanket and starts drawing blood, I feel sick.

“What’s wrong with the kid?” I wonder if they’re doing this on purpose to play on my empathy.

Surprise, bitches. You shot down any morsel of compassion and left him laying on the ground.

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“He’s the closest thing we have to you.” JD’s fat fingers tug me over to an empty bed.

“You’re kidding me. You’re leeching off of a toddler? There’s really nothing worth salvaging in this cesspool, is there?” It’s oddly nostalgic when he straps my ankles into the leather restraints.

Just like old times.

I need to finish the story with my arm bones in his wobbly neck.

“He’s the only thing keeping some people alive. And his healing ability isn’t very good.” The monster disguised as a nurse pulls the syringe from the thin little arm.

That has to be like half the blood in his body. A trickle leaks down his limp fingers as she turns away.

“He’s still bleeding. If he could heal at all he’d have stopped. What is wrong with you all?” If my hair was longer, I’d be pulling it out.

“We’re all sick.” JD spits into a metal cup. The dried tobacco around the rim looks like it’s been there for a decade.

“I’d say.” There’s a cure in every caliber for what ails them.

“Last year there was a wildfire that pushed us to an old mercury mine up the hill. We didn’t know how much it would get into everyone. The town just needs a bump of

your blood to pull out of the effects. He's—" JD nods to the miniscule form. "—the only reason a lot of people are alive."

"Maybe you're all better off dead." Assholes. Fire would be an excellent way to purge this new hell.

"Oh, now. Not a nice thing for a pretty girl to say. Don't worry, we'll all be right as rain now that you're here." His cup clatters on the table he's planted himself next to.

A white haired man steps breathlessly through the door. He freezes when he sees me. "I need to test her." His pale blue eyes look almost feverish with excitement.

Great. Another vulture. How long before he becomes my number one fan? If he's the doc, I bet he already knows about all the perks.

Like slower aging.

His gnarled hands shake when he pulls a scalpel from a drawer and shuffles closer. Picking up my cuffed forearm in his frigid fingers, he makes a long shallow cut.

"Ow. You know that shit stings, right?" Why do I always turn into just a thing?

The gasp he makes fills the room when the wound closes as he withdraws the blade. "It's perfect!" He doesn't even look at me before turning to his nurse. "Get the nutrient solution going immediately. We need to start pulling doses right away."

"Yes, doctor." Her flat brown eyes flick over me without expression.

Like a snake's.

"I hate you all so much." My head flops backwards against the thin pillow.

Trapped again.

“Well, you’re the hero of the hour, girly.” JD pinches his lower lip with his finger and scoops out the chunks of chew he has stashed against his yellowed teeth. “Didn’t even catch your name. What should I call you?”

“You can call me, Death.”

Chapter 19

Michael

Everything hurts. And, my whiskers are frozen on my face. When I manage to open my eyes, the stars in the sky seem to peer down on me like the useless fool I am. I should have taken her as soon as I heard the noise. There should never have been a question. I’ll forever regret that decision.

She’s gone.

With a groan I manage to sit up. Something small and hard rolls between my chest and shirt.

It takes a second to track it down and pinch it through the fabric. The bullet.

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Fuckers. I'm glad they didn't know I can heal, too. Just not as fast as her.

Still aches like a bitch.

I'm going to kill them all. Especially the short bearded one. But first, I'm going to make sure he tells me which of his men shot me.

Actually, I don't care. I just want her back.

"Took you long enough." Alpha is lying near the porch, his front legs are crossed over and it makes him look like a regal lion in the moonlight.

"Me? We need to teach the pack not to eat easy food. Are they okay?" My loyalties aren't really there at the moment, but I can't do anything about Hope without them.

"Most of the adults are. Some of the pups ate too much." A low growl emanates from his chest. "They didn't make it."

Damn. "I'm sorry. Any of yours?"

"One. The smallest." His furry chin extends to drop his head on his large paws.

"Lucky's mate lost her litter. When do we feast on the humans?"

Lucky is scary enough. He's going to be unhinged when we make it to the town.

Even better.

“Find the best spotters. We need to start looking for cameras. Was it the town on the lake?” My ass is half frozen to the ground. The folds of my jeans make a ripping noise when I stand.

“Yes. Lucky tracked them. He said the gates are guarded and will be tough to get in.” His massive muscles ripple in the moonlight when he stands. “But, we have you. And rifles.”

“Sure wish you could use a gun. You’d look scary as hell charging in with a fifty cal on your arm.” I wish I had a tank. Or a battalion.

He lets out a low rumble of a laugh. “My fingers were almost too big when I was human.” He opens his mouth in a wide yawn, then snaps his jaws closed with enough force I can feel it in the earth. “These are all the weapons I need.”

The beast has a good point. Lots of them.

“So, we have a plan. Blow shit up until we get her back. I like it. We leave in the morning.” I’d rather leave now, but I can still hardly move my right shoulder.

A dark and lonely house isn’t how I want to spend tonight. There’s no way I can even sleep in our bed without her.

The couch will have to do.

I couldn’t wait until morning. All I did was toss and turn, wishing Hope was in my arms. Dispersing firepower was an assembly line with Alpha and the other half-breeds helping.

Then, the woods were flying by.

Lucky took a few sets of eyes with him to check for cameras and traps. Knowing that the trails were probably watched made it easier for them to focus their efforts.

And they're efficient. There's a line of broken and sprung pitfalls.

We're nearly to the last hill before we reach the dam. It's been slower running through the woods versus nearer the lake, but it would be easier to spot us coming from the water.

It doesn't matter if they see me now. I'm close enough to smell her. Her scent hovers with a cloying, sickly sweet one. The same that was on the breath of that short bearded fuck who took her.

He wasn't lying about an illness. Wafts of it hang in the air like a cheap perfume.

"There's a high point that would work." Alpha turns his head and veers to the left at a slow lope. It's four of my strides to equal one of his.

This is ideal. A scrubby knob that sits almost a hundred feet higher than the dam village. I can see easily across the length. The distance isn't the best at almost six hundred yards, but I think it will work.

I have bullets to spare.

The pack dogs have already unloaded the rifles and ammunition. Food for weeks.

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“I’ve sent twenty of my best to go south and cross the river to the other side. We can keep them penned in, it’ll be easier to get her back.” Alpha sits back on his massive haunches and his tongue lolls between his teeth. “Anyone who tries to leave becomes a snack.”

“I’m glad you’re on my side.” Binoculars are at the top of my bag. Wiggling over the weathered rock, I take my first real view of where they’re keeping my girl.

It’s a shanty town. A collection of sheds and old travel trailers are parked in rough square patterns. Garden patches intersperse the open areas.

How do they survive? There aren’t many farms in the surrounding areas. They must get most of their food from the lake.

Well, that’s not ideal. It will be harder to starve them out if they have access.

I guess that’s where I’ll start, picking off the anglers. There’s at least twenty sitting out there along the edges and a few more in boats.

Before I start anything, I need to make sure they have her.

As I watch, a distant howl breaks through the mid-morning chill. All the heads of people I can see turn in the direction.

They’ve been warned.

“The other team is in place.” Alpha stretches out on the warm rock nearby. “Waiting

is the hardest part.” His amber eyes narrow as he turns his gaze to the small village below. “And they say we’re the monsters.”

All I can think of are the horror stories she’s shared with me of all the ways her body was harvested.

A shiver runs through my body. She could be in pain as we speak.

My hands itch. I’m not sure if it’s with the longing to touch her, or because I’m sitting her idly on my stomach while she could be in there being cut apart.

The only thing going for me is that the little town of squatters looks like such a shit hole, they likely won’t have the ability for organ transplants.

But, that still means they’ll be draining her.

Over. And. Over.

Bile rises in my throat.

The sourness in my guts doesn’t wane with the daylight. Even as the chill of night settles over me in a thin frost, I watch for her.

I have narrowed it down to a single building. There’s a lot of activity in and out, with quite a few people rolling their sleeves over a bandage around their elbows as they leave.

To not drop them in their steps takes an act of willpower I never knew I had. But, it too is fading with the warmth.

I need her back. I crave her body pressed against mine. To hear her giggle and see

those bright green eyes light up when she catches me staring at her.

What do we have here? A short silhouette waddles past the lights. The profile looks right. It isn't until he stops to talk to a tall lanky guy that I get a good view.

That bearded asshole who took her away. My first solid confirmation I'm in the right place.

Daybreak can't come fast enough.

Chapter 20

Hope

Murky light comes in through the dirty windows. Or, maybe it's just the fuzz inside my head that makes it seem that way.

Whatever is in their nutrient solution sucks.

I feel weak. Like after I was in the bear trap.

But, Michael isn't here to make me feel better. He'll never be again.

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Letting my lids fall heavily back over my vision doesn't help. If only I could block out the world so it won't exist. Maybe when they pull every drop out of me, I'll finally forget to hurt.

It hasn't happened yet. The lump in my throat still feels like a rock that tears jagged fissures into my chest every time I picture him laying on the ground as I was pulled away.

What's the point of trying to escape? There's nothing out there for me. I'll just be captured again by someone else who thinks they're doing "the right thing".

No one gives a shit about me. Just what they can get from me.

Except Michael. He just wanted me. The person. Not the object.

The creaking door signals someone new. Must be a change of the guards.

If only I had a little bit of play in these restraints, I'd be able to escape.

Their improvised ties ironically work better than the fancy ones the Institute has.

"Hey, doc. Good morning." Kyle pulls his feet down from where they were propped on the table.

Well, look who took some of their own medicine. The man that was white haired and gimpy yesterday walks with his shoulders back and dark brown locks scattered with gray across the top of his head.

I'm so fucked. They'll never let me go.

He came prepared. Pulling a large syringe out of his pocket, he taps into the line running out of my elbow and draws himself a full dose of blood.

"I'm doing very well, Kyle." He speaks facing me, but without even acknowledging my presence.

"Hey, ya know, if you like your little drug hookup, you might want to consider a better nutrient solution. Or is your plan to just suck me dry and toss me out?" If he moves just a little closer, I might be able to bite his nose off.

His bushy dappled eyebrows bunch on his very less-wrinkled face.

"Let me make this easy, your little bump doesn't last. It's only temporary. If you want a supply, you gotta feed the beast. Asshole." Being drained actually sounds like a better option.

I already feel hollow.

His lips thin, but he doesn't reply. Only steps back and pulls up his sleeve, pushing the thick needle into his own arm.

He would look fabulous with Alpha's jaws closing over his head.

"Fine, whatever. At least let the kid go." I can't believe they've kept the scrawny toddler here. "Bring him back to his mom." It's the only noise he makes, a soft whimper calling for her.

When I was at the Institute, it was bad enough hearing them cry. I never had to see them.

This? It's a new form of torture. Being so close and not able to pat his little hand. Talking to him doesn't seem to help.

Frankenstein here won't even check on him.

"His mom's dead." Kyle stands up and swallows the last of his drink. "She died trying to keep him from helping us. He's saved a lot of lives."

"You're serious. You fucks killed her just for what little bit of healing he has? I hope this dam breaks and you all drown." Where's an old fashioned cataclysm when you need one?

He shakes his head as he grabs the doorknob. "You wouldn't understand. If you had seen the suffering, the pain, you'd think differently. If it was your own family, you'd do anything to help them."

"You murdered my family!" I hope my scream carries with him when he slams the door. He took the only person who ever cared for me.

A commotion outside has the mad scientist doctor rushing towards the door when it bursts open, pushing him backwards into the room.

"Doc! Del got bit!" Two men drag a limp third person between them. They cross the room to another empty stretcher and lift the injured person on it.

Blood and torn flesh hang from his thigh.

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The gray haired leech snaps on a pair of rubber gloves and moves to inspect his new patient. “What happened?”

Both men start talking at once.

But, I get the gist. Wolves attacked their vehicle. He’s the only survivor.

My pack. It has to be. They’re the only ones for miles.

A surge of excitement powers through me. Alpha came for me?

My new mission in life is to feed every single one of these damn dam people to the dogs.

“This is the best day of my life.” Leaning back, I look at the ceiling with a little glimmer of happiness.

“What is wrong with you? We just lost two good men and this one is badly wounded.” Mr. Mysterious Number One yells at me from across the room.

A smile teases up my lips as I remember what Michael promised me.

His hellhounds are coming for me.

Everyone is nervous and I love it. The door never rests on its hinges as people come in and out to talk to the man on the stretcher.

It took nearly a pint from me to close his wound.

He must not be anything more than human. It took Michael only a fingertip for him to heal from a gunshot.

A twinge goes through my belly. I still regret pulling the trigger. But, not so much since it led to our truths being revealed.

What I wouldn't give to have his special kind of poison burn me again.

Near evening, an alarm blares from outside.

Shit, it's loud.

JD and Kyle jump up from their seats at the table.

Well, JD doesn't jump. He heaves. Then scurries. Like a rat.

The wounded one sits up and pulls his lines free from his arm. He actually glowers at me like it's my fault there's an insanely intense noise before he follows them through the door.

Are those gunshots? Some are close, others are farther away.

Screams. Yelling.

I'm finally alone. My hands are bound so tightly I can't move them. I try anyway. Jerking as hard as I can fails to gain me the right angle to pop my thumb out of joint.

Tears of frustration burn down my cheeks as I twist and pull.

This is my only chance.

The strap around my chest keeps me from being able to reach my hands. I'd gnaw them off if I could just reach them.

Inches. Freedom sits close enough I can reach it with my tongue.

Adding my own scream to the cacophony outside doesn't seem to fix my problem, but it makes me feel better.

JD blows in through the door, his face red and his pistol drawn. "We gotta move you someplace secure." Handcuffs appear in his hands as he starts unbuckling my wrists.

As soon as one is loose, I rip it out of his hand and try to claw at his face. "You can kiss my ass! Let me go!" My nails connect and leave a furrow down one of his ruddy cheeks.

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Anger darkens his features as he bats my hand away. “Listen, I’m trying to help you. There’s wolves attacking the town. I need to keep you safe!”

“I’m safer with them!” I try to keep my wrist away, but he grabs it and fastens one of the cuffs to it.

Leaning over, he links it to my other arm before undoing that belt.

“Alpha! I’m here!” Putting as much strength into my cry as I can, I give up fighting and focus on screaming.

When my feet are cinched together, he slides me off the stretcher. These stupid leg ties limit my steps to awkward little hops.

“Come on.” JD pulls my elbow, half leading, half dragging me out the door.

Kyle nearly collides with me, his brown eyes wide and wild. He glances down at us then pushes past. “I’ll get Connor.”

Finally, I learn the kid’s name.

Leaving the dim room, the craziness outside is a shock to the system.

Long furry bodies weave between the buildings. Snarling and growling mix with the yelling and gunfire.

“Alpha!” My voice cracks.

Please find me.

JD turns and smacks me hard across the mouth. “Shut it. Now move!”

No.

I let my legs go out from underneath me. If he’s in such a hurry, he can drag me. There’s no way I’m willingly going to run.

“Fuck.” He wheezes as he takes hold of the metal chain between my hands and starts to tow me across the rough ground.

I try to dig in my heels to slow him even more.

Until Kyle appears and lifts them into the air.

“I got this end, let’s go.” He picks me up just high enough that the small of my back tears into every bump and rock.

Snarling from the corner of the building stops JD.

I can’t see what’s going on from where I’m hanging between them.

But, I think Kyle just pooped himself.

Twisting my body might make one of them drop me. I do my best impression of a jump rope and writhe as hard as I can.

A second growling sound joins the first. Every time I jerk into a new position, I catch another glimpse of one of the two wolves slathering just feet away.

“Help me!” Kicking at Kyle, my legs fall free with a painful slap.

He reaches down, but a giant dog leaps forward to strand over me, striking at Kyle’s hand.

Kyle isn’t as dumb as he looks. Smartly, he backs away, hugging the toddler to his chest.

My furry savior turns and latches a hold of JD’s thick arm, shaking it hard enough that my hands fall free and I get sprayed with blood.

It makes my heart go pitter patter to hear his cry of agony.

Bouncing my head off of the ground when he released me wasn’t as fun.

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My knuckles no sooner brush the earth and they're ensnared in the hot muzzle of the animal who rescued me.

Too bad my poor tailbone is still bouncing across the gravel.

A shot goes off too close. Then another. That one hits the creature dragging me beneath it. With a whimper, it collapses on me, crushing me under its huge body. Popping in my chest reverberates through my ears as my ribs break in its dying thrashing.

Shit.

I can't breathe.

With my arms still tangled in its mouth, they're pulled above my head as the air seeps from my lungs.

Bursts of light explode behind my eyes. Being suffocated by the huge carcass of an ally wasn't on my agenda for today.

The noises of battle fade. A pink hue starts to form on the edges of my vision as I gasp emptily at fur.

It's nice and warm here.

Quiet.

Relaxing.

Feeling filters out of my limbs, but in an easy, radiant way. A nest of heat pulls in all the straws from my arms and legs and coils it in my chest.

Like drifting on a breeze, I feel myself fading into peace.

The weight lifts.

A shuddering breath fills my lungs and my ribs shift into place with a pinch.

One amber eye narrows and stares into mine, inches from my nose.

“Lucky. I’m so happy to see you.” His thick fur feels like heaven on my tingling fingers.

“Grab.” His rough voice coughs out the order as he ducks his broad head.

I dig in and knot my hands in the long guard hairs as he slings me to my feet. He’s half carrying, half dragging me toward the closest gate.

More guns go off.

Wait, did I just see a human fall? Did they get shot?

Who’s shooting?

Three more dogs gather around us, but we’re pushed to the edge of the dam closest to the lake. In the darkness, it seems like a void into space beyond the lip.

One of my pack goes down. It takes three men almost their entire magazines.

I'm slowing the wolves, they're matching their pace with Lucky.

Another falls.

"Get to safety!" I let go, my legs give out as I land.

Damned restraints.

Two more shots that sound far away make a man cry out and tumble to the ground.

It must be Alpha. He said once he was in the military before he changed.

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That's incredible. I bet he looks scary.

Let's hope I get to see it.

Crawling on my hands and knees, Lucky tries to take my arm in his mouth.

"No! You need to get away!" As I speak, he yelps as a bullet tears through his hip. But, he doesn't let go.

"Fine, get me to the water, I'll swim." I don't know how, but I can figure it out. It will give me the chance to get out of these cuffs.

Another shot hits him and he releases me. Slobber drips from my arm, but my skin is unbroken.

"Fuck, Lucky! Bite me and run!" Holding my elbow up, I hope he understands what I'm asking.

With a sharp nip, he breaks the skin just beneath my shoulder, tearing off a small piece of skin.

"Good boy. Nowgo!" Turning away, I'm reaching to pull myself up the concrete barricade that stands between me and the lake.

A long nose dives between my legs and launches me into the darkness. The flash of a muzzle up on the hill catches my eye as I fall.

That's my goal. Alpha.

I know the water was around thirty feet lower than the top of the dam, but it's an eternity before I slam into the cold surface and sink into oblivion.

Chapter 21

Michael

It took longer than I liked after the attack on the vehicle to get all the animals coordinated for an assault on the settlement. Late afternoon was hours past the time when Hope should be in my arms.

My heart nearly stops when I see her through the rifle scope. That bearded shithead is dragging her from the door. Then, she's picked up by a tall man holding something in a blanket.

I wish my aim was perfect, I'd shoot them both.

But, I don't want to risk hurting her. At this distance, I'm good enough to get a body shot about every three rounds.

Those odds aren't high enough for me to try. What I can do is start thinning the crowd fighting back.

Four men fall when I see the dogs leap in to rescue her. I barely have a chance to take a small sigh of relief when the wolf who is dragging her falls on top of her.

Come on. Move.

Hope!

Please be okay.

Lucky pushes the dead body off of her and I hold my breath as I watch.

Her thin hands reach up and grab a hold of him.

Whew.

Lining up, I squeeze the trigger on a man raising his own weapon at the small pack that is surrounding her.

It's satisfying when he tumbles to the ground. One less threat.

Fuck. Another dog falls. They're bunched against the side of the dam and I can't see her anymore.

Several men begin to advance, some with shotguns and rifles. The flash of the muzzles stand out as the light fades, drawing my fire.

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I drop another. And then that one goes down.

There's movement near the edge just as I pull the trigger again. I swing the barrel to watch, just in time to see Hope fly into the air over Lucky's head and plummet into the water.

Her arms and legs were bound.

I don't care about the wolves. I don't care about the people.

My crosshairs are focused on the spot where she disappeared.

Five. Six. Seven seconds go by. The bubbles start to dissipate where she went under.

Forty. Forty-one.

Where are you baby?

Panic starts to grow in my chest. How long can she stay under?

Reducing the magnification on the scope opens my field of view. Maybe she's swimming already.

Brown streaks bound out of the left side as Lucky and one other beast manage to escape.

He certainly lives up to his name.

One hundred.

Hope. You need to come up now.

The smooth plane of the water is all I can see. Not a ripple marks where she went in.

When the first human peers over the side, I knock the scope back tighter and take a few quick shots to drive them away.

I don't know if I hit any of them, but the last thing I want is them grabbing her when she comes back up.

Two hundred.

Shit. Why aren't you up?

A bubble of air pulses up a few feet closer than where she went in.

Glancing over the edge of the rock I'm on, there's nothing but boulders beneath me a long ways down. I can't jump.

If I started running right now, I might hit the edge of the lake in four minutes. But, to swim out to her would take me...an hour?

Fuck.

Hope.

I need you.

Five hundred.

Pain tightens like a clamp around my chest. She can't have gone through all of that to drown? Can she?

She's my only happiness. The candle in the darkness.

My one in a billion.

One thousand.

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Screw the rifle, the binoculars have a broader view.

Bigger and bigger patterns I weave across the surface. Checking each bank as far as I can see. The few boats that are nearby have all twisted so I can see both sides.

Two thousand.

That has to be it, she's hiding by one of the boats until she can swim free. I make it a point to memorize every single chip and stain on the hulls of each one.

Not an errant wave. There isn't as much as a finger showing near any of them.

Ten thousand.

I'm not sure if I should keep counting.

A hollow ache begins to consume me as I watch the darkness. I can't see anything but the lights reflecting off the water in tiny patches near the dam.

Have I lost her?

Was my only chance at joy so fleeting? It's a cruel twist of fate to drop perfection from the sky and have it ripped from me so soon.

It feels like my ribs are being split apart and Alpha himself has my heart in his claws, shredding me slowly from the inside out.

I'd endure being shot a million times to never have this agony again.

A thin sliver of a moon splits between the clouds when I hit twenty thousand. There's just enough light sprinkled across the water to keep searching.

I'm not leaving until I see some sign of her again.

The frost settles heavy enough I pull the blanket over me. It's going to be a long night.

Twenty five thousand seconds. Almost seven hours have passed when I hear Alpha's heavy footsteps.

And a strange chattering sound.

"Here." His deep voice is quiet. I almost feel what he says rather than hear it.

"What? I'm busy." I don't want to look away. There's a chance still. Right?

"Mikey?"

Her.

How?

I levitate from the ground and run to the giant creature. He holds a bundle against his chest that shivers within his arms.

"Hope?" I pull her to me. I can't believe it. She's alive. And soaking wet.

It's freezing out here.

Her teeth are rattling together almost loud enough to cover the sob that escapes her throat. Cold fingers thread themselves around my neck and into my hair. “I thought you were dead.”

“No, baby. I told you I’d come and get you. I always will.” My lips find hers in a chilly kiss. “Let’s get you warmed up.”

She wobbles on her feet when I stand her up, but dutifully holds up her arms so I can strip the shirt off of her. Her wet pants cling to her hips and she folds her arms over her belly as she shivers.

But, she’s here, with me. An agonizing weight has been lifted.

My own clothes shed much faster before I scoop her up and cover us both with the blanket.

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She's an ice cube against my body. It almost hurts how cold she is.

"Hope. I want you to know, it tore my heart out when they took you." Folding my legs over her, I wrap her tightly and will my own heat to seep into her. "I watched the water. How did you survive that?"

She hiccups and snakes her arm around my ribs, burying her ear against my chest. "I learned a few things about myself today." Her voice is muffled beneath the sleeping bag. "I think the biggest one was, I found out how much it hurts to lose someone you love."

The knot in my throat grows making it hard to swallow. Digging her face out from against me, I frame her cheeks with my hands so I can look into her eyes, flecked with the reflection of the moon. "Did you just tell me you love me?"

Her bottom lip folds between her teeth as she gives me a small nod. "It hurt so bad seeing you fall. I've never felt that much pain. I really thought you were gone." Hot tears roll against my thumbs.

The chill of her toes on my calves sends a tingle through me. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again." Tasting her feels like the first time. Soft, tender, and so sweet.

My cock swells against her thigh. "You're mine. I'm the only one who gets to touch you. I'll kill anyone who lays a finger on you. No more pain, baby. I love you, too. So much, I'm not ever going to let anyone hurt you again."

Her breath catches and she tugs my shoulder until I'm over her, caging her with my

arms. How can someone so small, be so fucking tough?

“Warm me up from the inside, Mikey. I want to burn.” She traces her nails down my back, tugging my hips to settle between her thighs.

My palm runs a heated trail down her side to cup her ass, tilting her waist so the head of my engorged dick presses against the hottest part of her body.

It only takes a few shallow movements of rubbing myself along her drenched pussy to spread her slick juices over me. We both sigh when I sink into her.

This is where I belong. Buried deep within her clenching muscles. My tongue savoring every inch of her smooth neck. Feeling her heels dig into the back of my knees.

She’s where I feel alive. Whole. Completely wanted.

Soft moans escape her lips as my mouth chases the flush of warmth running up her throat.

Those are the sounds I want to hear forever. If she screams, I want it to be my name in passion. “Tell me again.”

“I love you.” Breathlessly, she arches her chin up, exposing the delicate skin to my seeking tongue.

Faster, I thrust into her. Knowing I hold her heart, as she does mine, sends a flood of fire through me.

She’s my gravity. My very soul longs to bind myself to her. I never again want to feel the hopeless void of space, the emptiness of the universe without her.

Her legs tremble around me as her moans turn into short pants. She digs her nails into my back, urging me faster.

It's so hard to hold back. My belly tightens and my nuts begin to spasm. Grabbing her by the back of the head, I raise her lips to meet mine, crushing our mouths together as her body clenches down on my cock in a seismic violence.

My legs jerk between hers as I jet my own climax deep within her, ripping my face to the pale moon to roar out my ecstasy.

A symphony of howls join my cry, their long notes echoing from the hills.

Chapter 22

Hope

The flames of his desire burn deep inside of me as we cling to each other, quivering in the aftershocks.

He loves me, too. For who I am.

The mournful cries of our pack surrounds us. Knowing what they sacrificed to save me brings fresh tears to my eyes.

“Hope, baby. Please don't cry. You're safe now. We're going to leave at daybreak and get the hell away from here.” Michael still covers me, the furnace of his body cooking out every chill within me. He props himself on his elbows, his face silhouetted against the soft light of the clear night sky.

“We can't leave quite yet. There's one thing we need to do.” It's been gnawing at me.

“Yea, you need to tell me how you survived the lake.” His hot lips nuzzle the sensitive skin beneath my ear lobe sending sizzles through me. “I counted every second you were under water. Twenty five thousand, Hope. If you can hold your breath thatlong, I’m going to have so much fun fucking your face.” His belly shakes against me with laughter.

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His dick twitches within me as his hips begin a slow gyration between my legs.

The thought of him choking me with the full length of him down my throat has me squirming deliciously against him.

“Funny story. Remember I learned a few things about myself? Yea, apparently I can breathe underwater.” The memory of those first few moments of sheer terror as I lost the last of my air, the onrush of the freezing lake pouring into my lungs, will be long ingrained in me.

His groan rumbles through me. “Mmm, you never cease to amaze me. You’re adding all kinds of new things to try next time we go swimming.” The strokes he makes with his hardening cock get longer, pulsing against the ember of my last release.

A shiver runs through me. “I’ve had my fill of deep water for a while. Bonus point, though. I did teach myself to swim while I was down there.”

“Jesus, Hope. You didn’t know how to swim? Why would you choose the lake? Lucky was going to get you out.” His hand works down to my breast and finds my nipple with a hard pinch that makes my hips jump to meet his. “I should spank you so hard right now. But, I don’t want to stop what I’m doing.” He growls against my throat and his sharp incisor finds the lobe of my ear in a delightful nip.

“Lucky was shot twice. Did he make it away?” Fear rockets through me. What if he died after rescuing me?

“He’s fine. He isn’t hurt at all.” His hair tickles my cheek as he shakes his head. “I

don't know. Maybe he was shot. I was so busy watching you I didn't notice." Michael leans back, driving himself deep. "Hope, he can't heal that fast. What did you do?"

It's getting harder to think clearly as he churns me closer to another brink. Wrapping my heels around the hard globes of his ass, I just want to think about him. Not the dogs. "Nothing. Just told him to take a bite."

His hot hand wraps behind my knee and he folds it down to my chest. Rising above me on his knees, he pins my leg against my sweat soaked skin.

When the sting of his palm lands across my upper thigh, it isn't the brief snap of pain that surprises me. It's the raging fire which convulses me into a shuddering climax that ambushes me.

"Holy shit." His hands fall to either side of my hips as his cock erupts into me, scorching me into a level of intensity I've never had.

My entire body quakes, seizing his as if I'm going to swallow him whole.

"My girl likes to get spanked." His eyes reflect the distant lights of the village below us, glowing with fervor as his canines poke from his lips in a wild grin. "I fucking love it." Dropping his head, he sucks one of my tight nipples into his mouth.

Finding his long ears with my fingers, I stroke the length of them, reveling in the tremor that runs through him.

"There's one more thing." I'm not sure if he's going to like this.

"Anything, baby." He talks through his teeth that are firmly latched over my breast.

“We need to go back into the town.”

The suction he had on my sensitive bud ends as he raises his face to hover over me.

“That’s not happening. If I go in there, I’m killing them all for what they did.”

Good.

“Except one. They were using a toddler. He’s what they’ve been leeching off until they found me. We need to rescue him. I don’t think I could handle knowing I’m walking away from someone else having the same life I did.” I’m crying again.

Connor’s tiny pleas for his mommy still chime through me on a torturous repeat.

“Fucking monsters.” His weight settles back over me onto his elbows and his lips latch onto mine. “No one deserves what you went through. Maybe one day we’ll grow the pack large enough to march on Chicago.” The cool tip of his nose traces along my cheek. “There’s only one problem. They’ve reinforced their gates. They’ll be prepared this time.”

“I had a lot of time to think about this while I was stuck at the bottom of that lake waiting on my hands and feet to heal.” It’s hard to break limbs underwater to wiggle out of the restraints. I think it took me the better part of an hour to even free myself.

“What do you have in mind?” He snags the corner of the blanket and pulls it back over his shoulders, huddling me beneath him against the cold early morning.

“Well. I don’t really think you’re going to like it.”

Chapter 23

Michael

“Absolutely not. I’ll never tell you that you can’t do something, except this time. Want the moon? Done. Want me to wipe the city of Chicago? In a heartbeat. But, this? Jesus, Hope. How can you ask me to do that?” She has me so riled, my cock goes flaccid and slides out of her. I turn over and lay next to her, my elbow covering my eyes against the lightening sky.

“It will work, Mikey. I promise. And, I’ll be okay. You know it.” She rolls on her side, her warm hands feathering through the fine hairs on my chest.

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“Fuck, Hope! How can you ask me to do that?” Pinching the bridge of my nose doesn’t make the terrible pain behind my eyes disappear.

My stomach rolls at the thought of what she’s asked.

“That little boy deserves to be with people who don’t ask him for anything more than to be him. Please? Help me save him from a lifetime of torture.” Her tears drip onto my chest and roll down my shoulder. “No one even comforts him. Not even a touch. I know you can relate to that.”

She’s right. And, I’m frustrated that she knows that will work on me.

A lifetime of growing up isolated and alone. Being looked at as different is something I’ll never wish on anyone. At least I had my mother long enough to remember what she looked like.

That little boy won’t even have that.

God dammit.

My guts churn as I try and think of any other way that this could work.

But, I can’t. And, truth be told, there’s no way I could ever deny her.

I’d walk through fire for her.

“You get to pick how you distract me.” Her fingers walk down the trail of hair on my

belly and slide under the blanket. When she closes them over my nuts, my groan tells her she's won.

She sucked out the last of my hesitancy before we napped through the early morning hours. It just felt so good to hold her, I slept better than I have in days.

Alpha passed the plans through the pack and they gathered near the base of the precipice we've been staying on.

I'm glad the dam village has been so busy dealing with the aftermath of our attack yesterday, they haven't put much effort into keeping tabs on us.

Finding the right piece of wood didn't take long. There are some old rounds from a fallen tree that looks like someone cut it years ago and never recovered.

The weathered bones nearby explained why they failed to complete their task.

It's a harsh world we live in.

Getting my makeshift camp fastened up, my stomach rolls as the time to start creeps closer. It goes against everything I want to do.

The bags and equipment are stashed to easily retrieve when we leave. We haven't decided where exactly we're going next, but Alpha said he has some ideas.

We just have to survive tonight.

Hope pulls me close and turns her face up to me. The iridescence of her green eyes shines in the afternoon sun. "It's time, baby. I need to be close enough before it gets too dark to see."

Doubt is a cold veil. I don't know if I can do this.

Sliding my belt from the loops and draping it around my neck, I give her a smile that theoretically exudes more confidence than I'm feeling right now. "Take off your shirt." The only way I'm going to survive this is if I can somehow stay in the headspace that I'm in control.

Otherwise, I may break down. She doesn't need that. I want her to be able to rely on me.

However hard it is.

She steps away, seductively shifting her hips as she slowly loops her shirt over her head. "Like this?" Her hands work their way under her full breasts, pinching her own nipples as her heavy lidded eyes watch me unzip my jeans.

"Yea, like that. Now your pants." I didn't think I could get hard, knowing what's coming, but she brings out a lust in me that's impossible to tame.

She turns away and bends at her waist, perking her ass into the air as she lowers her khakis an inch at a time.

Palming myself, it takes all of my willpower not to rush forward and impale her on my throbbing cock. But, her little strip tease is hitting all the right buttons.

Fuck, she's sexy.

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Her fingers appear between her bare legs, spreading the lips of her glistening pussy. “How’s that, baby?” Peeking around her own thigh, her cheeks are flushed as she arches her back, spreading her thighs wider for me.

My dick leaks across my thumb as I squeeze myself, trying not to come just watching her. “Get yourself nice and wet so I can get a running start.”

Falling to my knees behind her, my mouth is inches from her exploring hand. The lure of her sweet scent makes me salivate more than any meal.

I’d rather eat her.

“That’s it, use those fingers and let me taste you.” My palms follow the smooth contour of her thighs until my thumbs meet at the center of her divine lotus she’s opened before me.

Willpower escapes me.

Devouring is an understatement. My tongue works its way along her dripping slit, battling with her fingers for ownership of her hard little clit.

Her whimper tells me I’m winning.

Relinquishing the sensitive victory, I plunge as deep into her as I can. Feeling her quiver and tighten makes my cock bounce in anticipation.

The very flavor of her has me groaning as I lap up the dripping desire that tries to run

down my beard.

With a throaty moan, her knees quiver and give out from beneath her. Falling forward, she braces herself with her hands.

My jeans slip to around my thighs as both of my thumbs flare her apart so I can move my mouth higher to the puckered ring of her ass.

“Oh, my god.” Her mouth muffles into her forearm when I circle and push my tongue into her for the first time.

“You said I could do anything to distract you.” Running my finger up her soaked pussy, I slowly slide the tip into the tight hole.

“I did.” Breathlessly, she grinds against me until I’m up to my knuckle.

Fuck, I’m almost losing it. There’s no way I’ll last long as snug as she is. My thumb disappears into her pussy and I slide a second finger into her ass, rubbing the three together.

She cries out, her head tossing back. I have to fist the head of my cock to keep from squirting all over.

Her body has me locked down, clamping the feeling from how hard she’s coming on my hand.

“Are you going to be a good girl and let me fuck that ass?” I have to. Every fiber of me is yearning for it.

Her panting voice tumbles under her belly. “It’s yours, baby.”

I raise up and line up with her, rubbing my aching dick up and down her pussy, dousing myself with the slick juices of her orgasm.

The belt slides from my shoulder and I thread the loose end through the buckle before reaching down and looping it over her arm.

It cinches just above her elbow.

“Are you ready, my love?” The mushroomed head of my cock fights the resistance of her ass before bursting past the clenching muscle.

“Yes!” she screams. A cold sweat prickles over her back as she works her thighs against mine.

Deeper, I sink, letting her move at her own speed.

I can’t breathe. The force of her constricting around me keeps the very air from filling my lungs.

A low moan grows from her chest as she gains ferocity.

As my belly slaps against the perfect mounds of her ass, her head raises to the sky and she looses a guttural scream that rips my release from me. Fire erupts from my cock as she milks streams of burning cum out of me.

My hand closes around the wood handle of the ax. With my balls still spasming and her body pulsating around me, I drop the blade on her extended arm.

Chapter 24

Hope

Sensory overload doesn't begin to explain what I'm experiencing.

The endorphins and sensations of Michael's body dominating mine almost overwhelms the agony of my severed arm.

He slides out of me and tightens the belt, stemming the flow of blood that's spraying over the ax head.

"Shit, baby. Are you okay?" He gathers me against him, curling me onto his lap. "I still can't believe you made me do this." His gentle lips find my temple as he rocks me slowly.

A metallic taste thins in my mouth. I must have bit myself.

My head moves up and down, shock still keeping words away.

He strokes the short hair above my ear. "Please don't ever ask me to do this again." His chest rumbles when he talks.

With morbid fascination, I see the fingers on my disembodied hand flex and flatten.

His arms hold me so firmly I can't move. Listening to his heart beat, I close my eyes and just let him comfort me.

The pain lessens and disappears, but my desire to move from his grasp is non-existent. Is it so wrong that I want him to hold me?

“I love you, Michael.” I want him to know, more than anything. No matter what happens tonight, I need him to never question that.

He leans away from me, fetching a cloth chilled with water. Wiping away the dried bodily fluids, he helps me pull my shirt on against the cool evening air.

“You know, if I ever tell people you’re a squirter, this is the moment I’m going to be referring too.” His baritone laugh shakes us both before he helps me stand.

“Here’s your belt. Let’s hope we never have to use it as a tourniquet again.” Pink skin has covered my wound. It won’t be long until my arm is fully grown back.

“I swear if I do, your ass is going to be so raw.” He playfully swats my thigh before handing me a bag of dried fruit. “Eat extra. Just in case.”

“Yes, dear.” I give him a big wink as I pull up my pants. It’s hard with one arm.

Just as I decide I’m going to wait until I have two hands, he tugs me against him, his fingers diving down to find my clit.

“Let me help.” His hot touch distracts me from the itching in my growing limb.

“You’re my favorite diversion.” I kiss him on the tip of the nose. “But, we need to get going.”

His lips thin as his jaw clenches. “I know. I’m not ready to risk you.”

I thread my new nails into his beard. “I can’t walk away knowing he’s going through

hell.”

Pulling my fresh palm against his mouth, he tenderly kisses it, then the tips of each one of my fingers. “You’re going to make an amazing mom to him. He’s going to be the luckiest kid in the world.”

That stops me. Mom. Is that what I’ll be?

Shit, I’m crying again. “Ready to be a daddy?”

His tongue plays over his elongated canine. “You can call me Daddy anytime.” Reaching down, he pats me on my butt. “Let’s get this over with so we can play house. Hmm. Maybe doctor, but less blood next time.”

The water isn’t any warmer today as I cut through it far enough below the surface that no one from the dam can see me.

There was an intake pipe I ran across yesterday that feeds into a lower room. I know I can fit into it. Thick windows under the water gave me an unexpected view of the interior of the dam. And, the illumination I need to pinpoint where I’m going.

It’s empty. Good.

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Slipping into the flow of water, it pours into a wide trough that feeds to the far spillway.

Getting inside was the easy part.

Lightly tiptoeing up the wide steel staircase, it's a pleasant discovery to see the heavy double doors are propped open.

When they dragged me in a couple of days ago, I noticed something that didn't seem as important at the time.

But, now, it's my goal.

This isn't something I could do last month. It's a skill I never would have learned without Michael.

How to start a fire using flint and steel.

The big pile of split wood that is centered near so many of their trailers will make the ideal point of chaos. Hiding behind it, I'm just about to strike the first spark when I hear low voices getting closer.

Shit.

Go by. Don't stop.

Thankfully, they listen to my inner plea.

It takes me three times to land the ember on the tiny pile of sawdust.

When I bend low and blow on it, my lips pull up in a grin thinking of all the dirty things Michael would say right now.

I bet he's fidgeting at the gate waiting for me.

Just a couple more minutes.

Alpha said there were enough nibbles off of my arm to give him and fifteen dogs a leap in their healing ability. Having virtually invincible allies will be our ace in the hole.

The small flame dances to life and I feel like I deserve a trophy.

What is wrong with me that I feel this excited to burn a village to the ground? Oh, yea. They're evil fucks who kidnapped me, tried to kill the love of my life, and murdered a woman to steal her baby.

Moral dilemma solved.

Assholes deserve to roast.

Pushing the growing fire into the bottom of the stacked wood, it's hard not to feel giddy about how dry it is and how fast the flame eats its way up.

Time to go.

Weaving my way behind campers and shacks, I'm nearly to the large gate when I hear the first yells of alarm.

That stack is nearly thirty feet square. If it catches like I think it will, they're going to have a very hard time extinguishing it before the buildings around it burn, too.

Frantic footfalls pass where I'm hidden. There's garbled shouting before more feet go by in the opposite direction.

Now's my chance.

The cross bar that locks the doors is heavier than I thought and makes a hell of a lot of noise when it clatters free.

"Are you okay?" Michael pushes through the slim opening and rushes to me.

"Yep, let's find that kid." My hand falls into his and I pull him towards the clinic where they had kept me.

"Anyone we need to keep alive?" Alpha asks as he lopez by.

“Nope!” We both answer.

The answering growl is the last we hear before screams shatter through the falling night.

“I’ll go first.” Michael steps in front of me, his pistol drawn. When the door flings open, the doctor leaps from his desk and backs into the corner.

“What are you doing here?” His brown hair flies around his head.

He must have saved a couple of doses for himself.

“Where’s the boy?” Michael points the barrel at the leech’s chest.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The doc says with a smug look.

A single shot through the forehead drops him without a twitch.

We push through to the room where they had held me, searching all the beds.

Empty.

“Shit. They were trying to move me to a more secure place. Maybe that’s where they took him?” I grab Michael’s hand and go back through the center door, past the body of the doctor.

Just as I reach for the handle, it moves within my grasp and pulls away from me.

JD's eyes widen as he stumbles backward. "What the f—"

Michael raises his gun so it sits between the eyes of the short man.

"Where's Connor?" I love seeing the look of shock and confusion on his bearded face. When the moment of recognition hits as he stares at Michael.

"What? How?" The sausage shaped fingers raise, his ruddy palms face us. "How are you alive?"

I catch a smirk tugging up Michael's cheek.

"I came back from the dead for my woman. That's what she means to me." He gives me a soft touch to the elbow, indicating for me to step to the side. "Why don't you come on in here so we can have a little chat?"

JD stands frozen. Sweat percolates from his forehead as he glances at the running people nearby.

My hand finds Michael's chest and I raise onto my toes to loudly whisper. I want JD to hear me. "I think you should shoot him. We can find Connor ourselves."

Michael's palm finds my hip and he smiles. "Anything for you, dear." He drops the barrel and pulls the trigger, putting a hole in JD's fat thigh just above his knee.

The scream reminds me of the lullabies at the Institute. Relaxing at someone else's pain.

He crumples to the ground with an audible thud.

Michael wraps his fingers around the collar of the crying man and drags his heavy

body into the door, kicking it closed behind him.

Handcuffs catch the dim light from their holder on his stretched belt.

“Maybe he does know.” I squat down and yank the shiny restraints free of the writhing man. “You want to live? Tell us where the boy is, and I’ll make sure you heal.”

JD digs his heel into the smooth floor and props himself against the doctor’s desk. “I’m not telling you. If you take him, we’re all dead.”

Michael strides to the corner and yanks the body of the dead old man from behind the furniture. “You’re all going to die anyway. You just get to choose if it’s a bullet or I let my dogs tear you limb from limb.”

“Oh, Mikey. You’re so sexy when you’re threatening.” I straddle JD’s injured leg, bumping the wound with my toe. “Makes me think that JD here wants a touch of your sweet, sweet loving, too.”

The groan from the stocky man tells me he doesn’t quite understand the full weight of my threat. His thick fingers press into his oozing knee as he wheezes short gasps. “You can’t have him.”

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“Do you want me to shoot his other leg, my love? Make him pay for ripping us apart?” Michael’s arm wraps around me possessively, his lips feathering over my neck. Yet, his aim never waivers.

I can feel him getting hard against my hip and it gives me an idea. Turning in his hold, my arms drape around his neck and my teeth find the corded lines of the hollow of his throat. “You know what I think, baby? I think I want to show JD here just how much I love you.” Palming the stiff bulge in his pants, my finger finds the zipper and lowers it slowly until his cock pushes free.

“Hope—” His gray eyes droop as his grip tightens on my waist. “—you’re making it very difficult to concentrate.”

“Well, I think that since JD here made us stay apart, he needs to witness us making up for lost time.” Sliding down his body, I squat over my heels and lick the head of his engorged dick while looking up at him. “I want you to shoot your spicy load in my mouth so I can make him scream.”

Michael tips his head back and laughs as he cups the back of my neck. “I fucking love you.” A groan vibrates from his chest as he watches me take the length of him into my mouth.

“You’re both sick.” JD’s words don’t match his rapt fascination with what I’m doing with my tongue over the tip of Michael’s mushroomed cock.

Michael grunts as he gets closer. His thumb clasps beneath my ear as he thrusts himself deeper into my throat.

“You have about thirty seconds to tell me where the boy is before I come in her mouth.” His thighs twitch when I cup his tight nuts and squeeze.

“Shit. Hope. I can’t—” He loses control.

I love it when he does. Scalding streams of cum explode into me. I keep up the frantic pace, sucking him dry of every drop while his legs quiver in release.

Panting, Michael bends over, pulling himself from my greedy lips and kisses the top of my head. “Last chance, buddy. Where’s the kid?”

My cheeks burn from the inside, filled to leaking with his stinging fluids. Instinct is telling me to swallow, but I let my eyes water through the discomfort.

“Kiss my ass, freak.” JD leans forward, pressing his weight against his bleeding knee. “Just because you gave me a show, doesn’t mean I’m telling.”

Michael strokes my cheek softly. “I think he wants it, my love.”

Turning on my toe, I don’t stand, but just spray Michael’s acidic cum onto the red-faced man.

The initial look of disgust shifts to shock.

Then pain.

His shriek is so high pitched it makes my head ring.

A thud at the door is followed by a low bark.

“Alpha.” Michael’s ears are flat against his skull and winces with every change in

decibel from the screaming man.

Pushing the door open, the great beast stands on his hind legs, a small bundle in his claws. “I found him.” His lips pull back to reveal his long canines in a wolfish grin. “He looks happy.” His amber eyes watch the thrashing man on the ground, blood smeared in a growing puddle under his kicking legs.

My sexy man gives a low chuckle before tucking his softening dick back into his jeans. “We had fun trying to get him to talk.”

Alpha’s chuffing laugh wafts a smell of raw meat into the room. “So, now he’s a seasoned meal?”

I lick my lips to taste the last of my sticky reward. “Make sure to take your time. Thank you for finding him.”

Connor is so light, I think the blanket weighs more than the frail body it's wrapped around.

Pulling the corner back, I get my first look at big brown eyes watching me.

“Hi, little man. You’re safe now. We’re going to take care of you.” My finger traces his shallow cheek.

Michael leans over my shoulder, careful to not touch Connor’s delicate skin. “Welcome to the pack, buddy.” His whiskers tickle my temple as he gives me a gentle kiss. “Let’s go, momma.”

Alpha waits for us to leave before going into the clinic behind us.

The gurgling scream that follows brings a smile to my face.

THE END

Epilogue

Michael

“Come on, baby. Push for me.” I’m so fucking proud of her as her face reddens with the strain.

I can’t stop kissing her sweaty forehead and brushing the long strands of dark hair from her face.

“Mikey. Just cut off my arm, please?” She grunts through another contraction, her belly rippling with movement as she grips her knees higher to her chest.

“Connor? Get your momma another damp rag, please?” I don’t want to leave her when she’s so close. “Baby, you know that me chopping your limbs off is only for special occasions?”

Her teeth grit as she bears down. “It would feel better than this!”

I can feel my ears flip at the approaching footsteps.

“Here, Dad. What else can I do?” His dark hair flops over his worried looking brows as he looks back and forth between Hope and I.

It won’t be long before he’s as tall as me.

“Nothing, son. Keep an eye on your siblings for me. You know how Cole likes to run off with the puppies when no one’s watching.” No one told me how hard it is to wrangle five kids. Soon to be six. The first one was the best surprise we could ever have. We thought our lives were complete once Connor came along, both of us loving him fiercely. Having fought and killed for him, he’s a part of us that no one will ever take away.

Learning we could have our own brought a level of joy that I never knew existed. But, being who we are has brought its own worries.

Especially when they’re raised in the woods with a pack of wolves.

“I guess you don’t want to hear how Sophie just took off on the back of one of Lucky’s pups.” His toe drags across the floor of the small cabin we’re staying in.

The forests have become our home, but a firm roof for times like these are nice.

Hope grunts through another hard contraction and a head appears between her legs.

“That’s my good girl. Just one more hard push.” I feel like we’re getting practiced at this.

In what seems like another life, I remember teasing Angie about Sam and Dani having so many children. Now, I can fully understand why they do.

A purple faced baby boy bursts into the world, his cries filling the bedroom.

Connor’s face breaks into a big grin. “Yay! We’re even again! Three boys, three girls!” He dashes out the door, I’m sure to tell the rest of the kids.

Pulling the squalling infant up to Hope’s swollen breast, I spoon my body around her and our newest addition.

He settles quickly as she pushes one of her leaking nipples into his searching mouth.

My thumb traces his soft cheek. I'm glad to see no reaction. All of our children are immune to the toxins in my body. Three of them even have some spice of their own.

"Does he sting?" My hand makes slow circles on her quivering belly, massaging her until her body heals.

"A little. He's beautiful. Looks just like you, complete with pointy ears." Her emerald eyes look up to me, full of love and tears. "I want more."

"Anything for you, baby."