



# Claiming Theo: Westwood Pride Book 1

**Author:** *Ava Hush*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Theo

I've known about my best friend and his family's place in the supernatural world for years now. It nearly breaks my brain if I think about it too long, so I try and go with the flow. I've managed to avoid the pride functions after the new Alpha took over, not knowing how he would respond to a human – a defective one at that – crashing his pride events. The Walker family has been nothing but great to me though so when Wes asks for the millionth time for me to come with them on their run, I have no excuses left that sound even a little believable, so I accept.

What was supposed to be a run of the mill pride gathering ends up being the night I find myself face to face with the Alpha . . . a lion claiming to be my fated mate. I'm confused and overjoyed but not everyone in the community is, and some are willing to go to extreme lengths to keep us apart.

Should we fight for fate or will should we allow our bond to be ripped apart for the sake of the pride?

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:47 am*

Theo

“I don’t know why you do this to yourself, Theo.” At least my best friend decided to wait until I’m into the final set of deadlifts before starting in on me this time.

“You don’t have to understand it; you just have to not bitch at me about it, Wes. I’m sick of doing this every fucking week.” I drop the bar laden with weights, letting it bounce a bit before stopping it with a press of my hands. I’m usually much more respectful of our building’s equipment, but I’ve reached my boiling point.

Wes just heaves a sigh and shakes his head. I understand his frustration, but I can’t dwell on it. My mom has a couple weeks left, tops. I feel like I have to make these visits every few days to make up for ghosting her for the last seven years; it’s not like the cancer forcing her onto her deathbed has actually erased all the awful shit she put me through when I was younger . . . but none of it matters anymore. I’m trying to come to terms with shit for myself, not just for her.

There might be a sliver of me that hopes she has changed her mind about me over the last few years and that maybe if I had come around sooner, I would have gotten the absolution I have always needed. I know that’s not how this works. I’ve seen time and time again that I will never come first for her, so why do I insist on putting her first now?

The last time I saw my mom before all this, I was seventeen, only a few months before my eighteenth birthday. Her latest boyfriend, Greg, had taken exception to my “attitude” when I spazzed about not being able to find my insulin. We all knew she had taken the money given to her for my prescription and bought either whiskey or

cocaine instead, but he had left me a bloody mess in the living room for questioning them about it . . . all while my mom complained that she couldn't hear her shows over our "roughhousing."

I stayed where they had left me until after the door slammed as they went to get more beer, not wanting to push Greg any further by reminding him I was still alive despite both their efforts. I could move without throwing up, but barely. I dragged myself out of our nice middle-class suburban home and hobbled my ass down the block to Wes's house. The walk I had made no less than a thousand times since second grade and normally only took a minute had taken me close to twenty that day.

Instinctively, I had known my best chance at surviving to graduation was to seek sanctuary with the Walkers. They had always treated me like one of their own, repeatedly reminding me their door was always open. I honestly didn't know if the adults knew much about my home life at the time, though they hinted a few times that their house could be my safe place, so maybe. I doubt Wes would have told them anything since I'd sworn him to secrecy a million times, and he would always pinky swear to not tell anyone anything.

To this day I grin because, no, he had never told a soul. He didn't have to. While I poured out my heart to him on his back deck when life at home inevitably got to be too much, his brothers could hear every single thing I said. When I was younger, it always amazed me how much better I felt after I vented to Wes, and when I returned home, it seemed easier to be there, at least for a little while. I found out after I started living with the Walkers that the older boys would usually pay my mom's flavor of the month a visit after I broke down, which normally encouraged them enough to skip town. Only Greg's stubborn ass had stuck around after a visit from the Walker boys.

When I collapsed on their front porch on D-Day, I thought I would have to lie out there for hours before someone would find me. Imagine my surprise when just seconds after I thudded atop the dark walnut boards, the Walkers' crimson front door

quickly swung open, wreath banging against the surface with the force. I only had enough energy to open a single eye and reach for Tom before my arm gave up and my hand fell uselessly back to the boards. I could have sworn I heard a set of rumbling growls, causing me to try to pry my good eye open again, but darkness swamped me anyway.

I shake my head to refocus on the present. I stare at Wes, taking in his frame and stance. He has a natural grace that I can only attribute to shifters. I still sometimes struggle with the knowledge that my best friend, and everyone in the family other than my puny human ass, is a mountain lion. I call them cougars instead of mountain lions because while they're the same thing, calling his—our—parents and brothers cougars while waggling my eyebrows gives me endless entertainment. I've seen their animals enough over the years that I'm almost immune to giant cats barreling toward me, but it took quite some time to understand that the breathtaking animals are not actually going for my throat; they probably just want to cuddle.

They didn't share their big secret right away. I was with them for months before I even caught on that something was off. Random things that alone could be explained away but that all together looked suspicious as hell. By the time Christmas rolled around and Tom suggested they take me on a walk through the woods, I had been convinced they were part of organized crime and maybe were getting rid of me. When I told Wes of my now-debunked theory later that night, he laughed until he cried, agreeing that the way they talked about pack traditions was weird if you weren't in the know. It had taken them so long to clue me in because they'd had to wait. Sharing your animal form and outing the whole "paranormals exist" thing to a human was a huge fucking deal. To the point that the Walkers had had to get written approval from their alpha, and I'm sure there were background checks and shit before they did so.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Wes asks. He would do it, too, but I don't want the extra stress.

I chuckle. “Nah. I won’t stay long, maybe twenty minutes. Besides, you have a pride run tonight, right? Full moon and all that?” I tease. The moon has no effect on them, but the new alpha, Sebastian, apparently has a sense of humor, because he actually changed the run schedule to match the full moon cycle.

He rolls his eyes and nudges my shoulder. “You should come out to pride lands after you visit Susan. Alpha Westwood has asked to meet you at least a dozen times, anyway, and there’s always a ton of food. Come on, you haven’t been to a run or any other pride event in years. Hell, the last time you were there, we were called a pack, not a pride, Theodore. My parents will start to think you’re ashamed of us.”

I huff at him, protesting his use of my full name, before acquiescing. I’d wanted to hem and haw to tease him but ended up giving in too quickly to pull it off because he was right. Dammit.

I shoot the shit with Wes until I’m done with my workout. He still has tons left in his routine, but I stopped trying to keep up with him in college; he goes hard for hours while I just keep a routine to stay healthy.

After a quick shower I head straight to my beat-up sedan while gnawing on a low-sugar granola bar to keep my monitor from sassing me. I would have stopped at home for a real snack, but I know if I enter my apartment, I won’t leave again tonight, and I have plans I can’t flake out on. My bio mom may not notice if I don’t show up, but Wes and his family sure will. Besides, it is always a good time on pack—fuck, no, it’s pride—lands now. Watching the different types of shifters get together and interact never fails to cheer me up, and I need all the happiness I can get right now.

## Page 2

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Theo

Fuck, today's visit sucked. It also ran late, meaning I've missed a decent portion of tonight's pride run, but I promised Wes I'd come, so here I am on my second plate of barbecue, trying my hardest to convince a new mom to hand over her snuggle nugget so she can eat in peace. I'd have won, too, if people hadn't started to trickle back into the yard and distract me.

Spotting Tom's cougar, I track his elegant lope to the pit I assume the family has claimed for today, laughing at the sight of water guns piled behind a lawn chair. I make sure to turn as he shifts back, pretending that I just need to toss my trash instead of actively avoiding being flashed by my best friend's dad. I know shifters have a different outlook on nudity, but this human right here is easily flustered when there are dicks flopping everywhere.

After giving ample time for Tom to be dressed, I amble over at a casual pace, reaching the pit the same time Wes and Nik break through the tree line, shoving and playing in their fur. They make their way over to us with Mary happily trotting behind. Tom distracts me while they shift and dress by making small talk about the weather of all things, his eyes twinkling with ill-suppressed humor at my obvious avoidance. I would absolutely die if I saw the person I view as a mother in her naked glory, bits out and bouncing around. If I can answer the question about her grooming habits down south, shoot me.

A flash of tawny fur farther away catches my attention. A motherfucking lion is striding over to our pit, shaking out his giant mane. My jaw drops as the lion doesn't stop his forward movement until he's standing directly in front of me with his head

level to my sternum. I squeak a greeting and look frantically at the others, all of whom seem either amused or giddy.

The lion makes a rough sound, almost like a cough, to gain my attention again before he transforms into the most beautiful man I've ever seen. I make a gurgling sound as my eyes take in his naked form, getting stuck on the massive erection bobbing an inch away from my body. Like I'm hypnotized, I can't look away from his dick even though I'm screaming at myself on the inside for looking like a drooling idiot.

"My eyes are up here, beautiful." At least he doesn't sound offended. I have to forcefully drag my gaze up to meet his, cataloguing every inch of sun-kissed skin in the process.

"Hi. Theo . . . I'm . . . That's my name?" Why was that a question? I clear my throat, shake my head, and try again. "I'm Theo."

His laugh is sinful, causing my skin to break out in goosebumps and my heart to beat faster. "It's such a pleasure to meet you, Theo. I'm Sebastian. You can call me Bastian, or whatever you'd like." His eyes contain enough heat that I start to squirm. I know I've heard that name, but since I barely remembered my own, I don't try too hard to place it. He reaches toward me, and his full lips part as if to say something.

"Alpha, here are your clothes. Do you need me to continue to entertain the prospective alpha mates, or will you be joining them?" Cole's gentle baritone snaps me out of my haze.

Alpha? Shit, this is the Walkers' alpha. I must have made a complete fool of myself. Before I can panic more, my mind catches on to the rest of what Cole said. Prospective alpha mates? Pain flares in my chest, and I reach up to rub it away as I finish telling myself to not be any dumber than I have been in the past minute. Of course, as the alpha, he needs to choose a mate for the strength of the pack—pride.

It's only rational it wouldn't be some human with type one diabetes and a truckload of baggage. Obviously. So obvious that there is zero fucking reason for me to be hurt or jealous. For some reason, though, my vision swims and my chest feels like it's caving in. We met literal moments ago, but I thought—it doesn't matter what I thought. I blink rapidly to stave off my tears and smile, stepping back with a wave, ready to run as far away as I can.

“No! No. Please, Theo. Don't go. I can explain. Please.” He ignores Cole's question completely as he pleads with me while jerking his pants on, never letting his deep brown eyes stray from my blue ones. I'm confused and hurt, but I don't know why. I'd like an explanation, and he seems to know what's going on, so I nod but don't move closer, afraid I'll burst into tears or throw myself at him.

He looks pained but continues in a low voice. “I already told them that no one they sent today is my fated mate and that I'm not going to settle for less than my perfect match, no matter how much connecting with another pack would seem beneficial on paper. The other packs know this, but they won't stop sending potentials, and I have no idea why. Some of them I've even met before, so they already knew I wouldn't choose them. I will only claim my fated mate.” His voice drops to a pleading whisper. “I will only ever claim you, Theo. That is, if you'll have me.”

I'm his fated mate? Understanding slams into me, and while I just know my face is stuck on some idiotic expression, I don't try to change it. Holy shit. That's why I had such a strong reaction to him. I've heard of fated mates, as Wes and his family have talked about them before, but I'd thought it sounded like a bunch of fairy tale bullcrap . . . but so did my best friend telling me he could turn into an animal, and that was certainly all true, so now I'm annoyed that I didn't pay more attention.

“Alpha? Are you saying what I think you're saying? Our Theo is your fated mate?!” I can see Mary crying happy tears in my peripheral as she leans into Tom's embrace. The man I've come to think of as my father stands there with a proud smile stretched



across his face.

Sebastian nods hesitantly, likely taking my continued silence as reluctance. I sift through all the small emotions and doubts and focus on the main emotions coursing through me. Elation, curiosity, and arousal. I can tell he's scenting me, because his nostrils flare with every deep inhale.

"Damn, Theo, say something!" Cole breaks my silence, nudging my bicep with his elbow. A low growl sounds from Sebastian, making my body flush and Cole step back quickly, hands raised.

"Can we go somewhere more . . . private?" I'm trying to ignore the growing attention our little group is getting, but the weight of the stares is making me antsy. I just want to be alone with Sebastian. His smile slips a bit, but he nods, holding his hand out to me. I take it and squeeze lightly, trying to convey reassurance even with my jumbled thoughts.

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Bastian

Running with our members is one of my lion's favorite things to do, so I'm beyond frustrated that he's being so pissy. I find myself wrestling for control multiple times just to stop him from ending the run early and going back to the house.

I reach the fallen log we always end at and sit, waiting for the pride to file by. Tom runs by, chuffing a greeting, before trotting across the yard back to his pit. Mary and the boys continue their game of tag, drawing my attention to a lone figure hovering around the Walkers' pit as he tries desperately not to watch the shifters dress.

My lion pushes at me again, wanting to meet the mystery man, though obviously I can guess that this is the elusive Theo. I don't know what I was expecting, but he's absolutely breathtaking. I allow myself to follow my lion's urges and lope toward him.

Halfway to Tom, I catch Theo's scent of vanilla bean and freshly cut wood. My heart rate picks up, and although I don't need my lion's confirmation, his rumble of longing and certainty cements what my soul is telling me. Theo is my mate. My lion's recent behavior definitely makes more sense now.

I shake out my mane, letting my lion preen under our mate's gaze. He looks nervous, and I wish I could slow my steps, but my animal has reached his limit and doesn't stop until he's close to nuzzling our mate's chest.

With one last noise of excitement from my lion, I'm able to snag control and shift. Once on two legs I realize Theo's gaze hasn't left my now fully erect cock.

“My eyes are up here, beautiful.” I try not to laugh.

“Hi. Theo . . . I’m . . . That’s my name?” He shakes his head and starts again. “I’m Theo.”

I lose the battle to keep my laughter inside, chuckling at his adorable introduction. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you, Theo. I’m Sebastian. You can call me Bastian, or whatever you’d like.”

Before Theo can respond, Cole interrupts. “Alpha, here are your clothes. Do you need me to continue to entertain the prospective alpha mates, or will you be joining them?”

My eyes widen as I take in the insecurities and pain on Theo’s face. He looks ready to bolt. I want to strangle Cole for his thoughtless words. He knows damned well none of those shifters is my mate.

“No! No. Please, Theo. Don’t go. I can explain. Please.”

I snatch the pants from Cole’s hands and hurry to dress. “I already told them that no one they sent today is my fated mate and that I’m not going to settle for less than my perfect match, no matter how much connecting with another pack would seem beneficial on paper. The other packs know this, but they won’t stop sending potentials, and I have no idea why. Some of them I’ve even met before, so they already knew I wouldn’t choose them. I will only claim my fated mate.”

No understanding seems to have dawned, so I continue in a whisper. “I will only ever claim you, Theo. That is, if you’ll have me.”

Mary asks me to confirm, so I give a small nod, but the longer Theo just stands there, staring at me, the more I start to panic. I scent him deeply, trying to get a clue as to where his mind is with all this. There are a bunch of emotions, but my lion locks on

the lust and won't let go. If he desires me, maybe we still have a chance.

"Damn, Theo, say something!" my gamma snaps, elbowing him. I growl, not liking the action or tone Cole has taken with my mate. I try to smile at him reassuringly, but it slips when he asks me to show him somewhere private.

The only place we can go is in the house, so I offer him my hand, holding my breath until his soft palm meets mine.

My lion immediately chuffs happily inside of me, content now that we are touching our mate. Theo squeezes my hand and smiles sweetly as I turn to lead us back to the house.

I would normally be mingling with the pride after our run, but I don't think I could stand to wait that long to get my mate alone, anyway, so I'm glad he suggested privacy, even if it means he's letting me down gently. A fissure of worry wiggles its way through me, but my lion ignores my human doubts, practically rolling over to show our mate his belly.

We reach the house, and I continue to weave us deeper inside, heading for the second floor since it's the only place off-limits to the entire pride. At the top of the stairs, I hesitate, not wanting him to think I'm just dragging him off to bed. Make no mistake, I absolutely would ravish my mate if he gave me the smallest indication, but until then I don't want to make it seem as if I just want to get him into bed.

"Bastian? Is something wrong?" His voice is filled with concern and some confusion.

"I, uh—I want to take you to my rooms. They're private, and honestly I want them to smell like you, but I don't want to make assumptions or make you uncomfortable."

He pulls his lips between his teeth, flattening them as he tries to hide his smile. "Do



you have seating somewhere in there? If I get too close to your bed, I might end up jumping you, but I think we need to talk a little first, don't ya think?"

"There are a couple chairs in front of the fireplace. It's not ready to be lit or anything, and I'm pretty sure there are some dishes on the desk in there. I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting—"

"Obviously you weren't expecting your mate to show up randomly at your pack, ahem, pride run, Bastian. I don't care about a little mess. I mean, I'm not the tidiest guy, either, so I won't judge you for not mopping every day."

I grimace. "I have a pride member who cleans a few times a week. I honestly don't have time for anything more than tidying, but I haven't been doing the best job of that either." I relax a little when his only response is a soft laugh and a nudge.

Opening the door to my rooms, I keep his hand in mine as I pull him into the living area. Someone before me had knocked down a wall and made two rooms into one, allowing for a living area and larger bathroom to be added to the master suite. I applaud their decision because it's the perfect place to retire at the end of the night, whether it is strictly for sleeping or if you need to wind down beforehand. It's obviously set up for a couple, with two of everything in each area. One of the walk-in closets is definitely bigger than the other, but its long shelves sit empty. I didn't know if my mate would be into clothing or fashion, and I wanted to keep the bigger one open for them.

We settle on the loveseat, facing each other, our shins pressing together as the cushions sag under our combined weight. My mind races, trying to find the best way to approach the conversation I'm not sure I want to have. He called himself my mate earlier, but that doesn't mean he will accept me and, by default, my pride. Becoming an alpha mate is a big deal, and as a human, he may not want that type of invasive responsibility.

"Hey, it'll be okay." He pats my free arm, drawing my attention. He has such beautiful blue eyes.

I cough and center myself. "You asked if we could talk . . . Did you mean in general or do you want to cover something specific? I'm sure you have plenty of questions, and I will answer them happily. I just don't want to overload you with information you aren't looking for yet."

"Well, I'd like to start with us being mates? That's kind of a huge deal. Are you happy to have found your mate? I know every shifter I've talked to has been almost reverent about fated mates, but I don't know if that was something you were looking for or if I just fell into your lap and took your choice away?" I must look horrified, because he stops talking.

"No, quite the opposite. I've been searching for you for a long time, Theo. I'm a rare shifter to have been born of fated mates who were each born of fated mates. The type of love and devotion I grew up seeing is the only thing I've craved in a relationship. I'm not going to lie to you and say I've been a monk, but I haven't gone into any relationship thinking it would last or gotten too emotionally invested. I knew my mate was out there somewhere and hoped he would look past my, well, past and understand the need for companionship once in a while."

"I won't begrudge you your sexual history, Bas. You had no idea when or even if you would meet me. I promise I understand. I don't want to hear a damned word about them past this conversation, though, unless I am going to meet them. I don't want to be blindsided. Now that I know who you are to me, I find I'm incredibly possessive. That's not like me, so I assume it's a mates thing?"

I give what I know is a wicked grin. "It is. We will both be pretty irrational until I've claimed you. My lion is preening at the thought of you being possessive, so I'm not sure I'd mind if you were jealous over me, even afterward, but I don't think you'll

like feeling that way, so I won't do anything to invoke that response on purpose. That being said, feel free to stake your claim on me anytime, anywhere."

Just the thought of his blue eyes flashing with possession and lust has my cock twitching in my pants. Don't come. Don't come.

"Anytime, really? Even if you're in a meeting with other leaders? How about a conference call and I want to stake my claim in your office right where they can see or hear us?" His voice is sinful and mischievous. I groan at the visual and breathe a little heavier as my erection threatens to bust through the fabric trying so hard to restrain it.

## Page 5

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Theo

Oh, wow, he really seems to like that. I've always thought of myself as a closet exhibitionist, and it seems my mate is super on board.

My rising lust must be apparent, because he groans low, clenching his fists. I know we need to stay on topic, though, so I lean back and try to cool down. I have questions, and I honestly am trying to remember why I need to ask them before I beg the man to mount me like the predator he is. Focus.

"I have diabetes. Is that . . .? Does that change anything?" I have to ask. It's not something I can change about myself, and it's not like it's something we can ignore if it bothers him. I have a continuous insulin pump, for fuck's sake. I still have to check my sugars a few times a day, though I do it through the CGM digital blood sugar reader so it's quick, but it's still a pain in the ass sometimes to remember. I want to make sure he knows what he's getting into.

"What? No! I will love every part of you, Theo. I'm a shifter. A little blood and a needle isn't going to scare me away from my mate. After I claim you, you might see a change with your diabetes since your health will improve, but I'm not sure how it works if it's something you're born with. We can ask a shifter physician, if you'd like . . . but honestly the answer doesn't change anything for me. You're mine, Theo."

Relief washes over me. I didn't think fate would pair me with someone who couldn't handle being with me as I am, but there's always doubt, right under the surface, that my body's inability to create insulin may be a burden to those around me. I get

annoyed at myself for having to watch every single thing I put in my mouth, but after years of being with the Walkers, I know I can find people who don't get annoyed with taking the extra time to think of my dietary needs and that not everyone will react like my mom and her boyfriends did. Hopefully the pack—shit, the pride—will feel the same way. I feel the need to brace myself for the upcoming questions, so I lean forward, placing my elbows on my thighs.

"An alpha mate. Is that just being your mate, or is it like a title? When Cole said it, it sounded like a title or job, but I don't want to assume."

He takes a deep breath and mirrors my posture, leaning forward. "Both. Only an alpha's mate can do the job, so it does receive its own title. You would be equal to me as far as rank within the pride, so they will treat your word as law like they do mine. The only exception is when it comes to security. Any rules I make regarding the safety of the pride are iron clad and cannot be changed unless I do so myself or am no longer physically or mentally able to. Then that duty goes to my successor or the alpha mate, whomever is in charge depending on the circumstance. As of now it would be Grey."

I nod in understanding, though I've never met him either. I do not in any way think I should be in charge of security. I honestly don't think I should be in charge of anything at all, but if it comes with being with Bastian, I'll figure it out.

Not hearing any objection from me, he continues. "As far as the job, it's one you would do naturally. You are in charge of the inner workings of families and individuals in the pride. Non-violent disputes, life changes, things like that. Ugh, I know I'm not explaining this right. Let me try again." He takes a breath and seems to center himself. Maybe he's as distracted by me as I am by him. His voice alone makes me hard, so let's see how many more questions I get in before I break.

"My job as alpha is to create and protect the house and the pride as a whole. To create

an environment for everyone to thrive. As my alpha mate, you take what I've done with the house and make it a home. You focus on the families and people within the pride to help them thrive individually." He pauses, searching my face for some kind of reaction. "I know it's a lot to ask. As a human, even mating a shifter is a huge adjustment, let alone being the heart and essentially the feelings center of the entire pride."

I nod, absorbing the information. I can do that. I enjoy being a touchstone for friends and family, anyway. Bas leans back, done with his explanation and getting more comfortable. He drapes an arm over the back of the chair, and my brain goes offline. I've found my breaking point, apparently. His ramble was endearing and made me want to smother him in kisses. I should have caught that he's more long-winded when he hesitated to just talk earlier and had me ask specific questions. Before he can gear up to fill the silence, I lean forward and kiss him soundly to stop him. I almost lose myself in his kiss before I rip my mouth away, panting hard.

"Bas, I know you would never push me to do something I don't want to do. It's not how mates work, right? And I know I have more questions, and you will no doubt have hours of information to give me before I start doing alpha mate-y things, but is there anything else I absolutely need to know tonight? Anything that can't wait until tomorrow when I can barely walk because you've fucked me into the mattress until dawn?"

His answering grin is wicked. "Have you ever had sex with a shifter before?" At my headshake he continues, voice sultry against my neck as he scrapes his teeth under my jaw. "Lions in nature have a row of three barbs on the underside of their cock that comes out during sex. When we're finally rid of our clothes, you might notice some of my anatomy follows my lion instead of a normal human." He pauses to build anticipation. I cross my fingers, hoping he's going to say what I think he will. "As a lion shifter, when I climax, those barbs will come out and stimulate your walls, pulling your orgasm from you if I'm doing my job right. The barbs stay out, almost

locking us together like a knot for a little while before they relax.”

My body flushes as I recall every smutty shifter book I had obsessed over in high school and college. Okay . . . I still enjoy them now, choosing to read shifter romance above most other genres. I started reading them all the time because I had a dream about being with a shifter, and then I fantasized about what sex with a shifter would be like. Never willing to risk coming on to Wes’s friends in the pride as an experiment, I hadn’t acted on it . . . but I have a mate with some interesting anatomy now, and fuck, that’s hot.

I climb onto his lap, not liking the small distance still between us. ”Will you claim me tonight?” I ask softly. I want him to so badly I ache, but I’d understand if he needs more time. My question must have ghosted over his ear, because he shudders and groans, pulling me down harder onto his lap. Using my hips as leverage, Bas grinds his unfairly covered dick against my also clothed ass and pulls moans from both of us.

”Yes. Please, Theo. Let me make you mine.” He gives me a preview of a claiming bite, clenching the side of my neck hard with his teeth right where it meets my shoulder, stopping just shy of breaking skin. He sucks one hell of a mark there instead before soothing the sting with his tongue.

I melt with the fading pain and answer by tipping my head, giving him more access to my neck. A low rumble starts in his chest, and his eyes flash amber.

“My beautiful mate.” His hands wander from my hips to under my shirt, lifting the fabric and slipping his hands underneath to caress the sensitive skin right under my naval.

I lift my arms to hurry him along, rocking my hips as I do so. He pulls my shirt from my torso with reverence, taking care not to catch the sleeve on the CGM site on my

left tricep. He pauses in his quest to remove my clothing when my front is completely bared to him, eyes fixated on my pert nipples. His tongue quickly peeks out to swipe along his bottom lip, leaving it shiny and so very kissable.

Grinning, I decide to tease him for a second before I try to tackle his pants, bringing my right hand up to tweak my nipples, first one and then the other. I let my head fall back, enjoying the sensations rushing through me, and let loose a low groan. Wet heat surrounds my less tortured bud, startling me enough to snap my head down to see him already looking right at me. The combo of glazed-over eye contact and perfect suction almost pulls my orgasm from me right there on his lap.

The time for teasing is apparently over as I'm lifted and my pants are torn from my body, Bas's mouth never leaving my increasingly abused chest as he also rids me of my plain black briefs. I almost protest his lack of nakedness, but his hand grips my shaft lovingly, squeezing and giving a gentle stroke before he adjusts his grip on my body and carries me to the lavish bed. His mouth latches wherever he can reach, making his way to my mouth, where he scrambles all brain function. Man, my mate can kiss. He sets me down, hunching over to continue our kiss as he positions me right where he wants me with his large, calloused hands.

Bas finally relinquishes my mouth to stand at full height, slipping his sweats down his legs, proudly displaying his body for my excited perusal. I don't dare move from where he's arranged me, but I'm free to drool over his perfect figure all I want. My eyes can't stop taking in every detail, from the golden happy trail to his half-innie-half-outie belly button.

Prowling like the lion he is, Bas gracefully crawls onto the bed with purpose. He moves like he's straight out of a fucking wet dream, hooking the back of my knee into his hand and lifting slowly. He pulls my leg up over his shoulder as he settles onto his stomach, murmuring praises as he exposes the sensitive skin of my perineum and lower. Completely bared to him, I feel my hole flex under his hungry gaze. With



no hesitation, Bas licks a stripe from my ass to the base of my dick, lapping at my balls with a growl. A moan punches from me as I arch up into his mouth. I don't know what to do with my hands, so I take over spreading myself for him, not wanting him to stop for even a second. I get a hum of approval when I bring my other knee up to my chest and tilt my hips to give him easier access.

Bas attacks my hole with barely restrained violence. The vibrations from his grunts and harsh moans just increase my pleasure, reducing me to a babbling mess. Once he's satisfied that my entrance is relaxed and properly sloppy, he raises his head, not bothering to wipe his face. Catching on that I need to be grounded by physical contact and am near tears, he shoves two fingers into my mouth, allowing me to suck feverishly on them as he roots around in his nightstand. I assume and hope with everything in me that it's lube he's looking for.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:47 am*

Theo

Well, double shit. In my defense, I'm dumb when I'm tired, and right now I'm really fucking tired.

A low growl comes from deep inside my mate, and his eyes flash with his lion. "You will not leave me, Theo. Even without Cole's reasoning, I refuse to be separated from my mate because simple-minded people are making rash decisions. They seem to forget that I was named alpha of Westwood for a reason. I won't say I'm eager to face a challenge, but I'm also not going to shy away from it. It's part of being alpha. I'm more concerned with you and your safety."

Damn him for being all reasonable, making valid points. His words do help with the panic that had been growing in my chest, but I don't need to tell him that right now. My mate is an alpha, a lion alpha, no less. I don't know much about shifter hierarchy, but in the animal kingdom, there's a reason lions have the reputations they do, right?

"I'm sorry, Bas. I was just worried. I'm not going anywhere." My phone beeps in displeasure from the nightstand, and I know I'm starting to get low blood sugar. Cole, used to the specific notification sounds and what they mean, turns and starts walking toward the stairs. I get a questioning look from Bas, but Cole starts explaining as he makes his descent.

"That beep means his sugars are trending low. He needs something before he starts feeling weird." He looks back to see if Bas is paying attention. Satisfied, he starts his descent to the main level of the house, continuing his summary of the noises my phone or monitor may make.

”The beeps will sound angrier the longer you wait. The little beep you just heard means snack and pay more attention. Juice is always a good option if he’s starting to feel dizzy or nauseated, but if you can get a snack in him before that, then it won’t swing too far the other way. A medium beep means go straight to a small glass of juice and follow up with a healthy snack, and the shrill repeated beeps means it’s more urgent, so a bigger glass of orange juice or the stupid glucose tablets he hates but always has stashed in his car. I’ll get some stocked here, too, with a mini fridge for your room just in case.

“If the one sounding like a tornado siren goes off, he’s in deep shit and probably needs medical attention—an ER visit is necessary. That one will also send a notification to everyone in the family. I’m sure now that you’re mated he can adjust your notifications to be whatever, but we’ll keep the siren just in case.” He doesn’t stop walking, just sidles up to the commercial fridge when we enter the kitchen and pulls out a yogurt, ripping the aluminum seal off in one go and dropping some fruit on top.

My mate and I watch with amused smiles as he doctors up a parfait complete with granola and nuts before grabbing a spoon and presenting it to me with a flourish. When I move too slowly for his liking, his left eyebrow rises in a demand for me to hurry up and eat. I snicker and thank him, shoveling it into my mouth. So good. Raspberries have always been a favorite of mine, but I never buy them. I can’t help but eat them all in one sitting, which is too much sugar, but there’s a real fear of them going bad overnight, so I always convince myself it’ll be fine . . . It’s not. Same with avocados; I only get them when I’m at one of the Walkers’ houses because the window in which I can eat them is so small and it bugs me to waste any kind of food.

I glance at Bas as I scrape the last of the yogurt-y goodness from the container and see him still watching Cole with a kind of interest. I know it’s not a sexual interest, but I still have to nudge him and raise a brow. Obviously I didn’t do a good job being subtle, because he chuckles at me and Cole looks adorably confused.

"I was enjoying watching Cole in his element as gamma. It's as natural for him as I thought it would be. It actually made me think about our conversation about being the alpha mate and what it entails. Cole would work closest with you on a regular basis, but we do have another position you will need to fill now that we're fully mated."

"Oh? I would fill it? Why not you?" He smiles at my confusion.

"I actually cannot be the one to choose. I can't have a hand in it at all other than giving suggestions for the larger pool of prospects. The position is our alpha mate's beta. That person is your second-in-command for everything. They will not report to me or anyone else . . . only you. They will prioritize you above even me because, as your alpha and your mate, I need that assurance in order to function or let you leave my sight. Normally you could take your time and weigh your options. Maybe even give a few a trial run, but with everything happening right now, I think it'd be best to get someone as soon as possible. You know quite a few people in the pride; do you have anyone who comes to mind right away?"

Oh, wow. "I do, but he's an enforcer right now and I know he's wanted to move up in the ranks. He would make an amazing beta for you someday, Bas; I don't want to be selfish." Okay, I kind of want to be selfish, but I'll understand if I'm not allowed to choose from the existing enforcers or ranking members.

"Are you talking about me?" I whip my head around to the doorway to the kitchen, and lo and behold, my best friend is standing there with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Shut up. Of course you would be my first choice, but I don't want you to resent me for taking more freedoms away from you. It's more restrictive than another beta position, Wes. You'd essentially be my shadow twenty-four-seven, if I understand what Bas was saying correctly."

"Theo, I wouldn't be able to rest if someone else was my best friend's second. I

don't trust anyone outside of Alpha Westwood and our family to look out for you like I can. Plus, it's an honor to be the alpha mate's beta." His sincerity makes my eyes want to leak. Giving into the urge, I jump up and hug my best friend with every ounce of my human strength.

"Nik is also volunteering to watch over Theo until the threats have passed. He said he could be here bright and early before you guys announce to the pride that you're mated," Cole chimes in, making me break my hug with his brother so I can look at him properly.

"What do you mean?" I ask. "You made it sound like everyone already knows, and that that's part of the problem."

"Ah, no. I will be making an announcement tomorrow to the pride, and we'll celebrate our mating properly. I'm not going to act ashamed of my mate, Theo." Bas looks genuinely upset that I would think he's ashamed of me.

"I know you're not ashamed; I just didn't know there would be a big formal thing where I stand in front of a shit ton of people and announce I had sex with their alpha last night." Duh. God, I'm tired.

Cole does what he does best and gently steers us back to the topic at hand. "Since Nik will be here in a few hours and it's still currently the middle of the night, let's get some sleep and get the betas and enforcers together in the morning to hash out a plan. I got some rest earlier, so I'll take first watch, and Wes will take over when you guys get up. I'll sneak in a nap tomorrow to make up for any lost sleep, so don't you worry about me. I want to finish planning the celebration, anyway."

We all agree and shuffle off to do what we're told. Wes takes the only guest room on the second floor with us, waving goodnight before closing the door.

Alone once again, I melt into Bastian's arms, letting the exhaustion wash over me. He kisses my temple before herding me to the bed and stripping us both down. My awareness is hazy now, so I don't track much of what is going on around me. I know Bas will take care of everything so I don't have to worry. With that knowledge I let sleep claim me as I feel the bed dip with my mate's weight.

## Page 7

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## Page 8

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Bastian

I've never been one to lounge in bed, but if this is what I will wake up to every morning, I can see the merits of never leaving our room.

Theo's beautiful body is sprawled like a starfish across our mattress . . . diagonally. I have no idea when he did that, but our blankets are also lying in a heap on the floor at the foot of the bed. I gently drag my fingers along the thin, soft skin covering his ribs, tracing every rise and valley, memorizing every detail. His soft snores only make him more adorable, and my lion starts to chuff softly, almost mimicking his sounds.

We have to get ready to meet with the pride enforcers and betas soon. I've been up for about half an hour, making plans all via text as to not disturb Theo; he had a long day—and night—for so many reasons, and not just the fun kind. I feel another rush of rage at someone threatening my mate and have to clamp my lips together to prevent the growl fighting to escape from my mouth.

To comfort both my lion and myself, I gather our mate from his weird position and arrange him against me as the little spoon. I give in to the urge to nuzzle into his neck and thoroughly inspect his mate mark with my tongue. Theo wakes slowly, thrusting his hips back into me to rub against my erection. I continue to lick every part of his neck and nibble where I can reach, sliding my hand down to his hips to help leverage him against me. His moan is still sleepy and relaxed, and I find I love the idea of him slowly waking up to an orgasm. I wrap a hand over his straining cock and start to lazily stroke him, not speeding up or increasing my grip as he whimpers for more.

My hips move of their own accord, sliding my cock into his crease where it catches

on his rim with every thrust. My precum makes our skin glide together with no friction, and I thank God that as a shifter I've always produced more natural lubrication than a human would.

Theo leans harder into me, panting sweetly and straining toward an orgasm just out of reach. I nip at his ear and encourage him; last night he seemed to be wholeheartedly enthusiastic about my dirty talk.

"Morning, my precious mate. Are you going to come for me? You're so sexy all mussed and sleepy. Once you give me what I want, we can go have breakfast, but I need you to come first. I want to lick every drop from my hand and share it with you. Do you want that, mate?"

That's all it takes for Theo to cry out, arching against me and giving over to the orgasm his body has been desperate for. I continue to stroke him softly to prolong his pleasure as I chase my own. It only takes a few more thrusts into the valley between his muscular cheeks before my own seed sprays over his lower back and ass, barbs pulsing in regret that they have no home to release into.

I make good on my promise to clean his spend from my hand, not leaving a trace behind. Savoring his taste, I use my now-clean hand to turn his face to me and capture his mouth with my own. He moans into my mouth at first contact and proceeds to lick every reachable inch of the inside, making me harden once again. I fear Theo will cause me to walk around with a permanent hard-on, but I am prepared to invest in something to help not scar the kids of the pride if necessary.

--

Cole claps loudly to get the assembled shifters' attention, trying to get the group to focus while they settle with their breakfast of donuts and muffins along our long wooden table. It's a tight squeeze, with the twenty bodies of my ranking members

vying for the sixteen seats left available, each wanting to be closest to where I sit with Theo happily perched on my lap and munching on his breakfast of peanut butter wheat toast, turkey bacon, and eggs. He didn't want to put anyone out by having them make him a special meal, but didn't want to risk being overloaded with sugar so early in the morning, so he made it himself as people trickled in.

“There are seats at the bar, or you can stand. We need to start or there won't be enough time before the rest of the pride gathers.” Cole looks as ragged as he sounds, dark circles smudged under his eyes, and scruff trying to become a full tawny beard before our eyes.

I let out a whistle to help things along, startling Theo. He blushes as I whisper an apology near his ear and gently kiss behind it, making him shiver.

Grey snickers at the lust he must smell rolling off of us, forcing me to shoot him a glare. He rolls his eyes but nods, knowing my human mate might not appreciate the ribbing from the group about our sex life quite yet.

I clear my throat, noticing that Cole has gotten everyone's attention and they are waiting for me to address them. “As some of you may have heard, last night I met my mate. We are fully bonded—” Applause and shouts of congratulations make continuing impossible, so I lift my hand and nod in thanks. “Theo and I are very happy, and I have every faith he will be an amazing alpha mate for our little pride of misfits. That being said, since he is human, there have been reports of unrest, and some have even implied that I will be challenged as alpha because of our bond. There has also been a hit taken out on Theo's life.” My statement is met with cries of outrage and promises of violence toward the culprits.

I smile. I knew my officers and enforcers would have my back, but I flick my eyes to meet Cole's, knowing he will be watching for any emotions outside of the predictable. His face gives nothing away, and it causes a frisson of worry that I may

not have the solid team I think I do.

Pushing those thoughts away, I motion to where Wes is leaning against the wall like he hasn't a care in the world. "Due to the threat, I asked Theo to choose his beta last night. I don't believe that his decision would be different even with years of time to think about it, and I cannot think of a better fit for the role. Wes Walker accepted the position in the wee hours this morning, and I want to take a second to congratulate him."

Wes is pulled into rough hugs and back slaps, all congratulating him on his new position. I see a few enforcers' shoulders relax and realize people had picked up that there was going to be a command change, and some had to have been worried about their current positions and who they would be reporting to. Wes is nearly universally liked, so no one is voicing concern at an enforcer being chosen instead of a beta.

The group turns almost as one as Theo pushes his plate away and pulls his phone out to check his levels. The logo from the app covers his screen while it's loading, and while we don't naturally have a need to know, the commercials everywhere for the reader means there are quite a few people at the table who know what it means. I can't tell if he's oblivious to the stares of the gathered pride members or if he noticed but is choosing to ignore it.

"Alpha, is that . . . but I thought you mated?" Ryker speaks up. I can tell his question is one of confusion and not derision; he's also young, so I forgive him for voicing his concerns like this instead of asking me privately.

My mate freezes in my lap, obviously gearing up to defend himself, but I caress his back and simply address the crowd. "Yes. And yes. Theo has type one diabetes, and based on what his levels have been like since we've mated, we are assuming that the rapid healing a shifter gifts their mate isn't enough to control it. Cole will be sending out info to help everyone understand what to look for."

Theo grumbles, making my chest bounce in an effort to hold back my laughter as Wes chimes in. "Your alpha mate is a grown-ass man and has been dealing with this since he was very young. I doubt you will ever have to use the information Cole will send you, but if the unthinkable happens, we all need to be versed in what to do. None of this is hard, and if he hadn't given himself away like he did, I doubt you would have noticed for years. I have a feeling he was only blatant today because he wanted to see everyone's reaction . . . in case they aligned with those who think he should die because of it."

Looks of horror cover the pride members' faces, and warmth spreads through me at how readily they are to bring Theo into the fold. Ryker's eyes flash with an emotion I can't put my finger on. Nothing negative, but I make a note to talk to him later to figure it out.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:47 am*

Bastian

Watching Theo interact with my pride members so openly makes my heart swell. I've fallen so hard for Theo already, and I know it would be considered too soon to profess my love by human standards, but by shifter standards, it's probably right on track. I sigh, unable to stop it or the dopey look I'm sure is plastered all over my face. He will be such an amazing alpha mate, and I cannot wait to watch him succeed.

Another pride member, Max, interrupts my mooning by booming his congratulations and giving me a firm shoulder grab paired with a slapping-back pat like most of the older generations of our men seem to be fond of. "He's a good one, Alpha. Couldn't have picked a better mate for ya if I'd tried. Congratulations again." I return his smile with a grateful one of my own and nod, thanking him before glancing over to check on Theo again.

Grey leans closer, talking low. "He's doing well, Alpha." I really wish my friend would do away with the title, but he was raised to become my second. It's ingrained in him to address me as alpha, so I don't usually push back too hard. I nod my agreement to his murmured words, waiting for him to continue. "Perhaps you both would be more comfortable if you were sitting together? Wes looks like he's constipated, and I believe it's because he's trying to watch everyone and everything all at once. It will take time for him to slip out of enforcer mode and only focus on our alpha mate."

A laugh escapes me as I see what my second sees. Wes's head is on a perpetual swivel; his smile obviously forced and fake as he assesses the entire crowd for threats against his charge. I wait until his gaze flicks to me again to catch his eye and nod

toward the nearest table. The relief is visible when he catches on. Wes smoothly interrupts Theo's conversation and guides him to the table, arriving well before Grey and me. We had kept a sedate pace, making sure to greet and interact with each pride member along the way, while Wes had been determined not to let anyone slow him down.

I wrap my arms around my mate from behind, pulling him to me until his back meets my abdomen. The need to scent him is overwhelming, and I don't see why I can't scent my mate among my pride, so I give in and bend my neck slightly to bury my face into the delicate skin between Theo's neck and shoulder. My lungs fill with the scent of his arousal and joy, pulling a groan from my chest. My lion, who has been basking lazily all day in the warmth of his mate's affections from the night before, perks up with keen interest.

A shiver works through Theo, betraying his need. My cock thickens, demanding to be closer to my mate than would be socially acceptable. I need him, and I need him now. I open my mouth to suck on the same skin I just scented and look to Grey, knowing he will understand that I don't want to take Theo in front of his family, but I am quickly losing the understanding of why it would be a bad idea. His eyes widen with comprehension, and he whispers something to Wes, who immediately turns to address the crowd.

Theo's whimpering moan breaks any resolve I have to wait for a seamless exit, so I turn him and deliver a scorching kiss before lifting him into my arms. His legs wrap around my waist, and my eyes threaten to close in the face of our combined pleasure, but I need to see where I'm going. I pull his head to my neck, and he happily diverts his focus from rutting against me for his own pleasure to driving me insane with my own. I race to the house, only stumbling once when Theo sinks his teeth into my neck hard, mirroring the spot where his own claiming bite sits. Fuck, I need to run faster.

We make it to the main hall before I turn us and slam his back against the wall. He

moans, baring his neck for me and arching his back. Shaking with need, I latch on, sucking more beautiful marks into my mate's perfect skin. He writhes against me, breath hitching with every thrust against my groin. I know he can feel my length, hard as steel, against his own. I lean back to watch his face overtaken by passion; he's so beautiful in his pleasure. Mouth dropped open, puffs of air accompanying each moan, his blue eyes glassy and unfocused, cheeks flushed with sweat beading his brow.

"I don't know if I'll make it to the bed if you keep looking at me like that, mate, and we aren't alone in the house." I can hear movement in the kitchen, though Theo likely doesn't. His pupils grow impossibly wider, reinforcing my assumption about his exhibitionist desires, and he whines, grinding himself against my erection and licking his kiss-swollen lips. He wants to be watched. I don't know how far that goes, but just knowing people are listening and the threat that they might walk in seems to push all his buttons . . . and mine.

I lean down, notching my mouth behind his ear, and whisper filthy nothings, loving how he reacts to my breath on that sensitive skin. He pants harder, pleading with me to take him. I know I won't allow myself to fuck him publicly until we have an actual conversation about it, but that doesn't mean I can't make him come.

Setting my mate down on his feet, I make sure he can stand before I pull down his pants and briefs to his thighs, tucking the fabric under his balls. Taking a second to admire how his cock bounces and the string of precum connecting his hip and his pretty slit, I groan. Sinking to my knees, I decide I want his bottoms completely off. I want him spread out and bared completely, so I pull them down slowly, giving him time to object. With nothing other than encouraging noises from him, I set the clothes aside and pull one of his legs over my shoulder, making my access to his perky peach of an ass and pretty pink hole easier. The floor won't be comfortable for long, but I look my fill, sneaking in a lick to the head of his pretty cock, taking in his essence before groaning and letting my head fall back as his taste invades my senses.

I place one hand against the wall and the other under his supple thigh, tilting his hips just enough so I have better access to everything I might want in this moment. I waste no more time, lapping at his hole and underneath his balls, pulling loud whimpers from my mate. He tries to thrust his erection, bringing my attention to the part of him feeling neglected. His head is dark pink and swollen, looking close to bursting.

"Please, Bas. Alpha, I need you." His pleas are music to my ears.

Taking him slowly into my mouth, I memorize every vein and ridge of his cock, using my tongue to massage under his swollen head. His keening cry draws my gaze up his lean body until I'm staring into my mate's eyes. I continue my assault on his dick, using just enough suction to make his legs shake.

"Oh, shit. Oh, fuck. Alpha. Bas, I'm going to . . . I can't . . . please!" I loosen my hold on his hip just a tad, allowing him to thrust farther into my mouth. I can feel his orgasm approaching, his sack pulling tight. His shaking body is only held up by my hand pressing him into the wall, and I revel in the depth of his trust in me to not let him fall. A whining shout punches from my mate as his cock pulses in my mouth once, twice, before shooting his cream down my throat. My eyes roll back again in pleasure as I swallow, my dick still painfully pinned against the seam of my pants. I take everything my mate gives me while shuddering at the abrasive cloth against my own cock. It takes every ounce of will not to just lose control and rut against the floor.

I distract and calm myself by licking him clean, suckling at his length until he twitches away from oversensitivity. I slowly let him gather himself, helping him back into his clothes. My movements are jerky, but I won't allow anything to disrupt his languid contentment, not even my anguished erection. I breathe deep to keep the calm I had gathered and hold Theo against me, trying to ignore the way his every breath fans the flames of my arousal.

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Theo

If there were a fire right now, I would be absolutely useless. Mind completely blank and fuzzy, I try to string two words together and fail. Giving up, I just let myself lean against my mate and soak up his warmth.

Once I have enough energy to pry my eyes open, my gaze finds his and I smile dopily. I register the feeling of his cock, hard and impatient, against my hip. I press against him and watch as his eyes fall closed and his head tilts back, a groan leaving him as his hips punch forward.

While my mind is still quite fuzzy, a thrum of anticipation flows through my body, and I feel an overwhelming urge to return the favor my mate just blessed me with. My hands grip Bastian's hips, pushing him back just enough for me to allow gravity to pull me to my knees. His arms tighten in alarm as I start my descent, but loosen again when he realizes I'm not falling.

My unsteady legs fold, and my knees snap against the hardwood. The fire in my mate's eyes has my spent dick giving a valiant effort to fill again. I look to him for permission before freeing his neglected and angry-looking cock. Leaning forward, I use my hands to brace myself against his muscular thighs. I keep my eyes on his, not wanting to miss a second of his reaction.

"Open, mate. Tongue out." His tone alone makes me whimper. "Do you want me to finish on your face or in your mouth? It's never happened before during oral, but it's different with you, Theo. If you want to put those beautiful lips on my cock, I have to know if you want my barbs opening your throat while I pump you full." His voice is

strained with need, and his hand grips the hair on the top of my head, pulling tight enough to sting but not hurt.

Oh God, that's hot. I hadn't even thought of that as a possibility. I keep my mouth open but beg with my eyes and nod quickly, hoping to convey my need. Footsteps sound by the front door but quickly retreat as Bas's rumble of approval forces a shudder from me. Gold eyes flash as my hungry lion pulls my head toward him, setting the tip of his length on my tongue, letting me feel its weight. A few experimental slides against my tongue to the back of my mouth give way to small thrusts, opening up my throat. I gag but push through, eyes brimming with tears. More movement from the corner of my eye only heightens my need to please my mate, knowing there are people watching him take what he needs.

"Such a pretty mouth, so good, so tight." His words punch out between thrusts that are becoming longer and harder. I keep my eyes on his face through tears, watching the veins in his neck pulse and his skin flush as he uses me to chase his orgasm. "Swallow it all, baby."

He explodes, barbs springing to push against my throat and mouth, holding me in place while his orgasm continues to fill faster than I could normally swallow. Spots fill my vision as I choke, but I lean into the helplessness, letting his pleasure lull me. I catch echoing groans from farther away and know at least one more person found their release the same time my mate did. I let myself drift, knowing I'm not passing out but wouldn't fight it if I did . . . Bas will take care of me.

Gentle hands massaging my jaw bring the world back into focus. I nearly jerk at the stretching pain, but soft murmurs and praise flow from Bastian's lips, soothing me. "You did so well, mate. Look how beautiful you are. I'm the luckiest man in the world."

His barbs slowly retract, and I move my jaw around to release the tension. Bas pulls

me gently to my feet, scooping me into his arms once I'm upright and striding purposefully down the hall.

"I want you to rest, baby. At least for a little while." I nod my assent and drift off, letting the rocking motion of my mate climbing the stairs pull me under.

Murmurs break through my pleasant dream. I slide my hand over the cool sheets covering Bastian's side of the bed and frown. He must have tucked me in and found something else to do while I was resting. Stretching, my body pops, and I take stock. My jaw is a little sore still, but otherwise I only feel hungry. I'm debating the merits of tracking down a snack and potentially facing the pride members who were privy to our sexy time moment earlier, when our door opens and my mate appears with a tray of food.

"Good afternoon, mate." His eyes sparkle with humor and satisfaction.

"What time is it?" I question.

A smirk accompanies his smug tone. "A little after three."

My eyes widen. No wonder I'm hungry. He must read my face because he assures me that he checked my monitor and that's why he has a meal ready. He settles the tray over my lap after I sit up against the headboard. My gaze roams over the spread, and I groan in appreciation.

"So what's the plan for the rest of the day?" I nibble on the artisan bread slathered with a delicious apricot and fig spread while gathering some mixed nuts for my next bite. While I love junk food as much as the next guy, I've grown accustomed to watching what I eat, and love that I have a mate who either asked or researched the best snacks and light meals for me.

“We have our first meal with a pride family in about two hours. I was going to start with Tom and Mary, but they didn’t get in line first, and Beth would throw a fit if we pushed her back for them. You know how much she likes to have something to hold over Mary’s head.” Bas can’t hold back his humor at their antics.

I laugh. “Gotcha. So we’ll be doing that for a while. Anything else? I know you probably have pride stuff too—is there something I should be doing yet? I also have to find a time to visit my mother . . .” A flash of guilt hits me. I haven’t thought of her once since I met Bas.

“Whatever you need, love. Though you do need to bring Wes with you when you leave pride lands, plus maybe a guard or two until the threat is dealt with.” He sounds conflicted, but I understand the need for extra security, so I simply nod my acceptance and take another bite.

“If we have the dinner tonight, maybe I should go tomorrow during the day?”

“We have both lunch and dinner set for the next few days, but you can go either early afternoon or in the morning. We can also push times around if those don’t work with your mom. You could invite her here?”

“Oh God, no. Even if she could travel, Mary would likely kill her on sight, and I doubt anyone here would stop her. She was a horrible mother, but she’s in a coma and has no one else. No matter how much I may hate her for her treatment and negligence of me when I was young, a part of me still loves her and doesn’t want her to be alone in her final days.” I don’t understand it myself, so I don’t really expect him to.

“I will ask for the full story someday, but you know your heart, and you’re doing what you believe is right. I cannot fault you for that.” He leans down to press a sweet kiss to my lips, and I relax into him, taking his offer of comfort.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:47 am*

Bastian

Dinner with Beth and her husband went exactly how I thought it would. The missus was crowing about being able to brag to all her friends that she was dining with us first. The food was good and lower in sugar so Theo could enjoy seconds. The conversation stayed light and supportive, and I was grateful. I wanted Theo to be able to relax about meeting all the pride members as their alpha mate and not just a friend.

After we got home and I did my level best to wear my insatiable mate out, I texted Wes to ask him to come to my office in the morning first thing. I wanted to warn him what they would be doing tomorrow with Theo's mom and hash out the extra precautions we needed to take.

I have heard snippets in my time in the pride about Theo, but no one really knew anything for sure about his upbringing, and not a single person was brave enough to question Mary about it. True to her animal form, she is a lioness when protecting her cubs, and it was made perfectly clear back when he was introduced to the pride that she considers Theo one of her own.

As badly as I want answers as to why there was so much strife in connection to the woman who birthed my mate, I will keep my questions to myself. I want to respect Theo and his need to tell me the story when he's ready, but I do need some basic info so I can make the right decisions about his safety. Should I send more than two enforcers? Six? Is she a connected criminal mastermind or a neglectful banshee? I need these answers, and I need them from someone with a greater knowledge of our usual security measures.

"Knock, knock!" My door opens, and my gamma and his brothers all enter my office. I raise an eyebrow because I was only expecting Wes. Cole has the decency to look sheepish, but Nik just looks determined.

"I may have said something I shouldn't have. I got up this morning and checked your and Theo's calendar and saw Theo has a "thing with his mom" today, and I texted Wes to ask if he knew about it. He was with Nik, and he saw it, and it turned into—" Cole thrashes his hands around, indicating the chaos that probably erupted.

Wes heaves a sigh. "Yes, I knew he was going to see her lately. No, I didn't tell you because you wouldn't have changed his mind anyway. Why are you both mad at me?!" Wes looks truly flustered and confused. I have an inkling why the two men in my office without an appointment are angry, but I sit back and watch the argument play out.

"He shouldn't have gone alone, Wes! One of us could have gone with him!" Nik roars, finally speaking up.

"He said it's something he wants to do alone. I asked him! I was respecting his wishes." Wes still isn't getting it.

"He wants to do it alone because you would just make it worse! You have made it abundantly clear you would rather kill his mom than talk to her, so why would he bring you along when he knows you don't support his decision anyway?" Cole sounding frustrated is something I only hear in connection to his brothers, and now I understand why.

"He . . . he wouldn't have just . . . I would have—" Wes's body language is as defensive as his tone.

"We would have sat with him to lend support, not berate him for being there in the

first place. You are his best friend, but we're his family too. Mom would have also gone. Dad? You didn't want to tell us because then he would have had someone else in his corner while he made a decision you were so sure was a mistake and a waste of time. That's why we're upset, Wes. Can you see where we're coming from?" Cole asks, trying to stay in his role of peacemaker.

"Look, dick. I hate his mom too. She was good for nothing while he was young, and she sure as shit isn't good for anything now. I think she's getting what she deserves, however much too late it is. That doesn't mean he shouldn't go. She's in a coma, for fuck's sake. What's she going to do other than lie there and let him be with his thoughts? Him being alone there is a fucking terrible idea," Nik reasons.

Wes's shoulders slump in defeat, and Cole moves to hug him. There is pain on the beta's face as he admits that he was being selfish. He apologizes and gets a nod and back slap from Nik, as well as another long hug from Cole.

"Well, now." The brothers jump, having forgotten I was even in the room, I imagine. "I'm glad you got all that sorted. I had a question about how many you should be taking with you today while you're with Theo, but I have to wonder . . . should you sit this one out, Wes?" I only half mean it as a threat. I hate the idea of Theo being further upset by his beta's views on the visitation.

"No! I'm good. I'll apologize to Theo, I swear." At my nod he continues. "Two enforcers would be nice, though the 'who' of it will be up to you, Alpha. I'd think medium security level and people who have worked together before so it's more seamless."

"Then you will have them. I'll send Nik and Jasper. You okay with that, Nik?"

"For sure. I've worked in tandem with Jasper plenty of times; we've got a good rhythm." Nik shoots me a grateful look, happy to be joining my mate.

”Then go ahead and get him and get ready. Theo wanted to head out in about an hour, but this meeting took longer than I expected.” My glare lacks any real heat but enough reproach that they start fidgeting. I shoo them out of the room ahead of me and hurry to love on my mate a bit before he leaves. I have a sudden need to hold him.



## Page 13

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Theo

Something is bothering Wes, and if he doesn't just spit it out, I'm going to scream. I wanted to give him time, but as we pull up to the hospice house, I'm at my wits' end. I'm already on edge being here, and the threat of supernatural assassins or some shit offing me for money isn't helping, so I end up just yelling at him.

"Just say it!" I shout way louder than necessary.

"Fuck, T. You don't have to be so loud; I can hear you just fine," he grumbles.

"No, you've been fucking weird since we got into the car, and since your balls seem to have left you, I thought I'd help." My sarcasm is out in full force.

"It's just . . . I'm sorry, okay? I should have insisted on coming with you, or at the very least been more supportive about your decision. You deserved to have me in your corner, not be another opponent."

Wow, that's not what I thought he was going to say. He's not wrong, but I won't hold a grudge. "Thanks, Wes. Was that it?"

"Nik and Jasper are our extras for today. They're meeting us here," he tells me as he puts the car in park.

"Anything else?" He shakes his head. "Then let's get this over with."

I climb out and spot Nik's light hair near the entrance, so I make a beeline straight to

him and let him give me a bone-crushing hug. He doesn't say much, just cups my chin affectionately as we separate. They wait patiently for me to indicate I'm ready, and then fan around me. Jasper leads us in, while Wes and I walk side by side. Nik brings up the rear. I feel like a mix between a criminal and a celebrity being shuffled from one place to another.

The nurses' station is busier than I'm used to seeing, but my favorite nurse sees me and waves us through with little fanfare, only ogling the pretty men accompanying me, and I really don't blame her. The three men surrounding me could draw the eye of any man or woman.

When we reach Susan's room, I take note that the woman who birthed me is lying almost exactly as she was when I left last time. Her baths are usually in the afternoon a few days a week, so I understand why she didn't look to have been changed at all, but they must have moved her for circulation or comfort recently.

The light hospital gown does nothing for her complexion, washing her out. Her hair is greasy, and her skin has a fake waxy look. I force myself to walk further into the room and sit in my usual chair next to her bed. I can hear Wes and Nik talking quietly, and I enjoy the familiar comfort their murmurs bring. Jasper sets up camp right outside the room while my chosen brothers pick places around the room to lounge, moving another chair away from the window in the process.

I sit there for over thirty minutes, just staring at her. I feel like I'm having an epiphany now that I've forced Wes and Nik to be in a room with this woman out of some false sense of obligation. I really think this might be the last time I visit her before she passes, and while I don't regret visiting for as long as I have, I won't be doing so again. I memorize her features and do something I haven't done in any of my previous visits. I stand over her sleeping form and kiss her forehead. "I forgive you," I whisper against her clammy skin. My final goodbye doesn't include the words, but anyone who heard it would know it for what it is.

I turn and catch Nik's eye, nodding toward the door. No one speaks as I walk out of my mother's room and let the silence continue through the main doors. I shoot Nik and Jasper a smile in thanks, and we split to head to our respective cars. Our footsteps echo in the parking lot, but I also hear a faint click, causing me to stop to listen better. Wes looks around the lot with a quick sweep, focusing on the north end.

An engine backfires a block or so down, startling me. Looking for the source, I don't see Jasper coming. The breath is knocked from me as the fox shifter tackles me to the ground, covering my body and shouting near my ear. Now that I can place the noise as a gunshot, I feel like an idiot for thinking it was a car. The new popping sound makes me think a suppressor is being used on another gun, but even with my limited knowledge of firearms, I know a suppressor doesn't mean silence. It just means you won't burst an eardrum if you aren't wearing ear protection.

I twist my head to see if I can get eyes on Nik and Wes, but Jasper shoves my face into his chest, wrapping himself around me like a spider monkey. I can barely breathe, but his body is so tense I know it's not over yet. A break in the gunshots has Jasper lifting from me, pulling me into a crouch and opening Wes's back car door, shoving me in roughly.

"Stay down!" He motions for me to lie on the floor. "Wes! Get him out of here!"

It takes all my willpower to not peek out of the window, wanting to see the guys to make sure no one is hurt. The car rocks and the driver's door is ripped open, and my best friend throws himself into the car, starting it before his door is even closed and slamming on the gas.

"Wes? Is—"

"Not now!" His tension raises my own. I don't like him snapping at me, but I know he wouldn't do it just to be a dick. Something happened.

The ringing of an outgoing call sounds through the car's Bluetooth. It only rings twice before Grey's voice comes over the line. "Hey, ma—"

"Attempt on Theo's life at the Honor Hospice House. Jasper was hit twice; Nik was unresponsive when we got Theo into the car and bolted, so I don't know his condition. We need backup or they're dead. They have a sniper, Grey."

"FUCK! Okay, Ryker and Solomon are the closest to the facility—five minutes out. How many are there?"

"At least five, but we took three out. That leaves the fucking sniper and at least one other." Wes sounds so worried, and I can't get the words Nik was unresponsive to stop repeating in my head. Jasper was shot twice while covering me. I feel like I'm going to puke.

The call must have ended, because Wes is addressing me now. "We have to take a weird way to make sure we're not being followed. I'm sorry, it'll be uncomfortable for a little longer." I make a sound of disbelief, like why do I care about an extra few minutes on a dirty car floor when our friends could be dying?

"He'll be okay, T. Jasper is a tough one, and once he can shift a few times, he'll be good as new. Same with Nik if we can get him to wake up." If. If. Fuck, it's if he can wake up. Before I completely spiral, Wes yells at me again. "Hey! I need you to keep it together until we get back to the main house. I can't lose my shit yet, and you know how I respond to you crying. Buck up, Theo. I need you to be strong for a little while longer, okay?"

I try to control my breathing, tears tracking down my face as I continue to lie on the floor. He's right. Wes could never deal with seeing me cry; he ends up raging or shifting every time. Once he even sympathy cried, but I swore to never speak of it aloud again. That errant thought is enough to slow my tears and shallow breaths to a

more manageable level.

"Good, that's good. Bastian will meet us out at the house, and we'll come up with another plan, okay? Jasper and Nik are going to be okay. They'll be okay."

"I feel like you're also trying to convince yourself, Wes," I croak.

"Maybe I am, but I also believe they'll be okay. They have to be."

Bastian

My lion is throwing himself around, trying to claw his way out. We need to put eyes on our mate to check him for any injury, and until then we won't be calming down. It takes everything I have to not stand on the front porch of the main house and just wait inside for Wes to bring me my mate.

Grey has been sending teams out and taking care of everything security-wise while Cole runs around comforting the scared pride members. I doubt either of the betas had wanted to create hysteria, but when Wes called Grey, we were at a meeting with some of the community leaders, and they heard everything, even with Grey stepping away from the table as he answered his phone. Word had spread like wildfire after we rushed from the room, abandoning the meeting. Both Nik's and Jasper's families arrived at my doorstep within minutes.

Tom and Mary were easier to redirect because they had two more sons racing their way here. Darren and Vi were much harder to assure since Jasper was their only son and the oldest of their six children. Jasper's younger sisters, seventeen-year-old twins, were as panicked as their parents but were doing a great job holding it together for the three-year-old triplets playing in the corner of the living room of the main house with no understanding of what was happening.

Even though I'm staring intently out the window facing the entrance to pride lands, I hear gravel crunching before I see the car. I'm out the door, ignoring the shouts of my men, needing to be closer. My breathing picks up when the car rolls into view. I take in the bullet holes that riddle the side, and my stomach squeezes painfully at the sight, not knowing if they ran into more trouble on the way here. Not seeing Theo in

the car, I open my mouth to shout for my mate as my heart pounds in my chest, when I see his head pop up from under the window like he had been lying on the floor. Good job, Wes.

The car jerks to a stop, and the two men exit the vehicle in a rush, the car still rocking. Theo turns to Wes and says something that has a faint smile tugging at the shifter's lips. The slam of the door smacking into the wall sounds behind me, and I turn to see Mary as she sprints to her boys, kicking dust up behind her. She rocks Wes with the speed she hits him at, but he just wraps her in his arms and holds her as she breaks down sobbing and babbling questions. Tom joins them at a slower but still hurried pace. Eyes glassy, he hugs his son tight and looks at me, nodding in thanks right before my arms become very full with my shaking mate.

I smash him to my chest, probably crushing him, but I need to feel the weight of his reportedly unharmed body against my own. He's okay. I don't smell any blood on him, just the strong scent of Jasper on his front. My lion moves to grumble, but I nip that in the bud. He was saving our mate. Shot twice for his efforts, and Theo would not have recovered like Jasper will, so we will be fucking thankful.

"Shhh. I've got you. You're okay. Shhh, love," I murmur to him, pressing my nose into the crook of his neck.

"He—they—" He hiccups, stuttering between sobs.

"We'll get them home, Theo. You're okay. They'll be okay." I hope I'm not lying to him.

Grey jogs out to us, checking on Wes and Theo with a quick sweep before giving me an update. "Ryker took down the remaining guy successfully, but the sniper was gone by the time Solomon found his perch. They're on their way now with Jasper and Nik. Jasper will need to shift again once they get here but was able to shift in the car while

they were loading Nik, so he'll make a full recovery."

"And Nik?" Theo asks tearfully.

Grey sighs, shaking his head. "Nik still hasn't woken up, but we're hoping he responds to our alpha's command to shift, because his pulse is thready at best. He needs to shift at least once or he won't make it."

"What are his injuries?" Mary asks, now tucked under her mate's arm, voice catching. Cole must have joined them, because both he and Wes are crowding around their mother, offering comfort.

"A single shot at the base of his neck. We're hoping it hasn't severed his spine. There was too much blood for Ryker to get a good look; they didn't want to stay exposed any longer than they had to. They were extremely careful moving him, though. That's why it's taking so long for them to get here," he answers before addressing my mate's beta. "Good job with the evasive route, Wes."

Grey turns, ushering us all toward the house. "We need to get supplies ready. I was thinking we can turn the sitting room into a little med area. The healer's not due to be back for another week, so there's no use going to his offices when in here will work just fine if we hurry."

Needing no further encouragement, we rush into the house and get to work. Theo goes to talk to Jasper's family, who is hovering but no longer frantic, so they must have heard the update on their son's condition. The little ones are herded further down the hall by their older sisters, assuring us they will keep the toddlers occupied and away from the bustle.

We end up just throwing a sheet over the dining room table since it would give us the most room, and Nik can lie on it comfortably instead of hanging off the end. The



chairs have all been stacked and pushed against the wall. Every first aid kit and medical bag has been brought in and set on the counter. A kettle is put on the stove for sterile water, with a second, electric version plugged in on the island.

The crunching gravel reaches my ears again, and I let everyone know to make room. Wes must have been standing outside, because as Theo and I reach the front door, we watch as he and Solomon cradle Nik's top half with Ryker carrying his feet. I send a quick thanks that the alpha who built this house had the foresight to install double front doors, because they're the only reason it's fairly easy for the men to squeeze in without repositioning Nik and aggravating his injuries.

Once Nik is arranged on the table, I place my hand on his chest. I'm horrified as I struggle to find a pulse or feel his mountain lion. As alpha, I should be able to sense and connect with his animal, and I don't feel anything for far too long.

There! A wisp of feeling. Having proven that his animal is still holding on, I push as much force and energy into my voice and hand as I can, needing him to listen.

"Shift!" His inhale means he heard me, but there's no change. I repeat my demand, desperation coloring my tone. Nothing.

I shout a third time, willing him to hear and obey me. Not even a twitch. Theo places his shaky hand on mine where it presses onto Nik's chest, and demands for us to try again. "SHIFT!" Our voices mix, stronger together than apart. I feel the extra energy and want to marvel at it but refuse to break focus. Nik's hand twitches before fur sprouts along his arms.

In what has to be the most painful shift I've ever seen, he slowly becomes a mountain lion, still barely breathing. His tail thumps once, proving he's not completely paralyzed. Thank God. I sigh in relief before addressing those watching with bated breath. "Let's let him rest. He'll shift back when he gains a little strength. He'll live,

but it will be a long and hard recovery.”

Mary and Tom are the first to step forward. Normally we don’t let anyone touch a healing animal except family and mates, so I’m glad the rest of those gathered respectfully file out of the house. His parents pet him gently, whispering words of love and encouragement. Then his brothers do the same, looking at Theo and motioning for him to join them. Theo kisses Nik’s cougar nose, choking back tears. I don’t hear what he says to the unconscious man, but his brothers give wet chuckles, so it must have been an inside joke. We let everyone get their time in with Nik, but he cannot be comfortable here on the table with all the hovering.

Theo hugs his family, promising that they can return in a few hours to visit Nik again, but that we need to get him into a room and they need to rest. They reluctantly agree only when we promise to update them on any change and swear we will have someone sit with him at all times. When the front doors close, Theo and I sigh heavily with relief and exhaustion. It’s not even noon and we need a nap too.

”Let’s get Nik settled, and then you can watch over him all you want,” I promise him quietly before taking his hand and leading him back toward the dining room.

Theo

Sneaky mate, tricking me into a nap. I can admit I needed one, but three hours was too long. I'm sitting in the chair someone brought into the guest room, snacking on a parfait someone put in the fridge in the bin labeled Theo Only. It's nice to have so many looking out for me, but I wish I knew who all was putting things in there so I could thank them. This one was made with cherry pie filling, probably a low-sugar option, and it tastes as good as a pre-mate orgasm felt.

Crunching on the granola, I look over Nik's mountain lion, lightly petting his flank. I snort at the thought of petting him like this in his human form. Bas would lose his shit if I were petting another man's hip and ass and cooing at him about how pretty he is, and if Nik were awake, he would have grumbled at being called pretty and would insist I stop the baby talk.

Nik's door creeps open, and Jasper pokes his head in, his auburn hair entering first. The move is decidedly fox, pulling a smile from me. The enforcers have all been stopping by on their breaks this afternoon; I was beginning to wonder what was keeping Jasper. I knew he had been resting, but I saw him through the window earlier, so I knew he'd been up and about for a while.

"Any change?" He sounds hopeful, like maybe Nik had shifted to human and back again in the eight or so hours it's been since he's seen him.

I sigh. "No. His tail thumped earlier, but I think he was just dreaming."

"Okay. I'll stop by again after my shift."

"Wait, shift? You should be resting, not working." I raise my eyebrow.

"I'm good. I promise I'm taking it easy, and I need to be doing something. I can't just sit here, ya know?"

I nod because, yes, I do understand. He's one of those people who need to feel useful, especially in a crisis.

"Will you shoot me a text if he ends up waking up while I'm still here?" he asks.

"Sure, just give me your number. Then you'll have mine too. Oh! Will you keep an eye on Cole for me and tell him you stopped by here and saw Nik? He's busy right now, but I know he won't be able to concentrate without regular updates. I've texted him, but another person's assurance would be welcome, I think." I hand him my phone. He agrees readily and leaves the room after another look at the man on the bed stuck in his animal form.

"Come on, Nik. I need you to shift and wake up now," I plead for what feels like the millionth time.

A knock sounds at the open door, dragging my gaze away from Nik.

"Theo, this is Murphy. He's the healer for the Bloodstone Pack. They heard what happened and knew our healer was on leave, so they sent some reinforcements." Ryker's vocabulary is stiffer than normal, but I chalk it up to being a newer enforcer around strangers.

"Oh, sure! Thank you, come in. Has someone talked to you about his progress so far?"

"No, I was simply told you had an enforcer near death and to assist you in any way

you needed. Mind if I take a look?" Murphy asks.

"I'm actually not sure I'm comfortable with that. No one outside family is allowed to touch an injured member while they're unconscious . . . especially when they've shifted. He is both." I'm truly torn. I wish Cole or Wes were here to help me navigate this as the alpha mate.

"It wasn't actually a question. I need to touch him in order to figure out what's wrong. I was more so asking you to move out of my way so I can access all sides of his animal." Murphy's voice is more hostile than I was expecting.

A low growl seems to pull Murphy from whatever mood swing he was having. "That is our alpha mate, healer. I suggest you watch how you speak to him." Ryker is big mad.

"Apologies. I wasn't aware your pride had a hum—an alpha mate. If you could allow me to get to my patient, however, I don't wish to waste any more time." The healer doesn't sound sorry or ashamed in the least. There's something about him that makes me uncomfortable, but I can't put my finger on why, other than he's kind of an ass.

A roar sounds outside, loud and angry. Ryker snaps to attention, reaching the door before skidding to a stop. He bobbles his gaze between Murphy and me, clearly not wanting to leave me alone, but if there's something going on, he needs to check it out as an enforcer, right?

"Go. I'll be fine. Wes should be heading this way soon, anyway." He opens his mouth to argue, when a second roar is accompanied by one I don't recognize. He nods before shifting into a grey-and-white wolf, using the speed of his animal to sprint away.

"I thought getting you alone would be so much harder. I guess what they say about

the gullibility of humans is true.” Murphy’s tone is smug, and I panic.

I feel like smacking myself. Fuck. I should have asked a hell of a lot more questions. How would this healer know of the attack this morning but not know about me being the alpha mate? More likely this is a shifter hired to take out the human, since he slipped up by almost calling me human earlier. I look between Murphy, where he is still standing over Nik, and the open door.

I should make a run for it, but then that leaves Nik completely defenseless, and I can’t do that. He saved me yesterday; now it’s my turn. Plus, this guy is definitely a shifter . . . I doubt I would make it three steps before he was on me, anyway.

”Fuck you. What do you want with me? It’s obviously not just to kill me, or I’d be dead already.” That much I know.

He hums in agreement. ”I’m not to kill you yet. I’m just supposed to stall a bit until the others can get into place, and then take you on a little field trip out to the lawn for you to witness the death of your mate. Want to know something fun? If by some miracle your mate wins, I’ll kill you right there, ending his life anyway. How fun is that?”

Horror washes over me as I realize how stupid sending Ryker away really was. It wasn’t just about me; it was about taking the pack from Bastian by any means necessary.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:47 am*

Bastian

Grey and I watch Wes and Cole talk to their parents, reassuring them that they can go up to see Nik in a minute, trying to get them to eat something first.

"Is Theo still sleeping?" Grey asks.

"He was when I left him about an hour ago. If he did wake up, I know he'll be heading straight to Nik. The enforcers have been checking in regularly, so I know he won't be alone there for long.

"Maybe you should have someone check to see, just in case."

I give him a confused look. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Just a feeling, Bastian. I don't like Theo not having someone with him, even on pride lands. My leopard is telling me there's something going on, and I always listen."

I trust Grey's gut more than my own at this point. I get ready to shout for Wes to get his ass to his charge, but I'm cut off by a group of shifters crossing into our territory uninvited. I vaguely remember meeting one of them a while ago, from the Bloodstone Pack, I think it was.

"What is your business here?" Grey demands, bristling.

"We are here to formally challenge Sebastian Westwood for control of the Westwood

Pride. He has taken a human for a mate, showing how weak he is. Westwood needs a firm hand and strong leadership to reach its full potential.” The brown-haired man who spoke isn’t huge, but I can feel his strength as a shifter and know he would have been a contender for an alpha position in a weaker pack. Too bad for him that Westwood is not weak, and neither am I.

I step forward, addressing the speaker of the group. “And you believe that’s you? You believe you are a better fit for this pride and its members?” I scoff. “I assume you are the stand-in for your pack, not who will actually be leading. I cannot see Alpha Bloodstone letting one of his people go off to be an alpha of a pride this large. That’s also assuming you win, which we both know won’t happen, cub. Who sent you on this suicide mission?”

The desperation in his eyes shows he isn’t unaware that he may lose his life today, and as he gets closer, I see the resemblance to the alpha of the Bloodstone Pack. I know he’s not their heir, so I’m guessing this is Logan, the second “spare” who has been told to prove that he has what it takes.

”You decline my challenge? Does that mean you concede, Westwood?” His tone doesn’t quite match his eyes, but I understand the need to not be seen as weak.

”No, cub. You’ll get your challenge. I propose it not be to the death, since you have so much of your life ahead of you, and you should learn from this loss that life does indeed go on,” I cajole him.

Pain flashes across his face, but he stands firm. ”I cannot. It must be a true challenge for alpha, a fight to the death.” He shucks his clothing, not waiting any longer. I simply shift, letting my clothes tear. I will not give him a time advantage in case he isn’t honorable and tries to attack before I’m fully shifted.

My lion is enraged, roaring out the acceptance to the man’s challenge. While I watch,



Logan shifts into a large grizzly. Fuck, I hate fighting bears. I roar again, and he joins, opening his giant maw and adding his deeper sound.

Grizzlies are incredibly fast for their size, so I cannot just use speed to combat his strength. I circle around a few times to watch how he moves and must admit that he has obviously trained, but has little battle experience because of his age. He's telegraphing every move he wants to make.

I wait for the next shuffle of his feet, lunging at the opening he leaves in his left side. I ram my body into his exposed ribcage, clawing and biting to get through his thick fur. He swings wildly, almost knocking me off. Realizing his current flailing technique isn't working, he slams his body onto the ground ribcage first, crushing me in the process. It takes me entirely too long to catch my breath and wiggle my way out from under him, narrowly avoiding his claws as I rise.

My body aches from the slam, but it's nothing compared to the carnage that is his left side. His movements falter, but he doesn't fall. A flash of grey near the bystanders catches my attention. Ryker is flagging down a group of enforcers in his wolf form, motioning with his snout toward the house. I shake my head and hope whatever that is can be handled by the group, because I need to stay focused.

The bear didn't use my distraction to get the upper hand, which surprises me. I would think someone out to kill me would stop at nothing to follow through. I circle him again, taking in his body language. He's primed and ready but doesn't look eager to fight me. Like his pride won't let him back down, but his heart isn't in it.

We continue to circle one another, taking quick jabs and swipes when the opportunity presents itself, but there is no heart in it from either side. I become more suspicious the longer the bear simply watches me.

We must be taking too long, because gasps echo around us, drawing both of our

attention once again. My Theo is being held at knifepoint, leading a stranger around the perimeter of the crowd. I wouldn't see that as the biggest threat since we could immobilize the man before he stabs my mate, but the red dot on his chest right above his heart that moves with him means a sniper has sights on Theo in case the man with the knife fails.

They come to a stop close enough for me to hear them but far enough that their sniper still has a clear shot. "Tsk, tsk, Logan. I thought you might have actually had a chance, but you prove once again that you are nothing." I swing my gaze to Logan, who is now standing there as a man, naked and bleeding, his face a mix of shock and horror.

He shakes his head fervently. "No, Murphy. I was going to challenge him just like Father said. He didn't say anything about Bastian's mate! That's low, even for you." Disgust colors his tone.

I let my eyes sweep the crowd, looking for Grey and Wes and find only my second standing off to the side. Cole is further down, trying very hard not to stare at the path to the woods we always use for pride runs. Wes must be tracking the sniper. I also notice Solomon and Jasper are missing.

"You were always such a weak boy. What did you think you were going to do, sacrifice yourself to 'save' these people? We knew you wouldn't win, so I came up with a contingency plan. If the human dies, it stands to reason his mate will follow, right? I'm sure the remaining members here would thank us for culling a weak Alpha. If not"—he shrugs—"they're welcome to join him in death."

The way he's talking, it sounds like he brought a hell of a lot more people than we can see here. If it were only the twelve, we'd be fine, as they are no match for our enforcers. There would be plenty of adults who could fight with us, too, if another few were scattered around our pride lands, but he is implying way more than just a

few.

I need to stall until the red dot disappears from Theo's chest. Unless? Oh, shit. "How did you know where my mate and his guards would be today?"

The man cackles. "We just needed an in, and we have to thank your generous pride member for seeing you for what you are and just handing us any piece of information we could possibly need!"

Theo

I can see Bas is struggling to accept that one of his own had a hand in this. Betrayal and rage roll off him in waves. I hadn't thought any of the pride capable of this level of deception, but it makes sense. It explains how they knew where I would be and when. Only a select few knew about the visit to my mom, so it narrows it down to enforcers and their families.

Trying not to startle the crazy man with a weapon, I make sure my voice is calm. "Who? I understand the why of it; no one wants a weak human alpha mate. What I don't understand is who would betray their alpha?" I scan the crowd without moving my head, looking for a guilty face and coming up with nothing. I can't find Wes or Jasper in the crowd either. I spy Solomon on the outskirts of the woods and watch him step back to be covered by shadows, and Ryker is vibrating with fury close to my mate and Grey.

"And why would I tell you, human? It's best not to out my allies when they could still prove to be oh-so-useful." His smug tone makes me want to kick him.

A cracking sound resonates through the air, and I'm thrown back by the hold Murphy has on me. My body lands on his, knocking the air from my lungs. Chaos erupts on the lawn. Roaring and screams crescendo after only a few minutes and then die down when I finally catch my breath and roll over, seeing Murphy was shot and is so very, very dead.

Bile rises in my throat, and I gag, not accustomed to the amount of gore right in front of me. I turn to see my lion and a bear fighting side by side, a myriad of animals

circling them for both protection and assault. I have no idea who is winning because I cannot tell which animal belongs to which pack. I have faith in the pride, and I really don't want to distract anyone, so I continue to crouch against the dead body, trying to breathe through my mouth as to not inhale the overwhelming scent of blood any more than I have to.

I catch sight of Jasper's fox limping from the woods, headed straight for me. I lift a hand to show him I'm all right so he can slow his pace. A lynx follows shortly after, but his gait is off, almost like he's stalking the little fox. My eyes widen as more falls into place. Solomon is the lynx, if I remember correctly, and he's the one who said that the sniper ran off, but do we really know that? He was at each place, or close by, and had been given every piece of information needed to pass along to the Bloodstone Alpha.

Jasper must have caught my rising tension, because he looked over his shoulder as Solomon pounced. I hear the familiar roar of my best friend coming from the woods, so I just have to hope Jasper can outmaneuver the lynx for just a little longer until Wes arrives. I shout for Wes, knowing he will be trying to find me, anyway.

Tearing through the brush, his mountain lion races across the uneven ground and fallen logs, not slowing until he tackles the much smaller lynx, tearing into him in a tangle of teeth and claws. I look away, not needing to see Solomon meet his bloody end, instead working on getting to Jasper, who is lying still but breathing.

The fox struggles to his feet and becomes a man when I'm less than a foot away, making me jump, startling at the dick swinging near my face. He chuckles and covers his junk until I can stand. I do a quick once-over of his body to check for injuries and am happy to see he looks fine except for a chunk still missing from his leg. Solomon must have attacked him in the woods and then again out here for Jasper to not have healed yet.

”Theo!” Wes’s voice is panicked, drawing my attention. I look up in time to be swung into my best friend’s naked arms, our chests colliding hard enough to dispel all air from my lungs.

”Ooof, you big lug. I’m fine. Are you okay?” I look him over, deeming him just fine as a victorious set of roars reach my ears.

Bastian’s lion and the bear stand tall in the center of the lawn, surrounded by bodies of animals and men. Cole walks toward them with pants, and I register the sheer number of naked bodies popping up all over the yard. I try not to blush but know I don’t succeed when both Jasper and Wes start laughing.

It takes about twenty more minutes to make my way over to Bas. He’s been busy barking orders, while I’ve made sure to stop and thank each person I see for fighting to protect our family, keeping my gaze way above the neck. Jasper continues to stand next to Solomon’s body, keeping curious eyes away until Bastian can get the full story and make his decision. I know Solomon had a mate around here somewhere, but I haven’t seen her yet.

”Mate.” I’m once again pulled off my feet and into the arms of a man. I breathe in the comforting scent of Bastian mixed with sweat, thanking every deity known to man that he’s safe and unharmed.

A throat clearing has Bas setting me on my feet, and I look to see a stranger shuffling from foot to foot while Cole hovers beside him.

”Theo, this is Logan. It’s a long story, but he’d like to join the Westwood Pride.” Why did my mate’s statement sound like a question?

”Uh, okay. Did you need help moving or . . .?” I’m missing something.

Cole catches me up. "He was a part of the pack that sent Murphy and attacked us."

The poor guy looks ready to cry, and I can tell that he didn't have anything to do with today, because he's still breathing when everyone else is dead. I point to him. "You good with switching to a pride with a human alpha mate?"

He nods emphatically. "Yes, I don't have a problem at all."

"Okay, good. So do you need help moving or are you, like, never going back because it's dangerous? We have furnishings and clothes if you need some until you get a chance to shop." I look to my mate. "He can have everything of Solomon's. The clothes might not fit, but the little house would work just fine."

"Why would—?" He freezes, finally looking over to where Jasper stands. "We have a lot to talk about before the night is over."

"You have no idea."

Bastian

As a pride, we really needed this run. It was a test of my control over my lion, however, since he didn't want our human to be out of our sight. The constant reassurance I'd given him didn't seem to help, so I ended up promising him time with Theo in animal form later tonight if he could just finish this run like the alpha he was.

I didn't promise him time directly following the run because I have plans for our little mate. I want to explore his exhibition streak, and since we have already gone over our limits and set boundaries, all we have been waiting for is the right time for me to initiate. A purr gathers in my chest from my lion at the thought of marking our mate in front of our pride.

With the extra burst of energy, we charge to the large fallen log right behind the tree line and roar, waiting for all our members to catch up so I can make sure every animal is accounted for before joining the group gathered by the food. Grey will bring up the rear as usual, with the enforcers flanking the more vulnerable animals until they step into the clearing.

Our resident chipmunk is last to cross into the clearing, perched on Grey's back. A nudge from him is all I need to trot over to Theo, pressing my head into his sternum.

He laughs, digging his fingers into my mane. "Did you have a good run, Bas?" I chuff but don't move yet, letting him pet me for a minute before I shift. I make sure to snag the pants he's holding for me and pull them on as fast as I can. He stops talking to the sweet couple holding their little one, distracted by my hardening cock.



A rumble leaves my chest, causing his eyes to snap to mine, and I groan at the sight of his blown pupils. Stepping closer, I cup his jaw and neck with my hand and tilt his head back. A whimper escapes him as I lean down and devour him using my tongue and teeth.

A wolf whistle pulls my attention from Theo's mouth, reminding me that although exhibition is our thing, fucking him on the grass in front of children and his parents is an absolute no-go. I pull back reluctantly and press my forehead against his, panting.

I look up and catch Ryker's eye, tilting my head to the house. His eyes widen, but he nods and turns to another enforcer, who nearly spits out his drink. They grab a few more people and head for the house while I look back into the inky depths of my mate's eyes, noting the pretty blue is almost nonexistent. He licks his bottom lip and tries to gather himself . . . which is not the goal for the night.

I give him another hard kiss before bending down to throw him over my shoulder, enjoying his carefree laugh. I shake my head at Wes when he moves as if to follow. He raises an eyebrow but nods back. Grey leans down to whisper something to him, causing him to turn abruptly and catch Cole's hand, leading him further from the house.

I take off at a brisk pace, sliding my hand up Theo's inner thigh as I walk, pulling a breathy moan from him.

Once inside, I pass the wall I consider ours and head to the table, setting him on the cloth-covered wood before pulling his shirt off. I glance around and see our men gathered around the space, there but not openly watching just yet. I watch my mate's face as he notices the company we have in the room. His lips part, and another breathy noise escapes him. He gives his nod of approval with hooded eyes, lying back against the tablecloth. A single hand travels up his torso from his abdomen to his tightened nipples, plucking and strumming while he waits for me to get with the program. My mouth waters at the debauched sight, my hands going to his waistband

to divest him of his pants. It takes only seconds for us both to be naked and hard, and I waste no time getting my mouth on his supple skin. I trail my mouth from his chest to his mating mark, sucking hard. Theo's back bows off the table with a groan.

"Mine," I growl out.

"Yours, Alpha," he mewls back.

I lose all sense of sanity in that moment, pulling his legs up to expose his pretty pucker. My eyes devour the sight of him still puffy from our romp this morning and breathe harder, knowing the greedy eyes around the room can see the same, can still smell me on him. His hole twitches, and I swoop down to soothe it with my tongue and teeth and lips. He tastes so fucking good, so mine.

"Please, Alpha. In me, now, please, please . . ." The enthusiastic rimming makes him babble and toss his head from side to side in desperation.

I make quick work of stretching him, whispering praises—how I can smell the arousal of everyone in the room, how sexy he is. His flushed chest and glassy eyes show me how much he loves this.

I generously lube both myself and his waiting hole before pushing in, forcing his ring to accept my intrusion. The burn always makes Theo crazier with need, and I want this to be perfect for him. Feeling his hole relax around me and accept me inside is like coming home. I revel in his tight heat for a moment before setting a punishing pace, holding the front of his thighs for leverage as his shins and knees press against my torso. His hands scrabble for purchase, finally hooking over the edge of the table so he can steady himself. His grip allows him to meet me thrust for thrust. More of his wanton sounds spill from his parted lips, increasing in pitch and frequency.

His body tenses and freezes below me. "Oh God, I'm going to—Oh, Bas!" I don't let his immobility stop me from tunneling into his body, keeping the ruthless pace he

loves, fucking him through his orgasm. As his tight heat convulses on my length, I lose the battle of holding my orgasm back and let out a roar as my barbs explode out of my cock. Theo squeals at the extra girth and stimulation, and another pulse of liquid spurts from his slit.

The sounds from our audience let me know they're finding their completion. Quiet groans and grunts echo through the room, and I know my mate can hear them, because his eyes sparkle and the flush covering his neck and chest intensifies.

Not wanting to ruin his afterglow, I bend down to capture his lips in a languid kiss. He sighs in satisfaction, and I swallow the sweet noise as the men clean themselves up and file from the house at a sedate pace, whispering praises and thanking Theo for his gift. Once my mate has had his fill of my gentle kisses, I gently pull out of his warm body and lean back to watch my cum drip from his swollen and slightly gaping bud.

Theo stretches, bringing my attention back to his fucked-out expression. "Thank you, Bastian. It was perfect. Give me a few minutes and we can do that again in our room."

I chuckle because if he doesn't fall asleep by the time we reach our room, I will eat my socks. "Whatever you want, love."

I make sure to clean him up as best I can before scooping up his pants and digging out his phone so I can check his sugars later, placing it on his chest as I gather him in my arms.

"Love you, Bas. You take such good care of me." His words are slurred and mellow as I begin to ascend the stairs. I pause to kiss him on the forehead and am rewarded with soft snores. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life loving this man.

Thank you for reading Claiming Theo! Theo's story came to me a while ago and I

just couldn't get it out of my head. Can't wait to delve into the pride and see whose stories come to me next!