



# Colt's Salvation [Midnight Falls 15] (The Lynn Hagen ManLove Collection)

**Author:** *Lynn Hagen*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Milo Landon didn't want to cover for his uncle at some extravagant wedding reception, watching happy couples staring lovingly into each other's eyes while his own life is a miserable, lonely wreck. Then Milo spots a gorgeous stranger watching him and is caught in the guy's mesmerizing gaze. Mr. Tall and Sexy approaches him, and Milo can't seem to keep his dang hands to himself, even after his uncle's boss has a tizzy over Milo inappropriately touching a guest.

Colt Segar is ready to ditch the reception until he spots a possible hookup for the night. If he can bed the twink, the hassle of attending the wedding will be worth it. Until he discovers that Milo is his mate, and the guy refuses to go home with him. Now he has to deal with Milo's irate boss, his mate's reluctance to reveal who is abusing him, and the darkness that dwells inside Colt. This should be a piece of wedding cake, right?

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

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Milo Landon really didn't want to be there. This wasn't his job, but he was filling in for his Uncle Eric who'd had some kind of out-of-town emergency.

As the sun set and night descended, the twinkling lights strung throughout the venue came to life, casting a warm glow over the outdoor wedding reception. The sweet strains of a slow melody filled the air, luring Milo closer to the celebration. The bride rested her head on her new husband's shoulder as they swayed gently on the dance floor, lost in each other's embrace.

Other couples were out there, too.

Laughter bubbled up from tables where friends and family were gathered, their voices blending into a symphony of happiness. The delicious scent of food wafted through the air, tempting guests to replenish their plates at the buffet or refill their drinks at the open bar. The atmosphere was alive with celebration and love, a perfect moment frozen in time.

A moment Milo longed to be a part of instead of bussing tables, trying to remain invisible to the guests.

He paused, watching as an enormous guy in a sleek black suit slowly danced with another guy who had to be a good foot shorter than him. It wasn't the size difference that caught his attention.

It was the pure love on their faces as they gazed at each other.

Why couldn't Milo find someone who looked at him like that? Unfortunately, his past

two boyfriends had deep-seated issues that eventually surfaced, turning them into jerks.

Sighing, Milo carried his tub to the next table, clearing away dishes and discarded napkins. As he bent down to collect a glass that was under a chair, he noticed a stranger watching him from a nearby table.

Their eyes met for a brief moment before someone walked over and drew the stranger's attention away.

"You're supposed to be blending into the background, not trying to catch a guest's attention," Dan said from behind him.

"I was picking up a glass off the ground," Milo defended. He had to keep his tone polite because this was Eric's gig, but it was hard when Eric's boss kept breathing down his back, micromanaging everything Milo was assigned to do.

"Empty your tub then clear tables three and four." Dan hurried toward another worker like he was about to scold the guy.

Which tables were three and four? For the life of him, Milo couldn't remember.

"I could accidentally spill red wine all over his white tuxedo jacket," a deep, masculine voice said from behind Milo. "He seems pretentious." A low, velvety laugh filled the air. "I just learned that word and love throwing it around now."

His heart hammering, Milo looked over his shoulder and stared right into beautiful green eyes. It was the guy who'd been watching him. "You used the word correctly." Milo swallowed hard at how breathtaking the stranger was.

"Colt." He took Milo's hand in his, lightly stroking the back with his thumb. "Who

might you be?"

"Nobody."

Colt raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "That's a cruel name for someone as bewitching as you."

"Milo." He cleared his throat. "My name is Milo."

"Much better." Colt gave him a smile that set his pulse racing. "Do you have a break coming up? I wouldn't mind getting to know you better."

Milo nodded then shook his head, so enchanted with Colt that his brain wasn't working. No man this good-looking had ever paid attention to him, let alone acknowledged Milo's existence.

Colt's sensual laughter rippled through Milo's body like a sexual pulse. "Which is it?"

"Yes, I do have a break coming up. I'm just not sure when," Milo admitted, glancing at Dan who was still hovering by the other waiter. "I'm not trying to be rude, because you're the highlight of my evening, but if I don't get back to work, Dan will have my head."

Colt's eyes followed Milo's gaze. "That pretentious asshole?"

Milo snickered. "You really do like that word."

The even whiteness of Colt's smile was dazzling. "If the shoe fits..."

When Dan started toward him, Milo jerked his hand from Colt's. Great. Now Dan

was going to crawl all over Milo for not doing his job.

“I apologize, but I really do need my help to get back to work,” Dan said to Colt.

“If you hadn’t noticed, I was speaking to your help,” Colt replied.

“And you are?” Dan asked.

“The bride’s brother.” Colt raked a contemptuous glare over Dan. “If I’m not mistaken, if a guest needs attention, it’s the job of your staff to provide it.”

“You’re quite right, sir. Milo will help you with whatever you need.” Dan pivoted and walked away.

At least Dan was smart enough not to argue with a guest, but Milo wondered if the jerk would say something later to him about simply standing there and not working. Dan was too uptight and needed to breathe and trust his staff to do their jobs.

“I think you just got Eric fired.” Milo glanced at Dan’s retreating form. He hoped like hell that wasn’t the case. He didn’t need to give his uncle an excuse to explode.

“Who’s Eric?” Colt’s dark brows furrowed.

“I’m filling in for my uncle.” Milo drew his attention back to Colt. “This isn’t even my real job.”

“What is your real job?”

“Apparently getting people fired.” Milo set the tub on the nearby table. His arm was cramping. “I’m a cashier at the local grocery store.”

Colt waved a hand toward the dance floor, which now only held the bride and groom and that big and small male couple. “If you’re that worried, I’ll have my brother-in-law smooth things over with Dickhead Dan.”

“The huge guy?” The one who’d been lovingly staring into the shorter guy’s eyes? The same couple Milo envied?

“No.” Colt grinned. “The shrimp he’s dancing with. Atlas’s dad will set things right.”

“I don’t think it’s polite to call someone that.” Especially when Milo had been picked on in the past because of his short stature. “I’m about his height.”

“I meant no offense.” Colt tugged at his tie. “I think this suit is affecting my brain. If Atlas sees me tugging at my clothes, he’ll put me in time-out.”

“You’re...you’re a very strange man, Colt.”

There was a faint glint of humor in his green eyes. “I’m just more comfortable in jeans than slacks. I’m dying to kick these shoes off. They’ve been irritating me all—” He blinked then sniffed deeply.

Wrinkling his brows, Milo sniffed, too. The only thing he smelled was the buffet. “Are you hungry? There’s still plenty of food left.” The only good thing about working this gig was the fact that the help was allowed to take leftovers home instead of the food being tossed in the trash. Not that Milo wanted any of it. He wasn’t a big eater and had made sure to eat before he’d left for this gig.

“Peaches.” Colt’s eyes fluttered close for a moment as he inhaled again, more deeply this time.

“I don’t think peaches are being served.” Milo reached up and slid his hand over

Colt's firm jaw, the guy's facial hair tickling his fingers. He'd never felt so fascinated with anyone before and couldn't seem to resist touching Colt, even though it was very inappropriate to do so.

Colt's eyes slid open. Milo tried to jerk his hand away, but Colt gripped his wrist in a gentle hold, keeping Milo's fingers on his face.

"I like your hand on me." Colt's green eyes darkened further.

"Um, okay." Milo scratched Colt's beard. "It's so soft."

A smile touched Colt's lips, and now Milo wanted to kiss him. "You have no idea what your fingers are doing to me, handsome."

"They're scratching your beard." Milo thought that was pretty obvious since he'd commented on how soft the hairs were.

"Come home with me tonight."

Milo pulled his hand from Colt's grip. "Why would I do that?"

What on earth was wrong with me?

He had an overwhelming urge to touch Colt again. Milo was on the job and shouldn't be fondling a guest's face. That was completely unprofessional, yet he couldn't seem to stop.

"Because you feel the undeniable attraction between us." Colt stood so close that Milo felt his body heat, and it was affecting him in ways that made him want to strip naked and offer himself to a guy he'd just met.

It was as if Milo's hands had a mind of their own. He rested them on Colt's lean waist, dying to touch other parts of the guy's body. He just bet that Colt had an amazing body under that expensive suit.

"Milo!"

He snapped out of whatever trance he'd been under at the sound of Dan's furious voice behind him. Milo spun, cursing himself. The guy had a knack for sneaking up behind him like some agile ninja.

"I apologize for this," Dan said to Colt. "I have strict policy guidelines that I expect my employees to follow. Touching guests inappropriately is grounds for dismissal."

"What's going on?" the large guy from the dance floor asked as he and Atlas joined them.

"A small issue that I am on top of." Dan clasped his hands tightly, looking as if he'd have a complete meltdown at any moment. "Milo, please leave the venue immediately."

"He wasn't touching me inappropriately," Colt snarled. "He lost his footing and grabbed me to balance himself. I don't have an issue with that."

Wait, what? The only thing Milo had lost was his mind. And had Colt snarled? Why on earth did Milo want to hear that sound again? He needed to focus on keeping Eric's job instead of what noises came out of Colt.

"Be that as it may," Dan replied. "I must—"

Atlas held up a hand to silence Dan. "This just seems to be a misunderstanding, Mr....?"



“Castel,” Dan replied. “The owner of Castel Catering. And you are?”

“My son.” A vision of elegance approached them, her strapless cream-colored dress hugging her petite frame. Despite her short stature, she exuded an air of confidence and grace. Her hair, as dark as the night sky, was artfully swept up with tendrils escaping in strategic places. The strands caught the light from the strung lights, causing them to dance and shimmer like stars in her gray eyes.

“Mrs. Havis.” Dan’s hands clenched tighter together—if the color draining from them was anything to go by—as his nervous gaze shot from Atlas to her. “I was simply informing your other son about the spotless reputation of Castel Catering and our commitment to providing exceptional service. Any wrongdoing or misconduct—”

“Milo tripped and grabbed my waist to balance himself,” Colt said to her as his eyes flashed with anger. “Mr. Castel is trying to fire Milo for inappropriate touching.”

That growly sound erupted in Colt’s throat again, seeming almost animalistic. Milo wanted to back away and draw closer at the same time. What in the hell was wrong with him tonight?

His gaze darted among everyone as his anxiety grew. Eric was going to be furious about this. Jobs weren’t easy to come by in Midnight Falls, and if he was fired...

The large guy glanced at Colt, then at Milo, before turning his attention back to Dan. “Mr. Castel, there’s no need for Milo to be fired over this.”

Dan paled slightly as he opened and closed his mouth a few times. “But I have clear guidelines that must be followed.”

Atlas arched a brow as he regarded Dan with cold gray eyes. “Colt said the guy just lost his footing. You’re telling me that’s grounds to fire someone?”

The large guy chuckled as he clapped Colt on the shoulder. “You see, Mr. Castel? No harm done.”

Dan looked like he wanted to argue further but seemed to think better of it. “Very well,” he said stiffly as he cleared his throat. “I’ll overlook the incident and Milo may stay for the rest of the event.”

This was far from over. Dan had only backed down because guests had rallied around Milo. He was a bit stunned complete strangers had stuck up for him but was thankful they had as Dan walked away.

Mrs. Havis squeezed Milo’s wrist. “I’ll have a word with Mr. Castel later. Something tells me he’s not going to let this go.”

It was as if she’d read his mind.

“I’m just filling in for my uncle,” Milo replied, still worried about Dan. “It’s Eric who’s going to suffer.”

And then Milo would suffer.

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.” She gave him a reassuring smile, but Milo wasn’t as confident. Even if his uncle wasn’t fired, he would be livid that this had happened.

“Mind telling me what’s really going on?” the tall guy asked Colt when Mrs. Havis returned to the guests she’d been talking to before joining them to help out.

“Dickhead Dan is just an asshole, Kellen,” Colt said. “Okay, so maybe my mate was touching me, but—”

“Your mate?” Kellen’s eyes bulged as his gaze shot to Milo.

A wide grin split Atlas’s handsome face. “No shit.”

Was Colt calling Milo a friend? He had no clue what was going on. Their reactions seemed a bit much for Colt making a friend. This was the strangest night of Milo’s life. “I have to get back to work. I’ve probably forfeited my break, but if that’s the worst that happens, I’m fine with it.”

“You never answered my question,” Colt said to Milo.

Milo didn’t like the way Kellen was looking at him. Like Milo was a rare specimen that intrigued him. Was it that rare for his brother to make friends? “What question?”

“If you’ll come home with me,” Colt said.

“We’re gonna leave you two alone.” Atlas grabbed Kellen’s arm. “Don’t get him into trouble again, Colt. It’s his uncle’s job riding on the line.”

“Yes, Dad.” Colt rolled his eyes.

Milo quickly grabbed his tub off the table and tried to escape before Colt turned back around. This night had turned into a complete disaster, and he still wasn’t sure why he’d touched the guy. He’d known better, and now he was going to pay the price when Eric found out.

“Not so fast,” Colt said.

“Stop it.” Milo pivoted on his heel to glare at the guy. “This was just a fun way for you to pass the time, but it’s not your ass in a sling if I get my uncle fired. If you’re that bored, go hang out with your mom. Stop using me for entertainment.”

There was a lethal calmness in Colt's eyes. "Don't pretend to know me. She's not my mother. My own mother was a cruel, heartless bitch who derived pleasure out of torturing me."

Images of Eric's own abuse surfaced in his mind. Colt was speaking in past tense, but Milo's torture was still ongoing.

"I don't play with livelihoods, Milo. I know the cold pains of hunger and wouldn't wish that on anyone." Colt stormed away.

Tears stung Milo's eyes as he hurried over to where he could deposit the dishes and trash from his tub. After he emptied it, he moved quietly around the tables, grabbing dirty dishes as he fought to compose himself. Dan would be all over him if Milo started crying in front of everyone.

"Hi. I'm Atlas."

Milo kept his eyes cast downward as he continued to clear the table he stood in front of. "I really don't want to get into trouble again."

"I'm not trying to get you into trouble, Milo. I just wanted to check to see if you were okay."

Milo hadn't been okay for a very long time.

"I appreciate your concern." Milo bent and grabbed some stray napkins off the grass. "I just—" He squatted there, holding the back of the chair as tears threatened to spill again. If only he could switch places with the people around him.

Mrs. Havis seemed like a supportive and loving mom. The idea of Atlas experiencing any kind of abuse or hopelessness seemed far-fetched. On top of that, the guy had

someone special in his life. Kellen would most likely pulverize anyone who looked at Atlas the wrong way.

Milo stood and blinked back his tears. “Just...thanks.”

“We’ll talk again,” Atlas said.

That wasn’t happening. They were from two different worlds. Midnight Falls was a small town, but there were divided social classes. While Milo lived with his uncle in a house that was in serious disrepair, Atlas likely lived in a much nicer home. The guy didn’t know anything about struggling just to get by or the nightmare of being abused. Not that he held that against Atlas. It was nice to know that not everyone was as miserable as he was.

“It was nice meeting you.” Milo hurried away when he saw Dan watching him.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Colt sat there, elbows on knees, watching Milo as he worked. Why in the hell had he practically bitten the human's head off? It wasn't as if Milo had assumed that Monica was Colt's mom. Colt had made the claim when he'd been talking to that dickhead boss.

Even so, Colt struggled to justify his short temper toward Milo, but deep down, he knew the real reason. The hurt and betrayal caused by his own mother still cut deeply, although it had been a very long time since their last encounter. The pain was still raw and ever-present, a constant reminder that he hadn't been enough for his own mother to love.

Logically, Colt knew that his mother's cruelty was the root of her heartlessness, but the little boy within him still longed for her love and acceptance, believing himself to be too broken, too damaged, to ever receive it from anyone. It was a constant internal battle, leaving him feeling worthless his entire life.

When Milo had snapped at him, Colt found he couldn't hold back his own sharp words. The memory of what his mother had done to him was too vivid.

Colt wished to god he'd had a mother like Atlas's. Monica's kindness only reminded him of what his own mother could have been like, of how she'd robbed Colt, Kellen, and Jared of a safe and happy childhood.

Closing his eyes, Colt tried to force away thoughts of his dead cousin as he felt a presence next to him. He didn't have to open his eyes to know who it was. Atlas's scent floated toward him.

The guy patted Colt's leg. "Your mate, huh?"

Colt smirked as he opened his eyes and sat back. "So much for hooking up with some random twink at the reception. I guess that plan is blown to hell."

So was Colt's plan to seduce Atlas's ex-best friend to get revenge for what the guy had done. Braylon had betrayed Atlas, sleeping with Atlas's boyfriend behind his back.

The plan was seduce Braylon, get the guy to fall for him, then dump him, leaving Braylon brokenhearted. Although Colt had made contact with Braylon in Fearless Fox and had the human eating out of his hand, it hadn't gone any further than that.

And now, it never would.

"Technically, Milo is a twink," Atlas said with a grin. "He's slim, very pretty, and his ass is nicer than mine."

Colt chuckled. "Do you have ass envy?"

When Atlas had walked into the kitchen the morning they'd met, the first thing Colt had noticed was how effeminate Atlas appeared. The human had delicate features, just like his mom, with pretty gray eyes and soft-looking black hair.

Kellen had only ever had hookups, and Colt had assumed that Atlas was one of them, though he was shocked his brother had brought one home since he'd never done that before.

For a brief moment, before he'd found out that Atlas was Kellen's mate, Colt had considered hooking up with the twink, as well. He'd never bedded any of Kellen's skanks, but Atlas's beauty had taken Colt by surprise.

Then he'd seen the bruising around Atlas's neck and had lost his shit. Painful memories of Kellen beating Colt with that leather belt seized him, and Colt wanted to kill his brother for abusing someone so small.

But it hadn't been Kellen who'd hurt Atlas. It had been a vampire.

Rationally, Colt knew that his brother hadn't had a choice in abusing him. It had been their mother's sadistic heart that had forced Kellen to either beat Colt or get twice the punishment.

Colt, Kellen, and Jared had been at her mercy. She'd manipulated them, tried to turn the three against each other, and used their love for one another against them.

Still, a part of Colt resented Kellen for what he'd done. And when the two had fought that morning, it wasn't just about the bruising around Atlas's neck. It was also about unleashing nearly one hundred and fifty years of rage and pain. What scared Colt was the fact that he'd wanted to kill his brother that day.

"I don't have any kind of envy since Kellen makes me feel like the sexiest man alive," Atlas replied. "He reminds me all the time how much he loves and desires me."

"If you start giving me details about your sex life with him, you're the one going in time-out," Colt teased with a grin. "No goddamn way I want to know how he is in bed, or I just might throw up and ruin this suit."

Atlas rolled his eyes. "I'm surprised you haven't tugged at your suit all night. You whined like a baby about wearing it."

Colt lifted his feet. "And my shoes, too."



It wasn't that Colt didn't like dressing up. He hadn't wanted to go to the wedding. Although Atlas's parents were nice to him, Colt wasn't a part of this family. He also didn't want to see how a loving family interacted, reminding him of what he'd never had.

"The reception is almost over, so I guess you can kick them off." Atlas looked around. "What are you going to do about Milo?"

That was a damn good question. "He handed me my ass, and I didn't handle it well."

Atlas turned in his chair to look at him. "What did you do, Colt?"

With a sigh, because he knew the guy was about to lay into him, Colt told him.

Atlas smacked his own forehead. "Between you and Kellen, I have my work cut out for me. Milo's feelings were justified, Colt. Everyone around him is dressed to the nines, and my sister and Craig went into debt to make this their dream wedding. Of course your mate thinks you're some rich, spoiled guy just trying to pass the time."

"People shouldn't assume things from appearance alone," Colt argued. "Look how fucked up things were when I assumed that Kellen put those bruises on your neck."

"You still assumed, Colt. Now that Milo has done it, you're pissed? There's a word for that," Atlas replied.

"I'm not a hypocrite." Colt clenched his jaw. When he'd taken off after his mom had killed Jared, Colt had been in a very bad place. He'd spent a good twenty years taking out his rage on people, starting fights just so he could release some of his rage.

But at the same time, there had been people who'd assumed he was just some asshole out to prove something. They had no idea just how badly he was hurting on the

inside, how he'd cried most nights wondering why his own mother had hated him so much.

Why he hadn't been good enough to be loved by her.

"When Milo is done for the night, go talk to him, Colt."

"I doubt he wants to see me." Colt rubbed his nape as he watched a guest talk to Milo. His mate nodded and hurried away, returning with a small stack of napkins.

"When I felt as if being with Kellen was a mistake, he bared himself to me," Atlas confessed.

Colt wrinkled his nose. "I told you I didn't want to hear about your sex life."

Atlas smacked his leg. "He bared his soul, perv. He gave me a part of himself, and it helped me to trust him. I'm not saying to bear your soul to Milo, at least not tonight, but being vulnerable is a good way to break down walls. Don't flirt or try to be smooth and charming. Just be yourself, Colt."

"If I did that, he would run from me. I'm nice around you and your family, but..."  
Colt stopped himself from saying he wasn't worth the effort.

"You're just like your brother." Atlas sat back. "Kellen thought he was too messed up for a decent guy like me."

Colt was a bit stunned that Atlas had guessed what he'd been thinking.

"I had a lot of self-esteem issues because of my mom and what Glen did to me," Atlas said. "I didn't think I was good enough for Kellen."

“Seriously?” Colt was surprised to hear that. “You’re the best thing to ever happen to him.”

“If you don’t give Milo a chance, you might miss out on the best thing to ever happen to you.” Atlas stood. “Just don’t demand that he comes home with you again. Start out by getting his phone number and invite him out for coffee.”

Colt turned over Atlas’s advice in his head as the guy walked away. He watched as his brother-in-law slid into Kellen’s arms and the way Kellen looked at his mate as if the human was his reason for breathing.

Colt longed to have someone look at him that way. The guys he hooked up with only had lust in their eyes. They’d only wanted him for his body, never taking the time to get to know him.

Except Hayley, but he hadn’t wanted to get to know Colt. The gazelle shifter had wanted to possess Colt. Just thinking about how obsessed Hayley had been with him made Colt shudder. He’d dated Hayley off and on for two months, but Colt had never caught feelings for him.

Hayley’s behavior hadn’t helped matters. The guy flipped out every time Colt didn’t call him. He’d tracked Colt down more than once, acting like a complete ass, uncaring who was around to witness his tantrums.

Hayley had said that fate had gotten it wrong and they should have been mates. Colt thought fate had gotten it right because the guy was too damn unstable and self-centered.

It had been a month since he’d told Hayley that what they had wasn’t going anywhere, and thank fuck the guy didn’t live in Midnight Falls or know Colt’s address. He never planned on seeing Hayley again, and now that he’d found his mate,

there wasn't a chance of Colt changing his mind.

An hour later, there were only a handful of people remaining. The bride and groom had left thirty minutes ago, a majority of the guests leaving shortly after.

The catering staff had cleaned up everything, so this was Colt's chance to talk to Milo.

He got up and headed to where his mate stood, talking with what Colt assumed was a coworker.

"May I speak with you a moment?" Colt asked as he interrupted them.

"It was great working with you tonight, Milo," the female said as her interested gaze slid up and down Colt before she walked away.

"I'm not going home with you." Milo crossed his arms, a sure sign he was closing himself off.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about." Colt tucked his hands into the pocket of his slacks. "I wanted to apologize for losing my cool earlier. You had no idea that you'd touched a nerve, but I could have handled it better."

Milo eyed him warily. "I shouldn't have assumed things about you. I didn't mean to snap at you. I was panicked because I thought I'd lost my uncle his job."

"Can we start over?" Colt stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Colt Sager. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He could tell Milo was fighting a grin. He shook Colt's hand. "I'm Milo Landon."

He let Colt's hand go, but all Colt wanted was to feel his mate touching him again.

"I just wanted to ask if we could exchange phone numbers and maybe grab a coffee sometime." Colt saw Dan in his peripheral vision and hoped like hell the guy didn't interrupt them. He didn't want to deal with the asshat and dress him down again. Colt would rather spend his energy on his mate.

"I guess that would be okay." Milo took out his phone, unlocked it, and handed it to Colt. "Call your phone so I can store your number."

Colt hid his shock at the phone cover when he'd turned it over to look at it. The case itself was black, but there was a glowing moon partially hidden by clouds, and below that was a wolf with its head thrown back, clearly howling.

"Got a thing for wolves?" Colt asked as he called his phone and then hung up when he heard it ring in his pocket.

"They're majestic animals." Milo accepted his phone back. "There's a certain haunting quality to them that I find intriguing, yet they're also incredibly fierce. They have a strong sense of protection and won't hesitate to attack anyone who threatens their mate."

Neither would Colt. "Haunting?"

Milo shrugged. "The image on my case always makes me think the wolf is howling because its lonely and in pain. I just want to hug it and brush my hand through its fur."

Colt was taken aback because that wolf was a representation of how he felt almost all the time. "Are you free tomorrow morning? I'd love to meet up with you at Bluebird Café and hear more on your take of wolves."

“I have to work my job tomorrow afternoon, but I guess we can meet an hour before my shift starts. Does ten sound good?”

“Sounds perfect.” Colt wanted to stand there for the rest of the night and talk to his mate. He knew the human felt the pull. It had been evident when Milo had touched his face and rested his hands on Colt’s hips earlier.

Now Colt wanted to kiss him, wanted to feel those soft-looking lips on his.

“I have to help load everything on the truck. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Milo walked away but glanced over his shoulder, giving Colt an enchanting smile.

Colt had to remember not to come on too strong when they met in the morning. Evidently that made Milo uneasy. He also had to act like he had two brains cells between his ears and try to refrain from pulling his mate into his arms when they saw each other again.

That was going to be a challenge, but Colt loved challenges.

“You all set?” Kellen asked as he and Atlas joined him.

“Did you take my advice?” Atlas asked.

With a wide grin, Colt replied, “We’re having coffee tomorrow.”

“See!” Atlas chuckled. “I knew that approach would work.”

“Congratulations on finding your mate.” Kellen clapped him on his shoulder. “Just give us a heads-up when you finally bring Milo to the house so we can give you two some privacy.”

“I’ll hang this tie on the staircase railing.” Colt loosened the tie around his neck. He liked how nicely he cleaned up but couldn’t wait to slide on some comfy jogging pants and a T-shirt.

“Let’s go, Casanova,” Atlas said before he and Kellen headed toward where they were parked.

Glancing at the catering truck, Colt was hoping to catch a glimpse of Milo but didn’t see him.

Tomorrow couldn’t come fast enough.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Milo had changed his clothes three times since he'd gotten out of the shower. He wanted to look good for Colt, but at the same time, he was going to work after their coffee. Not a chance Milo was showing up to his job in nice clothes. Not when he was always dirty by the end of his shift. He had to find a balance between casualwear and something he didn't mind getting dust and food on.

Which was the reason for changing his clothes numerous times in the past forty-five minutes. Milo started to change again, unhappy with the jeans and the almost-dress shirt he had on, but he forced himself to stay away from his drawers and closet. It wasn't as if he had a lot of choices in the first place, and the only thing he would end up doing was putting back on the clothes he'd already discarded.

"You're heading out earlier."

Milo's uncle leaned a shoulder against the doorframe as he sipped his coffee, his other hand tucked in his front pocket. Too bad Eric's good looks didn't match the man's violent personality. His hair was as dark as Milo's, but he kept it cut short. His eyes were a yellowish-green that Milo had always found strange, but pretty, and he was lean with muscles. His uncle was also a good foot taller than him.

"I just have some things I have to do before work." So far, Dan hadn't called Eric. Milo knew this because his uncle was being pleasant. Eric wasn't a jerk twenty-four-seven. Most of the time he was somewhat decent. It was when he either drank from that red bottle in the living room or was pissed off about something that he turned his sights on Milo.

Most of the time Milo hadn't done anything wrong, but when Eric was in a foul



mood, he always found something to nitpick to justify his anger toward his nephew.

“Bring some groceries from work.” Eric walked away, leaving Milo to put away the clothes he’d decided not to wear.

Then Milo stood in front of the mirror and twisted the ends of his hair, trying to look his best. The clothes he had on weren’t his most flattering, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Grabbing his wallet and phone, Milo headed out. Since he didn’t have a car, he would have to walk to Bluebird Café, which meant he had to leave now for his meetup with Colt if he wanted to make it on time.

The only vehicle parked off to the side of the house was Eric’s beat-up red truck with two large rust spots on the back. Milo would have asked for a ride, but if his uncle gave him a lift, that would mean getting to town way too early. Besides, Milo tried his best to interact with Eric as little as possible.

The day was warm, and the sun was beating down, making Milo sweat like crazy by the time he made it to the café. Screw a coffee. He wanted something cold to cool him off. Something with plenty of ice sounded perfect.

The walk had also taken longer than Milo had expected. Now he wouldn’t have an hour with Colt like he’d hope for. He would only have half that time before he had to head to work.

As soon as Milo stepped inside the quaint coffee shop, the cool exterior dried the sweat, making his skin itch. Colt was already there, leaning his hip against the counter as he talked with Ajax, the owner of Bluebird Café.

Milo was still as wildly attracted to Colt as he’d been last night. Just like the night

before, Milo had an overwhelming urge to touch the guy, to trace Colt's muscular arms and chest, to feel the guy's beard under his fingers.

Colt's jeans hugged his backside, accentuating its roundness. Milo thoroughly appreciated a nicely shaped ass. Colt wore a soft gray T-shirt and stylish black Trento boots, which Milo recognized because he had always wanted a pair but could never afford them.

His gaze slid back up Colt's body, lingering on his ass once more, and then continued to the man's muscular torso. It wasn't until Milo reached Colt's gorgeous face that he realized both men were staring at him.

He'd just been caught ogling Colt's sexy physique. Heat erupted over Milo's face and ears as he cleared his throat and walked to the counter, praying neither man said anything to him about his lustful appreciation of Colt.

"Good morning." Colt's smile brought an immediate softening to his features. Or maybe it was the fact of seeing him during daylight hours instead of at night. Whichever the reason, Milo found himself falling under Colt's spell once again.

"Hi." Milo returned the smile, hoping it wasn't too wide and cheesy looking.

"What can I get you two?" Ajax asked.

Colt looked at Milo to allow him to order first. He was standing so close that Milo could have reached out and grazed his fingers over the guy's chest.

Don't you dare start touching him again. He was nice about it last night, but squeezing his thick guns might come off as intrusive and needy.

"A large strawberry lemonade with ice." Milo reached for his wallet, but Colt held up

his hand.

“I invited you, so it’s my treat.” Colt turned his gaze toward Ajax. “Give me the same.”

“I’ll bring your drinks to your table,” Ajax said.

Colt glanced down at Milo. The guy really was tall as hell. “Do you want to sit on the patio or stay inside?”

“Outside is fine.” The patio was shaded from the sun, and now Milo was a bit chilly from the central air circulating inside. Besides, there were people in the café, and Milo preferred to have Colt all to himself.

As the two headed for the glass patio door, Colt rested his hand on the small of Milo’s back. Then Colt held open the door for him, allowing Milo to go first and choose what table to sit at.

“After the chaos with Dan and me being rude to you last night, I didn’t think you would show, especially since you were running late.” Colt sat across from Milo at a back table. He would rather have had Colt sit next to him, but now Milo could gaze at the guy’s rugged features and pretty green eyes.

“It took longer to get here than I anticipated, and we cleared up our rudeness toward each other last night,” he said. “If you recall, we ended our conversations on the subject of wolves.”

Colt’s dark green eyes sparkled. “That’s not something I’m going to forget. Have you ever seen one in real-life?”

“When I was six, my mom took me to the zoo. That’s when I fell in love with them.

We went back a few times during the summer each year until I was ten.” Milo looked up when Ajax brought their drinks out, along with napkins and two wrapped straws.

“Thank you,” Milo said.

“Let me know if you guys need anything else.” Ajax walked away, leaving them alone again.

“So, you’ve been fascinated with the majestic animals since you were a kid.” Colt took a sip of his drink, minus the straw, and Milo caught himself licking his bottom lip, wishing he was the rim of that glass. He was dying to know what Colt’s lips tasted like and if they were as soft as they appeared.

Leaning forward, Milo whispered, “Don’t tell anyone, but I have a wolf tattooed on my right shoulder blade.”

Colt winked. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“I went to this reputable tattoo parlor after researching the ones closest to Midnight Falls. Tattoos are forever, so you have to not only really consider what you want but pick the right place.”

“Without a doubt,” Colt replied.

“After I saved up enough money, I made an appointment. I can’t tell you how scared I was of getting one. I heard it really hurts, and it felt like the needle was piercing bone.”

Milio wasn’t going to admit that he’d cried a few times during the session and asked the artist for a break more than once so he could have a breather.

Colt's chuckle was deep and mesmerizing. "I wouldn't know since I don't have any. My brother is covered in them, though. When did you get it?"

"Three weeks ago," Milo said. "I don't regret it. Rob did an amazing job, though it's hard to see it since it's on my back. I have to twist and turn just to get a glimpse. Thankfully Rob took a picture of it with my phone when he was done, so I don't have to always contort my body if I want to look at my ink."

"Do you mind if I see it?" Colt asked.

"Now?" Milo glanced at the large glass window next to them and saw that the customers had left. Only Ajax was inside, but he had his back turned, doing something behind the counter. Still... "I don't want to take my shirt off in public."

Guys did it all the time in the summer, but Milo was modest and a bit shy. He didn't have ripped abs or guns like the topless men he'd seen around town.

Colt got up. "I'll stand right here and you move in front of me. I'll block the view so anyone who comes into the café won't be able to see you."

"I just don't want anyone to get jealous of my skinny, pale chest." Milo stood, unsure if he should do as Colt asked. "I worked hard at not doing any exercises to maintain the lack of definition."

"I love your sense of humor." Colt placed his hands on Milo's hips and moved him until the interior of the shop was no longer in view. Milo stood there for a moment and simply stared up at Colt, lost in the guy's eyes as he reveled in having Colt's hands on him.

Colt didn't say anything as he gazed down at Milo. Just like last night, it was as if Milo was in a trance. What really blew his mind was the fact the wolf's eyes on his

back were green.

The same dark hue as Colt's.

It had been a last-minute decision, and Milo still wasn't sure why he'd made the change from blue to green eyes.

"Tattoo, right." Milo gave Colt his back and then pulled his shirt over his head, clutching the fabric in his fists. "Be completely honest. What do you think?"

The tattoo covered Milo's entire shoulder blade. It depicted the same scene that was on his phone case because Milo loved that image so much. Only he'd asked the artist to make the wolf appear lost and heartbroken. Rob had exceeded Milo's wildest expectations, making the wolf's eyes appear as if the creature had a tortured soul.

He shivered when Colt's finger ghosted over his skin, almost as if tracing each line. "It's beautiful, Milo," he said softly. "The artist did an incredible job. He captured the loneliness and heartache in the wolf's eyes perfectly."

"That's why he charges the big bucks." Milo closed his eyes, goose bumps breaking out all over him as Colt continued to trace the ink. He could stand there for hours letting Colt's finger glide over his bare skin. Never in Milo's life had he felt such a deep connection to anyone else, as if he'd known Colt forever.

"Do you mind if I take a picture of it?" Colt hadn't stopped his featherlight touch when he asked.

"I don't mind." Milo wasn't sure why Colt wanted a picture, but a feeling of excitement shot through him knowing the guy would have the pic on his phone.

He could sense Colt digging his phone from his pocket, but his finger never let Milo's

back until he snapped a few photos at different angles.

“Even though you can’t see my face, don’t post those on some weird fetish site,” Milo joked.

“I’ve never been on a fetish site,” Colt replied, his voice still seeming in awe of the tattoo. “If I want to satisfy a kink, I handle it myself.” The guy’s deep chuckle slid over Milo. “That came out all wrong.”

Instead of just his face and ears, heat flushed through Milo’s entire body as an image of Colt, naked and spread out over a comforter, pleasuring himself, filled his mind.

It was the most erotic scene Milo had ever imagined in his head.

“Put your shirt on, shorty. Some customers just walked into the café.”

Milo thought about how upset he’d gotten last night when Colt had referred to Atlas as a shrimp, but truthfully, the word shorty almost sounded like a sweet endearment.

After sliding his shirt back over his head, they sat. Milo checked his phone for the time and saw he had twelve minutes left before he had to walk to work.

The time had gone too dang fast. “Thank you for asking me here this morning. I’ve had a really good time.”

“Me, too.” Colt leaned his forearms on the table. “I don’t want you to think I’m being clingy, because that’s not my style, but I’d love to take you to dinner once you get off work. Nothing fancy. We can enjoy a meal at the diner.”

How sad was it that no one had ever taken Milo out on a date? Was it a date? He’d been in two relationships in the past, but his former boyfriends had never taken him

out. Adam had been the laziest guy, always crying broke and never wanting to go anywhere. Then he started hitting up Milo for money and had become pissed when Milo said he didn't have it to give.

Adam also fought a lot with his mother, cursing at her and breaking things. Milo quickly dumped him.

Then there was Keith. Milo's last boyfriend had so many hangups that he should have been on medication. He refused to make any left turns when driving, freaked out a few times when Milo had accidentally kicked over the edge of the rug in the guy's apartment, and thought anyone female with a tattoo was a slut and any guy with one was garbage.

Those three things had only been the tip of the iceberg. By the time their relationship ended, Milo felt like he was the one who needed some damn medication. Keith had even been annoying as fuck when it came to correct body posture and using proper English. He had despised slang as if it was a filthy language.

Milo wished Keith all the best at finding anyone who would put up with his ridiculous idiosyncrasies.

Did Colt have any hang-ups or baggage? He'd said something at the reception about his mom being was a cruel, heartless bitch who'd derived pleasure out of torturing him.

Milo hoped Colt didn't have any deep-seated issues because he really liked the guy. He'd never felt so overwhelmingly attracted to someone before. Not like this. Not to the point that he became enthralled whenever he was near Colt.

"I don't get off of work until seven," Milo said. "I don't have to work Tuesday. We could meet up for lunch."



He was always exhausted after work, and Milo didn't want to be too tired to enjoy Colt's company. All he ever wanted to do after a long day was go home, shower, and chill in his room.

"Two days." Colt rubbed his bearded chin as he looked as if he was thinking it over, though there was a playful glint in his eyes.

"We can talk on the phone and text until we meet up again," Milo suggested. Two days seemed a long time to him, too. He wanted to hear Colt's voice before then and get to know the guy through calls and text messages.

"I'd really like that," Colt said. "It won't be the same as being with you in person, but I think I can suffer through forty-eight hours without seeing you."

Milo grinned. He liked that Colt wanted to spend time with him. That meant he hadn't bored the guy today. "You have my number, though I can't be on my phone at work."

"You tell me the hours I can't contact you, and I'll make sure that I don't." Colt stood. "I know you have to get going. I'll walk you to your car."

"I don't have a car." Milo got up and grabbed his glass. He was going to ask Ajax to put his drink in a to-go cup. It was too good to waste.

"Do you live in town?" Colt pushed his chair in, and so did Milo, hating that their time together had ended.

"I live off of Bask Road."

Colt's dark brows furrowed. "You walked here? That has to be a good ten miles, shorty."

“I don’t mind walking.” Milo skirted around Colt and headed for the glass door. “I’m used to it, and it’s good for my heart.”

“At least let me drive you to work.” Colt held the door for him, and Milo ducked under his arm, loving that he’d felt cocooned for five seconds. Whatever cologne the guy was wearing smelled so good that Milo wanted to shove his nose in Colt’s neck and get a lungful.

“The grocery store is a fifteen-minute walk from here.” Milo went to the counter and asked Ajax to transfer his drink into a plastic cup. He could do fifteen minutes with ease.

“Please.” Colt rested a hand on Milo’s upper arm. “I would really like to drive you there.”

Since it would give him a bit more time with Colt, Milo nodded. “Okay, but don’t make a habit out of chauffeuring me around. My feet might get used to being pampered.”

When they were outside, Colt led him to a burnt orange Range Rover that gleamed under the rays of the sun. “This is yours?”

“My tastes are simple.” He hit the fob and unlocked it. “Hop in, handsome.”

Milo was mindful of his drink as he climbed into the passenger seat. The interior was burnt-orange and black, and there was a large touchscreen on the dash with a ton of buttons below it.

It even smelled brand-new. Milo had never been inside a luxury truck before and was nervous about spilling his drink. “This is really nice,” he said when Colt slid into the driver’s seat.

“Thanks.” Colt pushed a button to start it, and Milo noticed how quiet the engine was. Eric’s battered pickup made a lot of weird noises and smelled like burning motor oil. The seats were worn and ripped in a few spots, and his AC didn’t even work. It definitely wasn’t as clean as Colt’s truck, either.

Colt reversed from the parking space then drove forward, the car moving effortlessly down the street.

Too soon they arrived at the grocery store. Milo usually liked going to work to get away from his uncle. But now he sat there wishing he could stay with Colt for a few more hours.

“Let me drive you home after work. You shouldn’t be walking those back roads.” Colt’s gaze made butterflies erupt in Milo’s stomach. The thick lashes only made his eyes appear more seductive.

Shoving those thoughts aside, Milo concentrated on Colt’s offer. He didn’t want Colt to see the sad state of his house. He also didn’t want Eric knowing about Colt. His uncle didn’t care that Milo was gay, but he had a tendency to embarrass his nephew in front of others.

“My coworker gives me a ride home,” Milo lied. “I’ll see you Tuesday.”

He reached for the handle as Colt said, “Call or text me when you get home so I know you made it.”

With a nod, Milo jumped out and headed inside the store.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Sunday night and Monday morning Milo and Colt had exchanged numerous texts. Every time Colt's phone chimed, he'd grabbed it to see what Milo had sent him.

He'd never been eager to receive a text in the past, but now Colt looked forward to reading everything his mate sent him. Then Monday evening, nothing. Milo hadn't sent a single text. When Colt tried to call, it had gone straight to voicemail.

Being away from his mate for two days had killed him and made his wolf snarl, but Colt kept telling himself that Milo had probably fallen asleep after a hard day's work. Unfortunately, the longer the silence dragged on, the more doubt and anxiety crept into Colt's mind. He tried to push it away, but that feeling he'd had since childhood of not being good enough to be loved by anyone dug its claws into him. Was Milo really asleep, or had he finally realized that Colt wasn't worth his time? The fear of rejection and insecurity battled against the hope that had blossomed inside Colt when he was with his mate.

That was any preternatural being's worst fear. Their mate rejecting them. Compound that with Colt's lack of self-worth and it was a recipe for spiraling into darkness.

"Pull your shit together," he murmured to himself. "Don't let those thoughts control you."

Although they hadn't set a time, Colt was parked in front of the diner, waiting and watching for his mate, wondering if Milo would even show. If his mate couldn't make it, why hadn't he texted Colt to tell him he wasn't coming? When they'd met on Sunday morning, in his opinion, they'd had a good time. Milo hadn't acted as if he was put off by anything Colt had said or done. His mate's texts had been sweet and

funny, making Colt constantly smile.

“Stop overthinking things,” he said to himself. “He’s not rejecting you. He just got caught up in something and wasn’t able to contact you.”

Too bad Colt wasn’t convinced. His mind kept going back to that comment he’d made about his mom to Milo the night of the reception. But if that had scared his mate, the guy wouldn’t have given Colt his number.

He tried to call Milo again, but the call went to voicemail. Snarling, he tossed his phone onto the passenger seat. After the shit Colt had done when he’d fled from home, he would deserve his mate ghosting him.

Those first twenty years had been an especially dark time. Colt had done some things he wished he could take back, fucked over people who hadn’t deserved it. He’d gambled, drank, fought, and spewed hatred and misery everywhere he’d gone, unable to break free of the chaos inside his head.

It was as if his life had been cursed from the womb, and Colt couldn’t understand why. He didn’t believe in reincarnation, but maybe he’d been the worst piece of scum in a past life and he was paying for it in this one.

All he wanted to do was see Milo, to talk to his mate, to hear his voice again. Colt scrubbed his hands over his face, and then watched the people on the street as he wondered where Milo was.

Maybe fate had decided Colt should spend the rest of his long life alone and that Milo was dodging a bullet by kicking him to the curb.

When his phone chimed, Colt snatched it off the seat, nearly dropping it as he checked his messages.

It wasn't Milo.

It was Hayley. Clearly, he hadn't taken Colt seriously when Colt had ended things.

Tossing his phone aside, he didn't even bother to read the text. Hayley wasn't who Colt wanted to hear from. He honestly wished the guy would leave him alone.

When three o'clock rolled around and his mate still hadn't shown up at the diner, Colt started the engine and drove home. He should have at least followed Milo home Sunday night so he knew where the guy lived, but that had felt too damn creepy, and he'd been determined to respect Milo's boundaries.

Colt wasn't trying to turn into a stalker. That was some shit Hayley would have done. Colt had told himself that he would see him on Tuesday, but that hadn't happened.

After parking behind the house, Colt stormed into the kitchen, his mood so foul that he didn't need to be around anyone right now. The last thing he needed to see was Kellen and Atlas making out. Atlas was sitting on the edge of the island, his legs wrapped around his mate as they deep throated each other's tongues. It was a glaring reminder that Colt's world felt like it was crashing down around him.

"Keep that shit in the bedroom," Colt snarled as he grabbed a bottle of water then slammed the fridge door. "I don't want to use the same counter his ass has been on."

Kellen growled as he pulled away from Atlas. "Disrespect my mate like that again and—"

"What?" Colt held his arms out wide, unable to rein in the all-consuming pain that was eating him alive. "You'll beat my ass? I'm not feeling very nostalgic right now."

Colt instantly regretted his words when agony flashed in Kellen's eyes. He wasn't out

to cut his brother deep. In fact, since they'd reconnected, neither of them had mentioned their upbringing. It was an unspoken agreement to never broach the subject, and Colt had just thrown their shared trauma in Kellen's face like the worst piece of shit to ever live.

"The fuck you say?" Atlas jumped off the island, shoving himself in front of Kellen. "I don't know what your problem is, but that was some really messed-up shit, Colt!"

"I—" Colt whipped the bottle across the kitchen and stormed to his bedroom, slamming the door so hard the walls rattled. He should never have moved in with Kellen. No matter how hard Colt tried to forget his past, he was constantly living it like a vicious cycle that refused to end.

With a growl filled with self-loathing, he swept his hands over the top of his dresser, sending everything flying. Unable to contain his anger, he slammed his fist into the mirror above the dresser, shattering the glass into a thousand pieces.

Colt destroyed his dresser and the head and footboard of his bed, splintering the wood until his hands were a bloody mess. He despised himself for throwing that bullshit in Kellen's face, but even worse, he hated that Milo's rejection was ripping him to shreds.

For once, why couldn't he have a tiny sliver of happiness? Why did life always snatch hope out from under him whenever he stupidly thought things were finally turning around for him?

The weight of his pain became too much at times, but it wasn't Kellen's fault. Yet Colt couldn't help but feel a slight resentment toward his brother for not being able to save them from their mother.

For not being able to save Jared.

It had been sixty-seven years since he'd fled that night, but time hadn't eased a fucking thing. Colt still woke in a cold sweat, listening out for his mother's footsteps, fearing her wrath. He still saw Jared's cold, dead eyes staring back at him when Colt and Kellen had found their cousin locked in a cage in that ice-cold shed. He still saw in his mind the raw torment in Kellen's eyes every time he had to punish Colt with that leather belt.

He still heard his mother's sinister taunts of how her boys were worthless mongrels that deserved being beaten and starved. How they'd made her life a living hell and how much she hated that she'd given birth to them or taken Jared in.

The bedroom door swung open, and Kellen rushed in, wrapping his muscled arms around Colt, stopping him from wrecking more in his room. "Breathe, brother. One deep breath at a time."

Colt's chest rose and fell heavily as he closed his eyes, fighting against the toxicity boiling inside of him. It wasn't just about Milo rejecting him, even if that had been the catalyst for him losing his shit. It hurt so badly that he wasn't sure how he'd survive the pain.

"I didn't mean it," Colt sobbed. "I'm sorry I threw that in your face. All we could do was survive what she did to us."

Kellen squeezed Colt tighter. "I'm just as fucked up, little brother. The only difference is I have Atlas to ground me now. Tell me what set you off."

He jerked from Kellen's hold and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Milo rejected me."

"Are you sure?" Bewilderment laced Kellen's voice. "Doesn't he feel the pull?"



“Apparently not.” Colt dropped his hands then used his shirt to wipe away the tears. “We were texting each other like crazy since Sunday, and then last night, he didn’t respond to my texts and left me hanging at the diner just now. He didn’t show up for our lunch date or have the balls to even send me a middle finger emoji.”

“I’m not trying to be nosy, but did something happen to scare him away?”

Colt glared at Kellen. “You mean did I say or do something to ruin this?”

Kellen snarled. “Don’t twist my words, Colt. I fucked up a lot with Atlas. I nearly got him killed several times because of the vampires after me. No matter how much of an asshole I was, Atlas didn’t give up on me. There has to be a reason Milo stopped contacting you.”

“I have no goddamn clue.” Colt wished he knew. Everything had been going great, or so he’d thought. “The last texts we exchanged were talking about...things. I didn’t sext him or pressure him to see me. I kept it cool and the conversation light.”

“Then all you can do is wait for him to contact you, Colt. The night Atlas fled, I wanted to rip the town apart to look for him, but what would that have accomplished besides scaring him even more?” Kellen asked.

“My wolf is going insane.” Colt rubbed his chest, feeling as if the ache would cripple him. “I just want to talk to Milo, to know what’s going on.”

“I’ve been where you are,” Kellen replied. “I let doubt creep in and was positive Atlas had rejected me, but all he’d needed was some space to work things out. I highly doubt Milo is rejecting you, Colt. It sucks being separated from your mate, but you’re just gonna have to wait until he reaches out to you.”

“A vampire choked Atlas out. That was how you got him back here,” Colt reminded

his brother.

“Stop trying to find reasons to sink even further into despair. If I had a choice, I would have preferred he’d called me when he was ready to talk instead of finding him dangling from a bloodsucker’s fist. Consider yourself lucky Milo isn’t in danger.”

He prayed that Milo contacted him soon, because if Colt had to wait much longer, his wolf was going to take over and track their mate down.

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Waking up, Milo whimpered as he eased himself into a sitting position on his bed. He didn’t think Eric had caused any major damage, but Milo’s body pulsed heavily with pain. If he’d known that Dan had talked to Eric about the debacle at the reception while Milo was at work yesterday, he wouldn’t have come home.

As soon as he’d walked through the door last night, Eric had beaten Milo senseless for nearly losing his job. He’d called Milo all kinds of perverted names for “inappropriately” fondling a guest. It had taken what little strength Milo had left just to crawl from the living room and get into his bed.

This was not how Milo had wanted to spend his day off. Thank god he didn’t have to work tomorrow, either. It had killed him to miss his lunch date with Colt, but there was no way Milo would have been able to walk to town.

After Eric had beaten him, Milo had shut off his phone to stop himself from texting Colt. There wasn’t anything the guy could do about Milo’s situation, and who would want to deal with that kind of vicious drama?

Milo didn’t want Colt to know about his home life, telling himself that it would be

better if they cut ties, but his chest ached so badly to talk to Colt. It wasn't the beating that made his chest hurt, either. It was a longing deep inside of him just to hear Colt's voice.

Wincing, Milo grabbed his phone off his nightstand and turned it back on, seeing that it was nearly midnight. Then his phone dinged several times to alert him that he had messages. Bracing himself—because Colt had probably told him to piss off for standing him up—Milo read the messages.

The first one was Colt asking how his work day had gone. Two hours later, he'd texted Milo to ask if everything was okay because he hadn't gotten a response.

Everything had been far from okay. The timestamp on the message said Colt had sent it right while Milo lay on the living room floor, wondering if he was going to die from what Eric had done to him. Milo only recalled the time because he'd stared at the living room clock on the wall as he lay there waiting to see if Eric was done beating him.

When his uncle stormed out of the house, Milo finally crawled to his room.

The last message was this morning, Colt apologizing if he'd said anything that might have made Milo uncomfortable.

Fuck. Milo closed his eyes. Colt thought he'd done something wrong. Milo couldn't allow him to think that, even though this would be the perfect time to never contact Colt again. That would be the best thing, but Milo wanted to reach out to him so badly that tears burned behind his eyes. How could he miss someone this much when they'd only met a few days ago? That made absolutely no sense to him.

But if he was going to contact Colt, what reason could he give for standing the guy up? He'd already lied to Colt once—about getting a ride home from a coworker—and

it had felt so wrong doing it. Milo didn't want to lie again, but he also couldn't tell the truth.

Unsure where his uncle was, Milo decided to text Colt instead of calling him. But simply texting the word "hi" felt too callous and indifferent.

The phone felt like a weight in his hand as he sat there trying to think of what to say. Milo turned it over, staring at the wolf on the back, and in that moment, he shared the majestic beast's pain.

Taking a deep breath and wiping away his tears, Milo began to text.

It wasn't my intention to stand you up. I was looking forward to spending time with you, but I had to deal with family matters.

He would know where he stood if Colt didn't reply. The minutes ticked by, feeling more like hours as he waited. Milo pictured Colt's handsome face, how his dark green eyes sparkled when he smiled or how they'd smoldered at the reception when Milo had touched Colt's face.

When he closed his eyes, he could hear the deep timbre in Colt's voice asking Milo to come home with him. Instead of letting Dan ruin his night, Milo should have said yes.

A ding echoed in the room. Milo opened his eyes, his hand shaking as he hovered his finger over the message icon. Whatever the reply, Milo would never regret meeting Colt.

Just tell me you're okay.

The concern wrenched a sob from Milo. He felt isolated and alone, a single text the only lifeline in the despair surrounding him. It always felt like no one cared, as if his

silent screams went unheard. Not since his mother died had Milo felt safe and loved. His former boyfriends hadn't made him feel whole, but somehow, Colt did.

Colt was the first person who'd asked if he was okay and the first person who seemed to genuinely care. Milo swallowed roughly as he replied, Have you ever felt like screaming until your voice is raw?

Colt's reply was instant. All my life, shorty. Sometimes it feels like the pain is eating away at your soul.

With a hiss from moving his body, Milo lay down on his pillow then turned onto his side, holding his phone close to his face as he sent Colt another text. Like no one really sees you. Like you're invisible to the world.

Milo turned slightly when the ache became too much.

I see you, Milo. From the moment my gaze found yours, I've seen you.

Easing off his bed, Milo shuffled to his window and separated the blind slats. His uncle's truck was gone. Milo prayed Eric was out chasing tail and wouldn't return for a while.

He looked down at his phone and texted Colt. Do you want to hang out now? I get it if you don't. I just really want to get out of the house.

Once again Colt's reply was instant. Give me your address and I'll be there.

Should he do that? What if Eric returned before Colt showed up? Milo wasn't sure if his uncle was still pissed, and he didn't want the guy to cause a scene when Colt pulled into the driveway.

Sending up a prayer, he gave Colt his address.

I'm on my way.

Since Milo had no idea how much time he had, he forced himself to move a little faster, though he paid for it with deep pulses in his body. What he really needed was a shower, but he didn't think he could stand that long under the spray. He also didn't want to stick around any longer than he had to in case his uncle returned. Milo's back was killing him as he pulled his clothes off and grabbed fresh ones from the drawer.

As fast as he was able to bend his painful limbs, Milo dressed. He grabbed his phone that he'd set aside, as well as his wallet and shoes, and then headed to the porch. Once outside, Milo eased into a sitting position on the steps and whimpered as he slid his sneakers on and tied them.

It took over a minute to get back up. His body ached with every move as he climbed down the steps and walked a few feet away. Five minutes later headlights appeared on the road ahead. Milo's breath seized as he worried it was Eric, but when the vehicle turned down his driveway and grew closer, the familiar noise of his uncle's pickup was absent.

The orange Range Rover stopped next to Milo. He moved faster than his body appreciated as he headed for the passenger door. Getting in was tricky. Pain flared all over him as he eased into the seat and closed the door.

Colt didn't ask where Milo wanted to go. He simply turned around and headed down the dirt driveway. Less than a mile after they'd turned onto the main road, Eric's truck rambled by in the opposite direction.

His uncle was unaware that he'd just passed Milo.

Milo looked out his window, his heart racing at how close that had been. If Colt had taken a few minutes longer getting there...

As Milo's heart slowly returned to normal, the sound of music reached his ears. The volume was low, but he could make out the soft sound of jazz. He never would have pegged Colt as a jazz listener.

Neither of them spoke. It was as if they were lost in their own thoughts. A few minutes later, the truck made a right turn. Milo glanced around as they drove through a small, empty parking lot that looked to have six parking spaces. Colt eased the Range Rover into the last one, which was closest to a picnic table, a lone grill, and the forest that surrounded them. On the other side of the lot, opposite the table and grill, was a trash can chained to a thick wooden pole and a single blue Porta Potty.

"I figured we could enjoy some fresh air and star up at the stars while we sit at the picnic table." Colt rolled the windows down. "If it doesn't bother you, I'll play some music as we talk."

"It won't bother me." Milo opened his door, turned sideways, and then winced as he got out. He was trying his damndest to hide his stiff movements as he forced himself to walk normally to the table instead of shuffling his way there. He didn't want Colt to know he was in pain because he didn't want to talk about what happened to him.

Colt sat on the tabletop, his feet resting on the bench. Milo eased onto the bench next to the guy's long legs. "Thanks for hanging out with me, especially since it's so late."

"I couldn't sleep." Colt's voice seemed even deeper among the dense trees surrounding them. "I was feeling restless, and your request gave me the perfect reason to get out." His leg tapped Milo's shoulder, making it ache even more than it already was. "Is this secluded enough for you to scream until your voice is raw?"

If Milo wasn't hurting so badly, he might have screamed his head off to relieve some of the despair inside of him. Instead, he gave a nervous laugh. "I wouldn't want to disturb the animals trying to sleep."

"Most are nocturnal." Colt slipped from the table and dusted off his backside. Then he turned and took Milo's hand, pulling him from the bench and a few steps from where they'd been seated.

"No!" Milo cried out as pain radiated down his arm and across his upper torso. Colt hadn't pulled hard, but the sudden movement was too much. The guy immediately dropped Milo's hand. Milo clenched his teeth and breathed out slowly, praying the agony eased as tears welled up in his eyes.

Slowly, Milo shuffled backward and eased onto the bench, hoping he didn't miss and fall on his ass.

Brows furrowed, Colt crouched down in front of Milo. His voice was soft as he asked, "Are you hurt, sweetheart?"

"I had an accident at work." The lie tasted bitter on his tongue, but he hoped Colt bought it and let the subject drop.

Without asking permission, Colt gently lifted Milo's shirt. Since he hadn't examined himself in the mirror to see the extent of the damage, he had no idea what Colt saw. The rage that erupted in his green eyes said it all.

"How exactly did you hurt yourself?" Colt's furious gaze was still locked onto Milo's chest.

"I didn't say you could look." Milo snatched his shirt free and shoved it down, mortified that Colt had seen what Eric had done to him.



A growl vibrated in Colt's throat, the same sound he'd made at the reception, only this time it wasn't soft and sensual. It held a hard edge to it.

He tucked his fingers under Milo's chin and turned his head until they were staring at each other. When Colt spoke, his tone was calm, despite the fire still blazing in his eyes. "Can you please tell me what really happened?"

Milo lowered his gaze. "It doesn't matter, Colt. It never matters."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

It mattered a hell of a lot to Colt. This wasn't an accident. Someone had beat his mate and left behind dark purple bruises over his stomach and chest. Colt wanted to know the name of the person he was going to kill.

"Is this why you stopped texting me and didn't show up for lunch?" He sat on the bench next to Milo, resting his elbows on his knees, chin resting on his hands as he stared at his mate.

It had to have been done sometime after Colt and Milo texted yesterday morning. His mate had seemed fine, saying he had to get ready for work. That was the last time Colt had heard from him until Milo had reached out tonight.

His wolf was going crazy, ready to break free and hunt. But Colt had to force an outward calm so Milo had a sense of safety. Colt knew how important it was to feel safe after something like this happened. Whenever he had been beaten, it had been Jared who'd consoled him. It had been his cousin who'd held him when he shifted to heal. For days afterward, Kellen had disappeared, and when he returned, he'd sat in a corner of their room by himself, unable to look at Colt.

Kellen had refused so many times to punish Colt. And when he did, their mother flailed the skin off of Kellen's back then told him she would do it again if he shifted to heal.

Colt didn't know who'd had it worse. He and Jared as Kellen beat them with that leather belt or Kellen when he refused to hurt his little brother and cousin. The images never faded in Colt's mind of Kellen lying on the kitchen floor, his back so raw and bloody that it was a miracle he hadn't died from his wounds.

“What happened matters to me,” Colt said softly.

“Why should it?” Milo asked, his gaze focused on the ground. “We’ve only known each other a few days. Any sane guy would run from the thought of dealing with someone going through this, so I don’t blame you if you don’t want to see me again.”

He stopped himself from resting his hand on Milo’s knee. One, Colt had no idea if his mate’s legs had suffered the abuse, as well. Two, he wasn’t sure his touch would be welcomed right now.

“Because you matter, Milo. You’re not invisible to me, and I’m not running anywhere.” Colt ran a hand through his hair as he sat back. Even though he’d been through abuse, he wasn’t sure how to handle this. Did he press harder for answers and take a chance that his mate would shut down and demand to go home? Or should he wait until Milo eventually opened up to him and told him who’d done this?

What if Milo was hurt again while Colt waited to gain his mate’s trust?

“Can we just...” Milo glanced up at him, and Colt was sucked into his mate’s gorgeous hazel eyes. “Can we just hang out? I just want to enjoy this night with you.”

That was a lot to ask. Colt had tried to kill his brother when he’d seen the bruising on Atlas’s neck. Now he had to sit here and pretend his mate hadn’t gone through hell when all Colt wanted to do was end the bastard who’d done it.

Even so, Milo came first, and right now, he needed that feeling of safety. Colt pressing the matter wasn’t in his mate’s best interest at the moment. It was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do, but Colt decided to change the subject.

“What made you give your wolf green eyes?” He’d stared for hours at the pictures he’d taken of Milo’s tattoo. Even the wolf’s fur was the same coloring as Colt’s.

If that wasn't fate, he didn't know what was.

"I planned on them being blue, just like the one on my phone case. For some reason I told Rob at the last second to make them a deep green." Milo's smile wrecked Colt. "It's eerie that I met a guy with the same color eyes as my tattoo."

"Or fate." Colt winked, trying to give Milo the night his mate wanted. "How do you know we weren't destined to meet?"

"Do you know how crazy that sounds?" Milo shook his head as he stared up at the night sky, visibly relaxed now. "As much as I want to believe that fate is real, I know it isn't, Colt. There are only coincidences and luck."

"I think believing that it's real, that there are some things you can't blame on coincidence or luck, makes life more interesting." He shrugged, hoping to change Milo's opinion. "Why are you so against it?"

Milo looked him right in the eye. "Because some people don't get a happily-ever-after, some who fate craps all over. I used to be filled with a lot of things, Colt. It's hard to find wonder in the world when—" His mate looked away.

Colt clenched his jaw when Milo stopped right before he was about to reveal something important. "When life keeps throwing left hooks."

"Exactly."

Standing, Colt turned to face him. "If you're up to it, do you want to take a walk with me? We can go as slow as you want, or we can just sit here. I'm fine with either one."

Milo glanced around. "It's dark out. What if there's something dangerous in the forest?"

“The only dangerous thing will be me.” Colt walked to his Range Rover and rolled the windows up before he shut off the engine. He took his phone and wallet from his pocket and stored them in the center console before he locked the doors.

Then he stored his keys behind a nearby rock. Although he had no intention of shifting, something told him not to carry any of those things with him, and he tried to always listen to his gut.

When he headed back toward the table, he saw that Milo was standing. Colt wanted to envelop his mate in his arms and never let him go.

Returning to the table, Colt stood in front of the guy. He brushed his knuckles over Milo’s soft cheek. As badly as Colt wanted to kiss him, he wasn’t making a move while Milo was injured.

But damn, with the way Milo looked at him with yearning in his eyes, it was hard as fuck to restrain himself. Colt felt the pull, too. That deep connection that drew mates toward each other, that consuming need to touch and taste and bind their souls together.

“Come on.” He took Milo’s hand and lead him toward the path. Colt kept his strides short so his mate wouldn’t feel the need to keep pace.

Milo’s assurance that he was safe with Colt hadn’t gone unnoticed. The guy might not want to talk about what happened to him, but in every other aspect, the human completely trusted him. His willingness to walk into a dark forest in the dead of night with someone he’d just met a few days prior spoke volumes.

A wolf howled in the distance. Milo stopped and glanced around nervously. “I’ve never heard one howl in real life before. As much as I love them, I don’t think I want to meet one face-to-face and get attacked.”

Milo had no clue he'd met one already. That a wolf was holding his hand and walking next to him. "You're safe with me, shorty. I promise I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"No offense, but I don't think you can fight a pack of wolves."

"You just crushed my ego." Colt pressed a hand against his chest like he was really wounded by his mate's statement. "And I seriously doubt there's a pack of them."

If there was a pack and they were wild animals instead of shifters, Colt could scare them off. But that would require him shifting. As much as Milo loved them, Colt seriously doubted his mate would handle it well if he had to shift to defend them.

Milo squeezed Colt's hand tighter. "I have to be certifiable to keep walking after hearing that, but..." He glanced up, his cheeks turning a light shade of pink. "But I never get to do this sort of thing, and sharing this moment with you makes it even better."

Moonlight crept through the canopy of trees, illuminating their path. "I like spending time with you, too." He smiled at his mate. "What would you do if that wolf came up to you and shifted into a man?"

Milo chuckled. "I'd probably pee my pants and hide behind you."

So much for Colt shifting in front of Milo tonight. He was struggling to find a way to tell the human that he was a shifter and that they were mates. Milo's infatuation with wolves should have made breaking the news a breeze, but the guy had already said he didn't believe in fate and that he would piss himself if a wolf did that.

For now, telling Milo the truth could wait.

Colt slowed when he scented a wild bear nearby. He'd been so focused on spending time with Milo that he'd forgotten about the wild predators that called the forest their home. That was a hazardous oversight. If he could put enough distance between them and the bear, the animal might not detect their scent since they were downwind.

Milo was staring up at the moon, oblivious that they'd slowed their pace even more.

"We should start back," Colt said. "I don't want to exhaust you."

"I'm doing okay. I can walk farther before we have to turn around," Milo said. "I'm soaking up the peace and quiet out here." He squeezed Colt's hand. "Just as long as I don't hear any more howling."

His wolf snarled when the scent grew even closer. Their paths were going to cross if he didn't turn Milo around. Colt would have to shift in order to defend his mate, and he didn't want to hurt the bear or have Milo suffer a nervous breakdown.

"I wore the wrong shoes for this," Colt lied. "As much as I'm enjoying our walk, my feet are starting to hurt."

Milo frowned. "What're you talking about? You're wearing hiking boots."

His mate wasn't going to make this easy. Colt gently turned him around. "We really should head back."

"Um, okay."

If it were up to Colt, he would lift Milo into his arms and get them back to his truck in no time. His mate was still walking slowly, and Colt racked his brain for an excuse of why they needed to pick up the pace.

As his wolf fought to get free, the hairs along Colt's arms stood on end. The bear was dangerously close now, and they weren't moving fast enough to escape the situation.

Colt cursed seconds before his wolf burst free, spinning around to confront the bear that had just wandered onto the path behind them. His wolf snarled as the bear rose to its hind legs and roared.

Behind him, Milo screamed. Colt prayed like hell that his mate didn't run. Though he wouldn't get far because of his injuries, the bear might give chase. If it didn't, Colt would become separated from his mate, unable to protect Milo if another predator was close by.

The massive bear dropped to all fours, unhinging its jaw with another roar. Colt jerked forward, trying his best to scare the beast away instead of engaging in a fight.

After another less menacing roar, the bear wandered off the path and disappeared into the shadows.

Colt shifted back to his human form, bracing himself as he turned to face his mate. Milo was trembling slightly, his eyes bugging out of their sockets. "You're naked!"

That was what Milo's mind was focusing on? "Because my clothes shredded when I shifted. I'm not looking forward to my ass getting gnawed on by the mosquito population as we walk back."

Milo stood there staring at Colt's cock as a deep blush painted his cheeks. "You're naked," he said more quietly. "Your wang is hanging out."

Colt frowned. Was Milo having a meltdown or getting turned on? "I already told you why. I need to get my go-bag from my truck so I can get dressed. I can already feel the mosquitos attacking me."



They began to walk, but Milo was doing so backward while he continually swept his gaze over Colt's naked body. His cock would harden if his mate didn't turn attention on something else.

"You're going to fall on your ass if you don't watch where you're going."

"But you're naked," Milo repeated matter-of-factly as he stopped. Was his brain not rationalizing the fact that Colt had just been a wolf? The guy was acting as if Colt's clothes had simply vanished for no reason and he was trying to figure out how that happened.

"What do you remember before I was naked?" Colt slapped a mosquito on his upper arm and then his neck. The damn things were irritating.

"The bear." Milo furrowed his brows. "It was behind us. Then there was a wolf. It scared the bear away."

"Where did the wolf come from?" Colt moved closer as he scratched where he'd been bitten. He was going to end up with mosquito bites all over his body if he didn't get to his truck. It was as if a neon sign was over his head advertising a free meal to the pests.

None of them had bitten him while he'd been clothed, but now they were attacking en masse.

"It came from..." Milo looked up at Colt, his face a mask of confusion. "It was you. The wolf was you."

Unable to stand it any longer, Colt grabbed Milo's hand and moved a little faster, determined to save some of his blood for himself. "Let me know if this pace is too much for you. I'm being drained dry by nature's little winged vampires."

Milo didn't complain, but he kept raking his gaze over Colt. "You were the wolf. How?"

"Shorty, if we make it to my truck before I pass out from blood loss, I'll tell you anything you want to know." He used his free hand to slap at his chest. He didn't want to stick around so they could target his cock. Colt could shift and heal the bites, but no guy wanted to deal with their tender bits being attacked.

It felt like an eternity before they made it back to his Range Rover. Colt grabbed the keys from where he'd hidden them, thankful he'd listened to his instincts. He opened the back hatch and grabbed his go-bag, dressing as quickly as possible, though the clothes didn't stop his skin from itching where he'd already been bitten.

Rounding the truck, he opened the passenger door and helped his mate ease into the seat. Why did the look in Milo's eyes seem as if his mate was disappointed that Colt was no longer naked?

After closing the door, he got into the driver's seat, shutting out the mosquito population. "I'm going to start carrying mosquito repellent and that pink stuff people use for bites."

"Calamine lotion," Milo said as he kept staring at Colt. Then he poked Colt's arm as if to confirm he was real. "You were a wolf, but now you're not."

"I'm what's called a shifter, sweetheart. I can change into a wolf or into a human." He pursed his lips. "What came first, the human or the animal?" Colt had never thought about that before. As far as he knew, no one had figured that out.

"Were you born that way, or did you get bitten?" Milo was still poking Colt's arm. "Where is your wolf now?"

“Out grabbing a burger.” Colt curled his hand around Milo’s poking finger. “As much as I love when you touch me, you’re hitting a mosquito bite, and it’s only making it itch more. And to answer your first question, I was born this way. A human can’t be changed.”

“I can’t become a wolf?”

“No.” Colt let Milo’s finger go. “As thrilled as I am that you’re not hysterical, how are you handling this so well?”

Milo snorted. “I’m not. Every time I feel the panic setting in, I think of your nudity, which gives my brain a delicious distraction.”

Colt grinned. “I’m glad I can freak you out and arouse you at the same time.”

Milo finally sat back as his gaze focused on the trees in front of them. “I wish I didn’t have to go home. Even after seeing what you are, I’m at peace when I’m with you.”

It was their connection. Colt felt the same way. His wolf was content now that Milo was sitting safely in the truck. He opened his mouth to ask Milo wanted to come home with him but remembered the carnage of his bedroom. His mate didn’t need to see how destructive Colt could become.

“We could go to my place and chill on the couch with no expectations,” he said. “I microwave a mean bowl of popcorn.”

His mate glanced at him. “Am I an idiot for trusting you so much?”

“Not at all.” Since they were mates. If they weren’t, Colt might question Milo’s self-preservation.

“I’ve been told I’m a little na?ve.” Milo looked out his window. “I think I’m proving that by wanting to go home with someone I barely know and who isn’t even human.”

Colt started the truck and reversed before he drove back to the main road. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being a little na?ve, shorty. You just have to be careful of people who prey on such innocence.”

Roughly fifteen minutes later, Colt was leading Milo inside the house, taking his mate to the living room. Thankfully, Kellen and Atlas weren’t in there.

“You have an amazing home.” Milo looked around the living room as if he were in awe. “But I don’t see a television.”

“I’ll grab mine from my bedroom.” It hadn’t been demolished in his fit of rage. Now Colt had to do some serious cleanup and express shopping to replace the furniture he’d destroyed.

Not too long ago he and Kellen had wrecked Kellen’s room when they’d fought. Cleaning up the mess had been a pain in the ass. Luckily, Kellen had found a website with speedy delivery. Colt was going to use the same company to get his bedroom back in order.

“Have a seat and I’ll grab the TV.” Colt pulled out his phone when he was by his bedroom and sent Kellen a quick text to tell his brother and Atlas to keep their asses upstairs tonight.

After he took his television to the living room and hooked it up, Colt headed to the kitchen. He grabbed a bag of popcorn from the pantry then turned to see that Milo had followed him. His mate’s fingers were curled around the edge of the island as he stood there. “I’ve never seen a kitchen so spacious and beautiful.”

“Thanks. My brother and I live here,” Colt said just in case Kellen didn’t see the text and came downstairs.

“Kellen. He’s the one who looks like a mountain, right?” Milo said. “The one at the reception?”

“Yep.” Colt tossed the flat bag of popcorn into the microwave and set the cooking time. “His bedroom is upstairs. Mine is on the first floor.”

When the popcorn was ready, Colt grabbed the bag, along with two sodas. They relaxed on the couch before he used the remote to find a comedy for them to watch. To his surprise, Milo curled into his side as the movie started. Colt slid his arm around his mate, so damn thankful that the guy hadn’t rejected him. It was still fucked up what Milo had gone through, and as soon as Colt discovered who had hurt his mate, the son of a bitch was going to die.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee roused Milo from sleep. He lay there with his eyes closed and wondered if he could creep out of his bedroom and make a cup without Eric seeing him. As the fog of sleep lifted even more, Milo felt not only warmth radiating all around him but a hard body pressed into his back.

Colt.

The memory of last night resurfaced. He opened his eyes to the gentle sunlight filtering into the living room and saw that he was nestled between the back of the couch and Colt's strong body. Colt's arm was curled around Milo, and one of his muscular legs rested on top of Milo's lower half, sufficiently trapping him.

Milo glanced behind him and saw that Colt was still sleeping, a serene expression on his handsome face. Colt was a wolf. Milo still couldn't believe it. His mind kept trying to reject the idea because that shouldn't be possible.

But he'd seen it with his own eyes. It had burst free and fiercely protected Milo from that bear. The massive wolf had been breathtaking, and a part of Milo had wanted to run his fingers through the thick coat of fur as he admired its beauty.

The thought of Colt not being human should terrify him, but instead, he felt the safest he had ever been when he was with him.

Colt stirred slightly, his arm tightening like he was afraid Milo would leave him. Milo turned his head back around, only to feel something very hard poking against his butt. Now images of Colt's nude body flashed in his mind. The guy had stood tall, muscles rippling, his thick cock on full display.

If Milo didn't stop thinking about how fierce and gorgeous Colt had been, his hands might start wandering. He already had a hard enough time keeping them to himself whenever he was near Colt.

"Good morning."

Milo glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the deep, sleep-filled voice. Dark green eyes sparkled as Colt gazed down at him.

"Good morning," Milo replied as he turned over to face Colt.

"How did you sleep?" Colt slid his hand over Milo's back, his leg flexing, which made Colt's erection press into Milo's stomach.

"Comfortably." It had been the best he'd slept in a long time.

"I smell coffee, but I don't want to get up," Colt said with a smile. "I'm curled around the best body pillow I've ever had."

It wasn't easy to think when all Milo wanted to do was wrap his fingers around Colt's cock and feel the hard length throb in his hand. "I had a massive wall of muscles keeping me warm all night."

Colt tucked strands of hair behind Milo's ear. "How do you feel, hon?"

For a brief moment, Milo had no idea what Colt was talking about. But as soon as it dawned on him, his body started to ache and not in a good way. "I would kill to soak in a hot bath with some Epsom salt."

"My bedroom is a wreck," Colt said. "As much as I want to ease your aches and pains, I'm ashamed to let you see it."

“Like I was ashamed for you to see my house,” Milo confessed. He doubted Colt’s bedroom was as bad as he was making it out to be. More than likely there was a pile of dirty clothes and shoes strewn about.

“I was focused solely on you when I picked you up, Milo. I couldn’t tell you what color your house is to save my life.” Colt leaned back and did a full-body stretch, muscles popping. It was shameful how fixated Milo was with Colt’s physique. There was more to a man than just his outward appearance.

“I’ll let you blindfold me until we reach your bathroom.” Milo couldn’t stop himself from touching. He brushed his hand over Colt’s chest, marveling at how the hard pecs felt under his palm.

“If I put a blindfold on you, it wouldn’t be for innocent reasons,” Colt murmured, curling his fingers around Milo’s wrist and trapping his hand against his chest.

Milo looked up at him, his lips parting as he imagined all kinds of wicked things Colt might do with a blindfold. Ever since they’d met, Milo had thought about the guy nonstop. It was as if Colt had flipped some sort of switch inside of him.

“Full disclosure, I had a meltdown of my own.” Colt sighed heavily. “I took it out on my room.”

“Do you have a lot of meltdowns?” Uneasiness settled in Milo. Yet another guy with deep-seated issues. Only, Colt was huge, and if he wanted to hurt Milo...

“No.” Wariness and shame filled his green eyes. “You’re afraid of me now.”

Milo swallowed roughly and licked his dry lips. “I haven’t had an easy life, Colt. I enjoy spending time with you, but I can’t be around someone who’s prone to angry outbursts.”



He already suffered at the hands of Eric. Milo needed Colt to be a source of stability, not pain.

“I’ve never put my hands on anyone smaller than me, Milo. I know what it’s like to be at the mercy of an abuser.” He placed his palm against Milo’s cheek. “I swear on my life that you don’t have to worry about me ever hurting you.”

Everything in him wanted to believe Colt, but it wasn’t easy to trust when you lived in fear, when every moment with Eric was a chance he might explode.

Colt untangled himself and sat up. “Let me show you my room. Then I’ll explain something to you, something that will shed light on things.”

Milo tried to get up, but his stiff body ached and throbbed in various places when he attempted to move. Colt eased him to a sitting position then helped him stand. He curled his arm around Milo’s waist and kept him steady as they walked.

There was a hallway past the spiral staircase. Colt led him down it, soft light from the sun coming in through a window at the very end. There was only one door, and Colt opened it, keeping his arm around Milo as he was led inside.

Colt hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said it was a wreck. Despite the deep, velvety reds and calming creams adorning every surface, splintered wood was scattered across the plush carpeting, mixed with fragments of shattered glass twinkling dangerously amidst the chaos.

Milo also noticed some personal items strewn about.

“You did this?”

“When I thought my mate rejected me.” Colt closed the door behind him then carried

Milo—because his feet were bare—into a pristine bathroom, its white marble surfaces gleaming under the soft glow of overhead lighting. The space was at least four or five times the size of the bathroom at Milo's house.

At the far end was a large sunken tub with a single step in front of it. To the right stood a sleek glass-enclosed shower, inviting with its multiple shower heads and built-in bench. But it was the long counter to his left that caught Milo's attention, with its three mirrors above and elegant shaving lights, which illuminated every inch of the surface. It was like stepping into a luxurious spa.

"I'll get you settled in the tub so you can soak while I explain things to you." Colt opened a cabinet next to the shower and pulled out a bag of Epson salt. Milo simply stood there as Colt drew his bathwater, adding a large amount of the salt.

When it was filled, Colt got up and led Milo to the edge. "I can help you undress and ease you into the water, or you can try to do it on your own if you want some privacy."

As sore as Milo was, he seriously doubted he could undress himself and lift his leg over the side. That meant he needed Colt's help and the full extent of Eric's wrath would be even more visible in the white lights of the bathroom.

"I don't think I can manage on my own. Sleeping on the couch has stiffened my body."

With a nod, Colt gripped the hem of Milo's shirt and carefully eased it over his head, helping to gently extract his arms. A deep, primitive growl ripped from Colt as his gaze swept over Milo's torso. Turning his head out of embarrassment, Milo saw his reflection in the mirrors.

A sharp gasp escaped him, his eyes widening at the vivid, deep purple bruising that

stretched from his shoulder, down his chest, and around his side. The dark hues were a stark contrast against his pale skin. It was a miracle he'd survived the beating.

Lowering to his knees, Colt unfastened Milo's jeans and slid them, along with his underwear, down his legs. Then he curled his arm around Milo to steady him as Milo stepped out of them.

"I..." His mouth was bone-dry as he fought back tears. "Thank you for helping me."

"You're welcome." Carefully, Colt lifted Milo off his feet and eased him down into the water. The heat sank into Milo's bones as he lounged backward.

Colt sat on the single step. He placed his forearms on the edge of the tub then rested chin on them. "My wolf wants to hunt down the person who did this to you and return the favor."

The water felt so good that Milo didn't care that Colt could see his cock. He was also unsure how to respond to what the guy had just said.

"You don't believe in fate, but it's real." Colt dipped his hand into the water, moving his fingers in a lazy pattern and creating tiny swirls. "Humans call the person they feel they were meant to be with their soulmate. But for my kind, it's so much deeper than that."

As the aches began to ease, Milo watched Colt's fingers while he listened to the soothing richness of his voice.

"My kind have a mate. The person that fate handpicked for us. Someone who is our other half. But finding them can be difficult."

"You're saying that mates are real while soulmates are just a connection?"

Colt sighed. "I'm explaining this wrong. I should have never brought up the soulmate thing. I thought making the comparison would help you understand this better, but it's only confusing you. Now I'm a little confused."

Milo touched Colt's arm. "Let's start over and forget the soulmate thing."

"But you got the handpicked thing, right?"

"Yes," Milo replied. "Your kind has a specific person meant to be theirs because fate handpicked them." He understood that part perfectly, even if he was having a hard time believing it.

"Right." Colt nodded as his gaze fell on Milo's bruises. "We know when we find our mate. It's something called the pull. It's a connection so powerful that we're drawn toward each other."

"Like I feel whenever I'm near you." Milo put the pieces together. "I can't stop myself from touching you, like the night we met and I played with your beard."

That explained a lot, if Milo bought the whole fate thing. He was starting to, wanting to. Nothing else made sense.

Colt smiled. "I wasn't happy when Dan caused a scene. I was thoroughly enjoying what you were doing to me."

He didn't want to think about Dan. That only made him think about Eric, which Milo was trying hard to forget. "So, you're saying you've found your mate and it's me?"

"Let's be honest, Milo." Colt sat back a little. "If you didn't feel the pull, you wouldn't be sitting here right now. After Dan had a fit and you chewed me out, and then I snapped at you, that would have been the end of your interest in me. But even

if it wasn't, seeing my wolf last night would have made you run as far away from me as you could."

"I kept wondering why, even knowing how much trouble I was getting into with Dan, I couldn't resist you." Milo touched Colt's fingers that were in the water. "After I chewed you out, I told myself to leave you alone. But when you approached me, apologizing and asking if we could have coffee, I was reeled back in."

Colt winked. "I'm going to let my charm take credit for that."

"You wish you were that charming." Milo smirked. "So am I your mate?"

"I thought everything I just told you would indicate a clear yes." Colt splashed a little water on Milo's arm. "As a backup, in case my kind are still uncertain, mates have a unique scent that only their other half can smell. For me, the strong smell of peaches hit me that night."

Milo frowned. "That confused me because we weren't serving any. I thought maybe you had too much wine."

"We can't get drunk off of human alcohol. Not even a little buzzed. It burns through our system too fast."

"That has to suck." Milo was trying hard to process everything, but his mind was struggling to believe any of it. The only thing he could cling to was the fact that Colt was a wolf. If that was real, then why couldn't the mate thing be real, too?

"We have our own kind of alcohol that knocks us on our asses." Colt lifted his hand, letting the water drip from his fingers. "I'm not sure how you're going to feel about the next thing I want to tell you." He rested his hand back in the water. "We're possessive and protective of our mates."

“Possessive, as in overly jealous?” Milo didn’t like the idea of Colt being overbearing or trying to control who he could talk to. He’d seen men and women who tried to control every aspect of their partner’s life, and it had never been pretty.

“Mates are precious. We only get one, and the connection after we seal our bond becomes a hell of a lot deeper.” Colt glanced at him. “That doesn’t mean I’d be an asshole if someone batted their eyes at you, but my wolf would turn lethal if someone made a move on you.”

Milo liked the idea of being precious to Colt and their connection deepening. As long as Colt never disrespected him, Milo could deal with the guy making it clear that his mate was hands-off. “I still don’t understand what any of this has to do with your bedroom.”

Colt glanced away. “When you ghosted me, I thought you were rejecting me. It’s the worst thing a mate can do. It’s a pain you never want to experience, Milo.”

“But I didn’t—” It must have seemed that way. If roles were reversed and Colt had stopped texting him, then stood him up for their lunch date, Milo would have thought the same thing.

“I know that now,” Colt said.

Milo was relieved that the destruction was due to Colt thinking he’d been rejected instead of violence being his default setting. If Colt had had an easy trigger when it came to his temper, that would have been a deal-breaker. No matter how much it would have hurt to walk away, Milo would have.

“I’d really like to finish this conversation later.” Milo closed his eyes, a dull throb at his temples. For the past three years he’d been at Eric’s mercy because Milo couldn’t afford to live on his own. How many times had he wished he could get out of the

situation he was in?

Now he had his very own wolf and someone who could not only protect him but wanted to bond their souls, and Milo was so damn confused about what to do.

“I’m going to take care of something, so just let the heat of the water relax you,” Colt said, though Milo hadn’t opened his eyes. “I won’t be gone long.”

As he listened to Colt leave the bathroom, Milo wondered if he was hesitant because this seemed too good to be true. Colt was offering him everything he’d dreamed of, but what did Milo have to offer in return?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Colt stood in the kitchen, his head lowered and his eyes closed. When he'd grabbed Milo's hand last night and his mate had cried out, he knew something was wrong, even though the guy had tried to lie about it.

After lifting Milo's shirt last night, Colt had caught a glimpse of the bruises. Enough to know his mate hadn't sustained those injuries at work. But seeing the true extent of damage in the bright bathroom had violently yanked Colt back in time to his childhood.

Breathing out slowly, he tried to calm the storm raging inside of him—tried to bottle those memories and put them back on the shelf. Colt could almost hear the crack of that belt as it connected with his flesh, could hear his mother verbally ripping him apart as she beat him or stood to the side as she forced Kellen to do her dirty work.

The pain was raw and fresh, as if it had only happened yesterday. His wolf whimpered, wanting the reins so Colt could hide inside himself. Over the centuries, he'd allowed his wolf do just that. But that came with a risk. Letting one's beast remain in control for long stretches of time damn near guaranteed the chance of going feral. If that happened, a shifter lost their humanity and capability to return to human form.

They would remain in their animal form for the rest of their unnaturally long life. Until recently, the temptation had been appealing, but something had always pulled Colt back to his senses and he'd shifted before it had been too late. But it wasn't just him anymore. He had something to live for.

A hard, burning lump formed in his throat knowing someone as small and beautiful



as Milo had been viciously abused and Colt hadn't been there to protect him.

Worse, his mate refused to tell him who had done it. That, Colt couldn't understand. He'd grown up in an era where it was common for parents to physically punish their children. What happened behind closed doors wasn't anyone's business, and it was rare for neighbors to get involved.

But that wasn't the case with Milo. In this era, people went to jail for assault and battery. And that was what this was. His mate had been assaulted and beaten.

"Colt?"

Atlas's voice penetrated the fog in Colt's head, bringing him partially back. He had nothing but respect for the human, because Atlas had been the first person who'd treated Colt like he mattered. Someone who hadn't hurt him or tried to use him. Although Colt knew that Kellen loved him, that love was also tainted with memories of pain.

"I want to apologize for yesterday," Colt said. "I took my anger out on you, and that was wrong of me. You didn't deserve it."

"We all have our bad days, Colt." When Atlas touched his arm, Colt opened his eyes and gazed at him. "Water under the bridge."

Colt nodded and cleared his throat as his past began to slowly fade back into the darkness. "I wanted to ask you if I can borrow some of your clothes."

"Sure, but I don't think you'll fit in them," Atlas said with a serious expression.

A smile pulled at the side of Colt's mouth. "For Milo."

“Oh yeah, sure! I’ll grab some jogging pants and a T-shirt for him.” His gaze swept over Colt’s face. “Milo didn’t reject you. I saw you two sleeping on the couch this morning. So why do you look like the weight of the world is crushing your shoulders?”

Colt shook his head. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

If Colt hadn’t shared his own pain with anyone, not even Kellen, he sure as hell wasn’t going to share Milo’s. His mate trusted him, and Colt wasn’t going to do anything to splinter that trust.

“Then I’ll go get those for you.”

While Colt deeply appreciated the way Atlas cared about him, the only person he wanted to talk to right now was Milo.

A few minutes later Atlas returned, handing over a pair of gray pants and a blue T-shirt. “I have to work this afternoon, but if you need to talk, Mason won’t mind me taking a call.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Colt chuckled, even though his heart felt heavy.

Atlas narrowed his eyes. “Just because you found your mate doesn’t mean I’ll stopped fussing over you, asshole. Keep it up and I’ll make you put those shoes back on.”

“Not a chance.” Colt strode away. “Thanks for the clothes, but if you come near me with those shoes, I’m burying them in the backyard.”

“Like a dog with a bone?”

Colt stopped and looked over his shoulder, an eyebrow arched. “Because I was a dickhead to you yesterday, I’ll let you have that shot at me. Besides, I walked right into it.”

He truly cherished his friendship with Atlas. The human had come to mean a lot to him and not just because he was Kellen’s mate. It was also hilarious to act like a brat around Atlas and see him become flustered, as if he was dealing with an irate child. It entertained Colt and allowed Atlas to flex his need to nurture.

The guy was a natural-born caregiver. Those people were like unicorns in Colt’s life, rare as fuck.

“Whoa!” Colt shot forward when he saw that Milo was trying to get out of the tub. “What’re you doing?”

“The water cooled off, and I was tired of sitting in the bathroom by myself.”

Colt suppressed a growl at the sight of Milo’s naked, flared backside and his exposed cock. This was not the time to lust over him, but it was a reaction Colt couldn’t control. Not when his need to claim his mate was this damn strong.

Making Milo sit on the step, Colt grabbed a soft, fluffy towel from the cabinet then returned. “You could have fallen, shorty. What if you’d slipped and hurt yourself?”

“I’m sore, not ninety years old and frail.” Milo switched his voice to an old man’s. “Go get me my joint cream, sonny. I think my arthritis is acting up again. Damn glaucoma.”

Colt chuckled as he helped Milo to his feet and slid the towel over his mate’s body to dry him off, careful of his bruises. He was still enraged over them but kept his anger under tight control. “You’re mighty sexy for an old man. Your wrinkles bring out the

hazel in your eyes.”

As he crouched and slid the towel over Milo’s legs, his mate’s cock started to harden. Colt deserved sainthood for not leaning forward and sliding Milo’s length into his mouth. His body immediately responded, his own dick growing thick as he brushed the towel over Milo’s ass then between his cheeks.

“You’re very thorough.” Milo’s voice was breathy.

“Wet skin can chafe.” Colt clenched his jaw, fighting to stop his canines from lengthening. His sainthood would be snatched away if he toweled off his mate’s erection. It was a fierce battle waging inside of him, his wolf snarling as the need to claim the human grew even stronger.

“Colt?”

He realized he was just kneeling there, his hands motionless, his gaze locked onto Milo’s beautiful cock. “I’m...” Colt’s ripped his eyes away from his mate’s shaft and cleared his throat. Then he rose to his full height and grabbed the clothes he’d tossed onto the counter. “I borrowed these from Atlas.”

His torture wasn’t over yet. Colt had to help Milo into the soft pants. His mate curled his fingers around Colt’s biceps, his now-hard cock bobbing as he lifted each leg. Milo glanced away, his fingers tightening, a fine blush blossoming over his pale skin.

It was the most exquisite display of desire Colt had ever seen.

When his mate shivered, Colt lifted the shirt and carefully put it on Milo. “You can go back to the couch, if you want, while I make you some breakfast.”

His mate’s long lashes fluttered several times, as if slowly emerging from the trance

that had encircled them both. “If it’s okay, I’d rather be in the kitchen with you so I’m not sitting alone in the living room.”

A smile spread across Colt’s lips, pleased that his mate wanted to be near him. “Are you going to critique how I cook?”

Milo gaze snapped to his. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“How disappointing.” Colt’s grin widened.

“I’m not sure if you’re messing with me or if you’re serious.”

Colt grazed his lips over the delicate curve of Milo’s ear, his body hardening further when his mate quivered. “It can’t think of anything more arousing than my shorty bossing me around.”

A soft whimper escaped Milo.

If they didn’t get out of the bathroom, he wasn’t sure how much longer he could resist his mate. Colt had to because he refused to claim Milo when the guy could barely move around.

“Let’s go eat.” After leading Milo out of the bathroom, Colt scooped him up. Milo circled his arms around Colt’s neck as Colt carried his mate through the bedroom. “After breakfast I’ll clean this up so you don’t get any glass in your bare feet.”

“I can help,” Milo offered. “I’m not just a cashier. I’m a certified professional in vacuuming.”

Colt grinned. “You can be a certified professional seat warmer until you’re no longer a ninety-year-old.”

“We’re not in the bedroom anymore.” Milo tapped his shoulder. “You can put me down.”

“What if I like having you in my arms?” Colt turned right and headed into the kitchen.

“Then carry me to your heart’s content,” Milo replied.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to cook with his arms full of handsomeness. “I’ll remember you said that, but right now, I need you to show off your skills and warm this seat.”

“I’ll pour some coffee for us while you dazzle me with your culinary talents. I’m desperate for some caffeine.”

Colt couldn’t force his mate to sit his cute butt still, so he didn’t even try. He placed Milo on his feet and started grabbing what he needed to make pancakes and eggs.

“How do you like your coffee?” Milo asked.

“Just a touch of cream.” Colt grabbed the box of pancake mix from the pantry and then the eggs from the fridge.

“You can cook, Colt?” Atlas asked when he walked in. “You’re just full of surprises.” He grabbed the large bag of mini bagels from the counter then the cream cheese and a carton of juice from the refrigerator. Then he took a knife from the drawer. “Give me a second to get out of your hair.”

Milo appeared uncomfortable as he stood completely still, the small container of cream in his hand while watched Atlas. Colt wanted to try and snap Milo out of his uneasiness, so he asked his mate, “Were you two formally introduced at the

reception?”

Milo still hadn't moved.

With his arms full, Atlas smiled. “No, but we briefly spoke. I'd shake your hand, but mine are busy holding my breakfast. I'll give you an elbow shake instead.”

Milo looked at Colt before he slowly shook the offered elbow.

“I didn't mean to intrude,” Atlas said, as if he picked up on Milo's discomfort. “I would have waited until you guys were done in here, but I'm starving, and my stomach forced me downstairs.”

“It's your house,” Milo replied. “You can go into any room that you want.”

“That's sweet of you, but it's Colt's house, too. I don't want to interrupt your morning together.” Atlas headed away. The cream cheese slipped to the floor, and he bent to retrieve it but struggled to pick it up while holding the bag of bagels, knife, and carton of juice.

Colt didn't offer to help. He wanted to see if his mate would.

Milo hurried over and grabbed it off the floor, but Colt noticed the wince. “Here you go.” He tucked the cream cheese snugly in Atlas's arms.

“You're a sweetheart, Milo.” Atlas exited the kitchen.

Forcing himself not to nag Milo about taking it easy, Colt turned toward the counter and prepared the pancake mix as his mate finally handed him his coffee. Colt took a sip and groaned. “You make the best coffee, shorty.”

“The pot was already made. I just poured cream into your cup.” He placed the container back into the refrigerator.

Colt didn’t like how tense Milo still seemed and wanted to take his mate’s mind off of whatever was bothering him. “I’m thinking we need some kind of meat. How good are you at cooking sausage?”

“I’m pretty good at it. Are they in the freezer?”

“Yep.” His plan to have Milo chill in a chair was out the window.

As Colt made the light, fluffy pancakes on the six-burner stove, Milo filled a skillet with some water and dropped the frozen patties into it. Soon the water was bubbling, the sausage turning from pink to gray. Then his mate poured the remaining water in the sink, returned to the stove, and dropped a pat of butter into the hot pan.

“I’ve never seen sausage cooked that way,” he commented.

“Are you talking about the water or the butter?” Milo held the tongs in his hand as he looked up.

“Both.”

“The water helps cook the frozen patties faster,” Milo explained. “The butter browns them and gives them an incredible flavor.”

Colt scrambled the eggs in a bowl when he was done making the pancakes. He grabbed another pan, sprayed it with cooking oil, and then placed it on the burner.

“Since you want me to boss you around, butter makes the eggs taste so much better than the nonstick spray.” Milo handed Colt the stick he’d used.



For decades Colt had been cooking for himself. He was self-taught but pretty decent in the kitchen. Even so, he liked his mate showing him a different way of making things.

He wiped the spray from the pan with a paper towel before putting it back on the stove. “How much should I use?”

“You want enough so the eggs don’t stick too much, but you don’t want to overpower them with the taste of butter.” Milo took the stick from Colt and showed him.

Doing something as domestic as cooking together filled Colt with a sense of peace, calming his mind like nothing else had. Milo’s presence quieted the self-loathing inside of Colt that had plagued him his entire life.

“I’d say we’re an amazing team.” Milo grinned as he cooked the sausages. “We managed not to burn down the kitchen.”

“Miracles do exist.” Colt winked with a grin. “Now to taste our creations.”

They worked together to grab plates, glasses, and silverware. Side by side, they divvied up the portions then sat at the table next to each other. Colt tasted the sausage, and Milo ate a forkful of pancakes.

They groaned in unison.

“Your meat tastes delicious.” Colt licked his lips, chasing the flavor with his tongue. Milo had been right. The butter made it so much better.

“I never knew breakfast sausage could be so obscene,” Milo teased with a sparkle of humor in his hazel eyes. “I’m at a loss of how to make your mouth-watering pancakes sound just as dirty.”

Colt speared a few pieces with his fork. “Let me slip my delicacy inside your mouth.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Milo slid his lips over the tines, groaning as he chewed then swallowed. “What about the eggs?”

Were they eating breakfast, or trying to make each other orgasm? Colt was down for either. “You got me there. I’d say taste my fluffiness, but that doesn’t sound filthy. It just makes me think of bunnies.”

Milo burst out laughing, the incredible sound causing Colt to grin like an idiot. His mate might have been the one who’d seemed under a spell when they’d met, but it was Colt who was hopelessly enchanted with Milo.

“We’ll have to brainstorm on that one,” his mate said when his laughter died down.

The rest of their meal was filled with humor and smiling. When they finished eating, Milo insisted on helping to clean up.

It was the best morning Colt had ever had.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Colt stood in his bedroom looking at the mess. His mate was behind him, just inside the door.

“I’d offer to help in here, but I lack the muscles to carry smashed-up furniture to... Where are you putting it?” Milo asked.

“For now, I’ll have to store the wood behind the garage until I can get someone to haul it away.” He wanted to growl at what he’d done to his bedroom, but he would rather use that energy for cleaning.

“While you flex your muscles carrying the heavy stuff, I’ll vacuum.”

Colt looked over his shoulder. “One, your feet are bare and there’s still glass everywhere. Two, I really want you to rest. You already helped to cook and clean up the kitchen. You shouldn’t overdo it.”

“Can I at least stay in here? I’ll keep out of your way and won’t wander around with the glass still on the floor.”

Either Milo was uncomfortable being alone or he became easily bored by himself. His need to be in the same room as Colt didn’t bother him. He liked having his mate so close.

“Okay, but I’m putting you by the wall under that window.” Colt pointed across the room. “If you get up and try to do anything, your butt is on the couch until I’m finished in here.”

Milo saluted him. "I'll suppress my obsessive need to pitch in instead of sitting on my butt while others do all the work."

"Smartass." Colt lifted Milo into his arms, crossed the room, and set him down on the carpet lacking debris. "Watch something on your phone if that obsessive need kicks in."

"It's in my pants pocket in the bathroom."

After retrieving Milo's phone, Colt started hauling the large stuff outside. Half an hour later, he saw that Milo had curled onto his side and fallen asleep.

Since his comforter would need to be drycleaned, Colt grabbed an extra blanket from his closet and placed it over his mate, along with a spare pillow to tuck under Milo's head.

Colt crouched there, gazing at Milo's peaceful expression as a flood of tenderness swept through him. "Get some rest, shorty." He kissed his mate's temple then got back to work. Not even the sound of the vacuum woke Milo up.

Just as Colt stored the vacuum in the laundry room, his phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw that Hayley was calling him. This needed to be handled once and for all. "Yes?"

"I don't understand why you keep ignoring me, Colt. That's total disrespect. You know I hate it when you do that," Hayley whined.

Colt leaned his backside against the washer, crossing an arm over his chest. "One, I've never disrespected you. Two, I made myself clear the last time we saw each other that what we had wasn't going anywhere."

“That’s not being clear!” Hayley argued. The sound of him stomping his foot could be heard. “I thought you meant you wanted to work on making our relationship more meaningful. You can’t end things unless we both agree on it, and I refuse to agree.”

“Life doesn’t work that way,” Colt gritted out. “Shit fizzled, and it’s time to move on.”

He could tell Hayley that he’d found his mate, but that would only send the gazelle over the edge. Colt also didn’t want Milo to even be a blip on Hayley’s radar. The guy was vindictive as hell.

“You know we were meant to be together,” Hayley whimpered. “I don’t know why you refuse to see that. Just come over and we can work this out, Colt.”

A migraine was starting in the back of his skull. Whenever Colt had been interested in someone, he’d held out on revealing where he lived. It was a precaution he’d always taken, just in case.

Hayley was a prime example of why that measure was needed. He had no clue that they didn’t even live in the same area code. Colt was an hour’s drive away.

It had been different with Milo. Colt had realized the human was his mate before he’d asked the guy to come home with him. If Milo hadn’t been his mate, they would have spent an amazing night in a motel room.

A person’s home was their sanctuary.

“I’m not coming over, Hayley. There’s nothing to work out. I wish you all the best.” Colt hung up and blocked the guy’s number. He should have done that a month ago.

He stepped out of the laundry room and right into Kellen. “Give a guy some space.”

His brother's arms were crossed. "I was coming to get a load of laundry and couldn't help but overhear your conversation."

"That doesn't mean you had to eavesdrop," Colt argued. "Just because you have exceptional hearing isn't an excuse to be rude."

"Cut the shit, Colt." Kellen frowned. "What in the hell was that about? Your mate is under this roof, and you're talking to another guy?"

He had to count to ten before he lost it on Kellen. "Are you accusing me of cheating on Milo?"

"Do you remember when you offered to get even with Braylon for betraying Atlas?" Kellen asked. "You asked me to describe my mate's best friend to you."

"I remember." Colt wasn't sure where this was going. "That plan isn't feasible anymore since I found my mate."

"Atlas heard us talking in the kitchen that day," Kellen said. "He didn't think I was attracted to Braylon, but I realized that it was total disrespect to even talk about another guy, especially when Atlas was in the house."

Colt had just wanted Hayley to leave him alone. The thought of taking the call being disrespectful to Milo hadn't crossed his mind. What if roles had been reversed and it had been Milo in the laundry room on the phone with an ex-lover? Colt knew exactly how he would react. "You're right."

The skin between Kellen's eyes wrinkled. "Why aren't you snarling at me and telling me to fuck off?"

"Because you're right." Colt shrugged. "If you want me to act like an ass, I can

oblige you, but I'd rather get back to Milo."

A wide grin broke across Kellen's face. "I'll be damned. You've been leashed."

"Don't get shit twisted. I'm just in a good mood. Now if you're done scolding me, I want to head back to my room."

Kellen shook his head and chuckled as he walked into the laundry room.

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It took a moment for Milo to get his bearings when he woke up. As he lay there on the box spring and mattress, he glanced around and saw that all traces of Colt's descent into despair had been erased as though it had never happened.

Milo wasn't sure what time it was, but the sun's rays had faded on the walls, a dark orange glow around the blinds like a picture frame.

It was dusk. Had he really slept the day away? Milo had never done that before and wasn't sure why that bothered him so much. There were times when he'd slept in on his days off but never an entire day.

Not even when he'd had the flu once as a teenager. Milo had gotten up repeatedly, thirsty and disoriented, until his mom had led him back to bed and tucked him in.

Her death had hurt so badly that even now he wanted to cry. It had been three years since her funeral, and he wondered if the pain of losing her would ever fade.

She'd been a single parent, struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads, but she'd given him such a full and wonderful life that he'd never envied what others had. Money had been tight, but money wasn't necessary to read stories to

him, take him on endless walks to the park where he could play, or movie night at home whenever she didn't have to work.

She'd been his best friend, and at the young age of twenty-five, Milo had lost her to an icy road and bad visibility. His mom had only been forty-two when the police had found her car, the woman inside dead from a head injury, even though she'd been wearing her seatbelt.

Milo had still lived at home because he couldn't afford to get a place of his own. When she passed, he'd been forced to ask his uncle if he could move in—an uncle through a brief marriage his mother had had when Milo was twenty. He and Eric weren't blood relatives.

And his life had been hell from that moment on.

Stirring behind him brought Milo out of his thoughts. Then a strong arm slid over his side before he was gently pulled back into a firm wall.

Milo sank into the heat, feeling safe with someone for the first time in three years. Knowing what Colt was and seeing the destruction of his bedroom should have given Milo pause. What did he really know about the guy? They'd texted Sunday evening and Monday morning, but the texts hadn't had any substance to them. Nothing that had given Milo any insight into who Colt really was.

It was obvious the guy had money, something that didn't matter to Milo. He would've still been attracted to Colt even if the guy had lived in a rental and worked a nine-to-five job.

Colt had a wicked sense of humor, something Milo's two previous boyfriends lacked. He really liked that Colt's humor matched his own. Milo smiled as he remembered breakfast, still struggling to think of a way to make scrambled eggs sound obscene.



But there was a darker side to Colt that scared him. Although the guy had explained why he'd destroyed his bedroom—a point Milo understood—it was still unsettling that Colt was powerful enough to reduce a sturdy dresser to kindling.

If that kind of strength was ever directed toward him...

In his opinion, the most important thing about Colt was the fact that he wasn't human. Before discovering that the guy was a wolf, Milo hadn't believed in fate or destiny, or even karma, for that matter. He just couldn't get behind the notion that some unseen, cosmic force guided people toward things.

As hard as he tried to convince himself that meeting Colt wasn't fate, he couldn't. Milo had loved wolves since he was six. Not in an obsessive way. He'd just found them fascinating, their howls haunting.

What were the odds that he would meet someone who could become one? The chances should have been zero because what Colt was shouldn't even be possible.

Yet, it was, and as insane as it should be, Milo couldn't deny how Colt made him feel or how drawn he was to the guy. Colt had said they were mates, and since the guy wasn't even human, Milo believed him.

He was pulled from his thoughts once again when Colt's hand slid over his stomach in a lazy downward descent, making Milo's heart beat a little faster. Colt's hand stopped at the waistband of Milo's borrowed jogging pants, the tips of his fingers resting under the fabric.

Was Colt doing that in his sleep, or was he awake?

The guy's breathing was even, but his hard cock was pressed firmly against Milo's ass, causing Milo's body to pulse as need filled him.

His own cock hardened, and Milo lay there wishing Colt's hand would slide even lower. Unable to stop himself, he pressed his ass, just a little, into Colt's erection.

Milo was so aroused that he was tempted to "accidentally" elbow Colt to wake him. Having the guy's hand so close to his cock and Colt's erection against his ass was pure torture, especially when nothing was happening.

Screw subtly. This time Milo pushed his ass harder against the guy's groin and felt Colt's hard cock press firmly between his ass cheeks.

With a soft growl, Colt flipped Milo to his back and poised over him, his hands on either side of Milo's head, his dark green eyes heavy-lidded. Milo gasped as he stared up at the guy, the pulse of need inside of him deepening.

The only thing Colt was wearing was a pair of boxer briefs, the hard outline of his erection visible through the thin fabric.

"Don't look so surprised." Colt nuzzled Milo, nipping his skin. "You can't grind your sweet ass against my hard dick and expect me not to react."

"I was just stretching." Milo tilted his head to the side, his breath catching as Colt licked and nipped a path across his neck.

He felt Colt smile against his skin. "Then I guess I should go back to sleep since I misunderstood what you were doing." He teased Milo's earlobe between his teeth, his voice husky. "I thought you wanted my cock buried inside of you."

There wasn't a chance in hell that he was letting Colt go back to sleep. Milo curled his arms and legs around the guy and yanked him down.

Colt chuckled and lowered himself a little more but still kept his weight off of him.

“Are you stretching again. or should I assume you want me?”

Milo gripped Colt’s nape then drew him closer, their lips inches apart. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since the night we met.”

“Since the moment I saw you.” Colt took possession of Milo’s mouth, chasing away the last remnants of sadness from his memories.

Tingles erupted through Milo as Colt plunged his tongue inside his mouth. Despite what Eric had done to him, Milo loved feeling trapped under Colt, loved having such a strong body surrounding him in such a sensual way.

As the last of the sun faded, leaving only a dim light from the bathroom to cast a glow, Colt broke away from Milo’s lips long enough to turn on the lamp that was resting on the nightstand. How that piece of furniture had survived was a mystery.

Colt grabbed something from the top drawer and set it aside. When Milo looked, he smiled at the clear half-filled bottle of lube next to the pillow. Colt pushed to his knees, and Milo lifted his arms, quivering as Colt helped him out of his shirt. Milo’s nipples hardened with anticipation. Colt brushed his fingers over Milo’s bruising, his eyes filling with something akin to regret. “I should have been there to protect you.”

“Don’t.” Milo curled his hand around Colt’s wrist. “It’s just us right now. No regret and no guilt.”

With a clenched jaw and a nod, Colt moved backward and slid Milo’s pants off, groaning as Milo’s cock sprang free, slapping his stomach.

That growl that Milo loved rumbled through Colt’s chest. The guy grabbed the lube before he slid to his stomach. Colt gripped the back of Milo’s thighs, lifting them as he trailed his tongue over Milo’s balls.

“Colt,” he groaned, tilting his head back and curling his fingers into the bedding. He gasped when his lover’s tongue trailed underneath his balls then circled around his hole.

Not his lover. His mate.

Colt’s tongue was warm and soft, contrasting with the roughness of his beard. Milo trembled as his mate explored him, the sensation incredible.

He heard the lube being opened, and then the coolness of it dripped down his crack. Then Colt’s finger was there, pushing inside him, filling him up. Milo’s breath hitched as his mate added a second finger, making his body tense for a moment before relaxing. Then Colt took Milo’s cock between his lips, sucking gently, his tongue swirling around the tip. Milo bucked his hips, a low moan escaping as a third finger was added.

His heart raced as he felt Colt’s fingers curl inside him, hitting that spot that made Milo’s toes curl. He gripped the bed sheets tighter, his breath coming in short gasps. Colt’s mouth moved up and down Milo’s shaft, his fingers working in the same rhythm.

This was so much better than any fantasy Milo could have conjured in his mind. The guy knew what he was doing, making Milo’s body come alive.

Milo’s breathing became erratic as Colt increased his pace. The sensation built inside Milo, and he could feel his orgasm approaching, his body tensing as he grew closer.

“Colt,” Milo whimpered. “I’m going to come.”

A low growl vibrated in Colt’s throat, sending shivers through Milo. His mate sucked harder, his fingers curling again, hitting that sweet spot repeatedly. Milo’s body

tensed, every muscle straining as he came hard, his release filling Colt's mouth.

Colt swallowed, not missing a beat as he continued to suck and finger Milo through his orgasm.

Lying there, Milo panted, his body limp as Colt slowly pulled his fingers out. His mate crawled upward, his body covering Milo's as he kissed Milo's shoulder, his neck, and then his lips.

"I'm not done with you, shorty." Positioning himself between Milo's legs, Colt pressed the head of his cock against Milo's still-pulsing entrance. He pushed in slowly, giving Milo time to adjust to his size. Milo felt a brief sting as Colt filled him completely, but it was quickly replaced by pleasure.

Milo wrapped his legs around Colt's waist as the guy started to move, pulling out slowly before pushing back in.

Each thrust of Colt's hips sent a jolt of pleasure through Milo's body. He tightened his legs around his mate, meeting each thrust with one of his own. The feeling of Colt making love to him was indescribable. Milo wished he could freeze this moment in time so it would last for hours. Sex normally didn't blow him away. In the past, Milo could take it or leave it, but it was as if Colt was made of pure ecstasy, his moves so hypnotic and sensual that Milo would never see sex the same way again.

Milo arched his back as he closed his eyes. The sensations were like a high, and he was helplessly drowning while Colt drove his cock deeper inside his body.

Dropping to his hands, Colt devoured Milo's mouth, their tongues dancing together as his mate increased the tempo of his thrusts. "My mate," he whispered against Milo's lip as if he revered those two words.

My mate. Milo loved hearing Colt call him that. It was as if he was staking his claim, and Milo was desperate to belong to his wolf. He opened his eyes and found dark green liquid pools staring down at him. Milo wanted to know what Colt was thinking, what was going through his mate's mind as he punched his hips forward.

Was the depth of Colt's feelings just as strong as Milo's were? In that moment he realized that Colt had already stolen his heart. Another orgasm built inside him, feeling more intense than the last one.

"Colt, I'm going to come again," Milo wailed.

His mate growled before he sank his sharp canines into the soft skin of Milo's shoulder. There was a brief second of pain before Milo hurtled over the edge of the abyss. Pleasure detonated outward as he cried out Colt's name, his cum painting their abs.

Something deep inside Milo's core ricocheted, though he had no idea what it was. His heart squeezed for a moment, and he could have sworn it stopped beating before starting again. The intense ricocheting settled into a low hum then slowly faded away.

Colt's snarl rumbled deep in his chest as he buried his cock, his orgasm pulsing inside Milo's body. He released Milo's shoulder, and then he licked at the wound. Colt cupped Milo's jaw, his eyes deep with emotion. He kissed Milo slow and deep as he eased his cock out of him.

Milo felt empty without Colt inside him, but the feeling was short-lived when he pulled Milo's back to his chest and held him close.

"I felt something deep inside of me, Colt," Milo said. "A strange sensation that I can't explain."

“That was our bond sealing.” Colt pushed his nose and mouth gently into Milo’s neck. “Our souls are tied together now.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you belong to me, Milo. Just like I belong to you.” Colt tightened his arms around Milo. “It means I’ll destroy anyone who thinks to harm you.”

Milo closed his eyes. So much had happened in such a short amount of time, but he was too mentally exhausted to sort through his thoughts. What mattered most was that Colt cared deeply for him. Everything else could sit on a back burner for now.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Colt woke to an empty bed. He lay there, listening to see if Milo was in the bathroom, but after a few minutes of silence, he got up. The bathroom door was wide open, and Milo wasn't in there.

Had his mate gone to the kitchen to get something to eat? Colt pulled on a pair of underwear and some pajama pants, along with a white T-shirt before he left his bedroom. The house was eerily quiet. When he found no one in the kitchen, Colt pivoted and searched every downstairs room.

"Milo?" Colt shouted, but his mate didn't answer him.

He hurried to his bedroom and snatched up his phone, dialing Milo's number as he grabbed some jeans from his drawer. His call went to voicemail.

"Goddamn it," Colt snarled as he tossed his pajama pants aside and slid into his jeans. He pulled on socks and shoved on boots before he grabbed his phone again and headed for his truck. Maybe Milo was with Kellen and Atlas. Colt dialed his brother as he shot through the kitchen.

"What's up?" Kellen asked when he answered.

"Have you seen Milo?" Colt bolted out the back door and jumped into his Range Rover.

"No," Kellen said. "I just dropped Atlas off at work. Milo's gone?"

Colt tore down the driveway, nearly colliding with a passing semi as he turned onto



the main road. The person laid into their horn, but Colt was too busy panicking. “I just woke up, and he’s nowhere in the house. His calls are going straight to voicemail.”

“Breathe,” Kellen said. “I’ll turn around and check to see if he’s at work. He also might have gone home. Do you know where he lives?”

“Yeah, I’ll check there. Let me know if you see him.” Colt hung up and raced toward Milo’s house. Why would his mate take off without waking him first? He was in no condition to walk anywhere. Now that they were mated, Milo’s body would heal much faster but not in a few hours.

Colt trembled when he spotted Milo walking down the side of the road. He pulled up behind his mate and jumped out, still in the grip of panic as he slammed his door shut. “What the fuck are you doing out here walking?” he demanded.

Milo jerked around and pressed his hand over his chest, his eyes wide. “Damn it, Colt! You just scared the shit out of me! I heard a car door slam and...” He took several deep breaths. “I’m on my way to work.”

Colt could only stare incredulously at Milo. “So you slipped out of the house? I woke up to find you gone, and my calls went straight to voicemail,” he snarled.

So many things could have happened to his mate walking on the side of the road. Milo could have been hit or his attacker could have spotted him. A million things could have gone wrong. Colt had seen a lot of horrors in his two hundred and twenty years.

The expression in Milo’s hazel eyes went from surprise and fear to downright anger. “I wasn’t aware I needed your permission to leave.”

“It’s not about permission,” Colt argued loudly as he took a few steps toward Milo. When his mate quickly backpedaled, Colt froze. Did Milo think that Colt would hurt him? “Don’t be afraid of me.”

The paralyzing fear in Milo’s eyes shredded Colt. No one had that look unless they’d been through some shit. His mate had bruises, but Colt’s gut told him it wasn’t the first time the human had suffered at someone else’s hands. What in the hell had Milo been through in his life?

“I have to get to work.” Milo spun and hurried away.

What the fuck? Colt took a deep, cleansing breath, feeling guilty for scaring Milo. That hadn’t been his intention. He’d just freaked when he’d found his mate gone, and he was still spiraling.

He caught up to Milo and moved in front of him but held up his hands when his mate stopped and took a step back. “I didn’t mean to lose my cool. I’m sorry.”

Milo glanced toward the field to his right. “I’m used to walking, Colt. My body actually feels better. Your calls went to voicemail because I forgot to charge my phone. It’s dead.”

Colt watched as a car came down the road, and then it veered into the other lane as it passed them by. “Can you please get into my truck? It’s dangerous standing out here.”

It was as if Milo couldn’t let go of his anger.

“You might say I belong to you, but you don’t own me.” Milo crossed his arms over his chest, fury in his eyes. “I don’t have to check in with you before I make a move, Colt. I’m a grown man and can come and go as I please.”

Colt gritted his teeth as he forced back a growl. “Letting me know you’re leaving is just common courtesy, Milo. We sealed our bond last night, and then I find you gone when I wake up.”

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Milo argued. “I managed to get where I needed to go before you came along.”

Why couldn’t Milo see his point of view? Why was the human so hostile? Colt just explained why he was upset, apologized for it, but that didn’t seem to matter to his mate. It was as if Milo saw only one side to this. His own side.

“I never said I owned you,” Colt replied, clenching his jaw to stop from yelling at the stubborn man, but it didn’t work. “It’s like you don’t give a shit that you frightened me!”

Colt pressed his lips together when a police cruiser rolled to a stop next to them. Deputy Cannon Lowery put on his red-and-blue lights as he slid the passenger window down. “Everything okay, fellas?”

Milo walked over to the passenger side. “Would it be a problem to drive me into town?”

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Colt shouted.

Cannon got out and walked around the hood of his car, his hand resting on the butt of his gun like he meant to intimidate Colt. “What’s going on here?”

“My mate and I were having a discussion.” Why in the hell couldn’t he chill? Why was his anger riding him so hard? Just because Milo was being unreasonable didn’t mean Colt had to be the same way.

“Maybe you need to calm down instead of scaring him, Colt,” Cannon snarled. “Is this how you treat your mate?”

“Can you please just take me into town?” Milo asked from behind the lion shifter. “I’m going to be late for work.”

Cannon narrowed his eyes at Colt. “I normally wouldn’t interfere with mates, but I think you need some time to cool off.” He opened the passenger door for Milo to slip inside. The deputy glared at Colt then got in his cruiser and drove away.

Colt stood there stunned. Couples argued all the time, but he hadn’t said anything to scare Milo. He’d just told his mate how he felt...in a loud voice.

Storming back to his truck, Colt jumped in and called Kellen as he pulled onto the road, following behind the cruiser.

“Did you find him?” Kellen asked when he answered.

He told his brother what happened. When Kellen didn’t reply, Colt asked, “Did you hear me?”

“Go back to the house,” Kellen said in a tight voice. “I’ll stay in the parking lot of the grocery store and talk to Milo when he gets here.”

“What in the hell did I do wrong?” Colt demanded, his head starting to throb. His tone might have been loud, but he hadn’t said anything out of line to Milo.

“He was scared and lashing out, dumbass. Instead of deescalating the situation, you jumped down his throat.”

“I apologized to him for yelling,” Colt argued.

“And then you tried to force him to see your point.” Kellen sighed. “You’re twice his size and intimidating as fuck, Colt. If Milo gets pissed, he’s not very frightening. If you get pissed, it’s like staring up at a tsunami baring down on him.”

“You think I’d hurt him?” Colt was taken aback. He was the one who’d wanted to knock Kellen’s block off when he thought his brother had hurt Atlas. The thought of touching Milo while he was upset had never crossed Colt’s mind. The human was his mate, and although Colt was pissed, he would rather shoot himself with Cannon’s gun than raise a hand to Milo.

“I know you wouldn’t hurt him, Colt. But Milo hasn’t known you for long, so he isn’t as confident that you won’t physically lash out,” Kellen replied. “Still, it is strange that his reaction was so strong. What aren’t you telling me?”

Colt pulled over right before he entered the town limits, watching as the cruiser turned a corner and was gone. Every instinct in him wanted to follow and demand his mate come home with him. His wolf was going apeshit to get to the guy.

He told Kellen about Milo’s attack.

His brother cursed. “That’s why he stopped texting you. It had to have happened sometime Monday. You said he worked that day. I doubt he walked home in that condition. Does he live with anyone, or maybe someone came by to see him once he was home?”

“I don’t have a clue,” Colt replied. “When I asked who hurt him, he wouldn’t answer me.” He closed his eyes. “You have no idea how badly I want to kill the person, Kellen.”

“You were taken back to our childhood,” Kellen surmised, his voice low, as if he was back there, too.

“Yes.” Colt struggled to breathe. “We know that fear and pain, lived through it for nearly a century and half. Just the thought of someone beating him, of someone making my mate live through that kind of fear kills me.”

“The cruiser just pulled up.” Kellen cleared his throat, as if pulling himself out of the past. “Let me speak to Milo. We’ll talk when I get home.”

After Kellen hung up, Colt rested his forehead on the steering wheel, missing Milo so badly that he wanted to cry. His mate hadn’t been the only one lashing out in fear, but Colt was the protector, the one Milo looked to for safety, and Colt hadn’t given his mate the one thing he’d needed in that moment.

I’m fucking worthless.

\* \* \* \*

The farther they drove away from Colt, the more Milo felt the deep ache in his chest growing. He stared out the side window, watching the scenery pass by, never feeling so alone and in despair than he did at that moment.

Colt’s truck was in the side mirror, and Milo watched it, tears stinging behind his eyelids as he fought not to let them spill. He appreciated Cannon taking him to work, but he wasn’t the person Milo wanted seated next to him.

It was the guy following them.

“I can smell your tears,” Cannon said. “Since I’m not mated, I don’t know the pain you’re going through being separated from Colt, but you wanted to get away from him. I made a judgment call, Milo. He can follow us to your job, and if he acts like he has sense, I’ll let you two talk.”

Colt pulled over just as they reached the town limits, no longer following them. Milo sniffed back his tears as they passed Bluebird Café, remembering when he'd met Colt there for coffee Sunday morning.

It felt like a lifetime ago. So much had happened since that morning. Milo had been happy sitting there talking with Colt, showing the guy his tattoo, caught in some kind of spell just being near him. No matter how hard Milo had tried, he hadn't been able to keep his hands to himself.

Touching Colt was hypnotic, all-consuming like a drug.

Milo didn't want to go to work. He wanted to shout for Cannon to take him back to his mate. Milo closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. When Colt had started yelling at him, all Milo had seen was Eric. All he'd felt was the pain as his uncle beat him. Milo had been caught in the grip of the memory, lashing out at Colt instead of understanding his mate's point of view.

When he opened his eyes, they were pulling into the parking lot of his work. Parked in the spot closest to the door was Kellen. He was leaning against the trunk of a cherry-red muscle car, his ankles crossed, his hands folded in front of him.

"I'm guessing Kellen wants to talk to you," Cannon said. "It's up to you, Milo. I can stop at the front door so you can go into work, or I can let you out at Kellen's car."

Milo appreciated the man's concern. Cannon had been good friends with Milo's mom when she was alive and had attended her funeral, telling Milo that if he needed anything, just call.

He'd never called the guy.

"You said you can smell my tears and you know about mates." Milo looked at him.

“Are you a wolf, too?”

The deputy gave him a warm smile. “No. I’m a lion shifter.”

That shocked Milo. He’d thought only wolf shifters existed. “Did my mom know?”

He shook his head. “We keep our existence a closely guarded secret. If a human isn’t a mate or someone important to our way of life, they’re kept in the dark.”

“I think I’ll talk to Kellen.” Milo wasn’t ready to go inside. His chest ached too badly, and his head wasn’t in the right place at the moment.

All he wanted was Colt.

“Since nonhumans live a very long time, not all of us have had it easy, Milo. I don’t know Colt’s story, what he’s been through, but I’m willing to bet he feels like shit right now for yelling at you.”

Milo glanced up at Cannon, confused about what he’d just said. “What do you mean nonhumans live a long time?”

The guy rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe Colt didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Shifters live for over five hundred years, maybe longer. Since you’re mated to Colt, you’ll live as long as he does.”

Mind blown. Milo sat there trying to wrap his head around living that long, but he couldn’t. How old was Colt? How long would Milo live? It was yet another thing he had to process in his already cluttered mind.



“Thank you for the ride.” Milo got out and closed the door then walked over to Kellen as the cruiser pulled away. “I take it you talked to Colt?”

Kellen nodded. “He didn’t tell me what you two argued about, only that he’d lost his cool and that Deputy Lowery gave you a ride into town.”

Shoving his hands into his front pockets, Milo looked around. “It wasn’t just his fault. I didn’t exactly keep my composure, either.”

“Maybe not,” Kellen said. “But more times than not, we act like complete assholes when it comes to our mates. Trust me when I tell you that it wasn’t smooth sailing for me and Atlas.”

“You two seem perfect for each other. I saw the way you guys were at the reception, the way you looked at Atlas as if he was your entire world,” Milo said. “To tell the truth, as I watched you two dancing, I was a bit envious.”

“You have no idea what Atlas and I went through to get to that point,” Kellen said. “Relationships take work. Just because we’re mates doesn’t mean everything fell into place. I put Atlas through some shit, nearly got him killed more than once, and half the time, I had no clue what I was doing.”

If Atlas and Kellen could get to the point where they now were, Milo had hope that he and Colt could do the same.

“Can you call your brother?” Milo asked. “My phone is dead, but I really want to talk to him right now.” He glanced at the store. “I wish I didn’t have to work today.”

“Who’s your supervisor?” Kellen asked.

“Her name is Deloris.” Milo watched as Kellen pulled out his phone and texted

someone. Hopefully Colt. Milo wanted to see his mate badly. It was just going to suck not to have as much time as he wanted to talk to him.

“I know her.” Kellen tucked his phone into his front pocket. “As soon as Colt gets here, I’ll go inside and smooth things over with Deloris so you can have today off.”

Milo frowned. “How do you know her? Is she one of you guys?”

Kellen chuckled. “No, she’s human. A month ago I came into the store to grab some things, and she flirted her ass off with me.” He grinned. “That was before Atlas. I might be gay, but everyone likes a good ego stroke.”

“You’re going to flirt with my supervisor?” Milo wrinkled his nose. “She has to be in her fifties, and you’re mated.”

“I’ve had decades of practicing the fine art of finesse.” He winked. “I’m mated, but I haven’t lost my touch. I just use my superpowers on Atlas now. I’ll also tell Atlas about it when I pick him up from work.” His smile faded a little. “We don’t cheat on our mates, and I don’t keep anything from Atlas. It’s not always comfortable being so honest, but it only makes a mating stronger.”

“I don’t want you getting into trouble with Atlas,” Milo said as Colt pulled in and parked three spaces down from Kellen.

“Atlas will give me shit about it, but he knows how much I love him and that I wouldn’t do anything to betray his trust.” Kellen jerked his head toward Colt’s truck. “No matter how angry he gets, he would never hurt you, Milo. I give you my word.”

“Thanks for talking to me and calling him,” Milo said. “Let Colt know either way about Deloris. I just want to know if we can go back to your house or if I should stay in the parking lot until it’s time for me to go inside.”

“I got this.” Kellen pushed away from his car. “You two can take off.”

Milo pulled his hands from his pockets and walked toward where Colt parked. His mate had gotten out and was standing there, looking unsure as Milo approached.

Since they were mated, their souls bonded, Milo needed to have that uncomfortable conversation about Eric. After all, they were going to be together for hundreds of years, according to Cannon. If Milo and Colt were going to make this work, trust had to be given on both sides.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Pain and regret radiated in Colt's dark green eyes as Milo stopped a foot from his mate. "We were both being unreasonable. Kellen said he would get me the rest of the day off, so if you're willing to talk, then so am I."

With a nod, Colt led Milo to the passenger side and helped him into the truck. Neither said a word as he drove toward the exit.

Milo's heart beat faster when he saw his uncle's red pickup driving past them as Eric headed toward the store. Was he there to shop or to talk to Milo? It was close to the beginning of the month, so Eric would want Milo's half of the bills.

He prayed his uncle didn't see him as Colt merged with the light traffic on the street, unaware how terrified Milo was right now. After the beating Eric had given him, Milo never wanted to see the asshole again.

Instead of Colt driving them to his house, he took them to the same spot they'd visited in the forest then parked.

"Are we going to hunt for that bear?" Milo asked as Colt cut the motor. He didn't like how quiet his mate had been the entire drive. He wanted to know what was going through Colt's mind.

"No," Colt said. "I'm going to steal a page from Kellen's book, but I wanted to take a walk with you while I did."

With no idea what Colt was talking about, Milo got out. He watched as his mate locked the truck but not before depositing his wallet and phone in the center console.

Then he hid his keys behind the same rock as last time.

“Look, Colt,” Milo said when his mate joined him by the table, “I can see that you’re still upset, and I don’t want to get into another argument with you. It’s okay if you need more time to cool off. You can just take me back to work, and maybe by tonight we can have this conversation.”

When Colt had pulled into the space at the store, his eyes had been filled with misery. Milo thought for sure the guy would apologize and they’d talk the entire ride, but that wasn’t the case. He didn’t like how solemn Colt appeared.

“I promise I’m not upset with you.” Colt took his hand. “I just have something heavy on my mind that I want to share with you, but I’m honestly not looking forward to talking about it.”

Milo followed next to him, noticing how Colt tempered his long strides so Milo didn’t have to walk faster. “If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to.”

They took the same path as before, which made Milo look around for any sign of that large bear.

“Tell me about your mom,” Colt said.

“She was wonderful,” Milo replied.

“Was?” Colt looked down at him, his brows furrowed.

“She died three years ago after a car accident. She veered into a ditch. The roads were icy and visibility was crap. By the time she was found, she’d already died.” Milo cleared his throat. He still wanted to cry whenever he talked about her.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Colt gently squeezed his hand. “What made her wonderful?”

Milo had no idea why Colt was asking, but he recalled what his mate had said about his own mother the night they’d met. “I never knew my dad. He bailed when she found out she was pregnant with me. My mom raised me by herself. She worked long hours but always made time for me.”

“Did she bake you cookies and give you hugs?”

“Yes to both. We didn’t have a lot of money, but I never felt as if we were lacking for anything.” He told Colt about the zoo, movie night, and all the ways she’d made his childhood, and adulthood, special.

“When I was twenty, my mom met a guy,” Milo said. “They got married a month later, but the marriage didn’t last long.”

“If it’s okay, can I ask why?”

The forest was so different during the daylight. It seemed friendlier with the sound of birds chirping and a light breeze rustling the leaves. The sunlight poked through the canopy in various spots, but it felt ten degrees cooler now that they weren’t in the direct sunlight.

“I’ve always lived at home. It’s hard to afford your own place when you have a minimum-wage job. My mom didn’t mind, and I thought of us as a team. While my mom was dating Chris, he seemed cool with me being there. It was after they were married that he began making comments that I was an adult and should’ve moved already. I tried to stay away as much as possible because they were newlyweds and would naturally want time for themselves, but that wasn’t good enough for him. Chris and my mom argued about that a lot, among other things.”

Colt remained quiet, staring ahead as Milo talked, but Milo knew the guy was listening to him.

“After six months, they divorced. I felt guilty for the longest time because a lot of their arguments were about me still living at home. I’ve been working since I was sixteen, helping my mom with the bills. Chris made me feel worthless, and whenever my mom wasn’t home, he would say I was the cause of their failing marriage.”

“How old are you?” Colt asked, still holding Milo’s hand.

“Twenty-seven.” Milo remembered what the deputy had said to him in the car. “How old are you?”

“Two hundred and twenty,” he said as if that wasn’t a big deal, and then added, “I didn’t mean to shock you.”

“Deputy Lowery filled me in on how long shifters live,” Milo admitted. “That surprised me, as did learning that he’s a lion shifter.”

Colt seemed lost in his head as they took the path to the right when they came to a fork. “Not everyone is blessed with a good mother, but I’m glad to know you had a happy childhood,” he said, though he wasn’t looking at Milo. “My father died when I was a small pup. I don’t even remember him. I was raised by a single parent, too.”

He stopped, which made Colt stop. His mate glanced down at him as Milo said, “I remember you telling me she was a heartless bitch.”

Looking around, Colt led them to a fallen tree, where they sat. “Even that’s too nice for what she really was.” He examined their entwined fingers. “I was raised with Kellen and my cousin. For some reason I’ll never understand, my mom hated Jared. Not that she was loving toward me or Kellen, but she took her anger out on my

cousin the most.”

Laying his hand over their joined ones, Milo asked, “Did she hurt him?”

Colt glanced away, swallowing roughly. “She hurt all of us. I’ll spare you the details, but it went on for a century and a half.”

Milo couldn’t imagine his mom raising a hand to him. There were times when she’d gotten upset with him when he was a kid, but the disappointed look in her eyes was punishment enough for him. “Physically?”

“Every way possible. Physically, verbally, emotionally, mentally,” Colt replied. “Then she got inventive.”

Milo wasn’t sure he wanted to know how inventive she’d gotten with her abuse.

“She forced Kellen to beat me with a leather belt whenever I looked at her the wrong way.”

A gasp escaped Milo.

“I don’t blame Kellen. He got it twice as bad if he refused to punish me. But I know he still carries the guilt of what he had to do to me.” Colt lifted their joined hands and ran his bearded jaw over Milo’s knuckles. “When my mom killed Jared, I took off, my head so fucked that I don’t remember a good portion of my life for the next twenty or so years.”

“I have no idea what to say.” Milo was sickened at the thought of the three of them living such a horrific life. He wanted to hug the boy that used to be Colt, protecting him from his mother’s wrath.



“There’s nothing you can say.” Colt’s eyes held unshed tears, appearing just as haunted at the wolf inked on Milo’s back. “I think I panic so much when you’re not with me because I’m terrified you’ll realize that you got saddled with someone worthless and decide to cut your losses.”

Yanking his hand free, Milo threw his arms around Colt, burying his face in his mate’s neck. “I’m not going anywhere, and if you call yourself worthless again, I’ll take you to task, Colt. You’re worth more than a lot of people I know. You’re kind, caring, funny, thoughtful, passionate, and mean the goddamn world to me.”

Colt slid his arms around Milo. “You quiet the darkness inside of me, regardless of how I acted earlier. I can’t promise I’ll be perfect, but I would never hurt you, Milo. I don’t ever want you to feel as helpless and afraid as I have.”

“My uncle...” Milo whispered as he dried his eyes on the shoulder of his mate’s shirt. “Eric is Chris’s brother. My mom’s house was a rental, and when she died, I had nowhere to go. I asked Eric if I could move in with him, but he has a violent temper.”

Eric never left bruises in places anyone could see, so no one knew about Milo’s silent suffering. Even if he’d told Deputy Lowery, then what? That dilapidated house was all Milo had.

Colt hugged him tighter. “I don’t want you going back there, Milo. Say you’ll move in with me. I know I’m a hot mess, but you never have to worry about—”

“Yes,” Milo said, cutting him off. “If you’re sure that’s what you want. We barely know each other, and we’ll have to get used to each other’s idiosyncrasies.”

Colt set Milo aside and cupped his jaw. “I’m positive that’s what I want. We’ll get used to each other’s habits. I look forward to getting to know you inside and out.”

Milo couldn't believe he'd just agreed to move in with Colt. It was terrifying and exciting, and his head spun as worry filled him. "What if us living together doesn't work out, Colt? I was completely miserable living with my uncle, but that was better than being homeless."

Milo thought so. The thought of sleeping on the streets was terrifying.

"Kellen would force me to leave before he'll let you walk out the door." Colt pulled Milo onto his lap and circled his arms around him. "Mates are cherished, even when they aren't yours. Why do you think the deputy was ready to beat my ass when it came to you? We protect them, shorty."

"I hardly think your brother would choose me over you," Milo said.

Colt dug into his pocket and pulled out his phone then dialed, putting the call on speaker.

"Milo got the day off," Kellen said when he answered. "I told his boss that he had a stomach bug. She said if he was out more than three days, he'd have to come back with a doctor's excuse."

"Gross," Milo said. "I'd rather you told her I broke my arm or something."

Kellen chuckled. "You can't complain when it worked. Don't sweat it. If need be, Colt and I know a lion shifter doctor who'll write that excuse for you."

"I appreciate what you did for me," Milo replied. "How much did you have to flirt with her?"

Colt arched a brow as he looked at him.

“I just gave her a dazzling smile and told her how nice she looked in her blouse. Now I’ll have to avoid the store, so Colt is responsible for grocery shopping.” Kellen sighed. “The shit I get myself into.”

“Atlas is going to beat your ass,” Colt said. “If he doesn’t, I will. You know he’s been betrayed before, but he put his trust in you for some damn reason.”

“Not if I tell him why I did it,” Kellen replied. “I would never do anything to break his trust in me, Colt. No one on this earth holds a candle to him.”

“I need you to settle something,” Colt said, as if ready to change the subject. “If you had to choose, who would you kick out, me or Milo?”

“You,” Kellen said without hesitation, which surprised Milo. “That was a dumbass question. Mind telling me why I’m putting your ornery ass out? If you hurt Milo’s feelings, I’ll tell Atlas and set him loose on you. He’ll make you wear those shoes for a month straight.”

Milo didn’t get the joke about the shoes. “He didn’t hurt my feelings, Kellen.”

Colt grinned. “Milo agreed to move in, but he’s nervous. He thinks he’ll be homeless if things don’t work out between us.”

“Not fucking happening,” Kellen replied. “First, you need to have a better talk with him about mates. Second, if it did come down to choosing between you two, a mate is always going to win. By the way, welcome to our dysfunctional family, Milo.”

“Thank you.” Milo smiled, praying it never came down to Kellen having to make a choice. Colt had been through so much for so long that he deserved happiness, and Milo was determined to give that to his mate.

“Talk to you later.” Colt hung up. “Feel better?”

“I will as soon as you tell me my portion of the bills. I’m not a freeloader.” Milo hoped he could afford it because he desperately wanted to get out of Eric’s house.

“One dollar a month.” Colt nuzzled his neck. “I know that’s steep, but it’s not easy keeping up with a mortgage on a house that’s paid off.”

“I might have to split that into fifty cents a paycheck.” Milo breathed in deeply, Colt’s lips causing havoc on his body.

“It’s pretty secluded around us.” Colt nipped Milo’s throat. “We could have a little fun without worrying about anyone seeing us.” He slid his hand up the front of Milo’s shirt and tweaked his right nipple. “I have a travel-sized lube in my front pocket.”

Milo could listen to Colt’s husky voice all day. “You threw one in your pocket on your way out the door to find me?”

“I’m always prepared.” He slid his tongue across Milo’s collarbone. “I grabbed it out of the center console just in case you decided to take advantage of me in the woods.”

Laughter bubbled up and spilled from Milo’s throat. “You’re the big, bad wolf in the forest who’s trying to get into my basket of goodies.”

“Why don’t we find a patch of soft grass?” Colt helped Milo to his feet, grabbed his hand, and then looked around. “There’s got to be one close by.”

Milo had another idea. “Just keep an eye out for any hikers, bears, and howling wolves.” He lowered to his knees, unfastened his mate’s jeans, and circled his fingers around Colt’s cock.

“The only howling wolf will be me,” Colt groaned.

When Milo pulled the hard shaft free, his mouth watered at the glistening pre-cum already beading at the slit. He leaned in and swirled his tongue around the swollen head, savoring the musky taste of his mate, his own desire spiking as he sucked Colt deeper into his mouth.

Colt hissed, threading his fingers through Milo’s hair as he started to thrust gently. “Fuck, that feels amazing, shorty.”

Milo hummed around Colt’s cock, his own erection throbbing in his jeans. He slid one hand down to palm himself through the fabric, sighing at the small relief it offered.

Then Milo fished his own cock out, slowly stroking himself. His grip on his own cock tightened as he took Colt deeper, the taste of his mate driving him wild. He loved this, loved being on his knees for Colt, loved the way his mate looked down at him with heavy-lidded eyes.

Pleasure numbed Milo’s brain, his thoughts centering around the heavy erection filling his mouth and sliding down his throat with every gentle thrust. His dick was hard, leaking, the ache in his balls growing stronger.

He’d never had sex outside, and the thrill of possibly getting caught only fueled his desire. They were on a path, which meant anyone could walk up on them at any second. Milo never knew he had such an adventurous side to him until now.

“This is so much better than fighting off a bear.” Colt thrust faster, hissing as he watched what Milo was doing to him. If Colt only knew how breathtaking he looked standing over Milo, his green eyes filled with raw passion, his body flexing as he took his pleasure from Milo’s mouth. He was truly a sight to behold.

“Make me come, sweetheart,” Colt groaned. “Squeeze your throat, baby. That’s it. Hollow those soft cheeks. Yes. Shit. You got it.”

Milo moaned around Colt’s cock, sucking harder until his lips met the base of Colt’s dick, jerking himself off a little faster.

“Baby, I’m there. Swallow my cum.” Colt’s teeth clenched as his fingers strangled Milo’s hair. He thrust a few more times, his seed pulsing down Milo’s throat as he shouted Milo’s name. At the same time, Milo’s own orgasm pounded through his body.

“Holy fuck,” Colt said, his breathing ragged. “That was the hottest blow job I’ve ever had.”

Then he looked down at Milo’s hand, and his eyes widened. “I would have done that for you.”

Letting Colt’s softening cock slip out of his mouth, Milo stood, though his knees ached from being pressed into the ground. “It was hot as fuck getting off while you were in my mouth.”

Colt groaned. “The things you say to me, shorty.”

Milo smirked as they righted their clothes. “I have to go to my uncle’s house to get my things.”

“I’d rather buy you a new wardrobe.” Colt tucked his T-shirt into his waistband.

As much as Milo appreciated the offer, there were things in his room that were irreplaceable. “I have to go there, Colt. I have some mementoes of my mom’s, including a photo album.”

“I tell you what, give me a list of the things you want and I’ll go by there later to get your stuff.” He slid his arm over Milo’s shoulders. “I’m not trying to boss you around, because if you recall, that’s your job, but I also don’t want you anywhere near him again.”

It wasn’t as if Milo was thrilled about going there. He just wished he knew when Eric would be gone to avoid any confrontation. Right now would have been a good time since Milo had seen Eric at the grocery store, but there was no guarantee he would stay gone from the house long enough for Milo to grab his belongings.

“What if I forget something on the list?” He didn’t want any of his mom’s things left behind. It was all Milo had left to remember her by. He would be devastated if he lost them.

“If it’s in your bedroom, I’ll get it,” Colt said. “I’ll clear the room out just to make sure.”

“What if Eric won’t let you inside?” Milo watched as a squirrel ran up a tree, staring at them as if it had witnessed the blow job and was judging them.

“I’ll get your things,” Colt said with a confidence Milo didn’t feel. If Eric discovered that Milo was moving out, the bastard could destroy his things while refusing to let Colt into the house.

His stomach twisted into knots. Milo hated confrontation. Even in high school he used to keep a low profile so the guys who picked on the gay kids wouldn’t notice him.

All he could do was trust that Colt would get his mom’s things for him before Eric threw everything in the trash.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Nothing was going to stop Colt from getting inside Milo's house to retrieve his mate's belongings. As badly as he wanted to kill Eric, Colt would keep the peace as long as the guy didn't stop him. Afterward, Colt would show Eric what being victimized truly felt like then bury his sorry ass.

"I need a favor," Colt said when Kellen returned from picking Atlas up from work. He'd yet to tell his brother that he now knew the name of the person who'd beaten Milo.

"What's up?" Kellen asked as he and Atlas stopped in the kitchen.

When Colt had heard his brother pull up, he'd left Milo in their bedroom, out of earshot. "I need you to take a ride with me," he said. "Milo told me who beat the shit out of him."

"Are you going to return the favor?" Atlas asked as anger filled his gray eyes. "Promise me the person isn't going to get away with what he did to Milo."

Colt grinned. "Bloodthirsty?"

"I don't know Milo, but the thought of anyone hurting him enrages me," Atlas replied. "I'm glad he's moving in. No one deserves to be abused."

Atlas knew of Colt and Kellen's past. Ever since he'd found out, the human had treated Colt like a brother, constantly fussing over him. Colt might act like a brat when Atlas did that, but he secretly loved how nurturing the human was toward him. Lord knew Colt hadn't experienced that with anyone else until Milo came into his



life.

“Actually, I wanted to go to his house to gather his things,” Colt said. “He lives with his uncle, and I need Kellen to stop me from unleashing my rage on the guy until I have Milo’s belongings out of there.”

“I take it the uncle is the one who hurt Milo,” Kellen said. “If he is, you might have to stop me.”

Fuck it. If the uncle died beforehand, Colt was still getting Milo’s stuff. The sight of those bruises on his mate’s torso still haunted him. Every time Colt thought of them, his wolf wanted to break free. Now that he knew who was responsible, he wasn’t holding back his wolf.

“Yeah, he’s the one who did it.” Colt told them about Eric’s violent temper. “I need you to help me pack Milo’s room, since I have no clue how much stuff he has.”

“You also don’t need the piece of shit creeping up on you while your back is turned.” Kellen nodded. “Let’s get it done now.”

“I’ll keep Milo company while you two are gone,” Atlas said. “Since he’s your mate and going to live here, we might as well get to know each other.” He turned to Kellen. “Maybe you should take Morgan with you so Sam can join me and Milo.”

Colt had met Kellen’s friends, and they seemed nice, but he didn’t want his mate to feel overwhelmed. “Maybe another time,” he said to Atlas. “I think Milo might appreciate it being just the two of you for now.”

“You’re right,” Atlas said. “I’ll grab a bunch of snacks, and we can chill in your room and watch TV.”

“Lock up behind us.” Kellen kissed Atlas.

“I’m gonna let Milo know I’m heading out.” Colt was glad Atlas would be there. He knew his mate didn’t like being alone. He was surprised the guy hadn’t followed him to the kitchen.

Colt stepped into their bedroom to find his mate stretched out on the bed, the remote in his hand. The new bedroom furniture was scheduled to arrive in three days. Colt couldn’t wait to get his clothes off the floor and back into drawers. He’d even ordered an extra dresser for his mate, hoping that Milo moved in.

That was before Milo had agreed today.

Placing the remote on the bed, his mate sat up. “You’re heading there, aren’t you?”

After crossing the room, Colt sat beside him. “I have your list in my pocket. I promise not to forget anything.” He brushed aside some imaginary hair on his mate’s forehead, unable to stop himself from touching Milo. “I won’t be gone long, and Atlas is here.” He smiled. “I think he’s dying to be your friend. He wants to load up on snacks and chill in here with you.”

“I guess if I’m going to live here, we should get to know each other.”

Colt laughed. “I swear he just said the same thing in the kitchen.” He had a feeling the two were going to become best friends. “If you need me before I get back, call me.”

Milo held up his phone. “It’s fully charged and ready for me to text you like crazy to see how things are going.”

“You can’t text me that much, or I won’t get your stuff packed,” Colt replied, though

he loved that his mate hated being separated from him as much as Colt hated the idea. “Behave, and think of an obscene way to describe scrambled eggs while I’m gone.” He winked. “When I get back, I might even let you pet my wolf.”

“Seriously?” Milo looked as if he was about to do a happy dance. “I wanted to ask you, but I wasn’t sure if that was crossing a line or something.”

“Crossing a line?” Colt shook his head. “You’re my mate, babe. My wolf is a part of me, so you can pet him anytime you want.” He leaned down and kissed Milo but forced himself to keep it brief. “We’ll go back to our spot, and I’ll shift so you can walk with him.”

Milo fell on his back, sighing. “You’re too good to be true.”

“Funny, but that’s what I think about you every time I look your way.” Colt pulled Milo into a sitting position. “If I can get your things fast enough, you and my wolf can take that stroll tonight.”

Milo grinned and bounced. Now all Colt could think about was Milo bouncing on his cock. “Don’t forget my mom’s small jewelry box in my top drawer,” his mate said.

Colt patted his back pocket. “It’s on the list, shorty.”

“Or the photo album on the floor in my closet.”

With a roll of his eyes, Colt bent and kissed his mate. It was meant to stop Milo from giving him needless reminders, but this time, it lasted longer and made Colt’s body hard. If he didn’t leave now, he might not make it out of their bedroom.

“Try not to miss me too much while I’m gone.” He winked.

“I’ll try not to weep into my pillow,” Milo teased. “Get out of here so you can get back that much sooner. I’m super excited to pet my wolf.”

“Your wolf?” Colt grinned. “I guess he is.”

Forcing himself to pull away, Colt headed out. He was taking his truck since he didn’t know how much stuff Milo had, and his Range Rover offered more room than Kellen’s car.

Colt also wanted his brother with him for intimidation tactics. As tall and muscular as Colt was, Kellen was built like a living, breathing mountain. It never hurt to have someone like that with him. Kellen could watch his back as Colt packed up Milo’s room.

He wasn’t worried about the mates being alone since no one ever came to their house. Besides, Kellen had set up a state-of-the-art security system a few years back. He would receive a notification before anyone got close to the house.

Kellen was already in the passenger seat—as if he’d known which vehicle they would take. Colt put the truck in Drive and took off. “He’s not Milo’s blood uncle. My mate’s mom married some loser but divorced him six months later. Eric is that loser’s brother.”

“Where’s Milo’s mom?”

Colt turned onto the main road. “She died three years ago. Since Milo couldn’t afford to live on his own, he asked Eric if he could move in.”

“You’re telling me that Milo has dealt with this prick for the past three years?” Kellen rubbed his hand over his beard. “I really am going to kill the son of a bitch. I’ll never understand why some men think it’s okay to use someone as a punching

bag, especially someone smaller.”

That was lost on Colt, too. Despite his past being wrought with abuse, he'd never lost that protective part of himself. Not for long, anyway. But even when he fought with men who didn't deserve his anger, it was never anyone who couldn't take the punches.

The thought of putting his hands on someone as small as Milo and Atlas made Colt nauseous.

When he pulled down the dirt driveway, the sun was just starting to set. The house was in full view. The night Colt had picked Milo up, he hadn't paid attention. But now, as he scanned the property, he noticed how neglected and rundown it appeared. The paint was peeling, shutters were broken, and the yard was overgrown with weeds.

A rusted red pickup was parked right by the porch, its hood facing the front door. Colt parked behind it and shut off his Range Rover.

As they both stepped out of the vehicle, Kellen made his way to the porch on the passenger side of the beat-up pickup while Colt pocketed his keys and walked around the driver's side. A lone light shone from one of the downstairs windows, casting a glow onto the porch. In the background, the faint sound of a television could be heard.

Just as Colt passed the driver's door, he slowed to a stop. The window was rolled down, and he smelled something he hadn't expected. Kellen had stopped, too, looking at Colt from across the roof, his brows furrowed.

There was no mistaking the distinct scent of jaguar. From the look on Kellen's face, he smelled it, too.

Eric was a shifter. Milo had lived with the guy for three years, so how had he not known what Eric was? Colt was pretty damn sure Milo would have given him a heads-up if he'd known.

Colt's wolf snarled as they continued their slow walk, climbing the porch. Before Colt could raise his hand to knock, the door swung open. A tall guy, lean with muscles, stared at them through the screen door. "There a reason I got two wolves on my property?"

Pure attitude poured off Eric. Colt had met his type before. Someone always raring for a fight with a constant chip on his shoulder as if the world owed him something.

When Kellen ripped the screen door from its hinges, Colt lunged at the jaguar, pinning him against the closest wall, his forearm over the bastard's throat. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't tear your throat out," he snarled. "You used your fucking strength against a small human, beating him senseless."

Instead of being afraid, Eric smirked. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Colt had to jerk his head back when Kellen's fist connected with the jaguar's face. Eric flew sideways out of Colt's hold then hit the floor. Kellen towered over him, his hands balled into fists, his face a mask of fury. "Lie again and I'll eat your fucking heart!"

Crouching down, Colt curled his fingers into Eric's shirtfront, a deep growl rumbling in his chest. "What my brother is trying to say is we know you took your violent temper out on Milo. I'm going to pack his things while the mountain behind me babysits you. Make one move to stop us and we'll do to you what you did to your nephew, only you won't survive."

The need to beat Eric bloody rode Colt hard, but he had to get Milo's things. He

stepped over the jaguar shifter and headed into the kitchen, looking around for trash bags. He found a box on top of the fridge and grabbed it before heading to Milo's bedroom. He didn't have to guess. Milo had been very specific which room was his.

As Colt stepped into the bedroom, he noticed the lack of personal belongings. The room was sparsely furnished with only a bed, nightstand, and dresser in sight. The walls were bare, devoid of any decorations or personal touches that might make the bedroom feel like a home.

As he opened the closet, his eyes landed on the empty top shelf and the few clothes hanging limply on hangers. Colt grabbed the clothes and the photo album off the floor, using a trash bag to store them.

When he went to the dresser, he saw that more than half of the drawers were empty. Only two held a small amount of clothing inside. It was clear that his mate didn't have much in terms of possessions, and it tugged at Colt's heartstrings to see such a simple and barren living space.

Fuck if it wasn't the same scenario as Colt had when he lived with his mom.

The only difference was that Milo couldn't afford to buy himself things while Colt's mother refused to give her children anything beyond the bare necessities.

He carefully lifted the jewelry box up and sat on top of the dresser and then pulled the list from his pocket. There was no way Colt could miss anything since there wasn't much in the room to begin with, but he scanned the list, nonetheless.

With everything checked off, Colt grabbed the half-full bag and walked back to the living room. He set the bag on the porch before he went back inside. Eric was now seated on the couch, a can of beer in his hand. The guy must like the taste because nonhumans couldn't get drunk from it.

His gaze fell on something sitting on the end table. The dark red bottle had a slender neck that led to a wide base. It was Red Spanking, alcohol that was made specifically for preternatural who wanted to get wasted.

How many times had Colt consumed the liquor just to forget his past? What pissed him off was the fact that Eric left it out in the open, uncaring that Milo might have helped himself to some.

If Colt's mate had drunk any, the potency would have killed him.

Crossing the room, Colt lifted the bottle and threw it against the wall, smashing it into a million pieces as the liquid splashed everywhere.

Eric shot off the couch with a low yowl. "Do you know how much that cost me?"

"Do you know what that would have cost Milo if he'd drank any of it?" Colt snarled as his canines descended.

"He's not coming back here anyway." Eric narrowed his eyes. "He owes me money. I might have let you come in here and grab his shit, but if he doesn't give me what he owes me, I'll—"

Colt whipped his arm out, grabbing Eric around the throat. "You'll what?" he growled. "Fuck it." Colt threw Erick to the floor so hard the room slightly shook. The guy shifted into his jaguar, twisted free, and leapt at him, claws out.

With a menacing growl, Colt dodged left then curled his arms around the cat, slamming Eric back down to the floor. Then Colt unleashed on him, driving his fists into the jaguar's side, still not satisfied when he heard ribs crack.

Eric shifted back into his human form and tried to swing at Colt.



“You want to beat on a helpless human?” Colt’s head filled with red haze as he released his dark side. “I’ll show you what a true fucking monster can do.”

He wasn’t sure how long he knelt there driving his fists into Eric, but hands gripped him and pulled him back. “He’s dead, Colt. Enough!”

Colt’s chest heaved as he stared down at the bloody mess. He drove his clawed hand into Eric’s chest and ripped out his heart. “I hope you rot in hell, you son of a bitch.”

He spat at Eric’s lifeless body before he stormed out, grabbing the bag from the porch where he’d left it, making sure to keep his blood-soaked hand away from the plastic.

Then Colt went to the side of the house and found a spigot. After turning it on, he washed as much of the blood away as possible. Drying his hands on his shirt, he called Cannon and told the deputy what just happened and gave him the address.

When Colt hung up, he grabbed the bag again and hopped into his truck. He tore from the driveway, leaving behind a large cloud of dust.

“You need to shift and run,” Kellen said from beside him. “You can’t go back to your mate like this. Milo doesn’t need to see this side of you.”

Colt’s wolf still wanted to fight, still not satisfied after he’d killed the jaguar. He blew out a few breaths and nodded. “When we get home, I’ll go for a run in the forest behind the house.”

He wasn’t sure if a run would help with the way he felt, but Kellen was right. Colt didn’t want Milo to see the monster that had broken free.

\* \* \* \*

“Wait, wait, wait.” Milo held up his hands, palms out. “You’re telling me vampires are real and one tried to kill you?”

Atlas nodded as he chewed the cookie and swallowed. “I know how you feel right now. I was shocked beyond words when I found out what the guy was. It was way worse for me since he had me by the throat and I was dangling in the air while he choked me out.”

They were sitting on Colt’s bed, their legs crossed, facing each other with a mountain of snacks between them. The television was long forgotten since Atlas had begun telling Milo about how he’d meet Kellen and everything that had happened afterward.

“I think I need a drink.” Milo pressed his palm against his forehead.

Atlas handed him his can of soda. “Baby sips. You don’t want to get wasted.”

Despite being told that vampires were real, Milo grinned. “Wouldn’t want the carbonation going to my head.”

Atlas chuckled. “Worse, when I went to the emergency room for slugging Colt’s concrete jaw, I saw my best friend and my ex-boyfriend together. Come to find out, Braylon had been sleeping with Glen even when I was still dating the jerk.” Atlas popped some MMs into his mouth. “I was devastated, even though I’d dumped Glen a month before. Braylon had comforted me while he was warming Glen’s sheets.”

“That’s just foul.” Milo took a sip of his drink. He really liked Atlas, even though he’d initially been uncomfortable around the guy.

Milo never really had friends. In high school, he’d talked to a few people, but they’d never hung out. Even though his mom would always be his best friend, Milo liked having someone his own age to hang out with.

Someone who knew about the nonhuman world.

“Tell me about it,” Atlas agreed. “But I have Kellen now, and he’s introduced me to two of his friends. A mated couple. You’ve got to meet Sam. He’s a mate like us and fun to be around.”

“I still can’t believe you socked Colt on the jaw.” A part of Milo wanted to be pissed, but Atlas had done that trying to defend Kellen. The guy hadn’t exactly told his story in a seamless timeline. Atlas had been all over the place, telling Milo first about how Colt had been ready to kill Kellen when he thought his brother had put bruises on Atlas’s neck.

If anything, that endeared Colt to him, knowing his mate was ready to protect Atlas even though he didn’t have all the facts before he and his brother had gone for blows.

“What about you?” Atlas bit another cookie. It was a mystery how the guy didn’t weigh more with as many sugary snacks as he consumed. Maybe Atlas didn’t do that all the time.

“What about me?” Milo set his can aside then told Atlas about his life with his mom, her failed marriage, and how he’d had to move in with his uncle.

“Is he the one who hurt you?” Atlas rested a hand on Milo’s knee.

“How do you know about that?” Had Colt told his brother and Atlas about his bruises? Milo wasn’t sure if he should be pissed or not.

“It’s not what you think,” Atlas said. “Colt didn’t run to us and spill the beans like some gossip. After he came home and lit into me and Kellen for no reason, he tore his room apart. Ever since I found out about their past, I’ve kind of taken Colt under my wing, sharing my family with him because all he had was Kellen. He’s like a brother

to me, Milo, and I hope one day Kellen and I will be like brothers to you. I was just worried about him when he went off the deep end.”

“When he thought I rejected him,” Milo said as he stared down at his feet. “I understand why he would think that, but...” Milo cleared his throat, hating to think about the pain Colt had been in. “When I first saw Colt at the reception, it was like a spell was cast over me. I know that sounds corny, but—”

“No it doesn’t,” Atlas interrupted. “I fell hard for Kellen when we met at Fearless Fox. I kept telling myself I didn’t want to be bothered and wasn’t impressed with his charm, but I was. I’d never gone home with a stranger before, but I was out the door with him so fast my head spun.”

“Colt said it’s the pull, but I know it can’t just be that.” Milo looked at Atlas. “Maybe at first. I nearly got my uncle fired because I couldn’t stop myself from touching Colt.”

Atlas chuckled. “I remember. I was confused until I saw the way Colt was looking at you. It’s the same way Kellen looks at me.”

Milo frowned. “I think I would have recalled Colt staring at me as if I was his entire universe.”

Atlas smirked. “Then you weren’t paying close enough attention, hon. Someone would have to be blind not to see how enchanted he was with you. He was ready to kick your boss’s ass that night. Also, he was looking at you that way the morning I walked into the kitchen to get those bagels. You weren’t paying attention to Colt, but I saw the way he was looking at you. It wasn’t just enchanted that time. He had a soft look in his eyes that made them sparkle. Only a guy in love looks that way.”

“In love?” Milo nearly choked, though he didn’t have anything in his mouth. “We’ve

only known each other about a week!”

Milo wasn't sure why he found that unbelievable since he was already in love with Colt.

“The way Kellen explained it to me, it's different for nonhumans. Their entire lives they search for their mate. If they're fortunate enough to find them, their already halfway in love with them.”

Milo was at a loss for words. Colt was halfway in love with him already? Why hadn't his mate said anything? Why haven't you said anything to Colt about how you feel?

They both turned their heads when the doorbell rang.

“Are you expecting someone?” Milo asked.

“No one knows where I live. I've yet to invite my parents over.” Atlas got up. “Maybe it's Morgan and Sam, the mated couple I told you about.”

They walked out of the bedroom and headed for the front door. Milo doubted it was Eric. Colt and Kellen hadn't returned yet, but it was highly unlikely that Eric had followed them back and raced to the front door before the brothers came in through the back.

Atlas swung the door open. Standing on the other side was a tall and slender young man with delicate features and silky brown hair. His piercing blue eyes were captivating, making him undeniably attractive.

“Can I help you?” Atlas asked as Milo came to stand next to him.

“I'm here to see Colt.” The stranger might have been gorgeous, but his tone left

something to be desired. It was haughty, as if he was irritated that he had to deal with Atlas and Milo.

“And you are?” Milo asked as his gaze swept over the guy, a surge of jealousy flying through him.

“I’m Hayley, and Colt is my boyfriend.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Milo would have been less shocked if Hayley had slugged him in the gut.

“You’re full of shit!” Atlas argued.

Milo became lightheaded. After getting to know Colt, he refused to believe that his mate would betray him with some hidden lover, and no one was going to convince him otherwise.

“I have no idea who either of you are, and I really don’t care. Bring Colt to the door now,” Hayley demanded.

“We aren’t doing shit,” Atlas argued. “You’re delusional since Colt’s husband is standing right next to me.”

A feral look entered Hayley’s eyes right before he bared small canines and attacked Milo. When they hit the floor, Atlas jumped on the guy’s back, smacking Hayley in the head and shoulders.

“Get off of him, you tramp!”

For a brief moment, memories of Eric’s abuse flooded Milo’s mind as Hayley tried to get to him, but Atlas wasn’t having it. Then something snapped inside of Milo. He brought his knee up, nailing Hayley in the nuts. The guy jerked upward, trying to get Atlas off his back. Milo grabbed the closest thing to him, swinging the heavy statue of a guy pushing a large boulder up a hill at Hayley.

When the hefty figurine made contact, Hayley’s nose exploded with blood.

Atlas continued to punch the guy. Milo swung again, this time hitting Hayley in the chest, though that swing wasn't as hard as he'd wanted it to be.

"I'm going to kill you fucking humans!" Hayley shrieked as he reached behind him and yanked Atlas off of him, tossing Kellen's mate to the floor. "Colt isn't married to anyone. He's my mate!"

Atlas scrambled to his feet as Hayley reached for Milo again. Milo swung the small statue like a pro baseball player, nailing the guy in the hand.

"I don't care what you are. I'll fight you with everything I have!" Milo shouted.

Something crashed over Hayley's head. Milo's eyes widened when he saw that Atlas had smashed a table lamp over him. Unfortunately, Hayley didn't go down. If anything, the assault only pissed him off more.

Claws grew from his fingernails as he reached for Atlas, but Atlas spun away, narrowly dodging those sharp claws. Milo swung the small statue again, determined to help Atlas, and struck the arm that was reaching for Kellen's mate. When it sounded as if Milo had broken a bone in Hayley's hand, he felt sick.

Hayley screamed, clutching his arm. He bared those canines—though they weren't long and thick like Colt's were—at Milo, plowing into him and sending Milo flying backward. He hit the floor and skidded a good ten feet before he stopped, and then watched in horror as Hayley backhanded Atlas so hard that he hit the coffee table with a nauseating thud.

Atlas cried out, gripping his side, then he rolled onto the floor, writhing in pain. Milo shoved to his feet and started grabbing things off the bookcase, whipping them at the guy.



Milo heard the roar of a car arriving then the crunch and slide of tires on gravel as it came to a sudden stop.

Hayley dodged the projectiles and leaped toward Milo, taking him down. He straddled Milo and choked him, realizing in a detached way that Hayley's claws were no longer out. Milo dragged his nails down the guy's arm, trying desperately to get the lunatic off of him. Blood pounded in Milo's head as his vision began to fade.

For someone so slim, Hayley was strong as hell. He was going to kill Milo if he didn't find a way to break the hold. Just as Milo feared he would pass out, Hayley was ripped away and thrown across the room. Milo rolled to his side, his eyes watering, his throat feeling as if it was on fire as he tried to suck air into his lungs.

He needed the oxygen, but it hurt so badly to breathe.

Afraid Hayley would attack him again, Milo tried to crawl away. He made it a few feet before he was lifted off the floor. Milo swung wildly, determined to fight for his life. He wanted a future with Colt, and he wasn't going to let some scorned harlot take that away from him.

"It's me!" Colt said as he pulled Milo to his chest. "I've got you, shorty. Take slow, shallow breaths."

Now Milo knew how Atlas had felt when he was in that vampire's grip. Milo's throat burned, and he wondered if Hayley had crushed his windpipe. Every breath was like swallowing fire.

Hayley shrieked and jumped on Colt's back. Colt dropped Milo, and Milo hit the floor, pain exploding in his arm as he landed on it. Un-fucking-believable.

With a deadly growl, Colt reached behind him and tore Hayley off his back,

slamming the guy against the wall with his hand around Hayley's throat. "I don't know how you tracked me down, but I'm going to rip out your spine for touching my mate," Colt snarled with murder in his green eyes and his canines at full length.

Milo looked to his right and saw Kellen on the floor, Atlas in his lap as he rocked his mate, softly whispering to him.

"He's not your mate!" Hayley screamed, but it came out muffled since Colt was pressing on the guy's windpipe. "We were meant to be together!"

"We dated for two months, you psycho bitch," Colt snarled. "I made it clear it was over even before I found my mate."

Unsure where he gathered the strength to stand, Milo pushed to his feet, the room spinning. When he spoke, his words sounded like a strained croak. "Colt is mine. I will do more than bloody your nose and break your arm if you don't back down."

Hayley sagged and started crying. If he hadn't attacked them, Milo might have felt sorry for him. Might have. It was clear that Hayley was obsessed with Colt since he'd found a way to track him down. That was dedicated lunacy.

"You can't be mated," Hayley wailed as Colt set the guy on his feet, removing his hand. He tried to grab Colt, as if to hug him, but Colt knocked the guy's hands away with a look of disgust.

"Apologize to Milo for attacking him and I might let you live," Colt said with a menacing growl then turned to Milo. "How badly did he hurt you?"

Milo pointed to his throat. "Atlas and I were kicking his ass until he got the upper hand."

Colt actually smirked. “No shit.”

“I jumped on his back, and Milo broke his nose,” Atlas said from across the room. “Your mate kicked him in the nuts, rammed that heavy statue-thing into his chest, and broke his arm, but that was only after that crazy bitch attacked him.”

Colt looked at Milo with pride. “Nice.”

Despite his pain, Milo grinned, feeling his face flush from embarrassment. “I don’t like violence, but he forced me to defend myself. I didn’t really lose my shit until he tried to hurt Atlas.”

Up until then, Milo had been nearly paralyzed with fear from thinking about his uncle beating him, but he didn’t say that out loud.

“Make him leave, Colt.” Milo really needed to stop talking. The more he spoke, the more his throat burned.

Colt turned his attention back to Hayley, his smile evaporating, replaced by a savage glint in his green eyes. “Leave town, Hayley. Forget I exist, or I swear I’ll kill you.”

Kellen rose to his feet, setting Atlas on the couch. He stormed toward Hayley, his features twisted into rage. “You hurt my mate. I’m going to return the favor.”

Colt moved as if to stop Kellen. When he turned his back to Hayley, the bastard spang and punched Milo so hard in the jaw that Milo thought it shattered. He hit the floor, landing on his back, unable to focus as pain ripped through his skull.

The growls sounded a million miles away as Milo lay there, wondering for a second if Hayley had actually killed him. Atlas dropped to his knees next to Milo, worry in his gray eyes. “Talk to me, Milo!”

He couldn't. His brain had been rattled too badly, the worst pain imaginable pulsing in his skull and radiating down his body. It honestly felt as if Hayley had knocked his head clean off. "It...hurts."

Even worse than his throat.

Atlas touched his chest. "Don't move. I don't know what damage he's done." Then he leaned in closer and whispered, "Colt and Kellen just tore him apart. I'm concentrating on your face so I don't have to look at what's left of Hayley. The sound alone is making me want to vomit."

Milo couldn't stop blinking, praying like hell that Atlas didn't throw up on him. He was also hoping Hayley hadn't caused any serious damage. The guy hadn't been able to get in a full swing because he'd been between Colt and the wall. If he had, Milo might have died.

"Look at me," Atlas said softly. "Don't pay attention to what Colt and Kellen are doing right now."

From the corner of his eye, blurry shadows walked past him. The smell of blood was overwhelming, a metallic scent that made Milo's mouth water as if he were going to be sick.

"Can you wiggle your fingers?" Atlas asked.

Milo wiggled them.

Atlas smiled. "Very good. Can you move your legs?"

The pain started to ease in Milo's head. The room began to come back into focus. "I think he just knocked the sense out of me. My head still hurts, but things are slowly

coming back into focus.”

“Should I call an ambulance?” The worry never left Atlas’s gray eyes.

“I think I’m okay. Help me sit up.”

“Are you sure?” Atlas pressed firmly against Milo’s chest when he tried to sit up.

“Let’s wait until Colt examines you before you try to do jumping jacks. Just lie here and stare at my pretty face, and I’ll keep gazing into your gorgeous hazel eyes.”

“Stop flirting with me.” Milo chuckled then regretted making the sound when a sharp pulse shot through his head. “I need some migraine pills.”

“Here come Colt and Kellen.” Atlas moved aside, Colt taking his place.

Colt gave a comforting smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Tell me what hurts, sweetheart.”

Kellen crouched on the other side of Milo, a look of deep concern on his face.

“Should we take him to the hospital? He was coldcocked by a shifter.”

Colt made Milo do the same tests that Atlas had done. He made Milo wiggle his fingers and move his legs. Then he had Milo follow his finger.

“I wanted to sit up, but Atlas got bossy and made me lie still,” Milo said. “I’m okay. My head hurts like hell, and my throat burns, but I’ll live.”

“We’ll let a doctor determine that.” Colt pulled out his phone. “I’m calling an ambulance, and you’re going to the hospital.”

“Since they killed Hayley and dragged his body out, say someone broke in and

assaulted you but got away before Colt and Kellen arrived,” Atlas said. “We’ll follow you two in the ambulance.”

Milo really didn’t think it was necessary, but he was outvoted. When the ambulance arrived, a collar was put around Milo’s neck and he was loaded and driven away, Colt still at his side.

Three hours later, the doctor walked into Milo’s cramped room in the ER. “I’m Dr. Baldwin, and I have good news, Mr. Landon.” He stood by Milo’s bed since the only chair at his bedside was already taken by Colt. Kellen and Atlas were standing off to the side. “Your tests came back, and luckily, you didn’t sustain any serious injuries beyond a mild concussion.”

Colt sighed heavily, his relief evident as his hold on Milo’s hand tightened.

“Thank god,” Atlas said.

“Are you sure you have the right tests?” Milo asked. “There’s no way that’s the only thing wrong. I got my ass handed to me. It felt like a brick wall slammed into my jaw.”

Dr Baldwin patted Milo’s arm. “I’m positive I received the correct tests results.”

“If you say so,” Milo groaned. “Just put me in a body cast and let me wheel out of here. I’m ready to go home.”

The doctor chuckled, but Colt just sat there holding Milo’s hand.

“Since you’re mated, you’ll heal faster,” the doctor said. “I still want you on bedrest until you’re steady on your feet. I’m prescribing something to help with your throat and some pain medication for your head. You’re a very lucky man.” He patted Milo’s

arm again.

“You’re not human?” Milo frowned.

“I’m a lion shifter, Mr. Landon. I spoke with Colt while you were getting your tests. He told me what happened. It’s a miracle you didn’t sustain more serious injuries fighting a shifter. The guy might have been a gazelle, but he was still ten times stronger than you. I’m just glad you’re going to be okay. I’ll start the process for your release.”

When the doctor walked out, Milo turned to Colt, croaking out, “Gazelle?”

“No shit,” Atlas said in surprise. “Aren’t they supposed to be docile animals?”

“Not if they’re insane,” Kellen snarled. “I should have Dr. Baldwin check out your side.”

Atlas waved away his mate’s concern. “I’m breathing fine and have minimal bruising. I’m certain I’ll live.”

“We’re going to give you two some privacy.” Kellen smiled down at Milo. “I can never repay you for keeping Atlas safe. I’m not really known for offering my friendship, Milo. Even if you hadn’t saved the love of my life, I’d still consider you family. You have my loyalty, and I’ll always have your back.” He took Atlas’s hand and left the room.

“I’m sorry.” Colt moved his chair closer to the bed, pressing his lips against Milo’s knuckles. “I was supposed to protect you. I don’t even know how Hayley found the house. I swear to you on my life that I broke things off with him a month before you and I met.”

“I believe you,” Milo said in a raspy voice. “When Atlas called me your husband, Hayley knocked me to the floor, choking me. Eric’s years of abuse flashed in my head, and something inside of me snapped.”

Colt rested Milo’s knuckles against his beard. The look Atlas had described to him sparkled in his mate’s green eyes. A look of pure adoration and...was that love? “You are the most amazing man I have ever met. I’m so proud of you for fighting back, shorty. When Kellen’s phone chimed, telling us that someone was near the house, I couldn’t drive fast enough to get us to you and Atlas. Then I saw Hayley’s car parked out outside, the front door wide open, and my heart gave out.”

If Colt hadn’t gotten there when he did, Hayley would have succeeded in killing Milo. “What happened at my uncle’s house?” he whispered.

Colt closed his eyes, and Milo had his answer.

“It’s not your fault, Colt.” He touched his mate’s jaw, gently scratching his fingernails against his mate’s soft beard. “I’ll never look at you differently for protecting me.”

“I just don’t want you to see that side of me, Milo.” Colt opened his eyes. “I don’t ever want you looking at me like I’m a monster.”

Milo tugged until Colt leaned closer, and then he curled his arms around his mate’s neck, hugging him. “You’re not a monster, Colt. You’re my guardian wolf who watches over me.”

“Always,” Colt whispered.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm*

Colt frowned and turned over in bed when he heard something tinkling, reminding him of glass tapping together. Milo walked into their bedroom, carrying a large serving tray. “What’s this?” he asked as he sat up.

Milo set the tray on the bed, splashes of orange juice on the white hand towel he’d lined the tray with. His mate smiled at him. “I got up an hour ago and decided to make you breakfast in bed.”

Colt was deeply moved since Milo was the first person who’d ever done this for him. On the tray sat a plate filled with pancakes, sausage, and scrambled eggs, as well as two glasses of orange juice and silverware.

“I see you recreated the breakfast we made together.” Colt swallowed roughly as he stared at the man he loved more than life itself.

It had been two weeks since the incidents with Eric and Hayley. Milo’s drawers were filled to the brim with the new clothes Colt had ordered for him, his mother’s jewelry box perched on top of his dresser, the photo album tucked in a drawer.

Colt had contacted Deputy Cannon Lowery that night and told the guy about Eric’s body and how the jaguar had been abusing Milo for three years. In their world, the justice was different, especially when it came to mates.

Cannon considered the case closed.

Since the night of Hayley’s attack, Milo had formed a strong friendship with Atlas, but he’d formed an even deeper bond with Colt. His mate laughed more often than he

had before, his hazel eyes sparkling with happiness. Colt was still far from perfect, but he was getting better, Milo continuing to quiet the chaos that lived inside of him.

“Atlas tried to help, so I let him pour the orange juice.” Milo pursed his lips. “As you can see his aim was off, but he seemed so pleased to help that I didn’t say anything about the drops he spilled.”

“You made his day.” Colt smiled as he sat up, placing the blanket over his naked lap. He picked up the fork. “This looks incredible, shorty. I almost don’t want to eat it and erase your efforts.”

Milo took the fork from him. “After the mess I left in the kitchen, we’re demolishing every bite.” He scooped up a forkful of fluffy eggs and held it to Colt’s lips. “Open wide and taste my steamy delight.”

Colt burst out laughing. “I guess that’s as close as we’re going to get to filthy eggs.” His laughter died down as his voice grew husky. “I’ll taste your steamy delight anytime you hold it close to my mouth, sweetheart.”

He opened, and Milo slipped the fork inside, and then Colt slid his lips over the tines, groaning at how good the eggs tasted but also to make the bite obscene.

Milo sat there with his lips parted, staring at Colt’s mouth, his breathing growing shallow. “You make me want to feed you eggs all day.”

“I’d rather you feed me your cock.” He slid the tray to the foot of the bed, taking the fork from Milo and setting it next to the plate. Colt pulled Milo into his arms, amazed at how much he loved the guy.

He turned and placed Milo on his back as he stared into his mate’s gorgeous eyes. “How about we have dessert first?”

“Our breakfast will be cold by then.” But Milo made no move to get up. He curled his hands around Colt’s biceps, pulling him closer until their lips met in a slow, sensual kiss that had Colt’s body instantly hard. He slid Milo toward the pillows, careful not to upset the tray.

“That’s what microwaves are for.” Colt glided his lips over Milo’s jaw, moving his hands down his mate’s side. There had been massive bruising where Hayley had punched Milo, but Colt was thankful his jaw was now unblemished. His mate’s entire body was flawless.

“Hang on.” Milo twisted under Colt and crawled toward the nightstand, grabbing the lube.

Colt trapped his mate on all fours then lowered his pajama pants and underwear. A low growl vibrated in his throat as he parted Milo’s cheeks, his puckered hole on display.

With a hunger that had nothing to do with their breakfast, Colt lapped at the tight ring of muscles, probing his tongue inside as Milo whimpered, his shoulders lowering to the bed.

Colt would never get enough of his mate even if he lived to be a thousand. He delved his tongue deeper, reveling in the taste and feel of Milo’s body. Then he reared back onto his knees and pulled Milo upright, tugging the guy’s shirt over his head.

The wolf on his mate’s shoulder continued to steal his breath no matter how many times he saw it. Colt traced the ink with his fingers, still stunned that Milo had gotten it three weeks before they’d met. Only, the feeling of the wolf representing Colt’s pain was gradually fading. Milo was his salvation, slowly healing Colt in ways he never thought possible.

They’d yet to return to their spot, and Colt still hadn’t shifted for his mate. He

planned to change that tonight.

Milo dropped back down, handing Colt the lube. He took it and then drizzled some of the gel onto his hand. He inched two fingers inside Milo's ass before he blanketed his mate's back, kissing and lapping at his nape and shoulders.

Milo groaned, rocking backward to impale himself over and over again. "I need more, Colt," he whined.

Pulling his fingers free, Colt lubed his cock and then rubbed the head of his shaft against Milo's entrance, teasing him. Then he gripped his mate's hips before slowly sinking inside as a strangled moan escaped his lips. Milo's body welcomed him, squeezing him tightly as Colt bottomed out. Colt stilled for a moment, savoring the feeling of being connected to his mate on such a deep level.

"Fucking heaven." He pulled out almost all the way before thrusting back in with a groan that rivaled Milo's own.

His mate met him halfway, his body moving in time with Colt's brutal pace. Every touch, every sound, every thrust was imprinted on Colt's soul. He gripped Milo's hips tighter as he drove deeper and faster.

A sheen of sweat covered their bodies, glistening in the morning light slipping between the blind slats. Colt wrapped one arm around Milo's chest and pulled him upright until they were pressed together. Thrusting upward, Colt bit down on Milo's shoulder as he felt his orgasm building deep in his gut.

Milo cried out as his hole clamped around Colt's dick seconds before Colt followed suit, filling his mate with his seed. They knelt there, Milo held up by Colt's strong arm. Colt eased his canines free and licked the wound and then said against his mate's ear, "I love you, shorty."

His mate reached back and touched Colt's cheek. "I love you, too."

The first time Milo had said those words to him a week ago, Colt's heart had filled with pure joy. He would never tire of hearing his mate say them. The feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing weren't as strong as they'd been before. Those feelings still resided inside Colt, and he wasn't sure they would ever fully go away, but Milo constantly built Colt up, making him feel like the luckiest man alive.

What had started out as a plan to find a hookup at the reception had changed Colt's life irrevocably. All it had taken was a pocket-sized human to caress his jaw and shine a beautiful light to help Colt find his way out of the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Milo bounced in his seat next to Colt as they drove to their favorite spot later that same night. He couldn't believe he was finally going to meet Colt's wolf face-to-face. It was like a dream come true.

"You keep bouncing in your seat and I'll be getting naked for another reason, shorty." Colt eyed him as he smiled. "I know you love wolves, but is seeing mine that exciting?"

Milo stared in disbelief at his mate. "Your wolf looks exactly like the one on my shoulder. Are you freaking kidding me? It's going to be like seeing my inked wolf come to life. Hell yeah, it's exciting! It's more than exciting. I feel like I'm going to pass out from the sheer magic off it all."

Colt chuckled and shook his head. "You definitely know how to make a guy feel special."

Leaning over, Milo kissed his mate's bearded jaw. "That's because you are. You've been nothing but magical to me since the moment we met, Colt."

Was his mate blushing? Milo grinned and rested his head on Colt's shoulder, still amazed at how happy the guy made him. Not just because he'd rescued Milo from a miserable life but also because Colt was the most caring and loving man anyone could ask for.

They pulled into their spot, and Milo damn near jumped out before Colt had parked.

"Slow down, Milo." Colt grabbed his arm. "If you get out before the truck has stopped, we're turning back around and going home."

Milo gasped as he stared at his mate. "You wouldn't dare do that to me!"

"Then stop trying to give me a damn heart attack." Colt finally parked, depositing his wallet and phone in the center console before he closed it.

"What, no lube?" Milo teased.

"The night is still young."

Colt got out, and Milo bounded out of his seat. His mate looked around and then stripped naked. Milo's brain froze as he stared at the guy's gorgeous body. If Milo wasn't so wired to see his mate's wolf, he'd spread Colt out on the picnic table and ride his fat cock.

Once Colt stored his clothes in the truck and hid his keys, he led Milo into the forest. "Ready?"

"My entire life." Milo twisted his hands together as he bit his lip.

Colt arched a brow. "You're more excited to see my wolf than to see my naked body. I think I'm offended."

Milo crossed his arms. “Stop being a baby and shift already. Like you said, the night is still young. I want my wolf, Colt.”

With a sparkle of mischief in his eyes, Colt kissed him. “Do I look like a baby to you?”

“Hell no, now stop torturing me. You’re stalling just to build anticipation,” Milo whined. “I already love you with all my heart. Now I want to get to know my wolf.”

“Just stick close to my side in case we have another run-in with Yogi Bear,” he said. “And remember—”

“Don’t run,” Milo groaned. “That will only incite the bear to chase me. You’ve said that to me a million times since you told me two hours ago that we were coming out here.”

Colt shifted so fast that Milo yelped. How in the hell did he do that? In front of Milo, a stunning wolf stood with a regal posture, its thick fur rippling in the gentle breeze. Milo’s eyes widened in awe as he took in the creature’s powerful presence. The wolf’s green gaze seemed to penetrate down to Milo’s very soul, leaving him momentarily speechless and mesmerized by its wild beauty.

Then he squealed and threw his arms around the massive beast, burying his face in its fur. Colt’s wolf form was a sight to behold. Milo couldn’t believe that this creature was his mate, the other half of his soul. He tightened his hold around the wolf’s neck, feeling its warmth and strength against him.

In response, it nudged its muzzle against Milo’s cheek, leaving a trail of wet kisses along his skin. Milo giggled with pure joy, pulling back to peer into its eyes. The wolf’s gaze softened, and Milo could feel the love and devotion radiating off of the animal.

Off of Colt. Milo could sense the deep connection between them, the bond that went beyond words. “You’re everything I dreamed of! Now let’s take our walk. This is a night I’ll never forget.”

Since he was a little boy, Milo had felt a connection to wolves. He just had no idea that one day his heart would be stolen by one. A wolf who would finally make Milo feel whole again.

THE END