



Purchased (Bound Mates #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Shes not just my mate. Shes my property.

When my newly purchased mate bit me as I led her from the auction block, I spanked her bare ass in front of everyone, but I didnt claim her right then and there as would have been my right.

I want her all to myself when I enjoy her virgin body for the first time.

Because Im not just going to breed her.

Im going to make her beg to be bred.

Publishers Note: Purchased is the third book in the Bound Mates series but can be read as a standalone. It includes spankings and rough, intense sexual scenes. If such material offends you, please dont read this book.

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Emma

“We’re finally getting out of here!”

I have spent thirteen years at the Honourhall Home for Lost Ladies, an orphanage located at the very far north of Scotland. Louise spent fifteen. Henrietta has been here all eighteen. We are all incomparably excited to be leaving, though there is a little maudlin feeling lurking behind the relief.

We are waiting to be freed, because we can no longer be kept. We are grown women who have lived almost every day of our lives behind the stone walls that separate us from the outside world.

Most of us will have to fend for ourselves, but some of us will find husbands before we leave, at the Honourhall Ball. It is for this grand occasion we have been preparing ourselves for years.

We are not permitted to date, or have much interaction with the outside world, such as it is. The island we live on is small, and the people are few. Tomorrow, when the ball is over, we will be given tickets to the mainland, and references for several employers who have taken those who leave the orphanage on as secretaries and such.

The atmosphere in our little dormitory is electric. Everybody is wearing their finest. Everybody except Bea, who is sitting at the window, staring out of it with longing. She’s always been a little strange, and a lot distant.

Her long, dark hair hangs lank and unbrushed around her shoulders. She is wearing

her work trousers and a long tunic over the top. Both of them are stained. She hasn't even bathed.

We all grew up together. In the absence of mothers and fathers, we are sisters, siblings forming a family. That means we put up with the strangeness and the sadness we all have. It comes out in different ways for each of us. Some of us are always cheerful to an irritating degree, others of us are melancholy. And then there's Bea.

She has been a lightning rod for trouble ever since I have known her, often deflecting trouble that would have found one or the other of us if not for her willingness to take blame and punishment alike.

The others roll their eyes when they look at her. They think she is just being difficult again. I guess I think the same thing.

"Why aren't you getting dressed, Bea?" I try to encourage her to get ready. I wouldn't want her to miss out on her future husband just because she wanted to throw a tantrum.

"There's nothing to celebrate," she says. "It's not a ball. There's not going to be any dancing."

"Yes, there is. There's going to be dancing, and cake, and drink."

"It's an auction. They're going to put us up for sale. We're going to pay for our care by being sold."

Everybody groans. "Do you have to ruin everything, Bea?" Sasha calls out.

"Don't listen to her," Briony replies. "Let her show up like a freakish mess. Let her miss out on a man."

“We’ve been fattened like pigs for years, and you girls can’t wait to go to the slaughter,” Bea shoots back.

I used to worry about her being bullied, but she’s always been able to defend herself. If it wasn’t for how paranoid she is, and how seriously she takes everything, she’d be one of my favorite sisters. I do worry about what will happen to her now that we are all over eighteen, and it is time for us to find ourselves new homes and new lives.

The matrons have made it clear that this ball is a great kindness, a single opportunity for us to go from the care of the orphanage to the care of a husband. Some of us will never have to worry about providing for ourselves in a world that does not look kindly on orphans.

Bea falls silent and the buzz of excitement returns. A dozen of us are about to go out and into the world. We will not have to wake up and clean tomorrow or spend the day doing darning for the local workers, or otherwise earn our keep according to the orphanage’s liking.

Since our early teens, we have been workhorses. They frame it as learning life skills, housekeeping, looking after the younger girls, cooking for the home, but it is really just drudgery. It will be different when we are married. I would happily cook and clean and tend children for a man who loved me.

I see Bea slip out of the room. She goes quietly, as if she does not want to be noticed. Worried, I go after her. I am about as pretty as I am going to get.

“What are you doing?” I stop her in the hall, where she is poised by the fire escape.

“I’m running away,” Bea says. “I’m not going to the ceremony.”

“But you must come to the ceremony! Running away is impossible. And what

happens if you try is unthinkable.”

We look at each other in horror, both aghast at the choices we are making.

“You’re so close to getting out,” I say. “Just stay another night.”

“I told you in there. We are pigs, ripe for slaughter. That ball will be a bloodbath. I will not stay. You should come with me.”

I can’t stop her. I wish I could. I don’t have her bravery, or her paranoia.

“You can be a pig, Emma, or you can be a wolf,” she says. “I choose wolf.”

She always talks in these animal terms. Really, you’d think she’d grow out of it.

“We’re young women,” I remind her. “And we are to meet eligible bachelors looking for wives of good moral character.”

“I am not of good moral character.” She smiles for the first time. “Why do you think we’re behind stone walls?”

“I have no idea.”

“Best way to keep wolves out. Until the pig keepers let them in.”

The girls open the door and look out for me.

“Stop talking to her. She’s crazy. You know she’s crazy. We will be well rid of her.”

Bea has a history of some mental health problems. When we were thirteen, she became convinced we weren’t in an orphanage, but a prison. They put her on pills

then. I think she's stopped taking them.

"She's off her meds," Sasha says, echoing my thoughts, but much more cruelly than I would have expressed them. "Plus, let's be real, she's not pretty enough to get a husband. Even if she comes to the ceremony, she will be left over."

"Don't be cruel, Sasha. Bea is very pretty in her own way."

Bea is actually gorgeous. I'm not sure why the others don't see it. Her features are unconventional, but striking. She has big, dark eyes, and Slavic bone structure. If she'd just clean up and put a little makeup on, I think she would put us all to shame.

"I hope you are taken by someone nice," Bea says to me. "But I'm sorry. I'm not staying."

She opens the fire escape, and she goes into the night.

"Ladies! Come!" Matron comes bustling up not a minute later. "The gentlemen are waiting to meet you all. Down to the hall at once. Come along. Don't you all look lovely!"

We forget about Bea instantly in our rush for the ball. Our excitement is at a peak as we are filed down to the hall. Matron takes us around the back, where the stage entrance is. The hall has a large open area for assembly seating, and a stage for productions and such. We have been told that we will go on stage, one at a time, and be introduced to the gentlemen that way. We are all practicing the little speeches we've concocted, some of us in our heads, others of us out loud. We will not get a second chance to have a first impression.

"Let me fucking go!"

Bea is dragged in by the security guards. Her clothes are torn in a vulgar way, and she is bloodied around her mouth. They have her caught with a dog catcher's pole, a silver chain around her neck pulled tight against her throat. She scrabbles at it with her fingers, attempting to escape.

“Enough. The auction is beginning. Shut her up.”

They whip a napkin around in circles until it turns into more of a rope and they shove it in her mouth, tying it behind her head. We are all staring, shocked at the sight of her, at the roughness of her handling, and at the word that just came out of the matron's mouth.

Auction.

She was right.

We are to be sold.

* * *

Page 2

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The room stinks of lust. There must be over a hundred men here, and those who are more than men, all waiting for the auction to begin. Being here, standing shoulder to shoulder with these base creatures fills me with disgust.

There is another scent, a lighter one, but more troubling than the base need of the males. Females in distress, afraid for what is about to happen to them. I can hear gasps from the rear of the stage, as if panic just began running through them.

I turn to my companion. "We should not be here. This is no better than a slave auction. It's immoral."

Antoine, my advisor, responds calmly.

"The director is one of our kind, and he reached out to the packs to let them know that he has a female shifter for auction this year. It may be distasteful, Ma'tre , but sometimes distasteful things are necessary."

The crowd can be split into two: disgusting human men wanting to buy a barely legal girl for their own ends, and shifter males hunting the world for an elusive fated mate.

Our kind does not get a choice in the way humans do. We cannot merely pick someone we like. We need to find someone who makes our chemistry run wild, the animalistic key to our particular locks. Anything less will not do.

I am here because I am nearly thirty years old, and if I do not find a mate and start breeding up a family soon, my pack will revolt. An unmated alpha is a liability in the eyes of the de Lune pack.

I have not been lazy in my search. I have searched for my mate high and low. I have attended parties, mixers, suffered endless matchmaker events, even tried an app created by an enterprising young shifter called Howl. I am beginning to think that there is no female in this world made to suit me, that fate has left me the youngest ever alpha of the pack with nothing but decades of solo aging ahead of me.

They start to bring the girls out. The first one is a pretty blonde in an old-fashioned dress. Her voice wavers as she introduces herself nervously. I don't think they knew what they were going to get when they came here. I scent confusion as well as fear.

The auctioneer is the orphanage director, a tall man with a belly that speaks to indulging amply in beer. His hair is thinning and his skin is marked with ill health. His power lies in collecting helpless females and selling them. A more grotesque creature does not exist.

"Let's start at ten thousand euros," he says. "Do I have ten?"

The bidding is immediate. She is just a human, so half the crowd stays silent. The human men looking for a virginal young women place their bids until finally she is turned in. Another girl follows, and then another. They are all pretty, all innocent, all deserving of better fates than this, but we wolves are waiting for the one of our blood.

I think I am starting to pick up her scent. I think we all are. I feel the stirring of the crowd, shifters starting to show interest, aware that we are all competition for one another.

"Now we have the last of the evening, a spirited girl who requires firm handling," the auctioneer says, his jocularly at odds with the state of the poor creature who is dragged bodily onto the stage with a silver collar around her neck.

She is not pretty in her current state. She is a dirty, bloodied mess. She is ferocious

and she is feral—and I am immediately in love.

You can spend a lifetime looking for something... someone. You can search so long you become certain the thing you are looking for does not really exist. And then, all of a sudden, there it is, as perfect as you imagined, and immediately feeling as though it has always been there, as much a part of you as your own heart.

She is mine.

Instantly.

Irrevocably.

Entirely.

She is mine the way my hand is mine. She is a part of me I did not know I was missing until this very moment.

I feel elation and outrage in equal measure at her treatment.

She looks like she's been fighting. Not just tonight. Her whole life.

I am immediately, desperately, violently drawn toward her. Every single one of my senses focuses on her as if she were the only creature left in all creation.

The other, better presented girls are nothing. Not even wallpaper. They are background static. She is everything.

I know in this instant, there will never be anything, or anyone other than her.

I stand up and lift my voice above the hubbub of the crowd yet to be brought to order

by the auctioneer who is still fussing with the sheet and the gavel.

I say one word, my voice ringing out across the crowd with complete conviction as I claim her.

“ Mine! ”

There's a brief pause from the crowd, and then some laughter as those who are human mistake me for a foolishly effusive man. The shifters are quieter, but watchful. They may not be reacting as strongly, but that does not mean they will not try to lay a claim.

“Please, Mr. de Lune. The auction will proceed in an orderly fashion.” The auctioneer tries to impose the schedule, but I do not care about schedules. I do not care about anything other than her.

Some might be patient, let the auction start, feign disinterest, bid as low as possible. I will be doing none of those things. My passion is too intense, and my need is too great. This is not a time to hold back. This is the moment to go all in.

“I want her now. If anyone so much as dares to think about so much as bidding on her, I will kill them.”

There's a ripple of indulgent laughter from the crowd. Some of the shifters understand the hunger I am experiencing. They wish the same thing for themselves. They wander the world, disappointed at how every pretty, smart, suitable girl is somehow lackluster because she is not the one . I was one of them just minutes ago. Now I am forever changed.

“Sir, the auction...”

“I want her. Now. Ten million.”

There’s a collective gasp. That’s a record price by quite a ways. These girls aren’t normally considered prizes. They are considered instead to be servants, slaves, and toys. Their worth lies in their lack of connections. Their inherent disposability. The highest price paid before this barely cracked half a million.

The money doesn’t matter to me. Ten million is a rounding error on my balance sheets.

The director slams the gavel down. “Sold!”

I move through the crowd with the intention of saving her from this horrible predicament. I notice immediately that the silver around her neck appears to be nearly pure. They’re keeping her nature muted, treating her like a mutt. They’re trying to stop her from shifting. Interesting.

“My name is Armand, pup,” I tell her, crouching next to her. “And I am not going to hurt you. Come with me.”

I speak English to her. Like most educated Frenchmen, my English is better than some English people’s. I know it is accented, but I am sure she can understand me. She will understand the pack too, for all of us speak at least two languages. The de Lune pack has always prided itself on education and refinement. We may be wild wolves and vicious predators, but there’s no reason not to enjoy the finer things in life.

My terrified mate lifts her eyes to mine, and I reach for her, wanting to caress her cheek, wanting to gentle her, reassure her that I will not hurt her. She is safe with me. I am going to take her from this terrible place and I am going to look after her.

She whips her head around and bites my hand hard enough to very nearly draw blood. She is feral, she is terrified, and if she feels the mate bond, she does not know what it is, or what it means. I take the pain without reacting. Best not to show a mouthy pup that it has the ability to hurt.

“Are you done?” I ask the question as mildly as I can.

She looks at me with fury in her dark eyes, and an unmistakable sentiment of loathing as she releases my hand.

“I do not want to stay here a moment longer than I have to, and I can only assume that you also want to go, so let us go, now. Swiftly.”

She pulls away from me, indicating she has every intention of making this as difficult as possible. The crowd is stirring, and I can feel the director watching us. He will want to move on with the auction, but I do not care.

“I can pick you up and carry you out of here if I have to, but I don’t think you’ll like that.”

Fuck. Off.

She doesn’t say it, but I feel it in her energy, the narrowing of her eyes, the curl of her upper lip.

“Second thoughts, Mr. de Lune?” The director raises his voice so everybody can hear. “I’m afraid all purchases are final. Even ones you will quickly come to regret.”

The crowd laughs.

“Some hands, please, to help Mr. de Lune claim his property,” the director calls out.

“No! Nobody touches her besides me.” I snarl the warning. The very idea of seeing so much as another man’s finger on my mate is enough to make me near feral with fury.

Her resistance is exciting everyone. I could drag her out of here, but this is introducing a new complication; she is showing me up in front of representatives from packs all over Europe and beyond. How I handle her will become a matter of record worldwide. They all just saw her bite me. Am I going to stand for that? I cannot.

I have to subdue her before we leave, show everyone that I am not a flailing, useless alpha. Several years ago when I took command of the de Lune pack, I was one of the youngest men to ever become alpha of a major pack, and that has created interest and gossip in equal measure.

Perhaps I am too sensitive, but weakness cannot be shown when you are an alpha. It can encourage others to try to exploit it, and create situations where the entire pack is in danger.

This moment is not just about my mate and me. It is about the whole pack. It is about the stability of the European wolves as a whole. I am on display as much as she is, and it would be very good for my reputation to tame her live.

Just how rebellious can one young whelp be?

“I don’t want to hurt you, but if you don’t come with me right now, I am going to spank you long and hard in front of everybody and carry you away regardless. I want you to get up, compose yourself, and come with me.”

I offer my hand for her to take.

Again she bites it. It hurts more the second time, and the laughter from the crowd is louder.

“You’re going to need a gag, ma cherie ,” I growl, picking her up in my arms. She can fight all she likes now, and she does, turning into a human ball of fury, fists, knees, teeth, elbows, feet. Holding onto her is practically impossible.

I can see Daniel and Marcel down in the crowd, ready to come up if necessary. I shake my head. I want to take care of this myself. My mate is fiery and frightened and fierce. A part of me is inordinately proud of what a problem she already is.

The fantasy would be for me to sweep in, throw money around, and carry her off as her rescuer, with her ever so grateful to me and wanting nothing more than to submit to me in bed. This is messier, dirtier; this is going to end more intensely.

She is going to force me to make her obey. Here. In front of everyone. Where I cannot allow them to see me in what they will consider to be weakness. I have to put on a show of what they will call strength.

The director has a chair, which I take for my purposes. Sitting down, I wrestle her over my knee and start swatting her bottom, throwing up the tunic dress that barely covers her upper thighs. I begin giving her what in most circles would be regarded as a good old-fashioned spanking, right there on stage in front of a crowd of predatory shifters and even worse men.

I do not want to hurt her, but I need her submission and there is no way to gain it in this moment besides through force. If I can stimulate her arousal, there is some chance she will succumb to the mate bond and relax.

“I would not have given a dollar for that one,” the director says, standing just off to the side of our little domestic squabble. “She is of feeble mind. I doubt they will give

you your money back, but they might let you leave her behind.”

The reason I have so very much money is because people, of all kinds and persuasions, are incapable of seeing value. They are blinded by the obvious. They follow one another around, assuming things that other people like are things they like. Then they call it an economy.

I am used to people saying transparently stupid things, but this outrages me to the point physical violence is dangerously within my grasp. I’d rip the director’s throat out, but I don’t have time right now. I am busy trying to handle a wild creature.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I growl in her ear. “But if you want to be dramatic, we will put on a show.”

“You disgust me, old man.”

Not the first words I thought my mate would say to me, but I see how they’re fair. An eighteen-year-old thinks a twenty-eight-year-old is practically dead. And a twenty-eight-year-old who wants to fuck an eighteen-year-old probably should reconsider everything about themselves. But this is different. This is mate bonding. Nature doesn’t care about social mores in the same way we do. In terms of pure animal connection, we are aligned.

I don’t feel disgust emanating from her. I feel fear and anger, two states that make sense given what is taking place. I can already tell that the girls were not told what awaited them. They were told to prepare for something much more wholesome. But she did not prepare herself. Her instincts told her better. I wish they would tell her better now.

“I can smell your desire. I know I don’t disgust you. Now quiet down and come with me.”

She responds by elbowing me in the torso, flipping off my lap, and stamping on my foot as she tumbles to the floor on all fours, almost as if she's trying to force a shift that will never happen with that collar on.

A laugh goes up from the crowd. This has turned from an auction to a performance.

I can't afford to stomach this kind of public disrespect. If she wants to tussle with me in private, that's one thing. I'd enjoy that. But I have an image to maintain. There are those here who will spread the word if I do not seem every inch the wild, dangerous alpha I appear to be.

"Remember I didn't want to do this," I growl. I don't want to hurt her, but she's given me no option. Snagging her up from the floor, I pull her back over my knee.

I spank her hard, aiming low for the place where she has the most flesh on her ass. She has long legs and a shapely ass. She needs more meat on her, but she will be fed up when I get her home.

For now, I claim her with my palm, but I am not immune to the sight between her legs, a very pretty pussy covered in glossy dark hair already starting to pout for me, her outer lips swelling and her inner ones presenting themselves like sweet midnight blooms.

My lust surges. I have waited to feel this intensity of connection all my life. I need her, and I know that she needs me. I can see it. I can smell it. I can feel it in my fucking bones.

I pull her head up, my hand fisted in her hair, a thick chunk so it doesn't hurt, but does control. I lower myself over her body and murmur in her ear.

"Why are you so turned on, if you don't want this?" I ask the deeply unfair question,

knowing full well she cannot help it. Her reaction to me is powerful, chemical, and preordained.

“Tell me you want to be bred. Tell me the only thing you can think of right now is my cock, knotting in your virgin pussy.”

She lets out a moan that very quickly turns into a feral growl. If I had any less control, I would throw her on the floor right here on the stage in front of strangers, sold girls, my pack, and more and breed her until we were both sated.

But she is my mate, and she is hurt enough already, and adding humiliation to punishment in this moment feels cruel. I need her under control, but I do not want to destroy her entirely. I have no idea what the act of being pinned and mated would do to her bruised psyche, and so I restrain myself to simply whipping her like the feral stray she insists on emulating.

She hisses, writhes, and curses at me, her passion and her strength on display. She is putting on every bit of the performance I need her to, almost as though she had been given stage notes. She behaves as though she hates me, as though she cannot tell the difference between me and the director, as if I am a new captor, and not her savior.

Fortunately, I do not have to rely on her behavior. I can scent her true reactions, her real feelings. At first there was fear and loathing, but now there is so much more. Arousal is mixing with fear, mixing with hatred, with outrage. She is furious at being disciplined this way, but she is not shocked by it. She is melting into it, bit by bit, moment by moment becoming more mine.

These brutal fools have clearly given her more than one beating in her life. There is a big different between whatever rough punishment they handed out and what I will do with my discipline.

“Settle, submit, cry if you must, but stop acting out like this.”

* * *

Beatrix

I hate him, I hate all men. I hate all women too; they’ve not been any better. I hated a lot of the girls I was left with in the dormitories, but them the least—or sometimes more because I never understood why they didn’t see what I saw. They clung to these ideas of being happy even when we were all obviously miserable, and even though I’d been right so many times before, they didn’t listen when I warned them about this.

He leans down and he bites me on the back of the neck. Not a savage playground bite. He settles his teeth over my spine and he holds me there. It’s not a move that feels particularly human. It makes something rouse inside me, something that has been getting bigger and bigger, something I have been struggling to control for years now.

At first, it was just something I felt from time to time, a playful wild thing in my belly. But it has grown to the point I now feel as though it is stretching against my spine and my skin. It is uncomfortable, and it is often angry.

But when he places his teeth on my neck, and when his hand clasps the curve of my heated, punished ass, I feel a sudden calm, as though the storm has always had an eye to it that I was never able to find.

I stop. Not because he told me to, but because he made me feel a little moment of peace in the midst of internal and external chaos.

“Good girl,” he growls, just barely coherent against my skin. “Do you want me to make you feel better?”

He rubs his hand over my cheeks, his fingers just brushing against the seam of my most private place. He touches me as though he owns me, as though my body is his to explore as publicly as he pleases. I should hate him all the more for this, but I am aroused. I don't know why. It's a fucking weird reaction to being spanked. I have been punished many times before, but never felt even remotely like enjoying it.

“Do you want me to take you somewhere private? Or do you want me to make you feel better here, and now, in front of everybody?”

He presses his finger between my lower lips, not penetrating me, but spreading them just a little, scandalously exploring part of my body that has never been touched before.

I find myself holding my breath, telling myself I don't want this while wanting nothing but it. I don't care about the crowd. I don't care about anything besides the way I need him and his touch, and how good he smells, and how his voice seems to slide down the inside of my spine, soothing and arousing me at the same time.

“I want to take you home,” he says. “I want to get that cheap silver foil collar off your neck. I want to bathe you, and feed you, and I want you to start a life with me. Now is that what you want? Or do you want me to rut you right here on stage like the wild little bitch you are?”

I arch my hips and I do my best to draw his finger in.

“I don't know if I can hold off breeding you,” he tells me. “Do you want that? Spread out on the floor, fucked deep? Held in place while you take your mate's cock for the first time in the eyes of the world?”

“Mmmm...” I let out a little animal sound as his finger finds the very entrance of my body and swirls around it. I have started to pant, to silently beg for his touch with

arched hips and desperately tingling clit. I need his touch.

He dips his finger in and out of me, barely entering me, but giving me a taste, then moving down and finding my wet clit, circling it with his finger, tapping the bud now and then.

For the first time in my life, I want a man to touch me. The lust I feel is all consuming. I want him inside me, and the slow circling of his finger around my clit is driving me a kind of crazy I have never felt before.

My hips rise, his finger sinks deeper, and he finds a little scrap of resistance inside me, something nature made for him. I hear him make a soft sound, and I feel him explore it and me.

“You belong to me,” he purrs. “I want to take you out of here before I mate you, but if you won’t settle, I’ll fuck you for the first time here. I’ll show everybody what I’m made of, and what you are made for.”

It’s a potent promise, and I believe it.

“Are you ready to be a good girl and come with me?”

He purrs the question again, and this time I don’t bite him. I give him my permission by stopping fighting him. I can’t do more than that. I won’t do that. He takes that as consent and picks me up, over his shoulder this time, striding straight off the stage and through the crowd with me as his prize.

CHAPTER 2

A rmand

I want to be as far away from this place as possible. My men are with me, moving in easy concert. Packs are good like that. I may not have a man right by my side, but they are spread out across the area and ready to intervene if necessary. I act with the knowledge that I am never alone.

The car is already open and ready for us. All I have to do is get her in and get the hell out of here. This is a bad place, and nothing good happens here.

“Can we get my friends?” She asks the question as I put her in the car.

“Your friends?”

“Yes. They’re stupid, but they don’t deserve to be bought by random men.”

I look down at her. “You are aware that you have also been purchased?”

“Yes.”

“And you want me to buy all your friends too?”

“I don’t know where they will end up.”

“You don’t know where you will end up, little one.”

I don't care about the others. Maybe I should, but all I really care about, all I am capable of caring about at this moment, is her. My mate.

“Monsieur de Lune!”

The director of the orphanage comes down the stairs with one final interruption.

I think about killing him. I don't know why, yet, but I am almost certain that this man should be dead. He takes girls and he sells women, and though I will not be leaving with a gaggle of unfortunates tonight, I will do something about this place.

“What is it?”

“After your most generous purchase offer, I feel the need to give you fair warning, Mr. de Lune. Don't fuck that one until you're in a secure location.”

I shut the car door, so she does not hear his vile comment, though it is likely too late. I have to wonder why he already has her in silver, cutting her off from her wolf nature.

“Why? She seems small and biddable enough?”

“She's got more animal in her than any of us.”

“Not more than me.”

“More than you and then some,” he says, enjoying frustrating me. He is a fool. “Trust me, what emerges from that one when you mate her is not going to be small or biddable. You have in your possession one of the old blood.”

“Old blood?”

“Siberian original,” he says. “She looks like a mutt, but she’s...”

“If you say another word, I will rip your throat out.”

“You are from slower, warmer climes, Mr. de Lune. And yes, you have your reputation for aggression and passion, but believe me, that female you have tucked up in your vehicle is going to make you regret the moment you ever laid eyes on her.”

He pauses, as if he knows he should not say what he is about to say, but men like him always talk. It would kill them to know that there was a parting shot they could have taken and yet did not.

“Your impatience may very well prove to be your undoing. You should have waited for another auction to run. We have many sweet, pretty young orphans, mothers and fathers destroyed in various tragic ways. You have paid the most for the worst, and, sir...”

He pauses dramatically.

“There will be no returns.”

I turn and I get in the car.

My mate is cowering in the far corner, feral and terrified. I wish I could offer her some comfort, but thanks to that asshole’s crude comments, she is now very aware I could be the worst-case scenario she feared.

I can still smell her arousal, but it is mixed with anguish, and it turns my stomach.

She is my mate. She should not fear me. Ever.

She asked me to save the others, but it is not possible. None of the girls will escape what fate has in store for them tonight. None of us ever really escape our fate.

I let her have her moment. Her fear won't be assuaged by words. It will be tempered by actions. I am not going to hurt her. I will not hurt her.

"Come here," I say, reaching for her neck. "Let me get that cheap silver thing off you."

She allows me to remove it. I open the window and toss it out, hoping that the gesture of freedom will help her feel better about her predicament. I am, in some respects, a hypocrite. I am not here to set her free. Not entirely. I am here to claim her in a new way, one that will see her made into a creature she does not know exists inside her as yet.

"Let's go," I tell the driver. "To the station, quick as possible."

"Yes, Maître ," he responds, sending the car into the night, away from the scene of all these crimes.

I cannot take my eyes off my mate. She is the most beautiful creature in the world. Every line of her face, every curve of her body, every breath she takes enchants me.

The dress they put her in—I have the sense she would not have chosen such a thing for herself—is too short. Not in an alluring way, simply in a way it was clearly cut for a shorter woman. The waist is too high, the hem too short and tattered. There are scratches along her legs.

"What happened to your legs?"

"I tried to run," she said. "Before it happened. I got caught in the brambles. My

mistake. I should have gone through the river. They wouldn't have been able to scent me then."

"You knew there was an auction?"

"They tell us it is a ball. They tell us we will meet handsome suitors, maybe the loves of our lives. But we're really just slaves."

"You're not going to be my slave."

"You bought me, beat me, and are taking me..."

"Home. I am taking you home."

She gives me a dark look.

"How did you know about the auction?" I ask her. "The others didn't know?"

"I was in trouble again," she says. "They sent me to see the director. He wasn't there, so I was in the director's office. I started looking around and I found the files. I tried to tell the others, but they didn't believe me. They never listened to me. Not since they put me on the pills."

"The pills?"

She falls silent, and the fact that we are two strangers who do not know anything about each other begins to assert itself in the rear of my car.

I am discovering a lot about her with these questions. I know she is independent, rebellious, smart. I know she does not play by the rules or respect authority. I know she is prepared to suffer for freedom. I know she is a wild thing yet to be unleashed.

“What else do you know?”

She shrugs. It could be that she doesn't want to overplay her hand, but I don't think so.

“Did the orphanage teach you that you were special, or different from other young women?” The director mentioned her Siberian heritage. I wonder if she knows what that means. I wonder if she knows why she had a silver collar around her neck to stop her from shifting. The director clearly knew, though I don't think his use of it was appropriate or necessary.

She frowns. “No. It did not. They made it clear we are inconveniences fortunate to be fed.”

I have to assume she doesn't know what she is. She doesn't know where she came from. She doesn't know what makes her special. She doesn't know why she and I are so deeply connected. I will have to explain all of this to her at the right time. Now is not the moment to reveal something so monumental to a clearly traumatized young woman who wanted to flee.

“What did you want me for?”

I hesitate for a moment. I could say I liked the look of her, but that is not the half of it. I could tell her I was drawn to her, but likewise... My hesitation gives her the opportunity to fill the silence with her own theory.

“You look rich enough and handsome enough to get a girl the usual way. So I guess you're going to eat me.”

“Eat you?”

“Eat me,” she repeats. “Or hunt me for sport.”

I narrow my eyes, confused. “What makes you think...”

She shakes her head and shrugs at the same time. “I don’t know. I know nothing good is going to happen to any of us. I don’t want to think about...”

“I did not pay ten million dollars to hurt you,” I tell her. “Even if you do not trust me, trust that nobody burns that much money for fun.”

“Is ten million even a lot of money for you?”

She’s smart and perceptive. I threw that money out there like it was nothing because it really is very little compared to what comes and goes through the businesses I own. The de Lune pack has been fortunate over the centuries, and under my care, our wealth has only increased.

“It’s more than I want to throw away.”

She gives a little shrug, almost as if she doesn’t care if she believes me or not.

Her long, dark hair falls over her face as she hides from me, but when she does risk a glance or a full stare at me, she is quite exquisite, with strong features, big brown eyes, a prominent nose, wide mouth. Her teeth flash when she speaks, the upper edges of her mouth curling up over canines she doesn’t yet understand the significance of.

She makes me feel alive inside, my beast surging for her. I remember how she felt over my lap, her body pressed against mine, taut with desire and resistance in equal measure.

“What is your name?”

She looks at me with an expression of mistrust. “It will be on the paperwork, I guess, assuming you get any when you buy a person. Do you get a license? There’s got to at least be a receipt, no?”

This young lady is not going to be forthcoming with personal information. I can already tell this is going to be a struggle in many ways. I did not come to this auction to take an unwilling mate. My expectation was always that when the bond was felt, both parties would be equally affected.

I never banked on having my mate be a young woman straight from what seems to be to be one of the most traumatizing situations one can be raised in, not to mention buying her against her will, being seen as a part of the ongoing horror, not a release from it.

I will be patient with her.

It does not come naturally to me, but I can be patient, sometimes.

I will be everything I am not used to being—for her.

“I will not harm you,” I tell her. “Your life is going to be very different now.”

She looks at me skeptically. “You already hit me.”

“I spanked you because you made a scene in front of dozens of people who I have to keep up appearances in front of. An alpha who cannot...”

“Alpha.” She rolls her eyes and makes a small, but unmistakable jerking off motion with her hand. I almost smile at her rudeness. She thinks I am someone who listens to

too many podcasts and believes in a pack of wankers who define themselves by abusing women.

“You’ll understand why I use that term in due course,” I tell her. “But I don’t mean it the way you think I do.”

* * *

Beatrix

My captor is very handsome. Charming. Rich. Contained. That last word comes to my mind, flashing through it in neon. I don’t know what he has inside, but I know he is accustomed to hiding it.

He’s very, very attractive. Dark curling hair, expressive silver-gray eyes just light enough to reflect the light. He has elegant bone structure, a long, lithe body with plenty of power behind it. He looks like he was bred by royalty. Given he was just in a modern slave auction, I suppose there’s some chance he is royalty of one kind or another.

I felt his power when he handled me, when he spanked me like a little girl, when he made it clear that there was no choice for me to do anything other than submit to him. My ass is still tingling from his punishment, and other unspeakable parts of me are tingling and pulsing and... I am so physically confused right now.

He is a mystery. I have to hate him, because he touched me roughly, not to mention bought me. He is the final act of the hellish play I’ve been trying to avoid since I worked out what the orphanage really is—a front for human trafficking.

He was there to buy someone.

He bought me.

He's not a good guy. I can't let myself think that he is just because he makes my heart race and my lower belly and inner thighs squeeze instinctively together when I look at him.

This is what men do. This is what they are like. Matron warned us plenty of times not to be caught in the company of men outside the orphanage. She told us that they are capable of terrible things, and would likely defile us, take our virginity. I didn't really believe her, right up until I did.

This man is a cathedral of confusion. I do not know how to interpret him. He wants me to trust him, but that's impossible. It would require me to stop thinking entirely.

Aside from my youth, I can't see any reason for him to be interested in me—and everybody on sale at the orphanage was young. He could have picked one of the nicer, prettier girls. The ones who had done their hair and whose makeup wasn't hastily inflicted upon them.

I know I don't look my best, and I know my best is not the best. So why me? Why am I here in this car with this man whose scent alone makes me want to do things I've never wanted to do before? Every breath I take is filled with him. He is taking up the entire field of my vision. I am absolutely fixated on him.

I tell myself I am just getting to know my newest enemy, but the truth is I am struggling to avoid falling into whatever trap is obviously being set here. I can feel wetness between my legs. An arousal that I don't want to be feeling, but can't seem to help.

When he smiles, I feel myself melt.

I am being hijacked by my libido. Hormones doing hormone things with no understanding of how much danger I am in. There is no good reason for good men to show up to an orphanage to buy girls who have just aged out of the system. Whoever this man is, however attractive I might imagine him to be, he is a predator.

“Don’t you mean sigma? Isn’t that the new term for douchebags with too much money? Don’t tell me, you’re the best at video games in the world, too.”

“I don’t play games,” he says, his lips quirking at me with a little amusement. “And I don’t mind attitude either, but you might want to keep a few things to yourself, because there’s more going on than you understand.”

“Right, you showed up to a barely legal teen auction because you’re a good guy alpha dog.”

I think about throwing myself out of the car. It would probably hurt, but it would get me out of the danger I can feel I am in. There is an intensity about this man that makes my stomach do flips.

“I came because I was searching for something. And I found it.”

“You were looking for the craziest girl in the orphanage?”

He tilts his head slightly. “What makes you say you’re crazy?”

“Everybody has told me I am crazy since I was taken there when I was seven. I insisted on telling them that I was a wolf. They laughed at me at first, then they punished me for saying it. Then, when I got older, and still wouldn’t let go of the delusion, they gave me pills that stopped me from saying or thinking anything.”

I see his fingers flex, then curl into a fist. He covers it with his other hand, tries to

force the tension out of his jaw. He forces a smile that is more like a snarl. He seems genuinely angry about what he is hearing and he is trying to hide it.

Strange.

“Are you still on the medication?”

“No. I refused to take it anymore, once I got big enough to make it hard for them. They tried to make me for a while, hid it in my food, tried to deny me food at all unless I took it, but it was too much work. I don’t make it easy. Besides, after a while, I knew what I was.”

There’s warning for him in that sentence. He won’t find me an easy captive. I don’t care if I want him. I don’t care if I need him. I won’t ever give myself to him. I have been starved of everything that matters. He cannot take anything from me that someone else has not already tried to take—and failed.

“I would like you to try to remember events and the people who were involved,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because I’d like to know.”

He smiles again. He’s very bad at smiling genuinely when he wants to kill someone. His silver eyes flash with anger that I can feel because it touches something inside me. It finds the rage that has been propelling me all these years and somehow soothes it just by existing.

* * *

Armand

The expression on the director's face flashes in my mind. The satisfaction. The smugness. The sense that he was so right and she was so wrong.

Patience , I remind myself.

There is a temptation to turn back to the orphanage and kill everybody who had anything to do with this state she is in, but that is not compatible with a sensible decision. So much about being a wolf is resisting those animal impulses when they come in human form. I like to think I am very controlled. It is important for me and my entire pack that I am.

I turn my attention back to my mate. From now on, she is the only thing that matters. I try to ground myself, notice physicalities because they are infinitely distracting.

I am a very tall man, six foot four. A lot of women are significantly shorter than me. My little mate is quite tall for a woman, five foot nine at least, maybe five ten if she is not stooping or crouching. I see not only youthful beauty, but elegant potential. She has a presence, too, even in this state. I can imagine how she will be years from now, when she and I are celebrating the anniversary of this night. I imagine her happy. I imagine her relaxed. I imagine her surrounded by love and family that right now she does not understand are even an option. I will show her all these things.

For now, I have to deal with the mess that has been made of my mate. I have to make up for the years she spent being told that her instincts are wrong, that she is trouble, that she is bad. It is going to be hard to get her in line and not be mistaken for those beige monsters.

She looks at me, so beautiful and so mistrusting.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Armand de Lune,” I say. I’d already told her my first name, but a full title is better. I refrain from telling her that I am the alpha of the ancient de Lune pack. Better to explain that to her when she knows what she is. The fact that she once understood she was a wolf and had it beaten out of her makes me incandescent with repressed rage.

“French,” she says.

“Yes.”

“Is that where we are going? France?”

“Yes, to the countryside,” I tell her. “I have a home there that I think you will find comfortable. It is the seat of my...”

“A home,” she says. “One of many?”

“Yes.”

“Must be nice.”

“And your name, little one?” I try the question again now that some of the tension is thawing a fraction.

“Beatrix.”

“A gorgeous name. What’s your last name?”

“They don’t let us have last names,” she says. “A last name is a family name, and we

are orphans with no family.”

“Your full name will be Beatrix de Lune soon enough.”

She stares at me, her eyes dark in the low light of the car. “Are you going to adopt me?”

The question is designed to throw me off, I suspect. Could she be so innocent, or think me so old that she would be my child? She is eighteen, and I am ten years her senior. I see her smirk as I look at her, and I know it is a joke. Good. She has a sense of humor. That is an excellent sign of a lively mind and a capacity for healing.

“I am going to marry you, little one.”

“No,” she says, the word carrying a sort of finality and weight I would not have expected from a young woman in a car with a rich and handsome man.

“No?”

“To marry a woman, you must ask for her hand. She must give herself to you. You’ve purchased me, Armand. That is more binding than a marriage.”

* * *

Beatrix

I am young, but I am old enough to have learned that men like to tell you they will marry you before they defile you. They like to tell you that they love you, too. They will say whatever they need to in order to crawl between your thighs. Men are consummate liars and charmers. You can trust nothing they say.

I spent too many nights trying to comfort girls who had unpleasant interactions with local men to trust one of them. The matrons told us to stay away, but not everyone listened. We were red-blooded young women with no families and a yearning to be loved. That went very wrong for quite a few of the girls.

I don't understand why this man is bothering to lie to me. He has already spent his millions on me, already has me in his grasp, and obviously has no intention of letting me go.

The game between us is over. I know what he will want from me. I see the knowledge in his gaze when it runs over me, inspecting me. He tries to hide his lust, but the air in this vehicle is so thick with it I feel as though I am drawing it deeper and deeper into my bloodstream with every breath I take.

He smiles, his dark eyes flashing with amusement. This man is a brute, but he is an intelligent one. Not just smart in the matter of books and such, but with a brain that clearly enjoys challenge and chaos. I find myself warming to him in that little look, even though I do not want to.

He is my owner, my oppressor, my captor. He, and men like him, are the reason the orphanage is able to run the way it does. They now have ten million more dollars to hold girls captive—if the director doesn't steal it all.

“Matrimony is traditionally a transfer of property. You're right about that. But the modern interpretations of both marriage and law mean a wedding is in order. You need to be mine in every sense.”

“You mean you want to launder me. Dirty money turned clean. Illegal trafficking turned legit ownership.”

“You are a beautifully cynical little thing,” he says, his eyes meeting mine as the

moon breaks through the night clouds. I see the lightness in them, feel a jolt deep in the pit of my stomach as his look hits me in some nearly physically tangible way. He is so handsome it verges on supernatural.

How am I going to escape him?

CHAPTER 3

Beatrix

We come to a halt in the middle of the countryside at a small train station. I know that it's not usually used for much of anything besides coal, so our presence here is odd and sets up alarm bells in me.

"What are we doing?"

"Changing modes of transportation. Cars are small and cramped. I don't care for them for long journeys," he explains, his tone off-hand before he fixes me with a more determined look.

"Beatrix, I know that this is going to seem like a very good place to try to run. There is nobody for miles and there is a great deal of open ground. But I remind you, there is nobody for miles. Nobody would hear your screams or your cries if I were forced to discipline you for running from me."

He speaks almost kindly, but there is a note of pure steel in his voice that tells me what happened in the orphanage will be the least of my concerns if I run.

He gets out of the car on his side. I get out of it on mine. The second my bare feet touch the moonlit ground, instinct insists I flee. It is not a choice, it is not a thought. It is an imperative.

A large hand closes around the back of my neck.

“Uh-uh,” he says, tutting lightly.

“How did you move that fast?”

“I walked around the car,” he says. “It’s not a long distance. Now, come.”

I whimper as I feel his power. He doesn’t feel like just some guy. I’ve been stopped, tackled, and even punished by orphanage guards. They were men. They were rough, gruff, aggressive. But I never felt like this when they touched me. I never felt a bolt of pure energy running through me, turning dials and switches in my mind, making me flood with need between my thighs.

I would have said this place was practically defunct, if not for the fact that there is a train here, a great big glossy black beast of a thing. It does not look at all like the trains I’ve seen around. It’s not graffitied. It’s not dirty. It’s not long. It has an engine and three cars, and every single one of them shines darkly in the moonlight.

“What is this?”

“My personal train,” he smiles.

“You can have a personal train?”

“Most people cannot, but yes, there are private trains. This is one of them.”

That’s when I know this man is loaded in a way most people never will be. He’s not just rich. This is billionaire level extravagance. He’s taken an anachronistic kind of transport and made it his own, and I am guessing it has to schedule in with all the public trains unless he’s also put his own tracks in...

I stop thinking about the logistics as he leads me up and into the interior. The carpet

is a deep red, and on the inside it is furnished like a palace lounge, every item befitting royalty. I immediately feel shabby and filthy, like a dog that has broken into the house after years of being chained outside. I don't belong here. I am not like these things. Not elegant. Not refined. Not worth anything...

"Oh, my god..."

"You have landed on your feet, pup," he says. "All of this, and so much more will be yours once we are married. My millions, at your disposal."

My stomach clenches. This can't be real. Am I having a hallucination? Did they catch me when I ran and hit me with some drug that put me into a dissociative state? Am I back at the orphanage, talking to a mop?

Strong arms wind around me and squeeze me, not hard enough to choke the life from me, but enough to put pressure all around me and calm me like the frightened animal I am.

"Breathe," he says. "You are safe."

You are safe. He says those words, and I believe him. I feel myself calming down, even though the world has suddenly become so strange I hardly recognize it.

"There are many hours before we reach our destination. You can have a bath, get changed, eat some food. Settle in. We will talk of larger matters later."

* * *

Armand

She is overawed, overwhelmed, and overstimulated. I can feel the tremors in her

frame as I hold her close to me. I should have thought more about this. Should have taken her into a quieter carriage, not one that Louis the Sun King would have found appealing.

I take her hand and lead her to the rear. This is where I have a bed and a bathroom. The designs here are not so ornate, colors more muted, fewer fancy trims.

“I don’t have a lot of clothing for someone your size or gender, but have a bath and I will find something for you to wear.”

I would like to bathe her myself, but she is already panicked and afraid and right, in the sense that I have purchased her. She is my property. There is no escape.

The train is already moving, sleek and comfortable through the countryside. We will not be captive to roads filled with drivers of varying capability. We will not be cramped in a small vehicle with no ability to move around, have a cocktail, or feel ourselves think.

Beatrix does as she is told, disappearing into the bathroom. I pass a shirt through the door. There is nothing else on board to cover her because I did not plan on having female companionship. This little visit to the orphanage was a last-ditch effort. I thought it would be a waste of time. I cannot quite believe that my mate really was there, suffering poverty for years while I lived like... this.

I have food brought for her. Nothing fancy. Bread. Cheese. Cold meat. Hardly the meal I thought I would be gracing my mate with, but I think she needs solid food. She looks hungry in every sense.

After a time, she emerges from the bath chamber. She has a towel on her head and my shirt on her body. It comes down to mid-thigh on her, giving me a nice view of her long legs. I wince internally when I see the marks she sustained in her effort to

escape.

In the privacy of my bedchamber, with a serving platter on the bed, we sit together. She devours hunks of bread, favoring the brioche. Then the cheese meets its fate. She eats particularly, avoiding the Roquefort, decimating the Camembert and Brie. She ignores the meats entirely.

She catches me noticing.

“I don’t eat animal meat,” she says.

I smile, amused. She does not know why, but I find it quite fascinating that one of her blood would avoid meat. Of course, this is killed, cured, as far from its original pumping self as it is possible to imagine while still being fit for consumption.

“More for me,” I say, finishing what she does not eat.

It is an honor to eat the crumbs from her meal.

She does not know it yet. Cannot know it yet. But I am entirely devoted to her. She is mine, not in a manner of crude ownership alone, but in a role that makes me her protector. I would lay down my life for her.

“Are you still hungry? Would you like a little wine?”

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“No. I am trying to help you feel comfortable and settled. You need to sleep.”

I pour her a small glass of red wine. Not enough to get a sparrow drunk, and I watch as she first sips, then drains it.

Like most broken things, she is desperate to be able to trust. I will give her that space, and she will fall into it. Force will be unnecessary. I can see her exhaustion. It is not simple tiredness. It is a deep fatigue of the soul caused by well over a decade of being denied the simple, necessary experience of being known.

She settles back against the pillows, visibly fighting sleep. I see her lids becoming heavy, dark lashes sliding down over those big eyes of hers. I wonder what they will look like when she smiles. I have never seen her so much as smirk. She may not know that happiness exists as yet, kept as she was in that prison for innocence.

The train is carrying us away from that place at a hundred and fifty mph. It is a speed that those who work there should be grateful for. The gentle rocking of the carriage on the rails is quite soothing and serves to help lull my mate into a state of relaxation.

She falls asleep awkwardly, half-curved up against the pillows. I wait until I am sure that she is entirely asleep before sliding her under the covers as slowly and carefully as possible.

I could lie down next to her, wrap my arms around her, offer my protection and affection. That is what I am drawn to do, but intellectually I am aware that sleeping in the same bed feels as though it would be too much of an imposition for her. She would probably panic if she were to wake up next to me, an interloper in her life.

She doesn't feel strange to me.

She feels like the missing piece I have sought all my life. The piece I thought might not actually exist. I stand back and watch her sleep, feeling a little moment of contentment I have never experienced before. So this is what it feels like to have someone to care about completely and entirely, someone to be devoted to. Someone who is loved so deeply and completely, though she is a stranger.

I don't know who she is, and to some extent, who she is does not matter. She is mine. Nature herself made her for me. She belongs to me in a fundamental way that most would never understand. Ordinary people, typical humans fall in love. They experience a cascade of hormones and chemicals that bond them to others for a while, but it is a tenuous connection that quite often does not last longer than an evening of rutting. Lifelong bonds are capable on occasion, but those can often be put down to self-delusion and convenience. Wolves? We bond instantly and eternally. It is not a rush of hormones that will fade over time; it is a writing overlaid in our very souls.

Humans are sometimes confused by sex. Wolves are not. I am not an innocent, nor am I pure, but my youthful sexual forays never held anything beyond simple lust. I never wanted to watch any of them sleep. I was never contented with their mere presence. I was never instantly, completely devoted the way I am now.

Our kind are made differently from humans in several respects. We are wilder. We can be less predictable. We have simpler needs, even more hierarchy than people enjoy, and an understanding of love that goes deeper and means more than people, who throw each other away for reasons big and small, could ever hope to understand.

There is nothing that this girl could ever do to make me abandon her. There is nothing she could do that would make me a sliver less devoted to her. In her, I see my future.

I realize I will have to sleep somewhere else tonight. I like to plan for every eventuality, but I never planned to be unable to sleep in my own bed. So I retire from the bedroom carriage and go into the lounge, where Daniel, one of my closest associates and long-term friends is holding up the bar. He's my age, with shaggy brown hair and a tweed suit that he insisted would help him blend into the English countryside. He did not allow the fact that we were in Scotland to dissuade him.

He lifts a brow in surprise, then shakes his head at me slightly.

“I did not expect to see you again so soon, Ma?tre .”

“She needs her rest. Those bastards at the orphanage put her through...” I pause and gather myself. “Add them to the investigation list.”

“Investigation list, or destruction list?”

“One, pending the other.”

I pour myself two generous fingers of Scotch and sip it slowly. This has become a momentous day. My eyes slide to the calendar on the back of the wall. Seventh of July. Right between two days of independence. Beatrix has her freedom now too. She has a chance to be who she has always been.

I imagine how shocked she will be when she realizes that she really is a wolf, that she’s always known what she is, and who she is. I cannot wait to guide her through that first transformation. I will have to take great care of her when that happens. It hurts a lot. And it causes symptoms that can be likened to a severe cold.

“We will need painkillers, Daniel.”

“Yes, Ma?tre . We have painkillers.”

“Good ones, I mean. Opiates. I don’t want her to suffer. I want the transition to be seamless.”

“As much as it can be, yes.”

I do not like the idea that there will be pain that I cannot prevent. “She’s had enough hurt, Daniel.”

He stays silent, kindly not mentioning the fact that I thrashed her publicly and thoroughly in front of a crowd. Or the fact that the first transition from human to wolf is the most painful thing a female can endure, including childbirth. Some females never emotionally recover from the first transformation, and refuse to do it a second time.

The physiology of being a shifter is a brutal thing, a supernatural curse, some call it. In females, the transformation is inextricably linked to the loss of virginity to their fated mate. When her flesh joins with the male nature made her for, she is transformed in many ways. She is not merely deflowered. The veneer of simple humanity is ripped from her and the beast is revealed. When Beatrix and I first have sex, she will discover something new about herself, something she clearly understood instinctively, or perhaps was told when she was young, but was taken from her by the orphanage.

The director knew the truth, but I wonder if he did not suppress it simply to make her easier to handle. It would be simpler to drug a young female shifter than to deal with all her rising instincts.

“We are going to the family home,” I tell Daniel. I had planned for a different destination, but Beatrix needs to be among her kind. “I want there to be nothing but peace and recuperation for her. I will take several months from my duties. I will...”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

There’s a sudden series of loud noises coming from the rear carriage. I move before I can think.

I rush back to find the bed empty and the rear carriage door open. The banging sound is the door slamming back and forth at high speed.

She's jumped.

I run to the little balcony at the back, expecting to see the receding body of my mate twisted on the tracks. But I see no such thing. Instead, I see something large moving under the moonlight, something fast and primal and animal.

A cold thrill runs through me as I realize what I am looking at.

A wolf. A shifter. Her.

My mate has shifted, leaped from a moving train, and is fleeing into the night.

It should be impossible.

Daniel is immediately behind me.

"She took her wolf form," he observes, stating the obvious.

"Stop the train!"

I pull the emergency cord. Even this customized vehicle has the same one as the one in many public passenger vehicles. It bypasses all other controls and immediately applies the emergency brakes.

The sound of metal on metal at this speed is deeply unpleasant. It sounds like something being ripped from the very core of the earth, a scream from hell.

It takes less than a minute for the train to slow enough, but that minute is an eternity in my world. I watch her run in wolf form, feeling everything I thought I knew melt and fall apart.

She should not be able to do this. She is my mate. I know it. I know it to my fucking marrow. We did not consummate our connection, so this should be impossible.

Nobody else will understand the problem. They will assume a hasty consummation preceded these events. They will think she is claimed. Is mine.

They will assume that my horror is to do with the fact that my mate has fled, has leaped from a fucking moving train. The fall could have killed her quite easily, but not only did she not die, she does not seem injured.

It shouldn't be possible. The thought keeps running through my head, torturing me with circular logic. The only way a female shifter is able to make the change is if she has been mated by her fated mate. But I am her fated mate, and she and I have definitely not ever had sex. I would certainly know if I had ever been inside her.

I am confused. Horrified, actually.

A dozen thoughts crowd my head all at once, coming thick and fast in the few seconds we have before it is safe for us to give chase.

Could I be wrong? Is she not my mate? Did I fall for some hot, broken, not-so-innocent girl in a shitty situation? Am I so lonely, so desperate, that the smell of a fertile female is enough to confuse my senses? Did I fundamentally settle for the first young woman to cross my path on this particular journey? Have I given up on myself? Was the pack right to force me to seek a female, or have they pushed me to bond with a ruined girl? Or is it the blood that the director mentioned, some Siberian heritage? Is that what spoke to me? Have I been drawn to a foreign lover that has confused my senses?

All these thoughts amount to nothing.

The blunt truth of it is that by all laws of wolf nature, I know she is not truly mine. She cannot be.

If I were to let her run into the wilderness, it would be proper and right. Some would say that I should let her run. I should let this evening be an expensive, humiliating mistake.

But she's fucking mine.

I leap from the train, my suit shredding from my body as I take my wolf form. I am fast, but she is also fast, and she has a head start of a good quarter of a mile. She is running at full speed, and has been all this time, while I questioned myself, questioned her, questioned all I know about nature and the pack itself.

My paws find the ground, propelling my powerful self in chase.

It would be easy to lose her if sight was the only sense I had to fall back on, but I have scent, and hers drives me wild. I pursue her at full speed, giving chase like the wild thing I am.

She won't escape me.

I won't allow it.

I will claim her. Reclaim her, if I have to.

The train recedes in the distance as we run from it, leaving behind comfort and all pretense of natural humanity. The ground is slightly wet. It must have rained earlier today. Not surprising, given the climate.

Our paws will be leaving deep tracks. They'll spur hunts if we're not careful.

What the hell am I thinking. We are not being careful. We are being wild.

Hot breath and pounding paws soon draw up alongside me.

I am not running alone. My retinue has followed me, and we are able to do what wild wolves do, taking turns in the lead, running our prey to the ground, but allowing ourselves to slow and store our strength while another pack member takes the lead and shapes the direction of the prey.

It is an unspoken process. The second I took my wolf form, they took theirs. They follow me without question. Not out of loyalty, but because they always follow me. I am what I am, and they are what they are. This is all instinct.

Beatrix has lost the protection of personhood. We are beasts, and she is our prey.

In spite of all of this, our inherent advantage in numbers, our greater male strength, our determination and practice at hunting, if she was not exhausted, I do not think we would be able to catch her. She is fast and light, not carrying near the muscle most of us are. At first she sets an impossible pace, but over time and distance, she starts to flag.

She is tagged with a quick nip on the back rear leg by Daniel, and then on the right by Marcel. They drop back as she slows, a limp in her gait that will only worsen with time.

Ordinarily, anybody who hurt my mate in any way would die, but those rules, like so many others are suspended right now. They are all extensions of me, doing my bidding. The alpha's mate does not merely belong to the alpha, she belongs to the pack.

These methods might seem cruel, but she could stop. It will all end once she is no

longer running. Until then, she is a fleeing creature attracting the relentless pursuit of a pack.

Stop. I will her silently, as she keeps running on pained legs.

Stop , I snarl, though it does nothing to stop her.

If I want her to stop, I have to make her stop. This needs to end, before my pack takes her apart one nip at a time for the sin of insolence. I surge forward, taking the lead again. This time, I am prepared to use the last reserves of my energy. I have caught up with her. I have run her ragged and now...

I do not grab a limb; I draw even with her and nudge a front leg with my nose. She does not have the energy to right herself, so instead she gives into gravity, stumbling, rolling. I am right there on top of her, teeth fastened on the back of her neck, forcing her down to the ground, biting hard enough to slice through her resolve.

The message is clear.

She will drop the wolf form, or she will suffer.

She chooses to suffer.

I hear her yelp beneath my teeth. I feel them puncture the thickness of her hide.

I should have known better. I know very little of her, but I do know that she is stubborn. I know that she has remained herself even though she has been roundly punished and rejected for it. Force is not the answer. It will never be the answer.

I release my jaws before blood taints my teeth, and I lick the place I bit, her fur gorgeous beneath my tongue. I groom my mate, making what was hurt feel better.

She is panting beneath me, her ribcage rising and falling with the effort of exercise. I wonder if she will faint, if she is so drained by all this chaos and fear that she can no longer retain consciousness. It happens quite often when a young wolf overextends themselves. There is a limit to what they can stand. The body can draw more energy than it should, pull from reserves that should never be tapped, and the result is exhaustion that lasts days.

In the end, that is what gets her. Not a lack of strength, but a lack of fuel.

The wolf form fades, leaving a naked young woman under me. She is thinner than she should be. I see ribs and I see sores. I see bruises that did not come from me, or from this rough round. I see softness too, curves and swells, and beauty in the raw, but it will take more careful tending than this to draw it out.

Almost immediately, she starts to struggle, both for consciousness and against me. She pushes against my pelted chest and I too shift, taking my human form. I need to be able to speak to her.

She needs to be able to argue with me.

* * *

Beatrix

“Let me go.”

“Never .”

He snarls the word, looking down at me with eyes the color of the moon. There is a fury in him that was not there before. He has taken my running rather badly. They always do. When they think I’m sweet and broken and helpless, a baby bird to be

nursed back to health, that is when they are sympathetic. But now he has seen me in my strength, I am feeling him in his.

I want to bite him, but he keeps me pinned in the dirt, covering my body with his own. His chest is rough with hair even in human form. The night air is cold, the ground is wet, but he is hot against me. Not just warm, but practically a furnace.

“You want to get up?”

I don't, actually. I want to stay here for as long as I possibly can. Under the stars, surrounded by wolves, beneath the body of one who hunted me down. This is what I have dreamed of my entire life. I have been a wolf without a pack, a waif without a home.

And now he is over me, making me submit, ensuring that I know I am his.

It's terrifying, and it is everything I have ever wanted.

I want to run, but I can't. He won't let me. There is no way of getting up or getting out unless he lets me.

The way his eyes burn into me makes me feel as though I am pinned to the ground by a look alone, pure silver, anathema to a werewolf, somehow contained inside him.

“Do you want to get up?” He repeats the question.

“Yes,” I lie.

“Then you must promise not to run again. People could see us, and that would be dangerous. Being a wolf means having power, and that means there are responsibilities. Or do you know this already?”

The question is pointed, but I do not know what it is pointing at.

“I have responsibilities?”

“You have the responsibility not to fucking kill yourself,” he growls. “You deserve another thrashing. Is that what you want? A beating? Do you want to be pinned in this mud and whipped for being so careless?”

His threats excite me. I feel his passion for me, the passion not of a stranger, but of an alpha wolf. I squirm, not to attempt escape, but to feel his strength. I like him better now. I like this raw animal thing, rather than the controlled, dominant, elegant man who has taken me.

“I want you to rip me the fuck apart,” I say, a dark truth emerging from me in a moment of raw revelation.

I see his eyes flash, his brows rise. I have shocked him.

I do not know what his response would have been because at that very moment, a car drives up to us, four wheels just barely making it through the mud. Was there a car on the train? Or is he followed by other pack members in case he needs to make quick moves off the track? I think the latter. This is a man who is deeply prepared and surrounded by those who serve him instantly and without question.

I wonder if he can handle someone like me, someone who has never served anyone, and never will. I ran because my instincts demanded I run. I want my freedom more than I want anything. I want to be able to express my animal nature. I am tired of being kept in small rooms for the body and the mind. I am tired of being told who I am, and how it is wrong.

Armand looms over me, his face a mask of perfect confusion and concern. He is

wondering if he just wasted ten million dollars. I think he did. I think he burned it on impulse, and he is just beginning to regret it.

“Is everything alright, alpha?”

“She’s intact,” he says. “And so am I. Let’s get going.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Blankets are provided and I am bundled up and back into captivity, needing a bath this time more than ever.

CHAPTER 4

B eatrix

There is silence in the car, mostly because we are not alone. The man who bought me is the leader of this pack, a true alpha in the animal sense. The others are not introduced to me. I suppose this isn't the time for cheerful intros.

I look over at Armand. There's a muscle twitching in his cheek, as if he's either very angry and holding himself from going off on me, or trying not to laugh. I don't think it is the latter. I think he is furious. I think I have shocked him, appalled him, and angered him. That is what I do when people realize I am not what they thought I was. My true self frightens and disgusts most.

Why not him too?

Just because he is an alpha, just because he is my mate, that does not mean I cannot antagonize him. Doesn't mean he can't regret having met me. I am sure he regrets all that money he spent. There will not be any refunds, not for me.

We get back to the carriage, the bedroom and bathroom that are still so fine, all so nice. Too nice for us wild, muddy creatures.

"Don't do that again," he says. "Don't ever make me watch you hurt yourself."

I try not to mention that my legs are killing me. They bit me when I was running, nipping roughly enough to draw blood. I have not carried those wounds overtly into

my human form, but I still feel those hot, predatory bites.

I can feel his annoyance with me. There is something new between us, not just displeasure. I know what it feels like when someone who thinks they're in charge realizes that they can't control me. There's something else too, a strange and undefinable distance. That's what I feel now.

"I'm not hurt."

He gives me a sidelong glance, his blanket shifting over his shoulders. I find myself distracted by his chest, the muscularity and hairy roughness of it. He is very much male, more intensely than anyone I have ever encountered.

"I think you have been hurt many times before," he says. "And I think you are hurt now."

I go quiet. I don't want him to know that anything hurts. I especially don't want him to know that I can feel his annoyance with me.

"I will bathe you, and you will accept it because you cannot be trusted out of my sight. Come here. Now."

We both step into the bath and Armand uses the showerhead to rinse most of the mud off the both of us. Standing naked before the man who has declared himself my mate, I try not to give into the shame that is creeping through my veins.

Being this close to a naked, virile man in the prime of his power—or perhaps not the prime. It is possible there is even more to come for him and that is an incredible thought because he is all muscle. When he is clothed he doesn't look overly bulky, because he's not. He's built for power, for speed, for hunting me down with his pack and capturing me in the middle of a muddy field.

I am devastatingly aroused, not just physically, but mentally. I never met anybody who was capable of catching me before. When I ran in the past, they would sometimes drag me back, but that took whole teams of men, and though Armand brought his pack with him, he really didn't need to. I felt his strength. I saw it. He could take me down dozens of times over. And he's mine? How could that be?

He avoids any overtly lewd touches, but he does not allow any crevice to stay caked in mud. He turns me around and rinses between my cheeks, the warm flow of water running down what used to be a private place as he holds one of my cheeks apart to allow himself access.

"You mucky little pup," he lectures, his voice rough but soft. "A dirty girl who should know better than to track all this filth inside, who will learn not to run from me ever again. I will teach you many things, Beatrix, things you clearly need to learn."

I know I am not permitted to move without him saying it as he turns me back around and lets the water flow down my front, purposefully directing the water low and intensely between my thighs.

"Stay still," he murmurs when I move slightly in response to the feeling of that warm water drumming against my clit.

"I can't," I whine.

He grips me by the back of the neck, his naked body pressed close to mine, his cock hanging thick between his thighs and rising against his belly as this particularly twisted little moment unfolds between us.

"You can," he purrs. "And you will, because I do not intend to give you any choice. You are mine, and this is what I intend to take from you."

He's not taking, though. He's giving. He's giving me pleasure, indirect pleasure not from his body, not even from his fingers, but from the drumming water that plays around my clit until my hips swing with unrequited need.

Armand grips the back of my neck even more firmly. He holds me in place, and he ensures that I do not escape a single one of those teasing droplets. He makes me take it, this pleasure that does not feel like pleasure so much as it does domination and command.

He is showing me that I am his. He is proving that I am sensitive and soft and that something as innocuous as a showerhead can undo me completely if he wants it to.

“Are you close to climax, Beatrix? My sweet little runaway? My rebellious she-wolf? Do you want to orgasm and be relieved?”

His questions come in that elegant tone. He is completely in control, and I am getting increasingly out of control. He brings the showerhead closer, makes the sensation more intense, holds me in place with his hand sliding around my neck to clasp at the front of my throat. There is no escaping this erotic discipline.

“Answer me, little wolf.”

“Yes,” I admit, a flush of hot shame rushing through me as he rotates his wrist, making the water dance between my sensitive legs.

“You will come soon enough,” he says. “But not yet. Not until I am satisfied you understand your place with me, and why doing something so reckless as leaping out of a moving fucking train is the worst idea you ever came up with.”

The water moves, but only because two thick fingers are sliding slowly inside me. He is careful, almost as if he is testing me, not going too deep, and not going too fast. I

feel his moon-silver eyes locked on my face, gauging my every reaction.

They slide inside me, slowly going deeper and deeper, my inner walls coating him with my own wet lubrication until the heel of his palm presses just above my clit and he rubs me there, not quite touching, but making the entire region move according to his will.

I am close to coming again, but I can see he won't let me, not that easily. He's determined to teach me a lesson in obedience. I've never been taught this way before. Maybe it will work this time.

"Tell me how this feels," he growls against my neck. "Tell me how you feel right now."

"I don't know..."

"Yes, you do."

"I want to come, please," I whimper.

"Do you feel how much control I have over you? Do you feel how your body quivers when I touch you? How I could make you feel the most incredible pleasure, or the most terrible pain?"

His fingers twist, and his thumb presses against my clit, rubbing me firmly and insistently until I am on the very brink of climax, then pulling it away right before I can reach any kind of satisfaction.

"Fucking, oh, my god, you're so fucking..." I complain as he denies me what he already told me he was going to deny me.

“You took your wolf form without permission. You jumped out of a train without a thought for what could have happened. You acted as though you only belonged to yourself, but you belong to me now, Beatrix. And you will be careful with yourself because you are mine.”

He emphasizes that point by letting his thumb ghost over my clit for a moment or two before letting go of my neck and using that hand on the showerhead. Fingering me, teasing me, rubbing me, and letting the water run over my clit in between sessions of stimulation until I feel as though my knees are going to give out completely.

He doesn't let me fall. He leans me back against his body, holds on with arms wrapped around me, and uses his agile fingers to drive me to the brink of not only orgasm, but sanity. My mind is devoid of thought, filled with chemical impulses of arousal and need. I want to come more than I have ever wanted anything in life. I want to come like I want to fucking breathe. There is no part of me that wants anything other than orgasm. I would fucking die if only he would let me come.

I don't know how he keeps me on the verge like this, how he seems to understand what every jolt of my hips and shudder of my breath means. It is like I am a book he has already read, and he is like a movie I have never seen, larger than life and full of more charisma than I can handle.

I do not know how long he keeps me like that in the shower, holding me in thrall to my own desire, but I know that when he does finally let me come, I do so screaming and begging and writhing on his hand. And I know that afterward, I am absolutely exhausted, from the auction, from the shifting, from the running, and especially from the coming.

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Armand

After my wailing, shrieking, writhing mate reaches climax under my hand, I take her to bed where she sleeps in my arms. The barrier of propriety between us has been broken. She is mine, and she will only become more mine hour by hour, day by day.

In the past, a female in my bed has always been more like a warm obstacle to a comfortable night's sleep, but it is different with Beatrix. She feels as though she belongs with me, lying on my arm, taking up too much of the bed, stealing the sheets, moving in the middle of the night, all habits I would usually find absolutely insufferable. I do more than tolerate them from her, I enjoy them. They are reminders that she is here with me.

We wake with the train still rolling, not far from our destination. We have moved from public to private tracks, and so we are moving at a clip through countryside where most have no right to be. Some call it a farm. We call it our territorial lands. They are open and they cover hundreds of miles of rolling fields and forests, all surrounding a palace that belongs to my family.

“Good morning, Beatrix.”

She opens her eyes and I see the bolt of consternation in their deep brown gaze.

I roll out of bed, giving her some space as she gathers the sheet up over her breasts.

“So that all really happened.”

“Yes,” I smile. “It did. Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she says.

I toss her a shirt. “Try not to rip this one up,” I tell her.

She gives me a little smirk. Not quite sorry. Not quite unrepentant either. She shrugs the shirt over her head and pulls her hair out from the collar. Her beauty is natural, dark, and wildly worrisome for a man like me who needs to maintain control for everyone’s sake and safety.

She slides out of bed, looking slightly tousled and quite adorable. I wrap my arms around her and draw her into an embrace. I want her to know that my affection endures in spite of our rough start.

We are still some way from the train platform as we wake and breakfast. The dining car has plenty available. I notice she goes for the croissants and brioche again. My mate likes her butter-rich baked goods.

I take the opportunity to introduce her to Daniel and Marcel, the latter of whom is a man older than me by ten years, a sleek, smart member of the pack who I suspect may already know what concerns me. He might have put two and two together. He might not.

“Daniel, Marcel, this is Beatrix. My mate.”

“I had the honor of biting your ankles last night,” Marcel says with absolutely nothing in the way of refinement.

“You were one of the many who had to give chase?” Beatrix replies in kind. “How many did it take to bring me down? Four?”

“Five,” Daniel says, butting in. “You gave us a good chase.”

“I was just getting started,” she says. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Alright, that’s enough. There will be no more running.”

Marcel, Daniel, and Beatrix exchange looks that suggest they all know better. I too, know better, but it is my job to enforce order.

I put my hand on the back of her neck and squeeze lightly. Does she remember what it felt like to have my teeth sinking in last night? I hope so. I hope this triggers some semblance of obedience.

I feel her tense under my fingers, then relax as a wave of submission runs through her. I lean in and speak in a low growl next to her ear.

“Better,” I say. “Daniel, we’re almost home. My mate will need a complete wardrobe...”

“Already organized, Ma?tre ,” he says. “The message was sent ahead not long after she boarded. There should be an array of clothing waiting when you arrive.”

“Good.”

Beatrix looks slightly confused, or perhaps embarrassed, as if she doesn’t know how to react to such plans being made in front of her. She will get used to it, and in time will make her own orders. She will never have to want for anything again.

“Is there anything you would like, my mate? I can have the order sent through.”

“No, thank you.” She shakes her head. “I can’t... I mean...”

“In time, you will become accustomed to asking for what you need, and getting it each and every time,” I promise her.

I am not only talking about clothes.

The train is moving smoothly through ancestral lands now, approaching the seat of my family, the place the de Lune pack has called home for centuries.

“You’re almost home,” I tell her.

“Home?” She cocks her head, as if she doesn’t connect the word with herself, as if the very concept of being somewhere she belongs is so foreign she cannot quite fathom it.

“My home. Our home. And now yours.”

The station is set back from Chateau de Lune by some distance, mostly because the pack and the local heritage foundation would have collectively lost their marbles if I had turned the actual building into a train station. I thought it could be rather charming, but I was convinced by the many arguments against having a big steam beast throwing coal dust over centuries of architecture.

This means that there is a short walk from the train to the house proper. As we disembark the train, I sweep my mate up into my arms, sparing her the need to walk on bare feet across the stony ground.

The chateau is inarguably a grand place. Much attention has been paid to the details in terms of marble work, carved sconces and trims, not to mention crystal light fixtures, statues, and works of great art.

It is a living piece of history, and the pack tend to it with great fervor. Sometimes we

host historians and other students of art who appreciate all that is stored here.

“Oh, my...”

She is awed, and I am not surprised. Craftsmanship almost always inspires. I set her down on her feet inside the doors, meaning to let her explore, but she stays close to me, like a child who has been chastised one too many times for breaking things in a fancy store.

“This is all yours?”

“This is all ours. It belongs to my ancestors, to the pack, and to the future generations yet to be born. We have the use of it for now, and it is our responsibility to preserve what is here and add to it for the future.”

She nods slowly, as if the words make sense, but do not quite touch her. I am sure she never expected to enjoy anything so fine, let alone bear some responsibility for it.

This will be a good distraction from what she has regarded as being abducted. She will become accustomed to this lifestyle and understand that she has been elevated from her desperate circumstances into ones that ensure she never need worry again.

* * *

Beatrix

He expects me to be impressed and excited, but everything I am seeing is only leading me to feel more fear. This place is full of pretty, rare things, and I can see in Armand’s eyes that he considers me just another one of those pretty, rare things. I am to be kept here, away from the world, producing for his line, for the pack, whether I want to or not. My future stretches out ahead of me in a terrible flash. I see the trap of

domesticity and comfortable wealth.

I come from poverty. I know that sitting here, in a place like this, while others have absolutely nothing is disgusting. To think that I spent years languishing in the orphanage, rarely getting enough to eat, having no chance at a life I got to choose.

I have access to it now, because the man who has had it all along suddenly decides I am his mate. Does he really expect me to be grateful? Excited? This house of riches may as well be a house of corpses. I cannot imagine all the people who could have been fed and clothed if this were not being hoarded.

He looks at me as if he expects me to be excited, to celebrate my good fortune. But I am young, not stupid. I know that the price I will pay for enjoying all these things is my freedom. I know that my youth will slowly wither in this palace and I will emerge one day, many decades from now, an empty version of what I was, and nothing of what I could have been.

He thinks this makes me want to stay.

It makes me need to flee.

But I do not run out the front door, even though I very much want to. I can tell he is so impressed with his gilded cage he will not expect me to have a problem with it.

He leads me through the place, pointing out what he thinks are items of note. I look with wide eyes and stay quiet and that is something that appears to make him think I am interested.

Armand is rich and powerful. He has always been rich and powerful. There are paintings of him as a child with his parents, a dark-haired boy with big silver-gray eyes. There is not so much as a photo of me in existence that I am aware of.

Blissfully unaware of the effect this display of wealth, privilege, and familial attachment is having on me, he sweeps me upstairs where I am confronted with a massive bedroom complete with the wardrobe he spoke about in the train. Gown after gown awaits, along with an array of jewelry that comprises a treasure trove in its own right.

Apparently I am going to spend the rest of my life either naked or at a ball. This is the way one outfits a fairytale princess.

“What do you think?”

“It’s all very nice, thank you.” I choke out the words, not wanting to seem ungrateful, but ingratitude is the least of my emotions. The real feeling is something closer to rage. Why do I have a tiara today, when yesterday I was locked in a closet so I could not run before being sold?

“It is overwhelming, I imagine. Don’t worry. You’ll have maids to help you dress if you like.”

“Oh, good. I was worried I’d have to dress myself.”

I try not to be sarcastic, but it seeps through, earning me a concerned look from Armand.

“You’re tired,” he says, unable to even consider the notion a young woman might be anything less than wildly impressed by being festooned with finery.

I’m living the dream, but I know that it overlays the misery of the rest of my life, and the reality of the world outside these walls. It can’t be real, and if it is, it shouldn’t be.

“Yes,” I say. “I think I am.”

I try to force a smile. It doesn't feel natural, but it seems to satisfy him.

"Do you want to eat, or nap, or..."

"I don't know," I say.

"I'll have some food brought to the bedroom," he says. "And we can talk."

"What are we going to talk about?"

"Everything," he says.

Nothing, I think to myself.

* * *

"You knew you were a wolf when you were young. You told the people at the orphanage, and they punished you, but you knew. Does that mean you have memories of being part of a pack?"

A bowl of grapes sits between us. I am not hungry. The question alone makes me nauseous.

I stare at him blankly. He might own me, but he does not own the access to my memories.

He pauses, then tries again.

"Last night, on the train, you took your wolf form. So you know how to shift."

I can't deny that, but I also don't need to confirm it, so I stay silent.

“How old are you exactly, Beatrix?”

“They tell me I’m almost nineteen.”

“And how long have you been shifting?”

I shrug. I don’t like being asked questions at the best of times, and being interrogated puts me in a very bad mood. Who is he to simply demand knowledge from me? My secrets are the only things I have, and I have learned over painful years to keep them to myself.

I shrug. “I don’t know,” I lie.

“Can you tell me the first time you realized you could take the form of an animal?”

He rephrases the question, and I realize I am going to have to tell him something. He’s not going to stop asking if he doesn’t think he knows, and I don’t want to sit here in this fancy chair for hours while he grills me.

“I’ve always known that was possible. Since I was little. I don’t remember a time I didn’t know. Except for when they drugged me into not knowing, and called me a liar, and told me I was sick in the head, and I got confused about it, but...”

I see the tension in him rising as I tell him those things. He doesn’t like them. They make him feel sorry for me. I don’t want that either, so I stop talking.

“Someone told you what you were?”

“I don’t remember. I just know I knew.”

He nods. “So you must have had contact with someone who told you about yourself.

Your parents, perhaps? Do you remember them?"

I shake my head. "I don't remember anything before the orphanage. I was seven years old when I was taken there, and it feels like that was when my life started."

"But you knew then you were a wolf."

"Yes."

"And at some point, you shifted for the first time."

"I don't remember that either."

He frowns, as if he doesn't believe me. He's right not to. The first time I shifted is blazed into my mind and my body. I could never forget it, even if I wanted to.

"Why does the answer matter? How old were you when you first shifted?"

"I was rather prodigal, just seven years old, but women, female wolves, they tend not to be able to shift until they reach full maturity and meet their mate. It is part of the bond."

"Huh," I say, as all the ramifications of that statement kick in, this finely painted ceiling developing cracks around the chandelier, metaphorically speaking as all the obvious inferences and such come crashing down around us. This is why he cares. He's not trying to get to know me. He doesn't care about my terrible past. He's trying to work out if I am a virgin or not. I'd laugh, if it wasn't so tragic.

"You think I've been fucking other guys."

"Have you?"

“None of your business.”

“I disagree,” he says. “It’s very much my business.”

“Why? How many women have you been with?”

“A number, but that is not important.”

I laugh at his open double standards. I wonder if anybody has disagreed with him in years. He is like the orphanage director, so used to being able to dictate reality to people who have no choice but to obey him, he has forgotten that it’s possible for someone to say no to him, or disagree with him, or otherwise defy him in some way.

I sit back in my chair and watch him as his eyes gleam with jealousy at the very idea of me having ever been touched by another man. He is possessive of me in spite of barely knowing me. That facade of elegance, education, richness, it’s turning to sand in front of me, falling away to reveal the animal who chased me down in the night and refused to let me up, who held me down in the dirt until he was certain he had me captured, and who fingered me into merciless orgasm afterward.

He hates the idea of me having ever been touched by anyone else. I think it would be better for him if I had just come into existence at eighteen years of age, fuckable for him and him alone, then come and joined the other pretty owned things in this big fancy house filled with wolves who are slavishly devoted to him.

I am the only one who sees him differently. I wonder if I am the only one who sees him at all. Is that because he’s not really my mate, or because he is? I am used to watching people build up notions of selves and such. The girls at the orphanage had to do it in order to survive. They had to tell themselves who they were because there was nobody else to do it. The teachers, matrons, director all told us that we were helpless waifs lucky to be fed or clothed or housed at all.

Some of the girls decided they were the product of famous men, sent away because their mothers represented disgraceful dalliances. Their mothers were actresses, singers, models, women more beautiful than these powerful men could bear to resist.

Others decided that they were the progeny of politically unfortunate royals. I knew at least five girls who imagined themselves to be the lost princess Anastasia, in spite of the fact they were born generations after her death.

We never told one another that we were making things up about ourselves. We all played into these little lies that made life feel bearable. It strikes me as being very funny that Armand is not immune to the same process of hiding behind a facade. He has more props. He has the house, the title, the followers, but when I look into his eyes I see the animal, not the man.

That animal is unhappy. Prowling. Sniffing. Wants to get to the bottom of my secret because he knows I have one, and I won't give it up the way he expects me to.

"You are more intelligent than they've given you credit for, aren't you," he says. "The way you look at me makes me feel as though you're looking right through me."

So he feels me inside him. I like that. I like that he knows I have penetrated him, just as he surely intends to penetrate me.

I give a little shrug.

"I want to spank you," he says, his lips turning up in a little smirk. "There is something about you that just begs to be spanked."

"It's not about me. It's about you not getting what you want. You want to spank me because punishing me is easier than dealing with the fact that I won't give you what you want. You're spoiled."

* * *

Armand

“Spoiled?”

I laugh, not because she’s wrong, but because I never considered the notion before. I was raised from birth to become alpha of this pack. I had all the trappings provided, and all the necessary attitudes installed by my parents, who have now retired to the Aegean.

“I suppose I could be described as spoiled in a certain light,” I say. “But the fact that I am your alpha remains.”

“And the fact that I’m not going to do what you want just because you’re alpha also remains.”

She’s eighteen, going on nineteen. Young to be this bold and sure of herself, but sometimes adversity breeds that quality, though in my experience it is more likely to create the opposite. I can only imagine what she’ll be like when she is more settled here. I suppose it’s down to me to train her to be as I want her to be.

“We will see about that, ma chérie ,” I say, remembering how she writhed beneath my fingers. She might be rebellious, but she’s never been handled by me before.

She smiles, and for the first time it feels like a genuine smile. Sitting in my shirt, in my bedroom, full of sass and butter, she is beautiful. I will remember this moment forever, just as I will remember chasing her through the moonlit fields and seeing her for the first time at the auction. Each of those moments revealed a different part of her, like a diamond twisting slowly in firelight with its various facets all gleaming.

“Are you still hungry? Is there a need going unmet?”

“I’m not hungry,” she says. “And I’m not tired.”

“Then you have some time to kill, to settle in. You’ll have a proper introduction to the pack tonight at dinner. They have been on me to find my mate.”

“Really? Why?”

“An unmarried alpha is a liability to a pack.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one, it means there are no direct heirs, which can cause an unsettled situation if something happens to him.”

“So I’ve been brought here to stamp out a few Armand de Lune babies.”

I try not to take offense to that assessment. “You are so much more than a bitch to be bred,” I tell her. “I hope that you can tell from the way you are being treated that you matter greatly to me. If all I wanted were babies, we would have already begun that process.”

She blushes deeply and adorably and that reaction, along with the topic of conversation, makes my cock immediately hard. Breeding her will be a pleasure. She has a hard outer shell, but she is tender and responsive, and I think when she opens up to me, giving herself fully the way one only can during lovemaking, she will be spectacular.

“You are most welcome here, Beatrix. The pack is eager to welcome you to the family. You are not merely a new member. You are going to be at the very center of

our lives.”

She looks horrified at that statement, which I intended to be encouraging, but see how it might be overwhelming instead. For a girl from a terrible old orphanage, being made the center of pack life is probably, well, entirely ridiculous.

“But that will come with time,” I tell her. “Tonight is just an introduction. I’m trying to explain that you are very welcome, that people are excited to meet you, and that I am proud to call you mine.”

Her eyes meet mine, dark and wary and afraid. Deeply, deeply afraid. I really have to stop talking about the pack, it’s far too much. I have to remind her of what is between the two of us, her and me.

Or maybe that’s just my lust talking. Maybe I need to focus more on her, her family.

“Do you remember your pack? Or anything about your parents?”

Her face goes quiet and solemn again. Once again, I have chosen the wrong conversational path.

She does not want to talk about herself. I will not get information by bald questioning. I’ll have to get in touch with the director of the orphanage for information. I don’t even know her last name. Does she?

“What’s your last name?”

She shakes her head and utters something like a curse under her breath.

“You’re not going to tell me anything about yourself?”

She sighs and looks at me as if I am stupid. “I don’t know anything about myself. Everything I ever thought I knew, I got told was a lie. So there’s nothing I can tell you about myself, not that I know is true.”

I make another mental note to kill the director. The man clearly knew precisely what and probably who he had in his custody. He should have reached out to the relevant packs to find her an appropriate home, a place for her to be raised among her own kind. Instead, he hoarded her for money, denied her truth, had her drugged into submission, and caused potentially irreparable damage. He hurt my mate. He will suffer for it.

I want to fuck her.

Even in the midst of sympathy and defensive rage, I feel the need to be inside her. It feels wrong, to need her so deeply, to be so consumed with desire that the tragedy I see in her eyes and every line in her face cannot take priority in this moment.

But she does not want to talk about it. She cannot tell me more than she knows, and the truth of the matter is, if this mate bond is as strong as I feel it to be, she wants my cock far more than she wants my questions.

Our bond demands consummation.

She is lost. Adrift in the world. Separated from her kind. Separated from herself. Our mating will bring her back.

Perhaps that is why, in spite of all the human tendencies to treat someone like her as a victim who should not be touched, my only desire is to take her, to be inside her, and to claim her as my own. It is entirely natural for me to be consumed with need for this perfect creature who is the mate nature, in all her wisdom, made for me.

All my life I have been told how it feels to meet one's mate, how it is to finally feel complete, to know that the search is over. We won't entirely enjoy that feeling until we have mated, until this sweet but spicy thing has spread her thighs for me and welcomed me into her depths.

But still, I am restraining my most animal passions out of concern for the fact that they would probably frighten her if she had any idea how intensely I want her.

Her lips quirk into something faintly reminiscent of a smile.

"You're looking at me like you want to eat me."

"I do want to devour you, but you'll stay intact."

She shifts on the bed, looking at me with the wide eyes of prey. That is not the reaction I want to arouse in her. I want to see her anticipation, her need. I don't want her to be afraid of being with me intimately.

It all raises the question yet again. The question I don't think I can survive not knowing the answer to. The question that drives me, torments me, and commands me to find an answer to it no matter what.

How did she shift without having been mated by me?

I want to ask her again who she has slept with, but I know how that question will come across. It will seem like petty jealousy. It will diminish me in her eyes, and that I will not have.

It is a question only I am struggling with because for the moment, I am sure the pack assumes we consummated quickly. They do not know that she shifted on her own accord, that she fled me in a wolf form I had never seen before. Maybe the boys put

two and two together, the fact that she was in her wolf form and I was not in the room, the fact that I hadn't mentioned needing the painkillers immediately, and was talking about the whole thing as something that was yet to happen.

That doesn't matter. What does matter is someone has been where only I should ever have been.

Jealousy sparks through me at the same time as concern. Something must have happened to her before I met her. Something terrible, perhaps. A lone wolf may have smelled her out, decided to take advantage of her. I can imagine her being loose in the Scottish wilds, roaming restlessly, eager for any acknowledgement of her true self.

A female wolf cannot shift for the first time until she has been mated. That is common knowledge. It is also widely regarded that it has to be a fated mate to trigger the shift, but that is where the whole argument starts to become gray. Some insist that only a true soulmate can bring out the beast in a female shifter, but nature is a messier creature than that. She makes a lot of spares. She revels in options.

It may be that we each have only one true fated mate, one who brings us the full joy of connection, the depths of animal soul connection, but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy others to lesser degrees. According to nature's design, it is always better to breed with a lesser option than to avoid breeding at all.

I look at Beatrix and am tortured by the notion of someone else putting so much as a finger on her.

"Have you been in love before, Beatrix?"

She shakes her head.

I breathe out a little and relax somewhat. She has not given her heart, even if she

happens to have given her body.

I reach out and cup her chin with my hand, rubbing the pad of my thumb over her lower lip in a gesture faintly reminiscent of the way I handled her pussy in the orphanage. I can see by the blush on her cheeks she has put two and two together as well, and feels the same sparking of sexual intensity between us.

We have chemistry that cannot be denied, and whenever I touch her, it flares into intense, all-consuming life.

“Who are you... what are you...”

She asks the questions with her voice muted, but her tone intense. She is shaking. I don't think she can help it. Her arousal is tinged with fear, and the combined scent is absolutely intoxicating.

She knows who I am, superficially at least. She's not asking for my name. She's not asking for my position. She's asking for something deeper, something I am not sure I can answer now.

This should be so straightforward. She should be my virginal mate, she should submit to my cock, and she should be bonding with me as nobody has ever bonded before. There should be nothing even faintly resembling a question of anything in either of our minds.

This is the sort of nonsense reserved for humans, all the wondering and the worrying and the uncertainty.

It is my job to provide clarity and leadership. Sitting around wondering who took what should have been mine, if they took what should have been mine, and how such a thing happened, and all the other terrible questions that lead inevitably to terrible

conclusions, is of no use to either one of us.

I shall have to do what humans do. I shall have to choose to love her regardless of what has come before, and what might yet come.

“I am your mate,” I tell her, sliding my fingers gently down her neck and wrapping them lightly around her throat. I feel her tremble as excitement courses through her. It is not so long since she was in her animal form, and then even less time since she writhed to climax on my fingers. Her body is craving my cock. That is simple instinct, and it will not be denied. She is as receptive as she is likely to be, and it is time to impress on her that she has a place with me.

“I am the one you will submit to for the rest of your life. I am the one who will own you. I am the one who will love you. I am the one who will take you and care for you and sometimes...” I hold back from saying the filthier, darker things: claim you, use you, breed you.

She is looking at me with a sort of feral innocence that makes saying such things far too inappropriate.

I want her to trust me.

But that might be almost impossible. She has been out of place all her life, and I know too well that those who have been out of place are vulnerable to exploitation. They are betrayed over and over by those they go to in the hopes of connection.

“Sometimes what?”

“Sometimes engage in intimacy with you,” I tell her, letting my thumb rub over her lower lip again. “Have you done that before?”

She draws back, bites her lower lip, and I see her expression go closed. My stomach sinks as I realize that likely means she has done something before. There is some experience lurking in her past. Her innocence has been taken, over and over.

“There is nothing you cannot tell me.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Her eyes go blank in a way that tells me she is locking herself away. Her secrets, for the moment, remain hers.

“You’ll learn to trust, in time.”

She draws away from me, as if using the word trust was more of a betrayal than bringing her down with my pack in a field. I have in my hands someone who would rather be beaten than understood.

I do not know if she is a virgin. I do not know if she gave herself willingly, or was violated. I know nothing. The urge to interrogate is supreme, but I know it will do more harm than good.

I could force the truth from her...

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Do you understand your position, your place with me?”

* * *

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I don't know that I'll ever understand my place with him. I spent my life half-imagining, half-remembering that I was a wolf, joined in my dreams by packs of beasts who comforted me when I felt scared or alone.

I quickly learned not to talk all about it. When I did, people mocked me or sometimes punished me. This man is trying to get me to talk, but I don't know him nearly well enough to trust him with the details of my life, in so far as I remember them.

I don't think he really cares about the answers anyway. I think he's full of desire for me. I think he wants to fuck me. The girls at the orphanage knew all about that, anticipated sex with great glee. We told each other stories about what we thought it was like. None of us ever had it, of course. We were locked away from boys, not allowed out at all unsupervised.

Of course, I had a reputation for sneaking out and about. There were questions about what I did, and rumors, too. My attempts at escape were scandalous for many reasons, but mostly because I was impossible to control.

"You're a wolf," I say. "Like me."

"Yes," he smiles. "We're all like you."

This man is handsome, charming, and obviously rich and powerful. When he looks at me with those silver-gray eyes, when he gives me all his attention and all his desire, I feel myself melt between my thighs. But it's the memory of last night that really turns me on.

Last night was the first time I caught the scent of my kind on the wind.

I took my wolf form last night because that's the easiest way to run, and most of the time nobody suspects the animal running at a distance is the girl they're looking for—but he knew it instantly.

He came after me, a full-blooded animal hunting me with inexorable intensity. I was never going to escape, no matter how far I fled. I felt that in the wind.

I never knew how much I wanted to be chased down by a male and pounced upon. I never understood how much I needed to be shown thoroughly what an alpha can do. Lying in the mud last night with him atop me, naked and furious and so afraid for some reason, as if he thought he'd already lost me—that was the most intimate moment of my life, and it is that moment that makes me want him now.

“I wish I didn't have to be a person at all. I wish I could stay in my wolf form. It's simpler there.”

“It is,” he agrees. “So much simpler. There is no shame. There is no conditioning. There is only the matter of what you want. What do you want now, Beatrix?”

I look into his silvered eyes, so much lighter than anybody's eyes I've ever seen before, and for a moment, I get a mental image of him as his wolf self, powerful, steady, offering me the protection of his ferocity.

I melt.

“I think I want you,” I say, nervous. Words are the worst. Having to hear them is bad enough, but having to say them is a terrible ordeal.

Fortunately he does not make me keep talking. When I tell him I want him, his

fingers drop from my neck to my breast. He reaches out with his other arm and kisses me deeply, drawing me closer to him with the fingers of his other hand in my hair. It is a tender, passionate embrace, but when he tightens his grip I think about how roughly he pinned me last night, and that is what makes me soak myself with desire.

Suddenly, I am so fucking horny I can hardly handle myself.

Taking my wolf form always invigorates me. It makes me feel as though I could rule the world. It reminds me that places like the orphanage are little prisons for people who consent to be imprisoned in exchange for the illusion of safety.

I told the girls the truth, but they didn't want to believe me. I wonder if they believe me now, or if they are getting comfortable in their new prisons. The thought takes me out of the moment, makes me wonder if I, too, am just getting comfortable in a new prison.

"You are a tense little thing," Armand purrs, looking down at me with those piercing eyes. "Tell me what you are thinking."

I snort. I wouldn't tell him what I was thinking if I only had two brain cells remaining.

His eyes narrow as he understands the quality and meaning of my mirth.

"I see. Won't tell me about your past, won't tell me about your present, won't tell me anything of any use whatsoever."

The air is still thick with arousal, but that doesn't stop me from arguing. If anything, all this passion, all this primal energy makes me want to fight more.

"I don't owe you anything," I tell him. "I don't care how much you spent on me. You

can buy a lot of things with ten million dollars, and you should have bought them, because you can't buy me."

I steel myself for what I know is coming. He's going to snap on me. He's going to give into anger, yell at me, curse at me, possibly beat me. He might kill me.

He takes a deep breath.

"I can be patient," he says. "You want to be difficult, that's fine. We are new to one another, and I know you have had a hard life. In time you will see that I can be trusted."

"I don't want to trust you. I want you to let me go."

It is a ridiculous thing to say. I don't want him to let me go. I want him to hold me down and fuck me. I want him to surge inside me, the cock I saw in the bath last night thick and hard and claiming me in ways I have never been claimed before. But it's easier to tell him to fuck off than it is to ask him to fuck me.

"And where would you go? What would you do?" He makes the mistake of taking me seriously. I whine internally, wishing he could see me for what I am, wishing I didn't have to say everything out loud.

"None of your business."

There's a brief moment in which silence fills the air between us. I know I am pushing him. I want to. I want to find his breaking point. I want to prove to myself, and him, that he is just like the other cruel, stupid, impatient men I have always known.

"You are starting to become rude, little one, and my desire to discipline you is coming back ever more strongly," he says, his eyes narrowed. "Do you wish to sit

down when you meet the pack this evening? Or would you prefer to stand by my side, unable to tolerate so much as a skirt pressing against your skin?"

* * *

Armand

Her eyes light up at the threat of punishment.

She likes it—or she at least finds it familiar.

I find myself smiling. Finally, a way in. Her defiance isn't the obstacle. It's the answer.

"Come here, whelp," I say, taking her by the wrist and turning her over my thighs.

She settles over my lap far more agreeably than she has done almost anything else. This is the only thing she does not fight, the only kind of interaction she seems comfortable with.

I smooth my hand over her cheeks, rubbing gently but firmly. I do not think sweet words and kindness will go far with her. I think her trust, her desire, her happiness is all locked up in rough treatment and animal passion.

"I just got finished telling you that you are mine," I say. "I informed you that you would be required to obey me. Now I'm going to prove it."

The bedside drawer contains all manner of treats and toys, but I will not be playing with my mate.

I pick up a wooden hairbrush from my collection, broad-backed and good for one

thing more than any other.

The sound she makes as I bring it down on her ass is satisfying as all hell. There is an animal yelp and a rather alluring squirming motion that makes her grind against my thigh.

“You are a brat,” I tell her. “And I know that underneath that sass you are just trying to protect yourself, but you don’t need to hide anything from me. I’m not going to let you disrespect me, and I’m not going to let you keep missing out on the life you deserve because you think you have to fight me.”

I bring the brush down again and again on her bare ass. It leaves pleasing red ovals on her cheeks, but what is even more pleasing is the wet spot she is leaving against my thigh.

Whatever her secrets, she cannot hide her desire for me. It’s the one true thing I know for sure—that she wants me as much as I want her.

“You’re a spoiled rich boy who thinks he can buy everything!” she shoots back. Calling me a boy earns her a good flurry of smacks right to the seat of her ass. Her cheeks flush bright red for me, her thighs kicking furiously.

“I am no boy, little girl,” I say, teasing her a little even in the midst of punishment. Shouldn’t do that really, against protocol, but I am not entirely above gamesmanship. If she wants to tussle, tussle we shall.

“Ow! Fuck!” She curses at me as the brush dances over her cheeks. “I hate you!”

That declaration of hate is more one of affection than I have ever heard before. I wonder if everything will be backward with my mate, if seduction will be repulsive to her, if roughness will be interpreted as kindness.

I test the theory, leaning down, fastening my teeth on her left cheek, the reddened flesh delicate and delicious against my tongue as I lick the skin caught there.

I hear her gasp, feel her stiffen, and I smell a sudden flush of arousal as she gets that much more turned on by the bite.

My instincts were correct. She does not merely like it rough. She needs it rough. She wants to be handled like the wild animal she is, tamed with pets, but made to understand there is no room whatsoever for her own claws and fangs to emerge. Fairness does not matter. Dominance does.

I release her cheek, leaving an impression of my teeth lightly pressed into her flesh.

She lets out a little whimper, but not of pain or fear. It is a sound of desire.

I can hold back no longer. I need to be inside her more than I have needed anything in life.

I slide her off my lap and onto the bed, pulling off all the clothing between us as if it were nothing more than tissue paper. Some of it gives way, some of it rips, none of it matters.

She is soft and naked, her long legs becoming curvy around her hips and thighs, her waist powerfully neat and her breasts full. Her long, dark hair wants to curl rebelliously and tangles in my fingers as I control her head, pressing her down beneath me.

Crawling up behind her, I spread her legs. A more romantic way would be to make love to her missionary, look into her eyes, whisper loving words, vow my troth. But that is the way humans make love, and at our core, she and I are nothing but animals.

So I bite the back of her neck and I use my thighs to spread hers, I find that dripping core of her that has needed my cock from the moment we met, and I spear inside her, thrusting deep in one powerful stroke.

She cries out as she envelops me, her inner walls gripping me tight and hot and perfectly mine. This is what we both needed. For a moment, I stay still inside her, relishing this deep and primal connection. I can feel every move she makes, every breath she takes. I can feel the inner muscles of her body contracting around me as her pussy grips me and tries to milk me.

My teeth remain on her neck, biting firmly, a little hard. I'm sure it hurts, but I also feel the fresh flood of desire coating my cock as she feels that little note of pain and responds.

I am fighting myself to stay in control. I want this to be slow. I want this to be... fuck. Drawing out of her feels like a little death, and sliding back in, this time with an intentional slowness that lets her feel every bit of her pussy being claimed, is enough to make me snarl with frustration at my self-imposed control.

I make myself go even slower, and I listen to the moan as her lower lips grip my cock so fucking prettily, the glistening sheath of my dick slowly sliding from her hot interior. She is mine. Finally. After a lifetime of waiting, I know where I belong, and I know she belongs to me.

The sense of satisfaction, ownership, bonding, belonging is so complete I could cry. There are tears in my eyes as I surge forward again, and this time I release the bite and instead kiss her neck and her cheek and when she turns her head to me, her lips and her mouth and, fuck, I am surging inside her, hips pumping deep inside this wicked little whelp.

“Does this feel good? Do you understand now?”

My questions are barely coherent, and her response is even less so. She moans and she says something that might be words and none of it matters because she is sliding over onto her side and my hand is cupping her taut, ample breast, thumb brushing over the nipple. My hand runs down her belly, then my fingers find the thick brush of hair above her pussy, running through it to tap against her clit.

She bucks against me, taking my cock so fucking nicely. God. She is perfect. Every moment we have shared before this one, every bit of tension, every argumentative word, every rebellion, every bit of resistance, is gone.

I roll over, pin her on top of me by wrapping my arms round her waist and locking her legs in place with mine so her thighs are spread, her pussy is open, and she cannot move. All she can do is lie on my chest and take her fucking.

She whimpers and gasps in my ear, little animal sounds that grow in intensity as she grinds her clit against my pubic bone and takes each and every thrust of my cock deep inside.

“I’m going to come inside you. You’re going to be full of my cum, and you’re going to have my baby. That’s what you’re for, Beatrix. You’re for me, for my cock, you’re the mate nature made for me, you’re my precious little fuck toy and you’re the love of my life.”

She bites me. Hard. Really fucking hard, actually, right on the shoulder, and deep enough to draw blood.

“What the fuck was that?” I grip her by the chin in the effort to stop those teeth of hers making contact with me.

She grins down at me, her pussy gripping my cock with desire as I narrow my eyes at her.

“Do you think it’s nice to bite while your ma?tre is fucking your naughty little pussy, is that it?”

“I don’t care what’s nice,” she says. “You’re inside me. That hurt, a little. That hurt when you pushed all the way in me. You think my pussy doesn’t hurt right now?”

“You can always tell me if something hurts.”

“I did tell you. I bit you.”

“Little animal,” I laugh. “There’s no need to bite.”

“I don’t bite because I need to. I bite because I like to.”

My hand slides to her throat, not gripping tightly, but just keeping her under control. At the same time, I thrust deep inside her pussy hard enough to punish her for that naughty bite.

Now we’re being rough, I give her rougher, harsher thrusts, letting her know her tender pussy can be punished if I decide to punish it.

“Be careful what you bite and where, Trixie,” I say, shortening her name. “You are not the only one with teeth.”

She blushes at that warning, seeming to enjoy it. Her hips perform a little grinding motion and her inner walls grip my cock with increasing eagerness. She’s trouble, and she likes it.

“Bad girl, hmm?” My cock slides in and out of her hole as I pump her pussy deep and hard. Not really the romantic treatment I imagined for my mate, but she not only likes it rough, she needs it dominant. Sometimes you give people what they need, not what

you think they should need. That's a lesson I've learned over and over as alpha, and it has never felt as applicable as it does now.

"I'm sorry it hurts, pup," I murmur. "I'm sorry your tight pussy is stretching for me, and you don't know how to take a proper fucking yet, but you will, and the pain, doesn't it feel good as well?"

I slide my cock all the way inside and hold myself there, waiting for her response.

It comes physically before it comes verbally. I feel her squeeze my cock with her inner muscles, her hips gyrating around my thick rod as she enjoys the sensation of being made love to for the first time.

"Do you want me to stop?"

I get a little whimper and a shake of her head. No. She doesn't want this to stop. She wants to come on my cock. She wants to feel my knot swell inside her and trap my seed against her womb until it takes.

"Then I am going to keep going, Trixie. I am going to mate your sweet pussy, and you are going to take every drop of my cum. Do you know what a knot is?"

I ask the question while sliding back and forth inside her slowly. I am getting very close to coming, and once I come, there will be no escaping me or my cock for several minutes.

"No," she moans.

"When I come inside you, my cock is going to swell up. It's designed by nature to keep my seed inside. You're not just being fucked. You're being bred."

I feel a rush of warmth around my cock as those words hit her brain and trigger a cascade of arousal. Oh, fuck yes, she wants this. She wants me to fill her up, to make her take my cum, to ensure that her fertile womb is given my seed.

I roll over again, but this time I am on my knees and she is under me. I pull her up against me, her legs over my shoulders as I ravage her depths with harder, rougher strokes. I do my best to maintain control, but animal instinct demands my passion and my intensity as I hold her hips and pull her to me, sinking deep as I finally give into the urge to come, my fingers splaying over her belly, my thumb rubbing her clit at the same time as my cock starts to expand inside her.

“Oh, my god! Armand! Oh! Fuck!” Her reaction is instant. I am glad I told her because I am sure she would be panicking if she didn’t know what was happening. “It’s too big!”

“It’s not too big. You can take it. I promise,” I assure her, paying careful attention to her clit, rubbing the pad of my thumb in slow circles that speed up as she writhes and bucks beneath me, her pussy filled with my cock and my cum.

I have never bred before, never intentionally kept my seed inside. It feels beautiful, sacred, and hot as hell to have her writhing, trapped on my cock, the knot making it impossible for us to separate.

“Fuck, Armand, oh, my. I’m...” She becomes incoherent as she submits to orgasm, her ravaged pussy gripping my knot and my cock with eagerness as her walls contract rhythmically. I can feel every movement she makes, and as delicious as it is, it also threatens to put me over the edge of what I can handle in terms of sensations.

My hands clamp her hips in place. “Stay still.” I grit the words out, as I feel my knot pulsing in her, ensuring the last drops of my seed are safely in her stretched little cunt.

Beatrix whimpers, but she has no choice other than to obey. I hold her there, beautiful and blushing, her naked body ripe for me and only me, her lips wrapped around the base of my cock, her inner walls stretched achingly wide.

I renew the attention to her clit, not touching directly, but massaging around it, keeping her distracted with pleasure as nature takes its course inside her.

“You were a good girl,” I reassure her. “You are taking your breeding so well.”

She moans and whimpers until finally, my knot starts to subside and my cock slides from her swollen pussy. Her lips are puffy and wide, and I can see my cum dripping from her.

“Beautiful,” I praise, leaning down and gathering her in my arms. “Are you okay? Did that hurt too much?”

“It hurt a little,” she says against my chest. “I didn’t know about the knot. I thought I was going to be split open.”

I chuckle and rub her bottom in an effort to comfort her. I’d soothe her pussy by petting it, but I am sure she is tender there.

“You’re so big,” she says. “And so strong. When you were inside me it was as if I was completely at your mercy. I was getting bred and...”

“There was no choice?”

“Yeah,” she says softly.

“There is always a choice,” I tell her, tipping her chin up so she looks at me. “But sometimes, the choice is going to be having your sore, deserving, naughty pussy

fucked long and hard by your alpha. Understand?”

She blushes, soft for the first time. I cherish her like this, appreciating that she is showing me a side of herself I am sure nobody has ever seen.

CHAPTER 6

B eatrix

Lying in the arms of my mate on a languid, sunny afternoon, I feel a sense of peace I didn't know I was capable of feeling. My pussy feels as though it has been ravaged and used, but it is not the only part of me that is feeling the effects of our mating.

My entire body has been transformed. I have not only been fucked, I have been taken. I have been changed from a wild single creature into his owned possession. I didn't feel that when he paid ten million dollars for me, an insane amount of money, but I feel it now. He runs in my veins. I can feel him inside me, not just in the ache of my pussy, but in my fucking cells. He's part of me. Am I part of him?

I don't dare ask, so I stay wondering.

What I do now know is that this is what the mate bond feels like. It feels like being tied to him by a hundred invisible threads that are strummed by a look, a word, even distance itself. I feel the connection to him as strongly as I have felt anything ever.

"This is usually when a female wolf would experience her first transformation into her wolf self," Armand says, his silver eyes regarding me with that half-confused, half-hurt stare he thinks he has managed to hide from me.

I don't know why men have to ruin things by opening their mouths, but the spell is broken by that comment. My ability to shift on my own terms seems to concern him a whole lot. He's jealous of the other men, men who don't exist, but he supposes must

do.

I do not want to have the conversation he is angling for. I have no strength for it, and I am annoyed by the necessity of it. I found my way to my wolf without a man's cock being involved—directly, at least. I could tell him that, but I don't think he would believe me.

He wants me to shift because of the magic effects of his cock? Not out of my own desire to take the form, but because he drives me so wild as the animal I am? It will make him feel powerful for me to lose control of my form? I can do that if that's what's necessary. This pretty palace could use some messing up anyway.

I take my wolf form, sliding into it smoothly and effortlessly because it is more me than my human self. Sometimes I feel as though my human form is the pretense, the mask I wear so ordinary people don't kill me on sight. My instincts are animal, my desires are animal, and right now, I am entirely animal.

The first thing I do in my much more powerful state is burst through the bedroom door. It is a heavy oak construction, but it comes off its hinges the same way any run of the mill door would.

“Beatrix!”

I hear him shout for me, but I am already gone, laughing inwardly in my animal self, thrilling to the freedom of being the menace I am. Things fly in my wake as I dash through the halls, not entirely knowing where I am going, but having the sense that the exit is out and down. My paws slide here and there on marble floors, and I find the remnants of my human mind wondering why the fucking hell a wolf shifter clan would live in a palace with no traction on the floor.

I slip and slide toward the front door, a big shaggy thing with little control over my

trajectory, collecting a runner along the way that has a table set on it with all sorts of things that crash and clang as they fall everywhere.

And then I am out.

Under the sun this time, running at full speed with all the joy that entails.

He is giving chase, I know that, but I am not really running from him. I am running for myself, for the feeling of freedom, and for the joy of using my body for what it was used for. The few times I shifted at the orphanage, I had to sneak out a very long way and hide clothes, and it felt very dangerous. I worried I wouldn't be able to keep my wolf form long enough. There were a few times that I couldn't. I lost it miles from where I started, away from my clothes, and had to sneak through the countryside entirely naked and absolutely exhausted. Taking an animal form uses a lot of energy.

I am burning a hell of a lot of energy now. Running at full speed is thrilling, but draining, and I shifted not twelve hours ago, so in some respects I am on fumes. I guess I just have my new mate's magic cock to thank for the energy I have now.

I turn my head enough to see behind me. Last time he came after me with a pack. This time it is just him. He is racing after me, his mouth open, tongue lolling in the effort to keep him cool as he sprints after me.

In human forms, a female is slower than a male over shorter differences, though not over longer ones. Women have always known how to endure. I don't know if males are faster than females in wolf form. I never raced one before. I suppose I'll find out.

* * *

Armand

I let her run.

I let her run because I want her tired out and calm later on tonight. I would rather have her falling asleep in the soup course than have this amount of energy when encountering the senior members of the pack in this state.

She is truly a handful, an absolute terror, I imagine, if not given the necessary attention. I can see why the director of the orphanage said she was going to be trouble. I have not been able to take my eyes off her since I bought her.

I don't mind that. She's worth the trouble. The moment I entered her body and felt her soul trysting with mine, I knew that she truly belonged to me, that she was not merely made for me, but a part of me.

This wild, rebellious little female is part of my wholeness. I won't ever be able to change her nature, but I might come to know myself through it.

So I let her run. I let her run because she needs this, and because I need it too. I need to feel her glee through the mate bond, her excitement and her true joy at being able to be herself with me. I also don't want to panic her and send her into a blind sprint. There are a lot of cliffs around here that a hapless young wolf could tumble from.

Fortunately, she runs toward the lake, where willows line the shores. There she slows and sniffs at the edges, scenting deer and other little creatures, and enjoying the sun filtering through the willow trees. She laps at the pristine waters then lies down in a patch of half-sun, half-shade, waiting for me to catch up.

When I arrive, I do not take my human form, as she does not take hers. I stay in my speechless animal self and I lie down beside her, nuzzling under her chin.

I want her to know that she is accepted with me. I want her to know she is safe with

me. And I want her to know that being the wild thing she is will never lead me to reject her in the way she has been rejected and punished before.

There are expectations for my mate. The pack and my parents, when they finally meet her, will want a well-bred young virgin with good manners and a pleasant demeanor. Someone soft and nurturing who will provide the pack with new alpha pups and an heir.

Beatrix is not ready for that responsibility. She has no idea of the weight on her shoulders, or how much scandal is potentially yet to be uncovered if something has in fact happened between her and another wolf before our meeting.

If there is an ex, I need to know, so I can kill him. If there is not, how the hell did she have access to her wolf form?

I try to force myself to stop thinking about those problems. In the end, the breeze and the scent of the wild washes them away, accompanied by a soft snore as my darling mate falls asleep in the long soft grass beside the lake.

We nap together for most of the afternoon, but inevitably it comes time to go back to the house and prepare for the welcome dinner. I can smell it being prepared even from this distant lake.

I nudge her up.

She lets out a little growl, not wanting to go back.

I insist, getting up and ambling back toward the house. The message is clear. Follow me, or stay out here by yourself.

I am slightly concerned she will stay out there. I think Beatrix could easily survive

out in the wild on her own. I am sure she could bring down a deer and feast on its flesh, find a den and curl up in it overnight.

My retreat is a calculated risk. If she follows, it will show willingness and connection. If she doesn't, well...

She nuzzles up along my side and accompanies me back to the chateau. Everything that had been knocked over has been righted, and the two of us pad up the stairs together, no intention of shifting back until we are in the privacy of our chambers.

There, we slide back into our human selves, naked and relaxed in ways we have not been before.

"You're lucky to have so much space to run," she says.

"So are you. All of this is yours now. You do understand that, don't you?"

"No," she says. "I never even had a room of my own. Most of the time in the orphanage I shared a bed. I've never had anything, and now you're telling me all of this is mine? No." She picks up a little paperweight inlaid with gold and puts it down almost immediately as if it burned her. "I don't dare touch any of this. It all feels like it belongs to someone grand and important."

I wrap her in my arms and look down at her, understanding the words she is saying, if not quite the emotional weight of them. I was raised with all of this. It feels quite natural to me to have many nice things because they are my due.

"Beatrix, you are grand and important."

She frowns, almost as though that statement was offensive.

“I’m not. I’m rubbish. I always have been. And I’m not going to be a good mate for you. I’m not... I’m not a good person, and I am a worse wolf.”

“Why do you think you’re not a good person?”

“I lie. I cheat. I steal. I do worse, too, sometimes.”

“And did you do those things because you had to survive in a place where very little was given to you?”

“Maybe. But I got good at them. They’re in my brain now. I’m not... your pack is not going to like me.”

“The pack is going to adore you, just as I do,” I reassure her. “And you will have help. There are many instructors here who can give you etiquette lessons and deportment classes and other lessons to teach you what you need to learn, history and mathematics and such.”

She looks even more uncertain now.

“Don’t worry, ma petite ,” I say. “When you meet everyone, you will understand.”

* * *

Beatrix

Now he’s talking about lessons. I really am not going to be good enough for this place.

The orphanage had enough basic education that we could read, write, and function to a low level. I have never learned history besides what I picked up here and there

through the few books that were passed around, and I don't know how much of what I read was true.

What I do know, because my instinct tells me, is that I am out of place. I am too young, too rough, too stupid, too poor, too outcast, too alone. I wish I had just one friend from the orphanage, but Armand refused to take any of them with me. So now I am facing this strange situation without any support from anyone who has ever understood me.

I want to go and hide and cry.

He keeps looking at me as if I should be happy, but I am not. And that makes it worse. It was okay when I was in my wolf form. Open spaces and pretty lakes are all I need, a water source and a place to hunt. But as a human, my needs are all too many, too overwhelming, and I am not capable of handling any of this.

"You're shaking," he says, taking my hands in his. "Beatrix, I promise, you have nothing to fear. Let me show you."

I let him show me. I let him find a dress he says will bring out my features, whatever that means. He chooses a deep green velvet gown, and his own suit is similarly colored, so we match. He even goes so far as to do my hair, braiding it with agile fingers.

"How do you know how to do this?"

"When I was young, I used to assist with my mother's hair."

"What happened to your mother?"

"She retired with my father. They live in Greece now, as the honored guests of the

main pack there.”

“I didn’t know you could choose to give it all up.”

“I was twenty-four when my father took ill. It was decided it was time for me to succeed him. I have been ma?tre of the pack for four years now.” He speaks slightly askew, due to the bobby pins he is holding between his teeth as he secures my braids in place.

“And there has not been a single day of all those years that the pack hasn’t desired I find myself a mate,” he says. “And now you are here. You are the culmination of an ancestral line that will blend with our own, strengthening the bloodlines, and ensuring that our kind survives into the future.”

“Are there a lot of packs?”

“Not as many as there once were, but yes. The bloodlines tend to become diluted over time, or simply end. After a certain point, a shifter can no longer shift. Some American packs have what they call domestic wolves, those who shift into forms more like a dog than a wolf.”

“Sounds cute.”

“I am led to believe it is, but I am glad you are entirely wild. You are absolutely stunning in your wolf form, Beatrix. You are a beauty inside and out. Thick pelt, tipped with white and that mask about your eyes and muzzle. You are the color of driven snow and exposed granite.”

I stare at him, the compliment hitting me deeply. He thinks I am beautiful. Not just as a human with big breasts and young body. He thinks I’m beautiful when I am shaggy and messy and wild.

“Thank you,” I say. “That is very nice.”

“Not nice, true. You’re stunning. The pack is going to be absolutely beside themselves. Look at yourself.”

I look in the full length mirror he has turned me toward and I find myself transformed in an entirely new way. I am elegant, I am tall. I am beautiful—he put a little color on my lips and mascara on my lashes when he was fussing with me. My hair is braided back from my face, but falls in dark curling locks down my back.

“They are going to lose their minds when they see you. I am losing my mind this moment,” he says, lifting my hand to his mouth. He presses an adoring kiss to it, and I start to believe that he might be right. If I can look this different, maybe I can be this different.

CHAPTER 7

B eatrix

The dining room, like the rest of the chateau, is majestic and very old money. This place was built and decorated when men still believed in being extra for the sake of being extra. There is not an unadorned corner in the place. Art is built into the very bones of this building, into every wall, every ceiling, every light switch.

There are dozens of people here. Maybe forty, all sitting at a very long table. They rise as we come in, smiles plastered on their faces. I am not used to people smiling at me because I walked into a room. At first I assume they are looking at Armand. Who wouldn't? Tall, rakishly and elegantly handsome, with those eyes that pierce you entirely when they fall on you. I can see why the pack chose him as replacement at twenty-four. He is every inch an alpha.

I look at him to try to tell what I'm supposed to do, and like magic he pulls my chair out for me. Everybody sits as I do. It's honestly kind of weird. For a second, I think about standing up again to see if they all get up, but I don't have the nerve.

Besides, food is already being delivered by white-gloved waiters. A plate is slid in front of me containing an orange-looking soup with bits of something that isn't quite fish in it.

"Lobster bisque," Armand murmurs to me as I stare at it for just a little too long.

"Wolves eat lobster... what's a bisque?"

“A kind of soup.”

He picks up one of the spoons provided and hands it to me. “Try it, ma chérie .”

I taste it and find that it’s not too bad. Quite rich, and very much not what I am used to. The only soup we got at the orphanage was more like gruel.

The second course is more along the lines of what I assume we’d eat.

“ Filet de bœuf Rossini,” Armand says. “Beef tenderloin with a truffle sauce and crispy potatoes.”

“It’s delicious,” I say, after taking a bite and realizing that my entire experience of food has been stunted in ways I cannot describe. I quite literally did not know it could be this good. I didn’t know it could feel like a painting being painted inside my mouth.

The waiter keeps my wineglass filled as well, and nobody stops me when I sip it. I am more than of age, of course, but it still feels strange because the orphanage strictly banned alcohol. It makes me feel warm and fuzzy, and it makes the strings between Armand and me, the invisible bonds between me and this stranger positively vibrate. I find myself gazing at him every chance I get, a fact he seems to notice and enjoy.

Is this love? I really didn’t think I’d ever be in love. I definitely never thought anybody would love me. He’s gorgeous, powerful, and entirely too rich for his and anybody else’s good. This feels like a dream.

“Tell me this is really happening,” I murmur to him. “Please tell me this is real.”

He leans over and places a nibbling little kiss on my neck, igniting thrills inside me. This is real. It’s as real as anything has ever been. I spare a little thought for the other

girls, wondering what they'd think if they saw me now. I hope they've found places as good as mine, though I suspect they haven't.

By the time the third course arrives, a selection of cheeses and such, I've relaxed enough to dare to make conversation with the other pack members.

Everybody is very polite to me. I needn't have worried about the pack behaving in a snobbish manner. I am the alpha's mate and they treat me accordingly. It's not because of me, I'm sure. Though this dress probably makes them think I am far fancier than I am. No, their admiration for me comes from their respect and admiration for him. They respect Armand. They look to him for their social cues, and my having his favor means I have all their favor.

Unfortunately, the same is not true between them all. I sit back and let the meal proceed and pay attention to the little mutterings and comments taking place in the room that are not addressed to me. I don't want to get to know these people by talking to them. I want to get to know them by how they talk to each other.

Most of the conversation is mundane and friendly. I notice that most of the pack appear to be partnered off and sitting in boy girl boy girl pairs. Conversation still happens largely along gender lines, women talking to women, men talking to men, though there is a reasonable amount of crossover now and then.

I'm looking for something wrong, because that is how my brain has been trained to interact with the world. Pleasantries and interesting conversation don't register for me. I am scanning this room like the animal I am.

"Would you like some more salad? It's delicious," the woman to my right says. We were introduced. Her name is Lydia and she has three children. She's very nice. I ignore her.

I don't want to make small talk about salad. I want to understand how this pack really functions. It's like the orphanage. There will be people vying for power. Armand might be the alpha, but that doesn't necessarily mean he is in charge. I'm sure if I were to say that out loud, everyone would be shocked, but it is true.

At the orphanage, the director thought he was in charge, but the matrons were really running things. They let him think he was making decisions, but he never did anything they didn't approve of first. I wonder if there is an equivalent of those matrons here.

"Stop it, you're such a stupid thing."

I hear a man growling at a cringing woman. His tone is somewhat hushed, designed to stay under the general hum of conversation. It seems to go without notice by those sitting closer, though to me those barbed words stand out as if they'd been screamed across the room.

"I'm sorry, it was just a little spill," his mate apologizes. She is a faint-looking blonde woman whose brow is furrowed and creased with worry. Her mate is several times her size and quite a lot older than she is, with a thick beard bordering on unkempt. He shows her no conversational grace.

"And me with a soup stain when I approach the alpha later," he growls. He might think he is doing it under his breath, but I can hear absolutely every word. "You like to sabotage me, don't you."

"It was an accident, Gerald. I promise."

"Always accidents with you, you careless bitch."

I see red.

* * *

Armand

Dinner is going very well. I am therefore rather surprised when my mate stands up, picks up a bread roll, and whips it at Lord Duplante with the accuracy of a sniper. It bounces off his head with an airy motion, tumbles off the table and rolls away into a corner, where it plays no further role in the scandal.

My mate is on her feet, hands clenched at her sides. She is staring at the man with a ferocity that makes me suspect she is very, very close to taking her wolf form entirely involuntarily.

“Don’t you talk to her like that again, you old brute. I’ll have your balls in my broth if you so much as think about it.”

The threat is delivered with teeth-flashing vigor, and I do not think a single person here wonders if she really means it. I’m not sure what prompted such a medieval outburst, but Beatrix is shaking with rage, the tremor in her hands proof that she is restraining herself. Some might think she is scared, but I know better. I can feel the energy pulsing from her, something far closer to fury than fear.

Duplante is fifty years old, and a banker in Marseille. He is self-important and regards himself as one of the pack elders though he has no place in my council and never will. I do not care for his lack of moral fortitude, and I do not trust him.

I, however, have managed to restrain myself from throwing anything at him. Seeing her do it, I wonder how.

He stares at her, malevolent. He has been humiliated, and he has no recourse to respond. I can see from the glint in his gaze that he’d like to hurt her. Beside him, his

mate is cowering as if she knows what is coming next.

Beatrix stays standing with her eyes locked on him, not dropping eye contact. Duplante looks at me. I lean back in my chair, relaxed, with no intention of intervening in this moment. I, like everyone else, want to see what happens next.

“Don’t talk to anybody that way,” she says, her voice cold and even. As I thought, there’s no fear in her. No adrenaline to make her voice shake. She is focused on Duplante as a predator focused on her prey. “Especially not a woman.”

Duplante looks shocked, then he looks at me, as if I will save him from the humiliation. I give him a little Gallic shrug.

“Say. Sorry,” she says. No. Commands. In an instant, my frightened little mate has become a fierce alpha female. It is just as impressive as I imagined it would be. She has strength, this one, and the pack is seeing it. They are also seeing that I back her entirely.

I hide my mouth with a napkin in order to prevent my smile from being seen. I shouldn’t be laughing at this altercation. It’s not supportive to be smirking in the background.

Realizing I will not get him off the hook, Duplante shifts uncomfortably as many silent eyes watch him be stripped of his bravado and ego in one rakish cut of her tongue.

“Apologies, Lady Beatrix.”

“Not to me,” she hisses. “To the woman suffered with the burden of being your mate.”

“Oh. Uh. Of course. Sorry, Jenny.”

Only then does Beatrix sit. She seems immune to concern about the scene she has arguably just made, a pleasant dinner interrupted by small scandal that will be the talk of the pack for quite some time to come.

“Will the alpha’s new mate bestow baked goods upon us all this way?” Michael asks the question, giving into his nature to be irreverent and to lean into trouble where he finds it. As my younger cousin, he will get the brunt of the pack’s obsession with finding a mate now. I make a mental note to rib him for that sooner rather than later.

“I can, if you like,” Beatrix says, picking up another roll and hefting it in her hand, a slight smile on her face.

Michael is blond and blue-eyed and in his final year of university at Oxford. He’s down for the weekend, and will head back soon. I’m glad she is getting to meet the limited amount of biological family I have at the chateau. I was an only child, and my father’s older brothers perished in various ways, many of which were ascribed to him. Some said he’d do anything to be alpha of the pack. I think misfortune found his family more often than most. That seems to be the way of powerful families. Fate steps in to average the score.

“No, thank you,” he says. “I would not withstand the fury of your righteous correction.”

She smiles and puts the roll back down.

I have no doubt the orphanage was a miserable place to grow up, but I think the fact she lived with a lot of other young women has actually prepared her quite well for pack life. She knew, without being told, that she needed to establish herself, and she is not letting Michael pull any shit either. I’m quite impressed, and hopeful she will

fit in easily here.

“I don’t see why that was necessary,” Duplante makes the mistake of muttering at a level that is audible to the table. I make a mental note to ensure that his place is moved much further down next meal. He clearly does not appreciate the responsibility of having the proximity he does, sitting mere seats away from us, right at the verge of family and true ranked members of the pack.

“You were rude to her,” Beatrix says. “You. A brute with untrimmed sideburns, rude to her, a goddess.”

There is a titter of amusement from around the table at her blunt, yet accurate description of Duplante and his mate.

“Manners are important for us all,” I remind him. If he opens his mouth again, it will go very poorly for him. I have already decided to address him after the meal. I don’t think his response has been nearly submissive enough, and I want him to know that no matter how young—and yes, even female—my mate might be, she must be respected.

Dinner proceeds without further interruption. People manage to eat without abusing their partners, which is pleasant. Beatrix has made her mark on the pack in an instant, and I could not be prouder of her.

Unfortunately for Duplante, his quick albeit reluctant apology at the table is not as genuine as it might have been. After dinner, I find him whining in one of the lounges, apparently either unaware or unconcerned that he might be overheard.

“That little whippet needs to be beaten,” he is complaining. “Barely more than a child, throwing food at her seniors and betters. If she were mine, she would have been horse-whipped right there and then, made to stand in the corner until her humiliation

was complete. He's going to spoil her. The pack will fall to ruin because of his permissiveness... ooof! "

The last part is the sound he makes as I kick his knees out from behind, making him fall into a subservient kneeling position as I stalk around him.

"My alpha, I..."

"I heard what you were saying. Bold words, Duplante. I should cut your tongue out for daring to utter them under my roof."

We like to appear civilized in this pack. Our meals are fine and our clothes are elegant and the home we live in is undeniably a vessel of the finest art and culture, but we are wolves and underneath it all we are animals. Things can become very brutal, primal, and animal if they need to.

Fear flashes through his eyes, but so does loathing. He does not like my mate. He does not like that I love her, and that I will not harm her for his amusement. It is possible that one day she will do something that deserves punishment of a public nature, and if he were in the inner circle, he would know full well that she has already been punished that way, but it will not be at the behest of a cringing beast like him.

"We are ancient creatures, and there are medieval consequences for disrespect. My mate gave you a gentle reminder that you would have done well to accept. I will not be as kind as she was. I will not limit my remonstrations to stern words."

Like the fool he is, Duplante decides to argue.

"You did not lift a finger when your mate..."

"Exactly. She is my mate. She is above reproach."

I know as soon as those words have left my mouth they are a mistake, but I am not about to walk them back. I will support my mate's rights and her wrongs.

"She is barely an adult. This pack is run by children..."

He is fortunate that I am not an absolute psychotic who would kill him outright for daring to question me. There is a coldness inside me, a rage that wants some kind of penance, because I know very well that he is not just talking about my mate. He is talking about me. I am the youngest alpha the pack has seen, and many of these older males feel as though they were passed over. The fact that I am my father's son further rankles. The youngest of his siblings, some feel that he was not suitable as a replacement for his father.

This insult will not go unanswered.

"Take your wolf form."

"I meant no disrespect, Ma'tre ," he says, unwilling to back up his words with his flesh. He lies to my face, gives me nothing but disrespect, but pretends these words alone would be enough to mollify my growing rage.

"Take your wolf form, or I will draw my sword and cut you down where you stand. Tonight was a gathering to celebrate the long-awaited arrival of my mate. She has been long desired by the pack. And you have managed to make it all about you and your sniveling complaints because she would not tolerate your boorishness."

Now I see fear on his face. It is a face that has not emoted nearly enough of that feeling in his life. This is a man who has been spoiled by privilege and believes his status will allow him to escape punishment. He is wrong.

* * *

Beatrix

After dinner I find myself in the company of the ladies who are excited to meet and chat with me. I have little to say about myself, so I avoid doing so and instead prefer to ask them questions about themselves, which they mostly enjoy. It's not the worst thing that ever happened to me, but halfway through someone's sentence about cheese, I hear the sounds of discontent faintly at a distance.

The sound draws me like a moth to the flame. The women had been entertaining me very nicely, but this seems far more interesting. The sounds are muffled at first, again passing beneath the notice of most of the pack.

I look around, seeing if anybody else is hearing this, but they don't seem to. I expected their hearing to be better. Hard to tell if that is because they are trying to be polite, or because they are genuinely unable to detect chaos about to unfold.

I am starting to sense that I am different from this pack. At first, the fascination of meeting a great number of my kind was exciting. But I am starting to think that I might not be quite the same thing they are. I am closer to them than I am to most people, of course, but they are softer and more domestic than I imagined.

I excuse myself by telling them I am tired, and I go to find my mate. As I walk through the chateau, I hear voices. One slightly raised, one begging for his life.

I approach the room where the begging is taking place to find my Armand standing over the kneeling figure of Duplante. He has a sword in his hand. They are flanked by six or seven other men, all staring with a variety of intensities and expressions.

"If you will not take your wolf form, you will die," Armand declares. His voice is cold and does not brook any disobedience. "You have been cowardly for too long, Duplante. Too quick to talk, and too slow to pay in blood."

I draw in a little breath of excitement. My mate is going to kill that man. He's going to drop him in the middle of the fancy room. I've never felt so close to Armand before.

Someone clears their throat. A traitorous bastard who has put himself on my radar by drawing attention to me with a flick of his eyes.

Armand's head whips around. He sees me, and lowers the blade.

I feel disappointment.

I wish I had stayed hidden. I'd get to see bloodshed. Now I am going to get whatever public display Armand feels should be put on for me.

"Beatrix," he says.

"Hello," I say, feeling a little shy. He has always been attractive, but he is even more so now, holding a sword like a vengeful angel. I sense he is defending my honor. "What's happening?"

"Did you need something, darling?" He asks the question kindly, but with an obvious edge of wanting me to go away. He looks around, as if hoping some stray lady might come take me away. They won't, of course; they are too busy talking about me now that I am no longer there. It will be impossible to pry them from those conversations for an hour at least.

"No," I say, ignoring the verbal nudge to leave them to it. I won't be leaving this scene until it has come to its conclusion.

"Ma cherie, I do not wish you to see this. These are brutal matters that might frighten you," Armand says, taking a step toward me, trailing the sword behind him,

almost as if he doesn't want me to see and notice it.

He doesn't understand that I find this side of him very appealing, and not frightening at all. The moment before he saw me watching, the man he was in that instant—I felt our mate bond more keenly than I have at any other time. Even when he was inside me.

Duplante, thankfully, is stupid, and decides to make an appeal to the men he thinks are his friends. This is clearly the act of a man who has never been forced to read any room, and who does not understand that the people he thinks like him would happily see him dead.

“Insubordinate little bitch, and me here on my knees being forced into animal submission on her account. Are you really all going to stand around and watch him fall for her cunt this hard? The pack hasn't deteriorated enough for your likings? Waiting until we are all entirely destitute?”

Armand's eyes flash upon hearing that disrespect. He holds up a finger to me.

“One moment, my darling, I have to deal with a little matter of pack discipline.”

He turns, and with a whip of his wrist, he sweeps the blade through Duplante's neck. The man's head topples as if it were only ever attached with butter, blood spurting in thick arterial gusts across the carpets and lower legs of the men.

I stare, entranced, feeling my wolf self surging at the sight. This dress is on the verge of being torn to shreds by the animal inside me who wishes to be free to roll in that blood and howl in triumph.

Armand hands the sword to one of his off-siders and comes to me without so much as looking back at the carnage he has just enacted.

He ushers me away from the bloody sight. I would resist, but I know better than to defy an alpha who just killed someone. Submission to him feels rather exciting now. Besides, there will not be much to look at for long.

I have the sense that the entirety of the scene will be clean in a matter of minutes, a small cadre of servants are already on their way with mops and cloths.

“You killed him.”

“I did. He disrespected you, and in doing so, disrespected me. Besides, there is some evidence he was defrauding the pack through the assets he managed. I had to deal with him one way or another. He chose the means in the end.”

This is the most attractive Armand has ever been.

“Are you afraid of me now?”

I shake my head no. I am not afraid of him. Quite the opposite. I like him more, trust him more, feel a greater kinship with him now than ever before.

He swings me about and looks down at me with an intensity born of his fear that I might not understand him, that I might mistake him for a feral, unpredictable beast.

“I would never hurt you, Beatrix. You alone are singular in this world. You, I will protect at the cost of all things, including my life. I want you to know that.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Of course.”

He smiles a little and shakes his head. “Why is this so easy, when every other conversation we have is so hard? Why will you tell me nothing of your past, of your life before me, but seeing me slay a man in cold blood seems to bring you only peace?”

I give a little shrug. “I’m complicated, I suppose. Isn’t that what they say about women?”

“Complex, yes, but I intend to unravel those tangles in you.”

“Best of luck with that,” I laugh. I have no intention of divulging my secrets. I might have seen something dark in him, but what he just did was practical, if a little flamboyant. Duplante was clearly a problem that needed to be taken care of. I am an entirely different kind of dilemma.

“I’m taking you to bed,” he says. “My appetite has not been entirely sated yet, has yours?”

He’s not talking about food; even I in my relatively pure state know that. The desire between us has been sparking since I found him standing over his unfortunate victim sword in hand, and is only getting more intense by the moment.

He takes me to the bedroom and together we stand in the glow of moonlight now shining through the old windows.

“I love you,” he says. “I am devoted to you, and I will never, ever allow anybody to so much as disparage you, let alone hurt you.”

There’s stray blood on his suit and his shirt and on his neck. I rise to my tiptoes and delicately lap it from his skin, the tip of my tongue cleaning away those few drops of Lord Duplante.

I feel a shiver run through him as he understands what it is I just did, how I did not recoil from the sanguine aftermath of his murder, instead took it inside me.

“Mon dieu ,” he murmurs. “You are an incredible creature, Trixie.”

I don't usually like it when my name is shortened, but he says it with a delightful French smoothness that makes it sound like a sweet endearment.

“I like the taste of blood,” I say. “Especially blood shed for me.”

He growls in response as the tip of my tongue lingers around his pulse. I am teasing him, being quite forward. I am not playing the delicate, frightened little virgin with him. I am the feminine animal he desires, someone equal to him in ferocity if nothing else.

“More perfect than I could ever imagine,” he growls. He kisses me roughly, pushes me against the wall, rifles through the fabric that keeps him from me, the fancy gown an impediment to our mutual lust.

Blood rushes, flows, his cock surges inside me. Images of animal brutality flash through my mind as he fucks me. I know there's something wrong with me. There's always been something wrong with me.

“You're so fucking perfect,” he purrs against my throat, dragging his teeth up my neck in a sensual motion that sends tingles running rampant through my body.

He pulls the gown from me, soft fabric sliding down my curves and pooling on the floor. The underwear I put on is taken off swiftly and meets the same fate.

Armand hoists me up in his arms and slides me down on his cock, impaling me with rough desire. My pussy is still aching from the first time we mated, but the pain only

makes it better, more intense. It's a dull ache that sinks through my pussy, finds all the heat inside me, and turns me into a writhing, squirming animal mess grinding against his cock.

It's hard to hide my body's tenderness though, and his ardor means that he is not careful or gentle. He fucks me like I want him to, like a filthy, hungry little animal riled by blood and lust.

"Mmmm oww, mmm," I try to hide my sounds of pain amid my moans of undeniable pleasure.

"Does your sweet little pussy hurt?" He rumbles the question in my ear, pins me against the wall, and gives me a firm thrust.

"Mgghh!" I let out a little stifled cry, but he follows that rough thrust with another and another until finally I give in.

"It hurts a little," I admit.

He slows immediately, sliding more slowly in and out of me, keeping me in place and keeping me fucked, though more gently now.

"Poor thing," he says. "Not used to being mated, are you, this sweet little pussy is tender." He gives another long thrust deep inside me, arching his hips.

"You're a monster," I moan.

It's not a complaint, or an accusation. It's an acknowledgement. He is beautiful and refined, but I thought he was soft in some way. He is not. He is as hard as anybody I have ever encountered, including the person I see in the mirror.

* * *

Armand

I pause for a moment, deep inside her, my lust all but entirely clouding my head as I claim her, my mate, the woman I would and have killed for. I will not have her insulted. She will be respected if the whole chateau needs to run red.

Is this how she sees me now? As monstrous?

It does not seem to dull her need for me. The moment I stop, she starts moving on me herself, sliding her tightness down my shaft, breeding herself. When she whimpered and said it hurt, I sensed she did not want me to stop, and now I am certain of it. She wants to enjoy the pain and the pleasure. She wants to feel everything.

And if I have to be a monster to give her everything she wants and needs? Protection, pain, pleasure? I'll be a monster as long as she wants me to be.

Is she afraid of me now? She says not, but how could she not be, having seen such a terrible thing unfold in front of her, and now the beast who did it is deep inside her, taking her again, using her tender pussy for his pleasure.

I feel her inner walls gripping me, I see the light in her eyes, and I smell her arousal. She likes this. This is the most receptive she has ever been, holding nothing back from me, giving even though I know it hurts.

Her whimpers are soft music to my ears, her surrender is a joy. She fought me so hard when we first met, she ran from me, she denied me her truth, but I don't feel any of that fight now. All I feel is her total sexual submission.

"You're going to come for me," I growl. "You're going to come as I breed you,

filling this sweet, owned pussy up with my cum.”

I feel her suckling at my neck, and I am almost certain that motion is not designed to please me as much as it is to get every drop of blood from my skin.

She is a dark, twisted little thing and my cock throbs all the more for the realization. Fucking her feels like being inside my own personal sexual universe. We match on levels neither one of us are consciously aware of, paired at a core anchor of our very beings, and there is nothing I would not do for her.

The feeling only intensifies as my orgasm comes upon me, rushing from my brain and my balls at the same time, every part of my being focused on knotting and rutting inside her until she is so full of me she cannot be anything other than bred.

“You’re going to swell for me, you’re going to take my seed, you’re going to be the mother of my whelps, and she-wolf of this pack. You’re my everything.”

She makes no verbal reply, but her little animal sounds, moans, groans, and grunts are enough to spur me on, the sound of her pleasure making me desperate to hear her peak.

“Yes! Armand!” She screams my name as orgasm fires through her, my knot stretching her pussy lewdly wide, trapping her on my cock. “Oh, my god, oh, my fucking... oh...”

I kiss her temples, stroke her hair, and reach between us to rub her clit, forcing her to keep the orgasm rolling around my knot. I know it can be painful to take, especially when she has only recently been bred for what I have to assume is the first time. This is rough treatment for a virgin, but I think she likes rough handling. I think she craves it.

She bites her lower lip, chews at the air, grinds and squirms and moans as my fingers continue to circle her clit harder and faster, spurring her onto another orgasm.

I feel her pussy grip my knot again, I feel her tremble all over. I see her sweat and hear her moan and I feel rushes of possession and pride as she responds to my touch as I demand.

“It’s too much,” she moans. “It’s all too much, it’s sore, but... no, don’t stop!”

I chuckle as I pull my fingers away, only for her to beg for me to put them back. I oblige her, because there’s no reason not to keep her in this particular physical prison. I can feel her soaking my knot as it begins to subside, her wetness and my cum coating my cock and then her thighs as her ongoing wriggling desire keeps her desperate for stimulation.

I slide my fingers inside her, rubbing up against the inner wall closest to her belly button, curling them up to find her secret little spot and forcing one final squirting release from her, after which she begs me to be careful as I pull my fingers from her swollen, ravaged sex.

“You are such a perfect mate,” I praise her, covering her with affectionate kisses and holding her in a tight embrace. She is soft and relaxed, no remnants of tension in her mind or her body. Her face is transformed by the orgasmic ordeal, and I think I glimpse what she would look like when she was entirely happy.

It will happen, I am sure of it. I will dedicate the rest of my life to keeping her in this state of completely satisfied desire. I will erase all the sorrows and horrors of her past. I will make her mine. Forever.

CHAPTER 8

A rmand

My mate keeps her secrets, but our lovemaking is so passionate I had started to forget that they mattered. We are forging something between us, something out of blood and lust, not tenderness and trust. I will take the former if I cannot have the latter.

I would never have slayed Duplante that way if not for her influence. Not that she asked me to do it, or that she had any idea it was in the cards, but something in her eyes when she saw me with the sword, an intense approval, made his fate inevitable.

She liked seeing me violent.

She liked seeing me merciless.

She liked seeing me kill.

Many of the men in the pack have told me how finding their mate made them better. I am almost certain Beatrix makes me worse.

I relish it deeply.

Probably shouldn't.

For too long I have been polite, controlled, passive at times. I have allowed life to flow by. I have let the pack do as they will, trusting in the forces of habit and

propriety to manage their behavior.

I see now that life as I desire it to be requires more aggression, more forcefulness. The willingness to do what must be done.

* * *

“So,” Marcel says in the early light of morning as I attempt to get my affairs in order while being able to think of nothing besides my mate. “Killed a man last night, did you?”

“He was asking for it.”

“I’d say he was. He’s been sitting on one of our largest estates for years and funneling the profits into private accounts. I was going to talk to you about it, but you were knee deep in your new mate.”

“Knee deep?”

“I didn’t want to mention the actual body part, Maître , at the risk of being disrespectful and losing my head.” He smiles to let me know he is joking about the last part.

The pack is having breakfast, but I leave my mate sleeping. She had a very big day yesterday and undoubtedly needs her rest. I need to see how everybody is reacting to the events. A death in the pack is an occasion, no matter how it comes about.

Breakfast, held in the conservatory, is busy as ever. The chateau contains thirty bedrooms and a good two-thirds of them are occupied at the moment. This is a place of respite for many, but not all of the pack.

Madame Foisin approaches me with a broad smile on her face. There is flour on her apron, and a little in her hair. She is a lovely woman who cooked for my father when he was a child, which gives some indication of her age. She is the most senior of us all, and the kitchens are her domain.

“Maître, I was wondering, do you think I should make a gâteau or a tarte Tatin?”

“For...”

“For the funeral. We will be laying Duplante to rest later today.”

I had not thought of catering the murder I committed, but I suppose that is part of the natural order of things.

“Ask his mate, perhaps.”

“Jennifer is in mourning and will not eat.”

I feel a deep pang of guilt at those words. “Don’t worry,” she says. “The man was terrible, and she will be better off for it. Sooner or later, every alpha makes his mark on the pack. Sometimes it is a terrible thing, but it is always necessary.”

I was concerned that the pack might react poorly to Duplante’s passing, but as a group they simply began to plan the funeral. His mate is in mourning, but not in a particularly deep way, I think. She has been relieved of a terrible burden.

* * *

Beatrix

I wake up, knowing exactly where I am because I have dreamed of it all night long.

My mind has been working overtime to try to integrate everything that has happened since I last slept.

I was terrified that the auction at the orphanage would lead me to ruin, but so far I seem to have fallen on my feet. I have a handsome, incredibly passionate mate. I belong to a pack of wolves, which means I am no longer alone in the world. I am finally with my own kind. I have every reason to be happy.

I don't know where Armand is, but that doesn't worry me. I have the sense that in this place, he is everywhere. His essence fills every inch and corner of this ancient French castle, which feels like a true home for our kind.

I find myself shedding a tear of relief. This is everything I never dared dream of. I had come to expect life to hurt, and to be empty of everything I need. I never imagined there was a place I belonged.

Getting up and dressing in the simplest of the dresses in my new wardrobe, I go and explore the place. There are wolves everywhere, but the chateau is by no means crowded. It is full of little nooks and secret spaces, each of which I want to come to know.

As I wander, I hear the unmistakable sound of someone crying. I am drawn to it, just as I was when I lived in the orphanage. If someone is hurt, I want to help.

I turn a corner and stop, realizing who it is.

The woman from last night. The one whose husband lost his head.

"I'm sorry," I say, apologizing for intruding on her. And maybe slightly for the other thing, but probably not.

She looks up at me with a tearful gaze.

“I’ve lost my mate,” she says. “He was a good man.”

I know you’re not supposed to argue with sad people, but I can’t help myself. I care, I really do, but I have a hard time talking like I do.

“He was demonstrably not a good man.”

“He was my mate,” she sobs. “He was all I had in this world.”

“You should consider getting more things. Maybe a hobby. Maybe stamp collecting.”

My words do not hit the way I want them to. They don’t help in the slightest. Actually, they make things a lot worse, because they turn her sadness into anger. Her face screws up and her eyes narrow with vicious anger, and she looks at me with true fury.

“You’re a little bitch. You’ll see. The alpha is sweet with you now, but over time he will treat you just like my man treated me. And maybe one day someone will kill him, and then you will know the pain I feel.”

“If he ever treats me the way Duplante treated you, I will kill him myself.” I pause, realizing that isn’t quite fair. “I might kill him anyway, you know.”

Her eyes widen.

“You’re a monster!”

“We’re all monsters. It’s our whole thing. We’re people who become wolves and devour human flesh.”

“We don’t devour human flesh!”

Another faux pas. I’m really racking them up today.

I try to reset the conversation a little.

“I am sorry you’re hurting. I really am. But that guy sucked, and if Armand hadn’t killed him, I think I would have sooner or later.”

“You?” She laughs bitterly. “You’re a female. You’ll be used to breed and nothing more. Me? I’ll never have another mate. I’ll never be bred again.”

“That’s up to you. Why don’t you try one of the younger males?”

She laughs, more out of shock than amusement.

“They’re a decade younger than me.”

“You could be a cougar as well as a wolf.”

She smiles weakly and shakes her head. “We get one mate.”

“I don’t believe that. I think we have special mates, but there’s nothing in life where there’s only one. I don’t believe your fated mate would curse at you in mixed company and get his head cut off.”

She starts to cry even more, and I slink away, feeling guilty and unable to help. Wolves put a lot of stock in fated mates and lifelong bonds, but I think sometimes a lifelong bond is better burned than endured. If I was talked to like a piece of shit and treated the same way, I’d rather be alone. I don’t care about the fucking mate bond. As much as I might be attracted and attached to Armand, I won’t be suffering for it.

Fuck that.

“There you are!” Armand steps around the corner, and his appearance makes my body flush with excitement and arousal. Looking at him is a chemical experience, like I’m doing a drug of some kind.

“Hi,” I say, instantly shy. This time yesterday, I didn’t know this man. Now, when I look at his handsome, angular, elegant face, I am internally set alight. It’s unsettling as much as it is exciting.

I wonder if Jenny felt that about the man who died, if she thrilled to him before he called her a curt name, or otherwise abused her.

“I wondered where you’d got to,” he says, with just enough concealed concern in his voice to tell me that he thought I’d run away. It’s not a ridiculous thought. Running away was my thing, for a while, until I realized that terrible things happen outside an orphanage, and sometimes awful walls can keep you safe.

“I was just looking around. Is that not allowed?”

“Of course it is allowed, this is your home. I am just cautious. I waited my entire life to find you, and now that I have found you, having you out of my sight creates a pain I didn’t know was possible to feel.”

I smile.

“Breakfast,” he says. “You must be starving.”

I am.

CHAPTER 9

A rmand

Beatrix settles in with the pack quite well, but of course I cannot let the mystery of her provenance lie. I send Daniel to scrounge up all the information he can find about her. He's a solid man, and I know if he finds something scandalous he won't use it against us.

A week passes, and life begins to somewhat settle into its new routine. I am a busy man, splitting my time between never-ending pack business and time with my mate.

I have avoided bringing up anything to do with her past, because it makes her uncomfortable, and she has deftly avoided talking about anything that happened outside the orphanage itself.

Daniel returns with tidings of his investigation, but I know the moment I see him I am not going to like what he has to say. He has a particular hangdog look about him that suggests failure.

"Bad news, Ma'tre ," Daniel says, slinging himself into the chair in front of my desk.

"Yes?"

"The orphanage is gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

“Not the building itself of course, Ma?tre , but the inhabitants. The structure, as it were. There are no more orphans, and no more staff. There’s nothing besides the shell of the place. Looks like the director took your money and ran.”

“Did you find any records?”

“No. I found nothing. The place has been stripped bare.”

I find myself pacing. The notion that he took the money and did God knows what to the girls who were too young to be adopted bothers me. I might have inadvertently made some lives very miserable.

“They didn’t disappear. Track them. The director. The records. Search registries of storage facilities. I want to know who my mate is.”

“A DNA sample might be helpful. There’s a database held by some parties...”

“You mean the Americans?”

“No. I was thinking the Russians.”

I let out a sigh at the prospect of attempting to get information in or out of Russia at this point in time.

“From what I last heard, the Russian packs are overrun with...” I don’t even want to say it. The cold ones are rampant in the northern climes. They were run out of France many years ago, and I hope that I do not have to do it again in my time. Vampires are like rodents. They creep in under cover of darkness and they suck the life out of a place.

“Yes. I know. But at this point, if we want information...” he says. I know the

Russian packs have been dealing with vampires. I've heard rumors of marriages and worse. We won't be stooping that far.

"Let's look for the director first."

"Or perhaps you could convince the young lady herself to be forthcoming."

"I don't think she knows very much. She was young when taken to the orphanage. Whatever happened to her after that is clearly unpleasant and nothing she cares to remember, let alone recount. No, this is a task for you, Daniel."

"Very well, Maître. But I think you should send Antoine. He's older. People respect him more. He can walk into any official building and look like he works there."

"Not a bad idea," I say. "Is that what you want, to be off the hook?"

"I just think Antoine would do a better job."

"And you miss the cooking at the chateau."

"And I miss the cooking here," he admits. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

* * *

A week later...

While the mystery of her heritage is being resolved, I focus on Beatrix. I want to show her how good life can be with us, and I want to show her the world she now inhabits. A visit to the local village is, therefore, essential

We are beginning the happiest days of our life. I am determined they will be such. I

may not know everything about Beatrix, but I know enough to understand she has had precious few nice moments in her life. That is something I can and will remedy.

The local village is a treat I have been saving for her, waiting until she seemed settled and ready to be out among the general public. A week has gone by without major incident, and she has been relatively controllable. She has been practically civilized in most respects.

We take the train into Fontlune. I had tracks run there because the journey is so picturesque, running as it does along the cliffs of the area that look out over rolling hills dotted with ancient buildings. This is one of the oldest parts of the world, where humanity has made its home since the stone age. The villagers are happy enough for the tracks as they allow for some freight to be brought that would otherwise be stuck on trucks that rarely like to rumble through the crumbling country roads.

Fontlune is a medieval village set on a cliff side, much the same way the chateau is, but older still. The buildings here have not changed measurably since the founding of the town. Red-roofed colomage buildings made of graying yellow stone and half-timbered walls straggle along the cliff face, and the center of the town is tucked in under the tall church tower.

It is a place in which time has been assiduously banished, and it is one of the places I feel most at peace in the world. The villagers have been under the protection of my pack for generations.

“Here we are,” I say, offering her my hand to help her alight.

She looks very different than she did when we first met. She is bathed, and dressed in calico white linen, her hair sleek and shiny and falling in loose curls down past her shoulders. The ladies of the pack have made it their mission to ensure she looks the part, offering various cosmetic services, hair trims, nails, even a little trimming of her

brows.

I forget, sometimes, how young she is. Not yet nineteen, and yet she has a pack looking up to her. I am familiar with the unseen weight of that sort of responsibility. I wonder if she feels it. I wonder if she knows how important she is.

“I had no idea there were people so close,” she says. “We run as wolves so near this town.”

“It’s a small town. Only two hundred inhabitants, and far enough from civilization that there’s very little likelihood of running into visitors. These people have lived alongside the pack for generations. Their local legends speak of wolves who become men, so any sightings are considered part of the local reality.”

“Seems reckless, but okay, if it works for you.” She looks around at the scenery. I wonder if she sees what I see, if she feels a certain pride at being part of this incredible beauty that can only exist where man has been in concert with nature for hundreds of years.

“There’s wolves everywhere,” she says.

She’s referring to the decorations, little wolves painted under windows and under doors by hands long passed on, refreshed by more recent ones. This is one of many traditions arising from the unique relationship between supernatural and typical.

“Everybody born here is natively considered part of the pack. They’re human, of course, but they’ve provided cover for us for a long time and now we return the favor. I am on the council, of course, and there are plenty of economic...”

“Can we get ice cream?”

“Better. We can get gateau Basque.”

We eat the sweet pastry treat, and for an afternoon we are a young couple in love, simply and completely enchanted with one another as slow liquid sun makes its way over the ancient stones.

“It could be like this every day for as long as we live,” I tell her. “Our children playing in the square, us enjoying local baking. This is what I want for you. For us. Happy ever after.”

She snorts into her gateau . “Sometimes you talk like a cheesy romance novel.”

“Someone has to hold hope when others cannot. That is half the job of an alpha.”

She doesn’t say anything to that directly. She finishes her gateau and looks around at the various sights and draws in the sounds and finally musters a response.

“This is beautiful,” she says, her tone half-annoyed, as if admitting that the place is pretty is something of a chore. She is enjoying herself more than she wants to. That is the problem. Life had become one series of terrible events for her, and now I am showing her that it can be good.

It would be easy to regard her tone as petulant and tempestuous, even childlike, but I see more than simple bad behavior. She is out of her element, and I know all too well that being shown good, happy things won’t necessarily make her feel good or happy.

I imagine it brings up feelings of loss, perhaps even rage when she realizes that all the suffering she went through was unnecessary. There were happy lives to live all along. People were cruel to her not because the world is cruel, but because they were.

For now, I am pleased to see her enjoying the village as much as I do, even if she’s

fighting against it.

“There are caves nearby where ancient men daubed paintings on the walls, beasts and creatures lost to modernity,” I tell her. “We can go and see them if you like.”

She gives me a smile that is only fifty percent forced. “I would like that.”

* * *

Beatrix

He is doing his best to make all of this nice, and I wish I could feel it on the inside the way I can observe it on the outside. I know intellectually that this is a beautiful village. I know this food is incredibly tasty. And I know that his imaginings of a marriage and children running barefoot around this ancient town square could very much be real.

It just doesn't fill me with hope the way it does for him. And of course, I know why. He has lived a life in this world, in the chateau, and in this town, and with more money than he knows what to do with. Everything has always gone Armand's way.

Nothing has ever gone my way. Every time I caught sight of a sliver of hope it was either snatched away, or worse, ended up being some kind of trap. I didn't notice my ability to believe in good things leaving me, but I notice that it is gone now.

I can enjoy the cake for what it is, experience the day for what it is, but trust this place to be what it seems? Absolutely not. Just because things look happy doesn't mean they are. Just because things seem good doesn't mean they are. People are liars. They can't help themselves.

Thanks to my better-than-average-even-for-a-wolf hearing, I can hear the bustle of

the town around me, conversations taking place behind what people think are closed doors. My hearing has always been better than most. Animal senses are. I wonder if Armand has his closed off, or if he just doesn't care, but I hear discord all around us. I can hear couples bickering. I can hear children yelling in frustration. I can smell the bitterness behind some of these smiles.

A small family wanders in front of us. Man, woman, baby in a push chair. They've been at the bakery.

A woman shows her husband a cute little wolf-shaped pastry. He smiles at it briefly, then rolls his eyes as she turns away and tends to their baby, sharing the treat with its grabby little hands. He pulls out his phone and opens a text. I can't see the message, but I can smell the pheromone release he gets from it. He's cheating right in front of his wife and baby, and I'm sure both mother and child believe implicitly in the happy family they don't actually have.

"Beatrix?"

"Hm?"

"You weren't listening," Armand says, a slight note of accusation in his tone.

He's wrong about that, of course. I was listening. I was listening to the myriad domestic scraps of all kinds going on around us. I was listening to parents telling their children to pick up their toys. I was listening to football games being turned up just that little bit louder to cover the sound of a vacuum cleaner. I was listening to dishes being done, and beers being poured, and I was listening to the bright and cheery voices of visiting couples that slipped back into dour and unhappy tones the moment they thought they had privacy.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

He gives me a patient look, his eyes fixed on mine, as if looking at me could keep my focus. Who knows. Maybe that is how that works. Maybe if I just look into his eyes, I'll stop noticing how the world has remained more or less miserable in spite of all the beauty in it, how many cruelties are hidden away in the plain sight of mundane day.

"And you're gone again," he says. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing," I say. I've shared thoughts like these before, and nobody likes to hear them. People want to hear nice things, cheerful things, the kinds of things that pour from his mouth without effort.

"I can feel the weight of that nothing, Beatrix."

His question probes and finds me raw beneath its point.

"Sorry, I should rephrase. None of your business."

He lets out a barking laugh of surprise, but he's not actually offended. I do like that about him. Armand is very centered in himself. He knows who he is and what he thinks and he does not need others to be thinking the same things in order for him to maintain his opinions. It's a very attractive quality. It almost makes me trust him. Almost.

"You are... certainly not what I am used to," he says. "The notion of anybody in the pack telling Ma?tre what they are thinking is none of his business..." He laughs again, entirely amused. Then his expression turns intense, his eyes more silver as he crooks a finger at me. He can't let this slide. He has to fix me. A tingle of excitement makes its way down my spine as I realize I might very well be in trouble with him. That's more interesting than the veneer of happiness he's been wanting me to buy into.

“Come here.”

He gets up, takes me with him, and draws me into an alcove in an alley where he runs his hands up the sides of my body, squeezing and soothing me with his grounding touch until they settle on my hips. He looks down at me, and I look up at him, the several-inch disparity in our height creating a dynamic of imbalance I will never shake.

“You,” he says, “are retreating into the recesses of your own mind, and coming out sassy.”

“You’re describing thinking. Is thinking banned in your pack?”

He lifts a brow at me, that finely shaped, elegant flock of hair signifying so much. He likes my attitude, but he knows he shouldn’t tolerate it. I’m sure he’s tempted to respond to me in kind, but he knows he has to be the alpha his pack groomed him to be, so instead of companionship there is authority.

“You have to speak with respect,” he reminds me. “I like your fire, but there are limits to what I can tolerate without having to discipline you. You’re a bad little girl sometimes.”

If only he could stop his voice from getting so thick and lustful at that last part.

“I am?”

“Mhm.” He slides his hand around and taps my ass. “And I would have it no other way.”

“Is that why you’re trying to beat it out of me?”

“Hardly,” he snorts. “I have not beaten you, Beatrix.”

“You whipped me when we first met.”

“That was different. We were strangers, and you were making a terrible scene. Besides, I had appearances to maintain.” He pauses. “I did not know you then.”

“You thought I was some other girl to be purchased for your amusement.”

“Not my amusement, for the rest of my life.”

“Mhm.”

“So cynical,” he says, taking my chin in his hand and pressing his lips to mine. “So beautiful. So brave. So bold.”

For a week, we have avoided discussing the part where he purchased me and dragged me out of the orphanage. He is so civilized in his everyday life. Like now, in this village. Pretending we are normal people enjoying a normal day. He wants so badly for me to play along with him.

But I can't.

I won't.

Because I see what he is underneath the veneer. I've seen him kill a man. I've seen him abduct a woman. The woman was me, and it was a week ago. So.

His kiss ignites that animal chemistry we always have, but my mind is not entirely dulled by it. He's dangerous. I know that. It turns me on, but I'm not blind. I'm not going to believe in his happy little world when I have already seen and felt so much

darkness.

That's why there's tension between us, a battle of wills that never really ceases. We put the hostilities aside for cake, or sex, but I think we both know that my status as purchased captive is never going to result in anything happy or healthy.

He kisses me again, more roughly, with more desire. He wishes I would just submit and be happy. He wishes this could be easy, the same way everything has always been easy for him.

I might be his first big, bad problem. He's not ready for me. Not really. He still thinks I'm a helpless broken little orphan. I am all of those things, but I am more besides. Does he know that? Does he even begin to sense it? I don't know.

I play small, because that's what he wants right now.

I melt into him, because that's what I want right now.

We play pretend together, that he is in control of me, and that I am controllable. We pretend that he knows me, and we pretend that I am known.

In the alley of a picturesque French town, we make love. Sweet, passionate, romantic, almost human love, rutting secretively against the wall of the ancient building in a quiet little alley that sees no foot traffic. Armand pins me against the wall, picking me up and holding me in place, pulling my panties to the side and sliding his cock in and out of me with devastatingly slow, gliding strokes that make me want to moan except for the knowledge that we have to be quiet. The world is going on all around us, and we are stealing pleasure and connection in the middle of its mundane play.

All the while he is fucking me, his cock swelling into the knot that will trap us together until nature declares me good and properly bred. I feel orgasm building

inside me every time his hips surge up and the hard mound of his pubic bone grinds my hungry clit for a second or two before sliding away so he can slide inside me again.

Faster and faster, harder and harder until there are almost no breaks and he is just deep inside me, cock thick and knotted, his seed pumping inside my pussy and my clit grinding against him as I submit to him, to orgasm, to the impromptu afternoon breeding.

“You are such a good girl,” he praises me, dropping kisses all over my face as he holds me in place afterward, the knot slowly deflating between us. I am stretched lewdly wide, my inner walls forced to take the unnatural girth of him as my clit continues to tingle, lubricated with sweat and seed as I stay in place against that wall.

“I’ve never been a good girl,” I breathe back between his kisses.

“You’re perfect,” he says. “You are everything I ever dreamed of and more. I love you, Trixie.”

He shortens my name, makes it smaller, cuter, sweeter, all while my well-fucked pussy soaks in his seed. I like it. I like him. Alright, I love him too.

“I love you too,” I tell him. “But I’m not perfect.”

“Quiet,” he says. “Maître has declared you perfect, so you are perfect. I will not brook any argument on that front.”

His cock slides from me, a gush of our desire runs down my thighs, and he slides my underwear back into place, the gusset instantly soaking with cum that I will have to wear.

“I’m so messy,” I say.

“Yes, you are.” He rubs his hand between my legs, pressing the wet fabric against my still sensitive clit. “You’re going to feel that, aren’t you, Trixie. You’re going to remember how it felt to be claimed by your alpha. And later, when I breed you again, you’re going to be wet and ready for me, aren’t you?”

I know exactly what he wants to hear.

“Yes, Ma?tre .”

His eyes flash as I use the pack term for him, he pats my semen-soaked pussy with a possessive tap and settles my skirt back into place. “Good girl,” he says. “Very, very good girl.”

* * *

We have dinner at a little restaurant in the village, having worked up an appetite. The food is good here, simple and fresh and cooked by someone who takes pride in it. I have been spoiled for dinners since I was abducted. I have been spoiled in many ways, some could say every way.

I hear a couple of men talking about the waitress. She’s pretty and not much older than me, and I see the way she’s forced to smile at some customers when she’d probably rather drop a tankard of beer on them.

“She’s a hot little piece of ass,” says the older man behind me.

“She’s mine, she is,” his companion comments.

“Thought she told you she wasn’t interested.”

“Said she doesn’t want me, but she’ll have me, whether she likes it or not.”

I stiffen.

I don’t think Armand heard them, but I did, and the rage that fills me as a result is extraordinary.

“We have to go,” I tell him.

“We do? Why?”

“Because I am going to turn into a beast and kill the man behind us if we don’t go now.”

Armand does not ask any more questions. I think he hears the urgency in my voice and realizes that I am not speaking metaphorically. I really will kill that man. It is taking all my self-control not to slide into the form of a wolf right now and tear him limb from limb. All my life, the girls I know have been preyed on by these useless, fleshy, corpulent, stupid creatures. I myself...

I take a deep breath and try to force the memories away even as they come flooding back of their own accord.

It happened about a year ago. I had snuck out of the orphanage in the attempt to find something approximating a life. I’d run away before, but this was the first time I’d been in a city at night rather than the local town...

* * *

A year ago...

The bus back to the orphanage is late. Actually, it's so late I don't think it's coming. I wonder if I read the schedule wrong, or if there's some reason it's not running to Burniecrag, the town where the orphanage is located.

Sitting at the bus stop with an all too thin coat pulled tight around me, I think about how angry the matron is going to be when I do finally get back. She'll send me to the director again, and I'll get another lecture about roaming.

A man pulls over, looks out the window of his sedan.

"The bus has stopped running. Do you need a ride?"

He looks like an average man. He has graying hair and a mustache and a work jacket that makes him seem responsible. He probably has kids my age.

"It's cold," he says as I get up. "And you're out late. Your parents must be worried about you."

"I don't have any parents," I say, getting into his car.

"Oh? Where are you living?"

"Burniecrag," I say.

He sets off along the road, and for the first little bit of the journey I do not notice that anything is wrong. I am too focused on worrying about what will happen once I get back to the orphanage. A beating, probably, or worse, confinement. They will surely notice I am missing at dinner. I was rostered to wash the dishes. Perhaps I can convince them I merely shirked the dishes, rather than left the place entirely.

My thoughts are pulled from that set of concerns when I feel a large, ham-like hand

settle halfway up my thigh.

I look at the man. He looks—no, leers—back at me.

My heart starts to beat faster as I realize his intentions are not what I thought. It is not the first time a man who has made me feel uncomfortable, but it is the first time one has touched me so forwardly, and in such a contained space.

“What are you doing?”

“We could get to know each other better,” he says.

“No, thank you. I’m late home. My father will be worried.”

He looks at me with the beady eyes of a lesser predator, not one who focuses on blood or meat, but one who senses weaknesses of another kind altogether. “You don’t have a father,” he says. “You would have called him if you did.”

“He’s...”

I don’t get to finish the lie because the man has pulled off the road and is trying to pull me across the car to him. He smells bad. Sour. Unwashed.

I kick him, I curse at him, and I push him away, but my struggles only make him laugh. He’s a lot larger than me, and a lot stronger. He gets out of the car, comes around to the passenger side, throws the door open and tries to pull me out that way. Kicking only gives him the chance to grab me by the ankle.

“Stop being a stupid little bitch. You’re out here on your own looking for trouble. Girls like you need to be taught what they’re good for.”

He starts ripping at my clothes, and that's when I grab the knife he has at his waist. He thought it would function as a threat, I'm sure. He must work at the slaughterhouse, because the hilt is caked with old blood, but the blade is clean.

I punch him with it, plunging the knife into his chest. It goes in deeper than I thought it would. I figured it would be stopped by his ribcage, but apparently that's not actually as good at stopping hard blows from a knife as you imagine.

I pull it out as he reels backward.

"You little..."

I can't believe he's still talking, let alone standing. I thought you died when someone stabbed you, but apparently it takes more than the one time. I do it again. And this time it is less of a desperate act and more aggressive.

I am beginning to feel very... inhuman. The sight of the blood, the smell of it, it's all very... moreish. There are things happening inside me, tectonic shifts of flesh and being. All my life I've been told I can be fractious and grumpy, but now I realize it was more than that. I am furious. I am enraged. And those feelings are not bad, or any indication of weakness of character. They are entirely necessary for the transformation that is taking place now.

I stab him again. And again. I make sure that the job of protecting myself is very thoroughly and properly done, and that nobody else will ever be hurt by him.

In the aftermath of doing what had to be done, I am covered in blood. Moonlight makes it look black against my skin, and I am absolutely coated along my hands and arms. I barely recognize them. Were my nails always so long? Was there so much hair, no, fur on the back of my hands?

I find myself on all fours, my body arched in release. It feels like orgasm, like unfolding in a way I had no idea I could unfold. I have been all bunched up my whole life, pretending to be something and someone I am not.

I no longer feel fear. I certainly do not feel guilt. In their place, I feel freedom and strength. I no longer need a bus. I can run home.

Of course, that's how I ended up naked in a field, but that's a memory for another time.

* * *

"Did something upset you?" Armand asks the question on the way home. The train is chugging merrily through the countryside

I struggle for an explanation, something that won't require me to actually tell him anything. "Sometimes I don't feel like I can control myself. It feels like I'm going to come out of my skin."

I don't tell him what I heard, or why it upset me so much, or what I intend to do. I know he wouldn't approve. Nobody ever approves of the way I like to fix things.

"You've not been shifting long, have you?" He sighs. "I wish you would tell me how you came to find your wolf self. It would help us bond."

"Why?"

"Well, it usually comes after mating, as I mentioned..."

I am not in the mood for talk about mating, or questions about my past, or anything. I wish he'd just stop. I turn on him, angry, teeth flashing.

“You think because I have power usually bestowed by some man’s cock, I must have taken a man’s cock?”

“I’m asking questions, not making assumptions.”

“Liar. You keep asking me if I was a virgin when we met. You think I’ve fucked someone else. This is all about where my pussy has been. You know what? Fuck you, Armand. Fuck you, and your castle, and your pack, and your village, which is filled with assholes, and fuck your fucking train.”

I take my wolf form and I jump off the train.

This time I am not tired. This time I am not scared. This time I am furious and I am running from the horrific prospect of having to share one of the worst moments of my life with someone who I actually like even though I’m fighting with him right now.

I know he’ll hunt me down, but part of me hopes he won’t. I don’t want to have to share these horrible bleeding parts of myself. I don’t want to feel examined and exposed. I just want to be, and if he won’t let me exist, then...

CHAPTER 10

A rmand

She'd rather die than actually talk to me.

Watching a woman throw herself off a train mid-shift is an absolutely insane sight. She takes her wolf form while in midair, and by the time she lands, she does so on powerful paws and massive legs that absorb the shock and take the momentum, using it for propulsion.

Stopping the train with the emergency pull cord yet again, I bound into the dark after her. My life seems to be consumed by chasing my mate and wondering what the hell happened to her before we met.

I don't have the patience for the chase, so I go all out, frustration propelling me at greater speeds than usual. I overhaul her in around five minutes and bring her down with a bite to the ruff of hair at her neck, bringing her down with me in a tangle of limbs, forcing her out of her animal form with a rough bite that does draw blood.

I'd usually be gentler, but I am at the limit of my patience with her recklessness, and she will heal up almost immediately in her human form anyway. I want there to be some rough animal pain for her to contend with, a consequence for turning this pleasant day into another mess.

"What's wrong with you!" I snarl the question down at her, teeth flashing at the end of her nose. "Do you want to die?"

“What’s wrong with you!” she screams back, unafraid and twice as furious. “Why do you only fucking care about what’s been between my legs?”

“I don’t care about that. I do, but because I want to know what your life was like before me. I want to know what happened.”

“Liar! You don’t ask questions about anything other than sex,” she throws back, slapping me in the face for good measure.

The blow shocks me, angers me, almost makes me retaliate, but sense takes the place of violence. What the hell am I doing? I love this woman and this is how I am trying to find out more about her?

“Just... stop running. You’re going to get yourself killed,” I growl down at her as we lie panting in the grass. I slide off her, but I sling a leg on top of her to stop her from getting up again. She’s incredibly powerful in her wolf form. So am I, but I am not used to having to chase down my lover.

“Stop asking,” she says. “Stop asking about my past, about all of it.”

“Fine. I won’t ask again. Just please stop fucking jumping from the goddamn train or I’m going to have to start strapping you down when you’re aboard.”

She looks up at me, naked and beautiful and terrified in some way that I can’t touch. I don’t think she’s afraid of me. I think she’s afraid of me knowing her, which is worse.

I can’t rush this. If we were normal people, we would barely be one date into knowing one another. The fact that we are mates means everything has happened on an accelerated clock. I can’t expect her to trust me deeply yet.

“I’m sorry I asked again,” I say. “You’re right.”

“I am?”

She looks surprised.

“Yeah.” I sit up. “You hardly know me. We both have secrets. It’s going to take time to build the trust necessary to share all of them. I’m going to let you move at your own pace.”

“Okay,” she says, her voice smaller. “Armand?”

“Yes?”

“Can I make my own way home?”

“You want me to leave you in the wild in the middle of the night?”

“Yeah. I need some time to think. I need some time to myself. I can’t think at the chateau. It’s too... it’s not... the place fills my mind.”

I nod. I don’t want to let her be out here on her own, but I also don’t want to make her feel like she can’t breathe.

“Very well,” I say. “I will give you two hours. Be safe.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really. Don’t do anything silly.”

“I promise not to do anything silly ,” she says in a tone that makes me wonder if this

is a good idea.

I have to show that I trust her. I have to show her that she has enough space that she doesn't have to run like crazy. The chateau is her home, not her prison. I am her mate, not her captor.

So I let her slide into the night.

I follow at a distance, downwind so she can't scent me. I'm not leaving her to her own devices, obviously. I'm going to make sure she is safe.

She goes back to the village, moving at quite a clip in her wolf form. She seems to have something in mind. I consider whether or not I should stop her. I have a feeling that she is up to something I will not like.

But she hasn't done anything wrong yet.

And I said I'd trust her.

So it doesn't matter that every instinct I have is screaming at me to stop her.

She pads into town, sticking to the shadows. This is not good. As a general rule, it is not allowed for members of my pack to take their shifted form in front of humans. I don't think she's been told that, but I make a mental note to let her know.

She stops in the shadows outside the tavern. She waits as people leave, mostly too drunk to notice her. I see her wagging her tail and lowering her nose to her paws. She's putting on an act, appearing to be a dog, curling up on herself and making herself look small. I look for a chance to come and chivvy her out of the place, but there are too many people around, and while one wolf playing small might pass unnoticed by the largely drunk people leaving the tavern this late, two almost

certainly won't. People keep coming at awkward intervals, giving me no clear shot to get in and herd her out.

And then the man she must have been waiting for emerges. Her ears perk up. She follows him. I follow her, trying to push away the sense of jealousy that rises in me. What does she want with this older heavyset villager? She follows him down a path and into the town square proper.

And that is where she does something so brutal, so violent, and so vicious that the sight will stay with me for the rest of my life.

I watch, horrified, as she savages a complete stranger by the fountain in the middle of the town square. A wolf can kill a man in seconds. She has done enough damage to destroy him and take him to literal pieces in under a minute. Then, with her victim publicly dismembered in the very heart of Fontlune, she flees.

There's nothing I can do. He's already very obviously dead, and running into town naked is not going to help. I have to follow her. She runs for the chateau like a wild thing. I give chase. This time I do not bother to hide the fact of my presence.

I run alongside her, terrified that the villagers will go for their guns and get in their cars and...

Sure enough, a matter of minutes after the death, headlights start to bounce across the plains as my fears are instantly realized. When a wild animal attacks inside a human encampment, humans respond as they have since time immemorial—they get a hunting party together and they chase the animal down with an eye to put it to death.

She starts to move in such a way as to put bushes and undergrowth between her and the lights. She's been chased by hunters before, clearly. The stories this girl is not telling me must be absolutely legion.

Running from hunters is all about eye line. They need a clear shot, and over the next few miles we do our best not to give them one. Shouts of confusion indicate they're not actually sure if they've spotted us or not. Some say we're foxes, or deer, or dogs. That doesn't stop a few hot heads taking shots anyway, bullets singing around us as we run for our lives.

This is the last time she goes anywhere alone. This might be the last time either one of us goes anywhere at all.

* * *

Beatrix

Armand is going to be so very mad. I don't care. The moment I bit into that man's neck I knew I'd done a good thing. The waitress and every other female he thinks about like he has a right to them just because he wants them will be safer now.

We are getting shot at, and that's not great. Those cars are bouncing around like ships at sea as they rumble over the terrain at the highest speed they can manage, and we are zigging and zagging for our lives. The fact that there are two of us further splits the shots.

There's just one problem. The chateau is miles away, we haven't lost them yet, and I am starting to tire. There's only so far that adrenaline can take you. If I can't keep running, there's nothing Armand can do to save me.

In life, you're always on your own. Whether it's surviving an orphanage or being chased by furious villagers who want to shoot you for savaging the village despoiler, other people can only help so much.

Armand sees that I'm slowing.

He slows too.

No! I want him to run. I want him to escape.

He slows more. He falls back behind me.

I know instinctively what he is doing, and why. He's not tired. He's a lot fitter than I imagined.

He's sacrificing himself.

For me.

When you're running from a predator, you don't need to be faster than the predator, you just need to be faster than your friends. Except Armand is going to let himself die. For me. For a girl he's known for a week, for someone who won't even talk to him about her past and keeps flinging herself off trains.

I didn't know it was possible to feel guilt while in wolf form. That has never happened before. Suddenly I am absolutely flooded with it.

I want to tell him to stop, but without the benefit of speech all I can do is get slower as well, and that will make him slower still, so really what I have to do is run like hell so that him being behind me does not mean he is caught.

I've never really thought of myself as lucky before, but that changes as Fate steps in to spare us.

I hear the hiss of a radiator impaled on a branch, and a crunch of an axle breaking over a rock within seconds of each other as the two cars come to an untimely end with their cargo of incensed villagers.

We continue to run full tilt all the way back to the chateau, arriving exhausted, muddy, and somehow against all odds, alive.

I fall into my human form at the foot of the stairs, and Armand does the same, his hand grasping the back of my neck as he ushers me up the staircase.

I know he's very much furious with me, but he does not say a word.

* * *

Armand

I shouldn't ask. I shouldn't bother to even form a question. I should remain silent and simply...

"What the Hades..."

I can't help myself. It's impossible, after such an experience, to not ask a single question or say a single word.

"You said you weren't going to ask," she says, her voice a low whisper, as if she doesn't really want to be flippant, but that phrase was preloaded in her brain.

"Go to bed, Beatrix. I cannot deal with you tonight. Bed. Now."

She slinks off without another word, knowing she's created the kind of mess very few people could ever hope to emerge from unscathed.

I can imagine the argument that will ensue in the morning. I'll lecture her for killing someone, she'll tell me that she saw me murder someone first. I'll say I had a good reason. She will say she did too. Then she won't explain why she did it and I'll have

to accept that because I promised not to ask any questions.

I am not ready for bed. I am exhausted, but keyed up.

I pull on a robe and go to my favorite lounge, where a good cognac awaits, as well as a good friend. The best friend, I mentally note with some irony, because he will not ask too many questions.

“I almost died tonight, Daniel.”

“Oh?” He looks up over his book with mild interest.

“Yes.”

“Glad you didn’t,” he says.

“Me too.”

“Was it anything to do with your mate?”

“Yes.”

“Figures. Women.”

“Women,” I agree, downing a good four fingers of whiskey.

It is not enough.

I sleep in the lounge that night. Someone puts a blanket over me, someone who understands about women, I imagine. When I wake up, Beatrix is apologetic in the shape of her body, but not in actual words.

I will deal with her, but only when I am ready to.

Life has already begun to absorb her at the chateau. I have a hard time imagining the time before Beatrix was here. She is a bold presence in the pack, never shy with an opinion, but with a sense of care for the pack that is as innate to her as breathing. She truly was made to be an alpha's mate.

But she also appears to hunt and kill men for sport.

I retire to my office to think and to do business. It feels like a much safer and reliable thing to put my effort into.

“Maître, we have a problem.”

If only he knew what an understatement that was. Antoine is supposed to be investigating the mystery of my mate, but he is back for some reason, something about consulting with the librarian.

Antoine is one of the higher-ranking members of the pack's administration. He is a solid, soft-spoken wolf with dark hair and eyes so light brown they almost appear red in certain lights. He is older than I am, as many of the upper ranks are, but he has never made the mistake of speaking down to me.

“What's the problem?”

“Someone is killing in the village.”

I clear my throat, my first instinct being to cover for Beatrix.

“Why would that be of concern to us?”

“A man was carried off in the night then disemboweled in the town square, his chest opened for the vultures who made their meal in the early morning light. I am told it was a disturbing scene for all those who viewed it.”

Antoine’s version of events certainly is dramatic, but that is how these stories go. Every retelling will add some embellishment. The vultures are a nice touch.

I draw in a deep breath. I knew this was going to come up.

“If it is not overstepping to make the assumption, your little bride has a talent for dispensing a very primal form of justice, Ma?tre .”

I draw in another breath. Breathing has very much become something I must manually control in this moment in which I seem to control nothing else.

“It is not overstepping. I do not like disrespect, but I do not deny that there is a chance she could be involved.”

I do not like that I am effectively lying to my pack. I do not want them to know what happened, but it seems they have already put two and two together and come up with a bloody corpse.

I can avoid the matter no longer, and so I summon Beatrix to the office. We need to discuss this one way or another. It may as well be here and now.

She comes looking sheepish. The irony is not lost on me as she looks up under her lashes at me. I know she is guilty as sin. She knows I know. Antoine knows. I would say there are cubs in the pack who already know. The question is what charade of justice and discipline will play out here. Killing humans is deeply taboo, for obvious reasons.

“Beatrix, you killed a man last night,” I say.

She smiles, looking almost proud. Antoine’s brows rise as he takes in this expression of hers. He will remember this and add it to the story, I am sure. So much for a tearful, repentant mate.

“Yes,” she says.

“I want to know why.”

The smile slips away, and her eyes go flat the way they do when she has no intention of talking. This vault of hers is the thing that most frustrates me. In moments like these she seems entirely impenetrable.

“Thank you, Antoine,” I say. “I will handle this.”

“Yes, Maître ,” he says, bowing out of the room.

“Beatrix, you have to stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what? Murder?”

“No. You have to stop going inside and locking yourself away. There is nothing you have to hide from me. I need you to understand that. You cannot disappoint me, or anger me, no matter what you do.”

“That’s not true,” she says immediately. “There are plenty of things I could do if I wanted to make you angry.”

“Do you? Want to make me angry?”

She doesn't answer that. She just looks at me with that impenetrable expression, half-blank, half-ominous. There is power in this young woman. She is young, but what she draws on is ageless. The energy in the room does not emanate from her alone. I can feel her unknown ancestry with us so keenly I can practically smell it.

"You can't publicly kill people in the village," I say. "It will cause terror among the people."

"Good. I want them to be afraid. If they are hurting others, I want them to stop. I want them to know that there is a consequence. Not something that might happen once they die, but something that will happen to them here and now, something that will take everything from them."

"What did the damn man do that warranted a public mauling and execution?"

"He wanted to take a waitress against her will. He was talking about it in the tavern. I decided to kill him."

I try to hide my reaction, and fail. I am deeply impressed. I like where this impulse comes from. I like how strong she is, and how obsessed she is with bringing justice. Most I know are eager to offload that responsibility to anybody else. It is a very good trait for an alpha's mate, or it would be if it could be tamed into something a little more civilized.

I try a new tactic, impressing on her the very real stakes I do not think she has considered, even under a hail of gunfire.

"You could be hurt. We could both have been killed."

She gives a little shrug. "If it happens, it happens. I'm sorry you were involved. I didn't know you were there. But I don't care what happens to me."

“I need you to be safe,” I tell her. “I did not wait all my life to meet you, to finally love you, to lose you in a matter of weeks because you don’t think your life has value unless you are protecting someone else.”

“What are you? A therapist?”

“No. But that might be a good idea for you,” I say. “I should look into bringing one to the chateau.”

She groans. “I regret saying that.”

That makes me laugh. She doesn’t regret the murder. But she regrets the notion of getting help. I can’t imagine a therapist who would be able to handle her, if I am to be honest. It would have to be someone capable of defending themselves, mentally, emotionally, and potentially physically.

“You’re putting more people at risk than just yourself, or me,” I tell her. “The villagers will defend themselves from what they think are wild animal attacks. You put the whole pack at risk of being shot if they are seen in their wolf forms. And then what? Then more rumors of wolves being shot and dead men being found. I won’t have you die because you’ve decided you are an avenger of the downtrodden. And I won’t have the pack becoming hunted on their own land. If you insist on sneaking out and murdering people, I will have no choice but to shackle you in the dungeon.”

She smiles. She tries to hide it, but it is there. I get to see her genuine smile so rarely, it is hard not to enjoy it, even though it comes from a rebellious place.

“That was a real threat, Beatrix. You will always be my mate, but you do not always have to be free if you cannot control your impulses.”

“The same way you controlled yours when you spent ten million on me and then

dragged me out of the orphanage? Or the same way you controlled yours when you killed that man the other night?"

"That was different."

"Why?"

"Because neither of those actions had any risk to my life or anyone else's, Duplante's aside and he forfeited his."

She shakes her head. "No," she says. "You're just as bad as me, but you grew up wearing fancy suits and you think you're better."

We have reached an impasse that I can tell will not soon be bridged. I love my mate with all I am, but I cannot seem to get through to her. I need help. We need help.

"I am going to find us some kind of therapy," I tell her. "But before that happens, I am going to whip you for what you did last night. I watched bullets fly over your head..."

"It was fun, wasn't it."

"No. It was not fun. It was dangerous," I growl the words while secretly agreeing, yes, it was fun. It was fun in the way things that can never happen again are fun.

She smiles at me sweetly, almost innocently. I really feel that she did what she thought was right. But we almost died. And it was reckless, stupid, and it could have been handled in a sane way.

"I don't even know where to begin disciplining you for almost getting us both shot," I snort.

“Maybe don’t? Maybe I’ve learned my lesson?”

I walk around the desk, sit back against it, then lean forward and run my fingers under her chin. “Have you, Trixie? Have you learned anything? Did it frighten you when you heard those bullets?”

“No,” she says. “But it scared me when I saw you dropping back, trying to save me. That scared me a lot. I am sorry. Really. I never want you to be hurt. I don’t care what happens to me, but you are you, and you have a whole pack and...”

“Beatrix, you matter as much as I do! I feel for you as you feel for me, do you understand? If anything was ever to happen to you, I’d be ruined forever. My life would never be the same.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, her face crumpling. “I just wanted... he was going to... I didn’t know you were there. I didn’t think you’d be in danger.”

I believe her. I stayed hidden. She did not know she was almost getting me killed. One way to look at this would be that I almost got the pair of us killed by letting her go into town. I should have stopped her when she started breaking the rules, not once she had already killed someone.

“In the future, when you hear something like that, you come to me. You let me handle it. I will ensure justice is done as it should be done. You have seen me do it, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “But I wanted to do it myself. I wanted him to... I wanted to be the one who made him feel like prey. I wanted his last moments to be knowing in his bones that he is not the one who decides what happens to others. I wanted revenge.”

I kiss the top of her head. Who am I to say that any of these impulses were wrong?

We cannot have a village full of bits of people, but her reasoning is impeccable.

“Talk to me first,” I say. “Please. So I can keep you and the pack safe.”

“I’m sorry I almost got us killed. You shouldn’t have come for me. You should have let whatever was going to happen, happen.”

“Absolutely not.” I grip her chin and force her to look at me. “I would die a thousand times for you on your worst day, do you understand? There is nothing more important to me than protecting you, no matter what you do.”

Tears well in her eyes. “I don’t deserve you to love me like this.”

“Yes,” I say. “You do.”

CHAPTER 11

A rmand

It takes some time to find the right person to provide us with some kind of mental health guidance, but I believe I have done it. Beatrix has been confined to the chateau since the murder, and she seems to have abided by her grounding with relative grace, though one never knows with a girl like her what she's really thinking, planning, or even doing.

We are roughly three weeks into our mate-ship when help arrives in the form of a massive wolf shifter from the far north. I greet him with more than a little relief, get him settled, and go and retrieve my mate from the corner of the library where she has ensconced herself.

“Beatrix,” I say, making her look up from her book.

“Hmm?”

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet. Someone who is going to help us with our communication issues.”

Her eyes widen a fraction. She shuts her book.

“You didn’t actually get a therapist, did you?”

“I did. And you’re going to talk to him.”

“You got a man? Why?”

“Because the number of shifters who are also therapists and who will agree to live in a remote chateau in France is close to one. So close to one that it is one.”

“I don’t want to talk to some shifter man.”

“We’re both going to talk to him. Separately, and together.”

“Have you ever seen the TV show Hannibal ?”

“Yes. Why?”

“That guy was a therapist. He ate people.”

“Beatrix, you eat people.”

She laughs, then rolls her eyes. “Okay, sort of, but also no. I don’t eat them. It’s just wolves can mostly kill by biting. I’m stuck with biting adjacent killing techniques. I only eat people when I have to.”

That statement could do with some unpacking, for starters. I hope our therapist is up to the task.

* * *

Beatrix

I knew he would punish me for murdering the man in the village and almost getting us both killed. I thought he’d spank me, fuck me, breed me, the usual. I never suspected he’d go this far and make me actually talk to somebody about my feelings.

This is cruel and unusual punishment.

“I really don’t want to talk to anybody.”

“I know, that’s why you need the therapy. He won’t report to me. You can tell him anything. It will be a place for you to come to terms with what has happened to you, and maybe you’ll feel less like murdering every man you meet.”

“I don’t want to murder every man I meet. Besides, won’t I just murder him?”

Armand snorts. “It would be interesting to see you try.”

“You think I can’t kill your little therapist? The pack is scared of me, Armand. They know what I’m like. They defer to me.”

“You’re right. They do. I don’t think you’ll intimidate this wolf.”

I put my book down and stand up. “We’ll see about that.”

Armand is smirking as he leads me to an office on the same floor as the other important rooms. His office is down the hall, but not so close he’ll be able to hear.

“You’re really not going to listen in on this? Bug the session?”

“No, Beatrix. Our problem is a lack of trust. That’s not going to be solved by invading your privacy. Whatever you say to Mr. Volkov stays with him.”

He taps on the door.

“Come in!” The words issue from behind the door. They sound a little deep and a little gruff, but I’m not afraid.

“Go on,” he says. “I’ll be in my office afterward if you want to talk.”

“Talking is about the last thing I want to do,” I say, pushing the door open and flicking it shut behind me.

“You’re Mr. Volkov?”

I meet my therapist with my neck craned back because he’s standing near the door, apparently on his way over to open it, and he’s very fucking tall.

“I’m Mr. Volkov.”

Mr. Volkov is six and a half feet of muscle and tattoos. He has heavyset dark brows, bright blue piercing eyes, and a massive jaw. He has to be forty something, he’s gnarled, he’s worn, and he’s scarred. He does not look like a therapist. He looks like an executioner. He has an accent, too. Not quite Russian, but somewhat Russian. I’m not good at picking accents.

“I’m in the wrong room,” I say.

I turn to leave, but as I go through the door, I find myself face to face with Armand, who gently, but firmly nudges me back in and shuts the door behind me again.

“Apparently I’m not free to leave.”

Mr. Volkov says nothing. He just lumbers across the room and seats himself, making the chair he’s sitting in seem small.

I look around the room. We’re on the ground floor. That’s handy. I go to the window—the chateau has lovely old windows that have leadlight tracing across them in a sort of grid and are more than large enough to open and step out of. I do this,

only to find that Armand has moved around the house in time to snap at my feet as they exit the window. He's in his wolf form for the snapping part, but he slips back into his human form to lecture me. I do like the sight of my mate standing naked in the garden looking stern. Maybe I can convince him to take me upstairs and not force me to do this whole ridiculous charade.

"You're staying in there for the hour," he says. "Stop trying to run away."

I huff and sigh, and put my leg back in.

"There's no point, this psycho doesn't say anything anyway. I think you got a dud," I say.

"Back inside. Do therapy."

I go back inside and lean up against the wall, as far from the so-called therapist as possible, staying at right angles to him so I can keep him in my peripheral vision.

He just sits there.

Time ticks by.

He sits there.

Until I lose my mind and start hammering him with questions.

"What is the point of you? Why are you here? You want to cash a check for occupying a chair? You think you're scary because you're covered in tattoos? I'm not scared of you."

He moves his eyes to me. Nothing else. Just his eyes. I notice again that they're blue.

Solid, boring, generic blue.

“Fuck, you are the worst therapist anybody has ever heard of. Worse than Hannibal. At this point I wouldn’t care if you tried to turn me into creme fra?che , it would be more interesting than this.”

His brow moves a fraction. He makes a note.

“It’s fancy sour cream,” I say. “I learned that here. What did you write down?”

He doesn’t answer.

Oh, this is fucking hilarious. We’re both playing the not talking game.

I know how to deal with it. I sit down too, may as well be comfortable. I choose the chaise by the window because it’s the seat furthest from the man, and the light coming in from behind me will help silhouette me against the window. He won’t be able to see my expression as well.

I settle in for an hour of silence. I figure we’ve burned five, maybe ten minutes already. And judging by the way other girls used to talk about therapists, I know the hour session is only fifty minutes. So I reckon there’ll be forty-five minutes of silence to contend with. Easy.

The stretch of time keeps extending out. He just sits there like he doesn’t care. I look at the clock on the wall, which I suddenly realize is there. It’s been three minutes. God, this is going to take forever.

I start singing to myself to pass the time.

“This is the song that does not end, oh it goes on and on my friend. Some people

started singing it not knowing what it was, but I will go on singing it forever just because this is the song that does not end...”

I trail off after a few rounds of that.

“You’re not going to talk? You’re not going to say anything?” I ask the question in salty tones. He’s really starting to annoy me.

“How does it feel when people won’t talk to you?”

“I don’t care. But when I’m locked in a room with them, not great. You’re kind of an asshole. A huge asshole. And you’re a terrible therapist.”

He doesn’t respond. I restrain myself from throwing things at him. Eventually, the hour is up, and I leave.

“Asshole,” I say as I exit the room, swiftly shutting the door and running down the hall to Armand’s office, where I burst in practically seething with rage.

Armand looks up at me, brow raised because yeah, it’s rude to throw a door open, but his expression quickly turns to concern as I lay out my complaints.

“He didn’t fucking say anything! He didn’t fucking do anything. He just sat there, charging God knows what per hour, wasting everyone’s time. It was bullshit. It was a complete waste of time. I won’t be going back. I hate him.”

Armand frowns. “He didn’t say anything?”

“He said his name was Mr. Volkov, and he asked me how it felt when people don’t talk to me, and that was it. That was the whole session.”

“Let me talk to him.”

“Good luck with that, Ma?tre !”

Armand throws a look at me that tells me using his pack’s term for him might very well backfire on me later. I grin. At least I can still get a reaction from him.

* * *

Armand

I find Mr. Volkov on the balcony outside the library, smoking a cigarette. He has shed his jacket and is down to shirtsleeves that are rolled up to his elbows. He is leaning over the railing, but stands straight up when I get closer.

“ Ma?tre ,” he nods.

“Mr. Volkov. How was your first session?”

His thick brows rise just a fraction, as if he finds the question surprising, or as if he expects me to feel as though the question was out of place. He is still facing the garden, not me.

“I cannot discuss private sessions.”

“I see. Well. From the sounds of it, there’s not much to discuss. You sat largely in silence, doing nothing, saying little. Beatrix was confused and concerned. Why did you antagonize my mate?”

Mr. Volkov glances at me briefly then responds in a slow drawl tinged with a Nordic accent that makes him sound simultaneously superior and disinterested.

“Why does the fact that your mate is unhappy with me, though unharmed in every way, make you so defensive? Why can’t she be annoyed without you coming to her aid?”

“I paid you to help her, not piss her off.”

“You paid me to help establish healthier dynamics. I have my own methods for doing that. You agreed, at the outset, to try these methods. Now that your mate is complaining, you want to fix the problem, and you’re furious with me.”

“I’m not furious. I’m curious.”

He offers me a sidelong smirk, still not giving me the courtesy of looking at me directly. This man is arrogant. He was more pleasant when I initially interviewed him, but that was over Zoom, and he had to look at the camera.

“If you don’t feel able to offer services, we are happy to host you at the nearby town...”

“You mean the one where your mate murders people?”

Blunt. Rude. And not something that should ever be said out loud. We have managed to keep Beatrix’s murderous outburst quiet. The villagers believe it was a freak wolf attack, and the distance of police means that there was no investigation.

“You may pack your things, Monsieur ,” I say.

He turns to me, a smile on his face.

“You really don’t like the truth, do you, Ma?tre ? Too used to dealing with people who have to submit to you in conversation and deed?”

“This is not about me. I retained your services because I want help for my mate. I will participate because you told me that it would help her. But I did not consent to be spoken down to by...”

“Yeah! Kill him!”

Beatrix pops up behind us, having apparently been listening in. She heard me getting heated. She felt my energy shift. She caught me just before I got to the verge of... I sigh inwardly. I have to manage myself better, or I will never manage her.

“I’m not going to kill him, Beatrix.” I turn to her, where she is smiling hopefully, her long, dark hair flowing in the breeze. She is beautiful when she is vengeful.

“You’re not?” She pouts. “Why not?”

“He’s annoying, not deserving of murder.”

“Well, I can’t kill him by myself. He’s too big.”

“Beatrix, go and do something else. Anything else.”

She smirks and turns away, causing me to rethink my instructions immediately.

“Wait! Not anything else. Everybody needs to remain unscathed.”

I turn back to Mr. Volkov once she is gone, unsettled with half my mind now wondering what she is doing.

“As you were saying.”

“Yes. As I was saying. You two are a good match,” he says.

“Oh, you think so?”

Is he trying to suck up to me now? Some kind of psychological head game?

“The pair of you have one thing in common with each other. You both like to lie to yourselves about what you are feeling. You’re furious. She’s hurt.”

“I’m not furious.”

“You ooze with repressed fury, Ma?tre .”

“I do not.”

“Of course you do. That is why you have done very little to restrain your mate. Why you delight in her viciousness. She is what you wish you could be. She’s more free than you are.”

“I have no interest in controlling my mate, because I want her free to love me. I have seen males who control their mates in ways that crush their spirits. I want to bring hers out of her, not be another person in her life she has to hide from.”

He looks at me keenly, and I am sure what he considers to be perceptively. “Are you hiding?”

Oh, fuck off.

I turn on my heel without saying those three little words that are absolutely pounding in my brain, and I leave.

I, ma?tre , alpha of the pack, abandon my balcony because the man on it makes me think things I do not want to think and feel things I do not want to feel.

She's right, he is an asshole.

"Are you sure we can't kill him?"

Trixie slides out of the shadows in the hall as I pass. She hadn't gone far. The likely interpretation is that she was spying on us, but I get the feeling she was keeping an eye out for me. I think we both feel a certain kind of threat from Mr. Volkov.

"We could, but we're not going to," I say, taking her hand in mine. "Come with me. We're getting out of here."

"Where are we going?"

"The garage."

It feels like we're escaping the chateau as we slide into my sports car and gun the six-cylinder motor in all its old world, dinosaur sputtering charm. I push the pedal to the floor and the acceleration throws us back in our seats as we race down the driveway.

"No train today?"

"No train today," I shout back over the rushing wind that demands I put the roof up.

We are both wind-swept when it slides into place. We look at each other, grinning.

"He got under your skin, huh? I bet he barely had to say anything. He just looks at you and he knows what to say. It's creepy. And I say that as a murderous she-wolf."

I snort.

I start to wonder if I overreacted when I got Mr. Volkov to come in and help us.

Maybe she doesn't need therapy. I certainly don't.

I don't think anybody actually cares if Bea wants to go about killing men who deserve it. The police will not like it, but the police rarely like anything.

Besides, we all know that newly shifted females can be a handful. Most are not overtly murderous, but the way the sudden influx of animal temper pervades the body can certainly affect more than mood. Also, to be absolutely fair to everybody involved, I was warned. The director's words ring in my ears . No returns.

I would never return her, but it is clear I will have to tame her.

Without Mr. Volkov.

"So did you fire him?"

"I don't know."

She cocks her head and gives me a look that I know, even out of my peripheral vision, is a special kind of withering. "How can you not know?"

"I told him to pack his bags, but then he just kept talking. I'm not sure if he considers himself fired or not."

"Is that how that works? People get to decide how fired they are?"

"Not typically, no. I did cut a man's head off not that long ago; that should still count for something."

"Sure," she says, grinning broadly. "You're resting on your old murder laurels. You have to keep things current, you know. You're only as good as your next horrible

death scene.”

“You really need therapy,” I laugh, shaking my head. “I think we will have to keep Mr. Volkov on.”

“I don’t like that guy.”

“Neither do I, but he might have a purpose. Even if we hate him.”

We drive through winding country roads, putting distance between ourselves and the chateau. Beatrix doesn’t ask where we are going. She doesn’t care. She just wants to go with me.

Our bond is growing by the day. Not in the way I imagined it would, but it is growing. In spite of Volkov’s antagonism, I already feel closer to Beatrix. Maybe the therapy is working, just not as I imagined it would.

I take her to the city, to a place of sacred shifter history. I want her to feel grounded in herself, and with us as a pack. I want her to know she belongs, even though she was raised among humans and doesn’t remember her history very well.

“There are legends of wolf shifters and werewolves dating back to the 1600s and beyond in Bordeaux,” I tell her as we wind through the narrow streets. “Our kind has always roamed this place, and not always in civilized ways. Humanity has been kind enough to turn a blind eye where it could.”

“You mean they know about us, but pretend they don’t?”

“In the 1600s a young man was caught eating people in this very city,” I say. “He told them he was a werewolf, created by a mysterious figure in the forest, and was sent to a monastery where he lived out his days as a werewolf among the monks.”

“What?”

“The monastery was in fact a bachelor pack. I don’t know if the magistrates at the time were aware, or if it was an act of diplomacy on the abbot’s part, but yes, the story ends well for him. Not so well for those he ate beforehand.”

“Is that why I’m here? To learn that a pack can reform a wild wolf?”

“That would be an improving lesson, wouldn’t it?”

We stop outside an old church in the ancient part of the city. It is not busy at this time of day, because it is late and the bars and restaurants are located elsewhere.

“It is said there are catacombs here that contain the remains of ancient shifters,” I tell her, watching as her face lights up.

“Really? Shifter bones beneath the cathedrals?”

“Yes. They’re interpreted as wolves, of course. But there is no reason for wild animals to have a den beneath a major human hub of activity. There’s also no evidence of prey, no small animal bones, etc. Humans assume that the space was ritually filled with wolf bones, but I believe it’s where those who died in their wolf forms were taken.”

“I want to see it.”

“It’s all shut off, I believe.”

We walk around the church and find the entrance to the undercroft, quite obviously located in the rear, two large doors located at a forty-five-degree angle and surrounded by a stone frame. They are blocked off by large gates, padlocked closed.

“We should go in there,” Beatrix says.

“We shouldn’t. There are gates for a reason.”

“They don’t apply to us. We’re above the law.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Laws are for people. We’re not people. We’re wolves. We’re animals. And animals don’t have to obey the laws of men.”

That’s a dangerous thought process, but I don’t know that I entirely disagree. We are not the same as those around us. We look the same. We are treated the same, but fundamentally we carry an animal consciousness that can never respect what humans respect.

“Boost me up,” she says. “The top isn’t that barbed.”

“Not that barbed,” I sigh. “I brought you here to educate you, not contribute to your delinquency.”

“You brought me here because Volkov made you so angry you thought you might kill him and you had to get out of the chateau before you did something that might be an even worse example to me.”

I look at her, quite surprised at how insightful she is.

“Was it that obvious?”

“The way you looked at him, you wanted to rip him apart,” she laughs.

“He was disrespectful, and I was disappointed. I wanted him to help you. Help us.”

“Therapists are pointless,” she says.

“Are they. How do you know that?”

She rolls her eyes. “Imagine thinking that talking about things makes them better. Crazy. Sometimes bad things happen, and you let them go into the past and you never think about them again, and if you happen to remember them by accident, then you think of something else instead. That’s how it’s done.”

She really needs therapy.

She’s started to climb the damn gates too.

Before we can continue this conversation about the value of not having conversations, and before I can pull her back down, we are interrupted by swinging torch lights and the arrival of two gendarmes.

“What are the two of you doing?”

I don’t like their tone. It is officious and domineering. I don’t do well with that kind of approach. My being an alpha means less than nothing to these humans. They are looking at us with the hard authoritarian expressions of men who have the right to put others in cages.

“He was trying to stop me from doing something I shouldn’t,” Beatrix says. “He never can, though.”

The gendarme looks at me. “Is this your wife?” He asks me the question in a tone that tells me he suspects she’s not my wife. If anything, he’s implying that I’m paying for

her company.

I suppose this could be one of the places one would take a lady of the night to if one had no other place to go.

This could go quite badly if it is not handled well. We were on the verge of trespassing, and with Beatrix being on the gate, they could argue that we had trespassed.

The penalty is likely a fine, but we could be arrested. Given what we have both done on our pack lands, this little crime feels like nothing, but that doesn't mean anything in this tight historical alley.

"She's my fiancée," I explain.

"No, I'm not," Beatrix pipes up at precisely the wrong time. "He hasn't asked me to marry him."

"I haven't?"

"No!"

"You're right. I forgot. I'm so sorry."

I go down on one knee before the gendarmes.

"Beatrix, will you marry me?"

There's a brief moment of confusion and excitement and then I see her expression clear.

“No,” she says. “Of course not, not now I know you’re a criminal.”

The gendarme curses at me.

“Get up, idiot. The two of you are trespassing. Name and address, please.”

“Armand de Lune, Chateau Loup de Lune,” I say.

They exchange looks. They see the way we are dressed, the way we speak, especially the way I speak, that there is some money behind us. That could go either way in terms of their thinking. Some gendarmes are noble beings, but others take full advantage of their authority.

This again starts to feel like a potentially concerning situation. The pack does not know where we are. I brought no retinue. I brought no backup of any kind.

“And your name?” he asks Beatrix.

“None of your fucking business.”

“Her name is Beatrix de Lune,” I say with a glare to her as I will her not to make this worse.

“You said she’s not married. Where is her ID?”

I feel the interaction sliding sideways at a pace I am absolutely not comfortable with.

“I can show my ID, and...”

“No, we need her ID.”

I am not worried about myself, but I am absolutely worried about Beatrix. They have her backed into a corner.

And that is when all hell breaks loose.

This time I see her capacity for killing up close, near enough to feel the blood spatter. I feel arterial sanguine essence splash my face, my neck, cover my clothes, saturate my shirt.

Stopping her is impossible. The second gendarme tries to run, but she bounds to him and dispatches him by grabbing him by the neck and shaking him as hard as she can. There is less blood this time, but he is just as dead.

She flows into her naked, feral human form and grins wildly. “Historically accurate, no?”

There isn’t time to panic or even chastise her. “We’re going to need to dispose of these bodies.”

“I can eat one, but two is a stretch.”

“Stay here.”

I go to the car, open the trunk and retrieve the blankets and towels kept there in case a picnic should ensue, or a swim should happen. There are spare clothes, of course, because a shifter never knows when he is going to burst out of his attire.

“Put this on,” I say, tossing her my spare clothes. I wrap the bodies up as best I can, knowing we are leaving a bloody mess, knowing that it will be found, certain that this is a mistake that will echo throughout time.

The drive back to the chateau is heavy, and without the gaiety that the drive away contained.

“Are you mad at me?” Beatrix has the nerve to ask the question while wearing my shirt and blazer, sitting in the passenger seat with her legs tucked up under her and an expression that I can only describe as serene on her beautiful face.

Meanwhile, the blood on my skin has started to itch, and my shirt sticks to it whenever I move, creating an unpleasant sensation of fabric and blood sucking away with every motion of my chest or arms.

“Yes,” I say. “I am mad at you.”

“I thought so,” she says, satisfied, as if that makes her feel good to know she read my expression right.

“It was a mistake to stop beating you,” I sigh. “I got soft and now we have two dead gendarmes to deal with.”

“That’s your fault. The bodies part.”

“How could it possibly be my fault?”

“You wouldn’t let me eat them. We could have taken them back down to the crypt and fed on them and left their bones with the rest. It would have been a poetic and romantic end for them.”

There is something wrong with my mate, something psychologically darker than I could have imagined. She looks innocent because of her age and her pretty features, but she is the most fearsome of our kind I have ever encountered.

“You don’t agree?”

“I think eating people whose only crime was trying to make sure nothing untoward was happening to you is not the proper way to reward them.”

“Is that what they were doing?”

“Yes. They probably thought I was taking advantage of you. Older man with younger woman, out late at night, she has no documentation, but does have an English accent... they probably thought you were being trafficked.”

“Oh,” she says. Then she repeats it more softly. “Oh.”

“And that is why they are going to have a proper burial and why their families will be receiving a stipend from an anonymous source for the rest of their lives.”

“So you’re really mad,” she says with a sigh.

“For killing going on three men now? I’m not pleased, Beatrix. That much is certain.”

“I just wanted them to leave us alone. They were being rude and invasive.”

“That was their job.”

“Well, they should have done it more nicely. Besides, you don’t know what their intentions really were. They might have been trying to help me, or they might have been trying to take advantage of a teenager from another country with a weird accent and no ID.”

She’s not wrong. She’s not right, either.

The sun shines. The wind whips through the open windows. The car handles a little worse than it did before because it is light and the rear is around four hundred fifty pounds heavier than before.

CHAPTER 12

A rmand

We get back to the chateau a day after we left, and I feel like I am a different man than I was when we drove away. Responsibility has always weighed heavily on me. It weighs even more heavily now.

“Go to the bedroom,” I tell Beatrix as we pull to a halt outside the chateau. I have chosen the rear entrance, because showing up covered in blood is not going to be a good look for the pack. “I will come and deal with you later.”

“I’m not invited to the funeral?” She pouts at me, then dares to laugh, her eyes sparkling with some deeply feral amusement.

“This is not funny, Beatrix. This is going to cost the pack in numerous ways. What if there were cameras there? What if we just revealed the existence of modern wolf shifters to people?”

“They wouldn’t believe it even if we did it right in front of them. Nobody believes anything they see anymore,” she says, getting out of the car and standing languidly on the back steps, her legs long under my shirt, her expression completely without remorse. “Nothing matters. You worry too much. I did what I was supposed to do, what any proper wolf would have done.”

I move faster than I realized I was capable of, pinning her against the wall with my body, one leg between her thighs as I snarl down at her, my teeth snapping a fraction

of an inch away from her nose.

“Oh? And what would a proper alpha do to his murderous little mate? What brutal punishment would she endure?”

I smell her arousal immediately. This was the wrong approach if I wanted to get actual contrition out of her. She likes it when I am rough; she responds to all things vigorous and animal.

“You didn’t tell me not to kill them,” she points out. “I didn’t know I was doing anything wrong. You have to be more specific with your expectations if you expect me to follow them. I’m not a mind reader.”

She’s right. Goddammit, she’s right. Yes, most people can be expected at baseline to not kill people the moment they seem slightly threatening, but the more I look at this from her perspective, the more I realize she didn’t know any better. Our freedom was under threat, and I was tense in that interaction. She would have picked up on my fear, the fear of losing her to the system because she has no official paperwork. She felt it, and she dealt with it.

I should have been the one to make her feel safe. I should be the one who makes her submit, not because I am overpowering her, but because she trusts me to handle things.

I kiss her deeply, and yes, roughly. But I am no longer doing it from anger or fear, I’m doing it because I am deeply in love with this feral creature who behaves so much like the perfect animal she is.

“I am going to put these two men to rest, and then you and I are going to have a good, long...”

“Mmm, yes,” she interrupts with a sexy little grin.

“Discussion about my expectations,” I finish the sentence.

“Oh, no!” She pouts.

“Go to the bedroom. Get cleaned up.”

“You need to get cleaned up too. You look like you’ve been in a human abattoir.” She grins and kisses me on the nose, then sticks out her tongue just a little and licks some of the dried blood from my neck.

“Delicious,” she says, her eyes sparkling.

Christ. What have I claimed as my mate?

* * *

Beatrix

Armand grabs me, tosses me over his shoulder, and carries me upstairs. He might be mad at me, but he is also really fucking turned on. His desire for me, as bad as I am, is unabated.

He smells like blood and fear. Not his fear, the fear of the men who died because they thought I was going to be easy prey. He thinks they were trying to help me. I don’t believe for a second that they had any good intention toward me. They looked at me the way I look at a good pie. Their last emotion has drenched him. He could almost pass for a pathetic human predator, except for the strength that emanates from him with every breath he takes.

I am not afraid of him. There will be consequences, but those consequences will not hurt me. I bet I'll like them. The chemistry between us never fades, even when he's furious with me. Even when he wonders what he's gotten himself into with me. He doesn't falter. He doesn't waver. He doesn't threaten to get rid of me.

They used to always threaten to kick me out of the orphanage, but he hasn't said that once. Not even when I almost got him shot. This man loves me in a way that is completely new to me.

So he could tell me he was angry at me for years at a time, and I would not believe that anger was his primary feeling when he looked at me like this. There is passion and fire in him that makes my blood charge with desire.

"Unbelievable," he says, pulling the bloodstained shirt from his skin over his head and dropping it on the floor.

He finishes stripping, yanks his shirt off me, and steps into the shower, dragging me with him.

"You make messes, you should help clean them up," he says, handing me soap and a cloth.

I blush a little, because suddenly this feels very vulnerable in ways I'm not used to, but I set to my task because touching him is not a hardship. Exploring his body with the soapy cloth, helping the muck of death slide down the drain feels very intimate to me.

"Never again," he says, sliding his hand under my chin. "No more killing."

"I can't promise that. Someone might really need to die."

He smacks my ass, hard, and it hurts all the more for being wet, but I maintain my refusal to promise.

“Why won’t you just submit, Trixie?” His voice is thick with lust and frustration.

“Because I won’t lie to you. I’m not a liar.”

“But you are a killer.”

“We are both killers,” I remind him.

He looks down at me, silver eyes lidded heavily, his cock hard against my belly. Our nakedness is natural, and in this moment, very alluring. I want him inside me. I want his forgiveness, but more than that, I want him to admit that what I did was the right thing.

“I killed them for us. They were going to hurt us, one way or another. We both felt it.”

He draws in a hitching breath. “I’m trying to be your alpha. I’m trying to teach you how to behave.”

“I know how to behave. I’ve been told how to behave my whole life.” I press against him, feel his cock harden against me even more. “I know what I am and I know what you are.”

“You’re going to be the ruin of me,” he groans as I wrap my hand around his shaft boldly. “I have spent a lifetime becoming responsible and now you are here and...”

“What?” I pump my hand up and down the length of his cock slowly.

“And you already know how to handle me so well,” he groans, resting his head back against the shower, letting me take the lead. I’m sure this isn’t what he has planned.

I know he’s going to want to spank me, lecture me, take control of me. He’s going to need to reassert dominance, but for now he’s letting me have my way with him.

I slide down to my knees, wondering if this will make him forgive me any faster. The sound he makes when he feels my mouth wrap around the head of his cock is absolutely transcendent. A soft, low growl that continues to reverberate through him and through me as I lower my head down, slowly taking him as deep as I can.

I feel his hand slide around the back of my head, he pushes deep over my tongue, almost all the way to the back of my throat. His hips pump forward and back again, making full use of my mouth.

I let him use me. I let him take me.

I suck him, roll my tongue under the head of his cock slowly, exploring him. He likes that. I can tell by the way his dick pumps and throbs inside my mouth.

“You’re such a fucking...” He can’t finish the sentence because it trails off into a deep moan.

He comes in my mouth and I swallow him eagerly and deeply. I want every drop of him. I want his living taste, not the taste of dead men in my mouth.

He watches as I lap him up, his eyes narrowing as his lids descend.

“God, Beatrix. You are nothing but trouble. Really. Fuck, you’re perfect.” He pulls me up and kisses me deeply as the last flecks of blood are driven from his skin.

“I should really be whipping your ass for what you did tonight,” he says. “I should be making sure you shed tears and promise me nothing but the best behavior. But punishing you feels like a sin in itself.”

He lifts my leg and slides inside me, his cock claiming me in passionate, slow strokes. I am wet for him, ready for his seed. I am here to be his, remain his.

“They were going to split us up; that is a sin deserving of death,” I moan.

“You are such a dangerous, sexy little thing,” he groans, kissing me possessively. “Every word that comes out of your mouth begs for trouble, but I cannot get enough of you.”

There’s no punishment. He doesn’t want to hurt me. He doesn’t want to discipline the spirit and strength out of me. He wants to love me, deeply, thoroughly, and until my toes curl and I scream his name.

And that is exactly what he does.

CHAPTER 13

A rmand

“Murder brats,” Mr. Volkov notes. “A couple of killers on a rampage through the picturesque French countryside.”

He’s standing on the balcony of his office, smoking. He seems unfazed by all I have just told him, which I appreciate. What I do not like is his summary of events with regards to my character.

“I am the alpha of this pack. I will thank you not to call me a brat.”

“You think an alpha cannot be a problem?”

“I think the alpha is almost always the problem,” I say. “Packs live and die on their alpha. That is why mine pushed so hard for me to find a mate. They weren’t content with me being a single younger male. They wanted to see me settled down with a family. It was what they needed to feel safe.”

I snort as I think how misguided they were with that idea. I’ve never been less settled. There’s been more deaths in the past week than there have been in decades. The pack is only really aware of one, maybe two of them. We’ve kept the matter of the gendarmes quiet.

I buried them personally while Beatrix slept, and showered again afterward before crawling in bed next to her. She was dead to the world, entirely peaceful. She feels

safe with me, in my house, with the pack. She trusts me and us. I enjoy that, even if it means I am left dropping bodies.

“And what did you need?”

“Hm?” His question interrupts my memories.

“When the pack needed safety, what did you need?” Volkov asks the question. I find it pointed, but I think about it.

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do,” he says, knocking the ash off his cigarette.

“I really don’t. I needed to be a good alpha.”

He turns toward me, flicking the cigarette into an ashtray without looking. “What. Did you need?”

Is he trying to intimidate me into answering?

“I don’t know.”

“You do. Say it. Get the balls to verbalize what you need, or there’s no way your mate will ever be able to do it.”

He’s badgered me into a corner, not raising his voice, not overtly intimidating me, but I feel pressure of the kind that makes the polite parts of my mind give up and let me become blunt.

“Fine. I needed freedom. I needed time to become who I was going to be. The alpha

position was always going to be mine. I was literally born for it. But I never got to consider who I might be outside it.”

I’m half surprised to hear myself say those words. I’d never have claimed them if they hadn’t come out of my own mouth. They sound resentful, of the pack, of my role in it, and I’m not. I love the pack, and it is an honor to serve as alpha. Somehow this wolf is making me say things I don’t recognize, things that don’t fit. He’s making me inconvenient to myself.

“So you went out to find your mate, and you found someone who had gone out of her way never to meet an obligation in her existence. Someone who had no pack, and therefore no pack obligations. You found a creature who was entirely free. Isn’t that interesting.”

“Are you suggesting the mate bond activated because she’s... unhinged?”

He gives a little shrug, his massive muscles moving infinitesimally. “I believe the fated mate connection is not set in the stars. I believe it is a primal connection based on some amounts of genetic suitability, but more than that, it is about the needs of the two wolves involved. I think you both had intense, directly opposite needs. That initial dynamic is still playing out. The pair of you are pulling each other in opposite directions. There is some risk that she will not be a stabilizing force on the pack as they’d hoped. It is possible she will unmoor you entirely, because deep down you don’t really want to be here at all.”

It is a hell of a thing to have your deepest fears verbalized by a complete stranger. I don’t want to hear anymore. I don’t want to think about what he’s saying, or what it means.

For a second time, I find myself storming out of Mr. Volkov’s presence. He says things that nobody should ever say, and he says them in a way that makes me

absolutely terrified that they are probably true. He is the manifestation of all my fears, and I'd rather be driving through the countryside covered in blood and thinking about how to hide two bodies than talk about this.

He is up in a flash, pushing the door closed ahead of me, one tattooed arm preventing my leaving.

I should kill him for this.

"I don't need to see your mate, because your mate knows who she is. There is nothing broken inside her. Yes, she has suffered, but she has the temperament that adjusts to such circumstances, and she is the one now experiencing pack life for the first time. Her needs are being met. You're the one who needs to do the work, Ma'tre."

"Don't call me that. The title feels mocking falling from your lips."

His tone softens a fraction. "I am not here to mock you, Armand. I am here to do what you paid me to do."

"You're supposed to fix the girl who drags men from their beds and slaughters them."

"No. You're supposed to be her alpha. You're supposed to have control of her, and you would have control of her, if you had control of yourself."

I surprise myself again.

I punch him in the face.

I've actually punched him before I even realize I'm going to do it. My fist is in motion, meeting flesh and skin and bone in a hard blow that makes my knuckles crack open and start bleeding instantly.

He's already glaring at me furiously by the time I realize what I've done.

"I'm sorry," I apologize instantly.

He opens the door. "My mistake, Ma'tre . I should not have cornered you."

"I'll send for the doctor."

"No need. It's just a bump."

I look at his face, and see that I've barely marked him. My knuckles have come off worse. They're bruised already. I can feel it. Flexing them hurts like hell, and I've managed to take the annoyingly thin skin off them.

I walk out of the room at a quick clip, not entirely sure where I'm going or why. There will be some pack business to attend to, I am sure, something to take my mind off all the failings the therapist I got for my traumatized mate won't stop bringing up.

By sheer chance—or maybe not by chance at all—Beatrix intercepts me. If I did not know better, I would say my feisty young mate has been guarding me ever since Mr. Volkov's arrival. Her concern for me is very sweet.

She grabs my wrist and pulls my hand toward her face, her eyes going slightly crossed as she inspects the damage.

"What did he do to you?"

"Nothing. I punched him."

She smiles broadly. "Good for you!"

“ Ma?tre! ” It seems Antoine has returned from his reconnaissance mission. He is standing in the hall behind us with what I can only describe as a stricken expression on his face.

I definitely want to hear what he has to say, but I don't want Beatrix to be a part of that conversation just yet.

“I have to attend to this,” I tell her. “We can talk more about this later, okay?”

“Okay,” she smiles. “I'm so proud of you.”

She's adorable when she's happy. I don't know that I have made her as happy with anything else I've done. I briefly consider punching Antoine in case that makes her smile, but obviously choose not to.

* * *

Beatrix

Armand is busy, and now, so am I.

There's something going on between the therapist and my mate. For Armand to have punched him, he must have been upset. That means Volkov upset him, and that, I will not fucking stand.

I don't like this interloper. I don't like what he does to Armand. I don't like how he makes him unsure of himself. Armand is the alpha. He is my mate. Everybody he meets should bow to him. That is the natural order of things.

Mr. Volkov is an anomaly. I don't like him. I don't like the way he looks. There's something about him I just can't trust.

Armand is trying to do everything right, and that's making him vulnerable. I'm not defenseless that way. I already know that it doesn't matter if you try to do things right or not, things go to hell anyway.

I sniff Mr. Volkov out, following my nose. I don't like the way he smells, either. His wolf scent is laid atop something colder, deader. Something like the scent of corpses. Sometimes one scent is stronger than the other, but nobody else seems to notice how gross he is.

I find him in the library, out on the balcony. The sun has started to set, and he is standing under the rising moon sucking on his cigarette. Disgusting habit. Maybe that's where the dead scent comes from.

I'd push him off the balcony, if not for the fact that we're on the ground floor and it would barely inconvenience him. I wonder if I can get Armand to move his office to the roof.

"Hello, Beatrix," he says coolly, greeting me before I want him to know I am here. I needed a bit more time to decide what I wanted to do to him. Murdering him seems a bit much given Armand's current feelings on the matter of me killing people. I don't want to upset my mate. I know I'm pushing him to his limits as it is.

"I should kill you," I hear myself say.

Shit. I opened with a murder threat. I was going to try so damn hard to stay away from going zero to a hundred that quickly, but it just feels like I can't help myself. I want very much to kill him. It's an imperative pounding in my blood. Death to the interloper.

"You'd find it harder to kill me than most," he says, unconcerned. "And unlike your mate, if you were to try, the result would not be a spanking. You would suffer badly

for a long time.”

He says all that very casually, but something about his tone makes me believe him. It makes me think twice. It doesn't make me any less desiring of hurting him for hurting my mate, but it does make me think I'm going to need to do it carefully.

“I like a challenge,” I say.

“You are a perfect little predator,” he says. “Made entirely for your environment. But I am not from your world and you will only hurt yourself in trying to hurt me. I know that this won't be enough warning to stop you from trying, but when you do inevitably try, and you do inevitably suffer, you will remember this warning.”

“Don't upset him again, or I will make you regret it. There. Now we're both threatening each other.”

He smirks at me. “Your session isn't until tomorrow, but I feel as though we are getting an early start on it.”

CHAPTER 14

A rmand

Antoine is practically vibrating with excitement as we enter my office. He is usually so restrained, with the boredom of life that sometimes comes to those who have lived a lot of it and ceased to be surprised. I have the feeling something has surprised Antoine.

“I have news, Maître . I think the mystery of your mate’s origin has been resolved.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Maître. Really. You might want to sit down. I’m afraid there’s strange news to be heard.”

I don’t sit down. I look at him, expecting him to make it quick. He does not make it quick.

“I found the director’s records. That’s the first bit of news, and the best. He secreted them away in a bank vault in Paris. There was quite a bit of information of various kinds in them. I’ve made copies, naturally, and added them to our archives.”

I try not to be overtly impatient. All I want to hear is what the deal with Beatrix is.

“Her family name was Rostova. She was orphaned because her parents both died in inter-pack aggression. The Russian packs were at war in the early two thousands, and

that war was vicious, bitter, and violent. Females were not spared any more than males were. Her parents sent her away to safety, to family in Britain. But the family she was sent to were also killed, as were the people she was traveling with. She was found in a bloody crime scene, and taken to the orphanage, because she was judged to need a higher level of care than could be given in a foster home. They did not know her shifter heritage, but they knew she was not normal.”

It sounds like Beatrix’s trauma has always been clear. She wears it like armor. The Russian connection is also not entirely surprising, given that the director mentioned she had Siberian blood.

“Moreover, Ma?tre , I can allay your second concern. The one around her virginity. I did some research, and there’s an ancient shifter pack—or was. They were wiped out in the wars. They’re noted in the history books because they had a specific mutation. Females of most shifter packs these days don’t gain the ability to shift until they’re bred. Some don’t even have the ability to properly hunt and kill once they do shift. They’re practically domesticated, more like dogs than wolves. We’ve all heard the stories out of the States.”

“Yes. And?” I am growing increasingly impatient as he seems intent on saving the best for last.

“This is the part that I find concerning, Ma?tre . And so you know, I have not told anybody, nor will I, besides you.”

“Alright.”

“Females of this lost pack do not gain their ability to shift when they are mated by their fated mate for the first time. They gain their ability to shift when they first kill a man.”

He pauses to let that sink in. “She is not made wolf by merit of mating, of love. She is made wolf by merit of destruction, of committing an indelible sin that can never be forgiven.”

He is laying it on more than a little thick, but I get a sense of what he is implying.

“There have been killings in the village, Ma?tre . And your mate has been growing ever more powerful. It is said that every time she shifts she seems larger and more powerful...”

I ignore the observation about her getting bigger when she shifts. It is interesting that he mentions it, not because it is true, but because clearly the pack has been talking about her, communicating with Antoine behind my back. It could be the usual gossip, or it could be something else.

“So she hasn’t been with anyone before me. She’s not been mated before. I was her first?”

“ Ma?tre , all due respect, her virginity or lack thereof is hardly the largest problem we face. The bloodline she comes from does not bestow shifting with the shedding of blood as some cute little quirk. The gift requires blood to maintain. She is not herself if she does not kill. And, to make matters worse, there is a decent chance that she will pass this undesirable trait onto any offspring you have. It would be a violation of the bloodline.”

I nod and compose myself. He wants me to be concerned; I want to dance with joy. She is mine, all mine. She was never touched, and she never will be.

“I don’t think you’re understanding the full ramifications of this, Ma?tre .”

“Of course I understand. She is wired innately differently. We knew that already. But

she has not caused any problems in the pack, has she? Throwing a bread roll at a man at dinner isn't exactly a vicious, bloody attack. The only people she has killed has been in one form of defense or another, and all outside the pack."

"She can't be trusted. At any time, she could become entirely uncontrollable. We are all unsafe in her presence."

I can tell that he is afraid, but the conclusions he is drawing seem hysterical even to me. I can quite literally smell his fear. He's been whipping himself up into a frenzy the entire time he's been researching.

"You are to keep this to yourself," I tell him. "Nothing will be done hastily, and you made it very clear nobody else knows this but you. So, if this were to become a more public matter, I'd know where to go."

"She's been killing for a year at least. I cross-referenced unsolved mysteries with her time at the orphanage. There was a spate of them. All able-bodied men. All succumbing to vicious injuries attributed to animal attacks. She is no innocent. She has a body count higher than anybody in the pack. More than anybody you have ever met."

He expects me to be shocked, but after having seen her in action, I am not surprised at all. This is all entirely coherent information given what I've seen. Antoine's horror would only be increased if he knew that the pack cemetery holds two more bodies now than it did when he left.

"Do those packs still exist? Does she have living relatives?"

"If she does, it is best she never meets them, and they never know she is alive. The horrors I uncovered while studying the acts of her ancestry were shocking. I have to say, it might be best to reconsider procreating with this one. There are some packs in

which an alpha has more than one mate. I fear for the fate of the pack if her genetic material were to become established.”

“The idea that we are afraid of who she is to the extent she cannot be bred is cowardice.”

Antoine’s expression closes, like the file. He puts the brief on my desk. “This is the information I accumulated, Ma’tre . I would advise you to read it and come to your own conclusions. I am available to discuss anything you wish to. And I will, of course, maintain complete confidence. Nobody will hear any of this from me.”

“Thank you, Antoine.”

At that moment, when he was probably about to start begging me to abandon my mate, Beatrix runs in and slides onto my lap, claiming me with her butt and legs in a way I find entirely adorable.

If she noticed the way Antoine pulled away from her as they passed at the doorway, she doesn’t say anything about it. I will need to speak to him about looking less entirely terrified when she is in his presence.

“I told Volkov that I’d kill him if he hurt you again.”

“Beatrix. He didn’t hurt me. I hurt myself attempting to hurt him.”

She flashes her teeth in a feral little grin. “Next time you punch him, his face better not be so hard, that’s all I’m saying.”

She is absolutely incorrigible. I don’t know how to respond, especially given Antoine’s breathless revelations as to her background.

“So what now? We sit around feeling bad about who we are while some dickhead you found online has free rein of the chateau? You know all he does is fuck around with our heads. I think he likes it.”

She really doesn't like Volkov. I wonder if I shouldn't put a security detail on him, given her predilection for dealing with people like him with absolute brutality.

“Well, now I'd like to talk to you about intimacy,” I say. “I want to be intimate with you emotionally as well as physically. And that means sharing our backgrounds.”

“Ughhhh,” she grunts. “I hate that part. I don't want to talk about the past. It was bad, and I didn't like it, and besides nothing really ever happened. Any time a man tried to touch me, I hurt him. You're the first one I didn't severely maim for beating me.”

“And I appreciate that, sweetheart, I really do. The fact that you and I can be together without me losing any body parts is deeply romantic.”

“Now you sound sarcastic.”

I rub her back in a reassuring way. “I'm not being sarcastic. It's just difficult to say these things without sounding crazy because they're insane.”

That makes her laugh.

* * *

Beatrix

There's a file on Armand's desk with a little skull embossed in gold on it. I am trying not to look at it too directly, but my gut is telling me I should really look inside.

Can't do it now. Will have to come back later. Sneak in late at night, see what it is. Or maybe tomorrow. Whatever's inside is calling to me.

I could just ask him what it is, but the same instinct that tells me it is important tells me he won't tell me.

I nibble Armand's neck, and I pretend not to pay it any mind, but that folder just became the center of my world.

CHAPTER 15

A rmand

“You cannot tell anyone what I tell you, right?”

“Yes,” Volkov says. “You have complete confidentiality in this room.”

“I have information that suggests my mate is from an ancient line of wolves. These wolves did not breed out the way most lines did. They remained primitive in some respects, more primal in their desires and in their deeds.”

“So you’re putting her behavior down to genetics, not the experience of being abandoned and growing up without context in a cruel human world that was incapable of tending to her needs even if it had been interested, which it was not. Interesting.”

“Now you’re making me sound...”

“What?”

“My researcher was very disturbed by what he discovered about her heritage. He claims that breeding with her could contaminate our bloodline.”

“What you’re describing is racism.”

Those words hit me like a blunt hammer. I have no desire to think that way, or to

discriminate.

“Wolves believe in pack lines because they are, well, you know, significant in property matters...” I start to say, because I know he is right. But I am skirting around the edges of the problem, and I know it.

“He said she’d be violent, and she is. He said her shift was not precipitated by love, but by killing, which it seems to have been. She is different than we are. If we have children, they might have the same tendencies. They might lean toward killing. If they’re female, they might not be able to take their wolf forms until they off someone. And that’s just impractical on many levels...”

“Why?”

“Because falling in love with your fated mate and being transformed by the act of love is beautiful. And having to kill someone is not.”

He nods and makes a note.

“But it doesn’t matter,” I say. “Because come what may, she is my fated mate. She was made for me. I love her more than I love life. I have never bonded with anyone the way I have with her. I have never loved so deeply, been so frustrated, cared so much, felt so protective... and so protected. She would do anything for me.”

“The devotion of a strong woman is a powerful thing,” Mr. Volkov agrees. “I am glad you can see that. Being able to appreciate her is an important step toward resolving this ambivalence.”

His words carry an accusation couched in gentle therapist speech that makes me want to rip his throat out. Smug fucker.

“The last thing I have ever felt about Beatrix is ambivalent,” I declare. “I don’t actually care where she comes from, or what her bloodline is, or even if she was intimate with someone before me. I just want to know her truth. That’s it.”

I get up to leave the room, before I give into my urge to hit him again.

I am about to open the door when it is kicked open. I find myself pushed around behind it as Beatrix bursts in and throws the file that was on my desk at Volkov. It hits him in the chest and bursts open, showering papers everywhere.

“I’m an evil psychopath!” She makes the declaration. “They have a whole file on me. My mate has a whole fucking set of research on me that I didn’t even know he was doing.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“How does that make you feel?”

She’s not aware that I am in the room. All her attention, all her anger is focused on Volkov.

I feel as though I am intruding, even though she is the one who barged in on my session. As she rants, I back toward the door and leave without her noticing I was ever there, though I can still hear her as I retreat.

I want to give her the chance to process her rage with Volkov. He’s the one she went to. Not me. She didn’t ask him where I was. I assume she will come looking for me soon enough, though.

* * *

Beatrix

“Why doesn’t he love me?”

“What about this makes you think he doesn’t love you?”

“He sent a man to go and get dirt on me. He found out all this stuff about me, and he didn’t tell me any of it. He was keeping this a secret from me. All this information about me.”

“How long has he had it?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. He should have told me right away.”

“Your mate wanted to know more about you.”

“And everything he found out is bad. I’m a psycho from a long line of psychos, and the person who made these notes said I should never be bred with.”

“That’s a hurtful statement.”

“Yeah, it is. Just because I kill people and have to be prevented from eating them, and because I assaulted him viciously the first time we met, and because I’ve been killing since I was fourteen, it’s, like, what, I’m a bad person now?”

Volkov’s lips twitch in a way I haven’t seen them twitch before. I think he finds it somewhat amusing, which only serves to piss me off.

“What? Is this funny to you?”

“Your indignation at imagining being considered a bad person just because of a bit of

murder is pretty funny.”

“Well. I mean. I have good qualities. I care about people. I try to keep them safe when I can. I was trying to keep Armand safe when I... wait... do you know about the gendarmes?”

“I’ve been made aware.”

“If they hadn’t done what they did, I wouldn’t have done what I did. I solved a problem.”

“Yes, and the fact that you were trespassing in the first place was hardly your fault.”

“Exactly. Armand let me do it.”

“Armand is too much of a permissive mate.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I’m saying it.”

The problem with this man, aside from everything, is the fact that he doesn’t actually know everything. He thinks he does, but there is much of my experiences he knows absolutely nothing about. Like what Armand did to me the night we met. Nobody who saw that would ever call him permissive.

“If you knew the things he did to me, you wouldn’t call him permissive.”

“I’m sure he’s capable of discipline from time to time, but it is when he feels like it, not when you need it.”

When I think about that, I suppose it could be true.

“Well, don’t tell him that. I like him indulging me.”

“Do you?”

“Of course!”

“I don’t see any of course about it. It leaves you to get into trouble and take care of matters your own way, which nobody appreciates.”

“Exactly. I’m not appreciated. It’s all very unfair.”

“I think this would be a good time to bring Armand in,” Volkov says. “Do you object to that?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“I’m going to bring him in. You can pick up the file.”

He’s subtly giving me a task, telling me what to do. And that is why the file remains strewn across the room when he returns with Armand.

I am so angry with him I don’t want to look at him. I definitely don’t want to hear his excuses for why he did all of this without telling me. He’s been working so hard to get me to trust him, but he’s never trusted me.

“I see you found the report,” Armand says, looking at it scattered all over the room, horrible sentences of betrayal and judgment on every surface. “I’m sorry, Beatrix. I meant for you to find out, but not like this. I wanted to talk to you about the contents of it when I’d had a chance to think.”

“Fuck you.”

“Okay, fuck him for what, Beatrix?” Volkov interjects.

“Fuck you for getting that report made, and double fuck you for making it sound reasonable.”

“Alright,” Volkov says. “Now, Armand, Beatrix would like you to double, or perhaps triple fuck yourself. How does that make you feel?”

Armand gives the man a death glare, and the memory of what he did to that man who was rude to me at my first dinner comes swimming back. Volkov should be more careful. Armand has an edge to him as well. People forget that.

“I don’t think we need your interference,” he says.

“You pay for my interference, Mr. de Lune.”

It is so weird to hear someone call Armand Mr. de Lune. It feels disrespectful even though it isn’t really. Most people call him alpha or ma’tre , but I suppose he’s not Mr. Volkov’s alpha or ma’tre .

“So you don’t want to breed with me now?”

“Of course I want to! I want a family with you, Beatrix.”

“The file says if you breed with me, it’s the end of your pack as you know it. And it says I’m young. And I might get worse.”

“You are young,” Armand says. “And I choose to believe that means you’ll get better.”

“So you’re acknowledging the inappropriate nature of this...” Mr. Volkov opens his mouth and I want to make him regret it. There’s nothing inappropriate about how Armand has handled me. He’s the first man in my life to not only make me feel safe, but to actually ensure my safety.

“Inappropriate?” I burst out.

Volkov ignores me, keeps going for Armand instead.

“You purchased her, did you not?”

Armand’s eyes narrow, and I get the feeling he might seriously hurt Volkov before this is over.

“She was up for sale. What should I have done? Stolen her?”

“You could have reported the entire matter to the proper authorities.”

“And in the meantime God knows what would have happened to her, and the odds that the authorities did not already know are next to nothing. The director general of the National Police was there. Sometimes the best way to navigate a corrupt world is to play the game. I don’t keep her prisoner. There are no chains on her limbs.”

Volkov is really giving Armand shit, and not for the reasons I want to talk about. It feels more like he has his own agenda right now, like he disapproves of this entire relationship. Is he trying to split us up? It’s quite literally not possible.

I came in here wanting to scream at Armand, and now I want to defend him.

“He didn’t do anything wrong, and if he did, I don’t care. I do more wrong than anybody else, and I want him. Nobody else could handle me. You couldn’t handle

me. Armand is the only person I've ever felt loved by, and nothing you say, and nothing he does is going to change that."

Armand is smiling at me. "Beatrix, I..."

"Shut up, I am still angry at you. That was still fucked up."

"It was," he agrees. "And I am sorry. In my defense, I didn't think you'd find out."

I stare at him for a moment, then laugh. "That sounds like something I would say."

"Yes, it is," Volkov says. He sounds disapproving. Good. I hope he fucking hates our relationship.

"What's in there, it answers a lot of questions," Armand says. "Did you read it? I don't know how much you remember about your past, but it's all there."

"I read some of it, and then I got too angry."

"There was a lot in there about where you come from, and what happened back then. If you ever have questions that you want answered, those pages answer it."

"You shouldn't have done it without telling me."

"I know."

I look at him, long and hard. "You'd do it again, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," he admits. "I would."

A laugh bubbles up in me. We are cut from the same cloth, he and I, both

unapologetic about doing what we feel needs to be done.

“I love you,” I say.

“I love you too,” he says. “And honestly, the information we have now is going to help. I know it is.”

“What’s so useful about knowing why I was fucking abandoned, Armand?”

“For starters, you weren’t abandoned. You were hidden in the orphanage. It was an attempt to save you, and I’d say it worked.”

“Maybe. Maybe my parents just wanted to get rid of me.”

Armand shakes his head vehemently.

“You were one of the last of your line, and your pack was under attack. There is absolutely no chance you weren’t wanted, and they didn’t try to keep you safe. My guess? They planned to come back for you, but couldn’t. I doubt they knew what happened to the girls when they aged out.”

“Do you really think so?”

I have never allowed myself to feel hope that anybody cared about me. The girls at the orphanage all had stories about the reasons they ended up there. I heard a lot of theories about absent parents who were coming back at any moment. I never believed them. I always felt, deep down, that I’d never see mine again.

“Do you remember your parents?”

I don’t know the answer to that question. Memory requires consent. You can’t

remember things if you don't want to, if you think about something else whenever it tries to surface, if you shove it down really deeply.

"I don't want to talk about myself," I say. "My memories are for me, not for anyone else. And not for people who ask me and assume I have to answer them. You might have paid for my body, but you didn't buy my brain."

Mr. Volkov is making notes feverishly.

"How do you feel when Beatrix shares nothing with you?"

"I feel great," Armand says, his tone dripping sarcasm. "Brilliant. I enjoy being shut out of her internal world and having to guess at the forces that formed her, and being unable to understand where she is coming from, or what I can do to make her happy."

"You want to make me happy?" I ask him the question, not because I didn't know that, but because I'm setting a conversational trap.

"I would die to make you happy."

"I'm still not going to tell you about my childhood, but I will tell you that you dying won't make me happy," I tell him.

He narrows his eyes at me for a moment, then relaxes a little as he gets the joke, somewhat against his will. He doesn't want to think this is funny. He wants to be annoyed, because I'm not giving him what he wants, but he's too good-natured and he likes me too much to stay mad.

"Alright, so I know you don't want me dead. I know one thing."

"You have a binder full of things you know about me," I say. "A whole stack of

Beatrix facts. What else do you want?

He looks at me deeply, seriously. “To know you as you know yourself.”

CHAPTER 16

B eatrix

That night, I dream I am small. There is snow outside, but it is being painted black with blood in the moonlight. There is so much fighting happening, fighting that makes me excited, but I cannot participate.

My older brothers are fighting out there, and so is my father. I am curled up with my mother, who is in her wolf form. I am the only one who cannot become a beast.

The fighting is getting closer and closer. We hear bangs and whines and cries and shouts as shifters are forced out of their wolf forms by injury or something else. I do not know entirely what is going on. I can see a little through the window aperture that has been left open so my mother can keep her eyes out for a moment we all hope will not come—and that comes anyway with the inevitability of a story being told against my will.

My mother turns to me and nudges me up. I have been taught what to do in these situations. I grab the fur at the back of my mother's ruff around her neck and I hold on tight as she runs out the back of the house. The moon is so bright it feels like it is daytime.

I love running with her this way, being carried across vast distances with her powerful body keeping me safe. The smell of her fur is so comforting, I cannot bring myself to be afraid. I know I will be safe, because she has always kept me safe. I know everything will be okay, because everything has always been okay. I even close

my eyes as she runs. I'm not supposed to do that because of the risk of falling asleep and losing my grip, but it feels so good, like being rocked and comforted with the rhythmic up and down motion.

I don't hear the bullet that hits her. One moment I am pressed tight against her powerful, furred body, and the next we are both skidding and rolling through the snow. She is no longer in her wolf form. She is naked and she is bleeding and she is making a sound that will forever be wired into my being.

She reaches for me, but her hands cannot grasp me. They are too weak. Other hands reach for me. Bigger hands belonging to tall men with long guns. They pick me up by a leg and dangle me in front of them.

They are arguing over whether to kill me or not. I know that, even though I do not understand a word that comes out of their mouths.

They speak a blunt and brutal language. It is foreign to me, and sounds harsh and cruel to my ears. Little do I know that one day I will think in it and speak in it and my native tongue will be lost to me.

“Beatrix... it's okay, you're safe. I'm here. Je suis là, tu es en sécurité, mon amour .”

I wake up to Armand reassuring me in his native tongue and the language we have learned to communicate in. I'm crying. I didn't know that.

“It was just a nightmare,” he says.

But it wasn't. It was a memory. One I had forgotten I remembered. I used to dream of that night a lot, but as I got older I stopped thinking about it. I made myself stop remembering it. And now it's back. And it feels as present as it did the day it happened. I feel it viscerally, in my body, every bit of fear, horror, outrage, and

sadness in me. I am shaking and I am crying, and Armand's arms and voice are not enough to chase it all away.

He holds me tight and murmurs soft little comforting words to me until I start to calm down.

"That must have been such a bad dream," he says. "I'm so sorry. Do you want to tell me about it?"

No. I do not want to tell him about it. I don't want to think about this again, or anything even remotely close to it. I want to lock that shit away so I never, ever have to remember or feel it again.

"You have to stop digging up the past. You have to stop asking me questions about what happened. You have to fucking stop, or I am going to go crazy," I tell him.

"Okay," he says. "No more questions. Do you want to try to go back to sleep, or do you want to see what cake they have in the kitchen?"

"Cake in the kitchen, obviously."

* * *

Armand

It has never occurred to me before that all this digging into her past could actually hurt Beatrix. I never thought about the fact that she's not ready to share, or even think about what happened. I took all that information in the file because I decided it was mine, and I was entitled to know.

I have treated her like her past is a puzzle that can be solved with therapy and

pressure, and nothing good has come of it. I have driven her to have a nocturnal breakdown.

To say that I feel guilty is an understatement. I have been so selfish, so demanding. I have insisted that her trauma is mine to know because I wanted to verify her virginity like some kind of medieval monster.

Strange that Volkov didn't point that out along with all of my other faults, but the man obviously has his blind spots.

"I am sorry," I tell her. "I'll never ask you another question again."

She nods with a mouthful of red velvet cake, her fork poised over a dark chocolate gateau . When she can speak, she says very little.

"Thank you."

"And I'll send Volkov home. I don't think he is doing either one of us any good."

She smiles. Her eyes sparkle, and the smile gets a little wider. "Can we..."

"No, we're not going to kill him, no matter how satisfying that might be. You and I are going to take a break from slaughtering people for being inconvenient or annoying. We're going to live proper lives. We're going to get married."

"You still haven't proposed," she says.

"I haven't? It didn't count in front of the gendarmes?"

"No," she giggles.

It is good to see her feeling better, to know that I can make her feel better after having spent so long making her low-key miserable.

“I suppose I’ll have to get onto that,” I say.

“Yes,” she grins at me. “I suppose you better.”

* * *

The next day, I handle business as I promised.

“We’re not going to do therapy anymore, Mr. Volkov. I will pay out the rest of your contract.”

“I see, and what precipitated this?”

“She’s started to have dreams about the past. Nightmares, really, and I don’t want to contribute to them. Her past isn’t mine to delve into.”

“I didn’t come here to delve into her past. I came here to help the two of you...”

“We don’t need help. I’m going to propose and we are going to get married.”

“So you’re going to cover up all the unresolved trauma with a wedding.”

“Yes.”

“Sounds like a flawless plan.”

Sarcastic asshole.

“Listen, we can’t all spend all our time unearthing the horrors of our past for the amusement of some tattooed sadist who never has anything useful to say anyway.”

“Ouch,” he says flatly.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to be rude, I just don’t think this is helping us. If anything, it’s making it much worse.”

“Ah. So talking is making things worse, but commissioning reports that dig into your mate’s history that she discovers in your office, killing gendarmes, summarily executing your own pack members without warning, they’re all very helpful?”

“I didn’t say that. I just said we don’t need therapy.”

“Understood.”

I hate how smug he is. No matter what I say, he has the upper hand because he has the position of power. He has become our priest, the authority we go to for absolution, presenting our thoughts and feelings for his inspection. It’s humiliating and I will not miss doing it.

“I don’t want you talking to Beatrix again either.”

“Even if she tries to talk to me?”

“What do you mean? She would never.”

“She asked to speak this afternoon.”

“Why?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that.”

“I told her I was going to send you away. She seemed happy about that.”

“It’s almost as if she is a very confused young woman who does not know what she wants and needs,” he deadpans.

Jealousy shoots through me.

So Beatrix is going to talk to him about her past, and I will know nothing. I should be pleased she is addressing her problems. I tell myself that I am happy. I’m not at all offended that he is her confidante and I am not. That’s fine. That’s totally fine and very healthy.

This is good.

This is what should be happening.

* * *

We have a whole crate of stuffed wolves that we give out at the festival in the village once a year. It’s a midsummer full moon celebration, and it’s fun for the pack and for the people. I don’t know that this year’s will go ahead after the incident in the town square.

The air is full of fluff and I am full of rage as I try to work these feelings out without having to talk to anybody.

Daniel interrupts me, smirking at the chaos I’m causing on the rooftop. I didn’t intend for anybody to see this, but of course there’s no privacy in a pack.

“What are you doing, Ma?tre ?”

“Nothing.”

“It looks like you’re using a ceremonial sword to cut the heads off stuffed toys.”

“Does it?”

He picks up one of them and holds it out, headless.

“What did Mr. Fluffy do?”

“Nothing.”

He puts it down and looks at me with a kind of amused expression, which is pretty bold given the last thing I did with this sword.

“You know, having a mate can be stressful, as well as being the greatest joy.”

“Can it? Fascinating.”

“Don’t be snappy.” He nudges me. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Should never have got a therapist. Now she has someone else to talk to instead of me. And she doesn’t talk to me to begin with.”

“She’ll talk to you when she knows what to say.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Give her time.”

What the hell is happening to me? I'm supposed to be the alpha, the one who knows everything. The one everybody comes to for answers. Here I am, on my roof, getting the most basic advice from my cousin.

"You've been wound tight since she got here," Daniel says. "I think you need to relax."

"Really."

"Yeah," he says. "Just chill. What's the big deal?"

"It's just the future of the pack and the love of my life."

"Right. Not worth worrying about it."

I throw a stuffed toy at him.

CHAPTER 17

V olkov

My tenure as therapist to this pack of French wolves is coming ever closer to a close, but there are some members of the pack who have asked to see me besides the alpha and his mate. My services are actually becoming more popular as time goes on. Almost as if the pack is lacking safe confidantes. Almost as if it is being run by a violent little boy who should know better.

I am getting a view of this pack that few others will ever have. I am coming to know their secrets, the things they keep hidden even from one another. It is a fascinating dynamic, and I know it will only grow deeper and richer over time. The books I will be able to write on this will inform shifter psychotherapy for decades to come. Putting up with the alpha is absolutely worth it.

This is the first session I've had with this particular member of the pack. She enters the room with her body contorted like an apology, avoiding eye contact with me in an overt display of respect.

I note instantly that she is afraid. Fear clings to her in an acrid, bitter scent that hits me in waves. The ability to smell feelings is not always a blessing.

"Come and sit down," I tell her, gesturing to the chair most clients sit in.

She does as she's told, giving me a little glance as she sits. I check my notes. All I have is a little note request for an appointment, written in a neat and careful hand.

“Jenny?”

“Yes.”

“What brings you to see me?”

“They killed my husband.”

The woman in front of me is delicate and feminine. She speaks in a voice barely audible above a whisper, and yet there is a strength to it. Her hair is a fine kind of blonde, done up in a careful up-do that indicates she is taking care of herself in the midst of her grief. Her clothing is likewise formal, a china blue floral blouse and skirt. There is a quiet elegance to her that is quite at odds with my appearance, but I appreciate it. I’d put her age at around thirty or so, still young, but older than the other two I’ve been handling so far.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I say. “Who killed your husband?”

“The alpha, and his mate. She did not touch him, but she put the order on him just as surely as if she’d done it herself. And then he, the alpha, Armand, executed the love of my life as if he were nothing more than a rat.”

She speaks softly, but I can tell there is fear and rage inside her.

“Can you tell me more about the circumstances, or...”

“The girl didn’t like how he spoke at dinner, so she made an example of him on her first night here. Then, to impress her, Armand insisted on murdering him. He was cut down, and that was it. They acted as though they had done me a favor. Nobody has even asked me how I am.”

“How are you?”

She lifts her eyes to me, only to dip them almost immediately.

“I’m sad. I’m angry. I know he wasn’t the best of men, but he was a good man to me. He was my mate. My fated mate. And they took that bond from me, cut it away without any kind of thought for the pain I would endure.”

“That is a hard loss. I am sorry. And no support was offered at all?”

“I have his funds, and the house, of course, but I won’t be able to afford that indefinitely.”

“Have you brought that up with Armand?”

“And have him whip my head off too?”

“You think he would kill you?”

“I don’t know. The rules have changed around here since the girl arrived.”

I note that she does not refer to Beatrix as the alpha’s mate, or by her name, or any other title that might show respect. Indeed, her upper lip curls every time she refers to the girl.

“What would you most like to talk about today?”

“I want revenge,” she says. “I want to avenge my husband’s death, and I want the girl to know what it feels like to lose the only man she’s capable of truly loving.”

“You want revenge? You want to kill the alpha?”

“Yes,” she says. “I suppose I do.”

“And do you have a plan to do so?”

“Several,” she says. “I rarely think of anything else, if I am to be honest. I come to the pack dinners and I see them eating and carrying on as if nothing has happened. Nobody cares what they do. The pack seems to adore them. The worse they act, the more they seem to be worshipped. The girl killed someone in the village for amusement, and there are two fresh graves in the cemetery that don’t belong to any of the pack.”

I am bound to report genuine threats to the alpha, as he is the closest to an authority in a pack system. This is starting to sound very much like one. Of course, I would be reporting her to the man she is afraid of.

“Do you intend on carrying one of these plans out?”

She looks out the window for a moment, then back at me. “I hope to gather the strength.”

“We can work on processing your grief and moving forward.”

“Hmm,” she says. “Yes.”

“I’d like to see you again tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I thought therapy was once a week.”

“It’s as often as I deem necessary.” And you might kill someone, or get yourself killed trying. I don’t add that last bit, but it is my main concern. The body count around this pack is disturbingly high.

* * *

When she is gone, I go and find the alpha. He is in his office, discussing matters of business with his advisors. He seems very competent when it comes to handling the day to day of the pack. I hear positive murmurings around the financial wealth of the collective, which covers for a lot of personal sins.

I knock on the door. Armand looks up at me, and an expression of annoyance flits over his handsome face. He is not good at hiding annoyance. He doesn't seem to think it is necessary.

"I need to speak with you, alpha. It is a matter of some urgency."

"Give us a few minutes," Armand says to his friends and advisors. He sends them off with a wave to a side study. I note they are all male. The pack's female influences seem limited, which is not a sign of health.

"I thought I was done talking to you," he says when they are gone.

"This isn't about you. Well, it is, but not in the usual way. I'm not talking to you as a client. I'm talking to you as an alpha, because a matter of pack security has come to my attention. A woman named Jenny Duplante came to see me."

"Oh."

"Yes. She believes you murdered her husband."

He nods and shrugs slightly. "She's right about that."

"She also says you've made no attempt to make amends. She is afraid for her financial security, and deeply mourning her mate."

He frowns, as if those feelings make no sense to him.

“The man was bad news. She’s better off without him.”

“She doesn’t feel that way, and I’m afraid she might do something regrettable.”

“Like what?”

“She wants to kill you.”

It takes several minutes for Armand to stop laughing. “You’ve seen the woman. She’s not a threat.”

“As you are well aware, women are often more dangerous than they appear, and they are always a threat,” I say. “But do with the information as you will. I’ve held up my end of the bargain. You’ve been warned.”

“Thank you,” he says. “I do need to give her some assurance she’ll be taken care of. I thought she would have known that. No member of our pack will be destitute.”

I could walk out the door. I don’t owe him anything else. I’ve done what I need to do. But I find myself staying behind.

“I’m worried about you, Armand.”

“I know. But you don’t need to worry about me. I’m the alpha of this pack. I’m in control.”

He’s a handsome young alpha, and yes, he’s in control, but he has a lot on his plate. He seems to lack any guidance from older pack members since his father retired. Having been born relatively late in his father’s life, the old man was never of much

use to him. He is a prince with the intelligence to manage the pack, but his emotional intelligence is not keeping up.

“Don’t,” he says.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t look at me like that, like you’re understanding me.”

“Heaven forbid.”

“I’ve got this. I’ll deal with Jane.”

“Her name is Jenny.”

“Right. Sorry. Of course. Yes.”

“You should know the name of the woman who wants you dead, Armand.”

He smirks, handsome and reckless. He is a decade older than his mate, but what they say about men maturing slower than women is so clearly true in this moment. He seems almost as wild as she is right now.

“Women have wanted me dead before. It’s not as interesting as it seems. Most females don’t actually try. Beatrix might, but Jane... Jenny, she was happy to be pushed around by old Duplante. She’s not going to suddenly get a backbone now.”

“She may not come after you with violence. Don’t forget the string of murders nobody has paid for. You are vulnerable on a range of fronts.”

He dismisses that almost immediately, as if it’s absolutely nothing.

“Pack justice is always rough. Her husband challenged me and lost, fair and square. He was a hapless, bloated old sop who thought he could talk to me as he pleased. He was wrong.”

Armand is so close to being a good person sometimes, but is also a thousand years away from it right now.

I tell myself again that I have warned him, and that my duty does not exceed that.

“Anything else?”

There’s a note of hope in his question. He wants to know about Beatrix.

“Nothing else.”

I leave.

CHAPTER 18

B eatrix

I was supposed to see the therapist today, but when the time for the session comes around, I decide to skip it. The idea of talking about what I dreamed about feels fucking awful. I don't want him to know what happened. I don't want Armand to know what happened. I wish I didn't know what happened. Every bit of memory feels like I'm being cut from the inside.

I shut this stuff off from my memory for a reason. I repressed it because it doesn't help to remember. Remembering feels like wanting to scream continuously all the time day and night.

Fortunately, the chateau is a very large place and there are always at least a hundred people milling around it at any given time. It's not hard to get lost in one of the libraries, sitting rooms, game rooms, conservatories, art studios, and studies. This is a building made for people who want to get lost while not actually running away from home.

I am in the second-floor conservatory, a later addition, glass walled and jutting out over the cliff against which the chateau is set. Sitting out on the edges of the room make me feel as though I might go tumbling over the side at any moment.

I like this room because just being in it is unsettling, and it being unsettling means I'm just distracted enough not to think about...

A tap on my shoulder makes me turn around.

Mr. Volkov is there, his arms folded over his chest.

“We have a session.”

“I changed my mind.”

“It’s a matter of courtesy to inform someone if you don’t intend to keep a meeting with them.”

“I don’t like your tone.”

“I don’t like your behavior.”

“Okay, now I really don’t like your tone. You’re talking to me like I’m a child. I’m an adult. I’m eighteen years old.”

“Yes. You should be in school, being looked after by an adult.”

“Armand is an adult.”

His jaw clenches for a moment. “The two of you are a couple of incorrigible children who hold the lives of dozens of others in your hands.”

“I thought you’d been fired, why don’t you fuck off, you big, fucking stupid...” I go off on him, cursing furiously until Armand appears. He does that, when there’s enough chaos.

“What’s all the yelling about?”

“He called me a spoiled child,” I say. “He said we’re irresponsible.”

Armand looks at Mr. Volkov with an expression I know means violence.

“Why would you say that?”

“We had a session, which she did not attend. I told her that it is rude not to let someone know if you’re not coming.”

“It is rude,” Armand says. “If you’re going to make me retain this man, you should attend the sessions you make with him.”

“Okay. Maybe. But you have to remember that I don’t care.”

He smirks, but shakes his head. “No, Beatrix. You’ve been rude to our esteemed guest, and you will have to pay the price.”

“What...”

Armand sits down in the chair I was sitting in, and pulls me over his lap, tipping me over his thighs like it’s nothing. It all happens so quickly I don’t really get a chance to respond before he smacks my ass.

“Ow!”

He spans me again, hard enough to make me yelp for real.

“Is this what you need, Mr. Volkov? A demonstration of discipline? Some evidence that I do not let my mate run entirely wild? Do you want to see her bare bottom spanked?”

He flips my skirt up and smacks me over my panties. I curse and earn myself another slap as a result. Spankings don't really hurt, not the way actual violence hurts. But they sting in a way it doesn't. It's like he's whipping my pride, not my ass.

"This isn't necessary," Mr. Volkov says.

"Isn't it? You've been insisting that I'm not sufficiently in control of my mate, and this pack, but here I am, showing complete command."

He's making a point, and he's using my butt to do it.

I should be angry, and I am, but this is also an opportunity to fuck with Mr. Volkov, and I want to take that. Armand's hand peppers my ass with a series of harsh slaps that make me tingle with arousal.

"Does she look under control now?"

"She looks like she likes being treated this way. And you like treating her this way. This isn't discipline. It's foreplay. This is more evidence that the two of you are unsuited to the situation in which you find yourselves. If you were, you'd not resort to these antics, talking about weddings when you should be..."

"Oh, that's right, we're getting married, just as soon as she accepts my proposal."

Mr. Volkov makes a noise under his breath, turns, and walks away just in time to save my ass from getting really sore. The moment he's gone, Armand stops spanking me and just starts rubbing instead.

"We are fucking with him a lot."

"We are," Armand agrees, rubbing my ass.

“It’s nice to share a hobby.”

Armand grins, and in that moment we feel completely on the same page. “He called us murder brats once.”

I snort. “Well, that doesn’t fit.”

“You hardly murder anyone, and I’m never a brat.”

“You are...” he laughs. “You are such a brat, Beatrix.”

“I am not! Brats are spoiled and they get their own way, and they push limits even when the limits are clear. I just do what I want when I need to do it and I have never been spoiled in my life.”

“I regret to inform you,” Armand smiles. “I have already spoiled you terribly, and as for the rest of it, you’re describing a brat.”

“I was raised in an orphanage, so I’m not a brat. You were raised in this house. You’re the brat, Maître .” I grin, teasing him, knowing it’s a bit of a sore spot, but wanting to play with it anyway because he called me the name first.

Armand lets out a low growl and picks me up, swinging me around and bending me over the back of the chair. He throws my skirt over my back, pulls my underwear down, and slaps my ass a couple of times before reaching between my legs and rubbing my clit.

“How does it feel now? Do you feel like you’re about to be bred by a brat?”

“Yes,” I laugh as he grips my hair, pulling my head back, arching me as he frees his cock and slides it right inside me. It’s a tight fit, but the spanking got me wet already

and fucking with him turns me on.

He makes a deep growling sound, not appreciating that term at all.

I have my pussy fucked hard and fast over the back of the library chair, his fingers strumming my clit the entire time.

“Tell me I’m a brat, will you, you spoiled little pup,” he growls as he fucks me toward a gorgeous orgasm.

I squeal and gasp and writhe, perfectly kept in his hands and then trapped on his knot as he breeds me once more, fingers circling my clit insistently, demanding I come, demanding I suck the cum from him with my contortions and contractions.

In the end, we both find ourselves in the chair, messy and half-clad, and grinning like a pair of idiots. Me sitting on his lap, his fingers trying to untangle the mess he made of my hair.

I love him.

CHAPTER 19

Armand

Days pass. We do not get any more mature. I do not fire Volkov, because several members of the pack reach out to me telling me how useful they find him. He has built up quite a clientele among the inhabitants of the chateau.

I am mildly concerned that he might be attempting a coup. He's getting the confidences of the pack and undermining my leadership. But I am not worried. If he does attempt something that stupid, he will find that I have a lot more loyalty at my disposal than he thinks. It is normal for pack members to question and doubt their alpha. It is simply a matter of staying steady and letting them see that things will turn out okay.

Things really are turning out okay. I've never felt so close to Beatrix before, and I have been thinking more and more about our wedding.

We are brushing our teeth when inspiration strikes.

I turn to her, toothbrush in mouth, and ask as romantically as I can.

"Beatrix, will you marry me?"

She gives me a sidelong glance that makes her look older than her eighteen years.

"You are not proposing to me in the bathroom, Armand."

“No?”

“No.”

“Do you want a big, fancy proposal in front of the whole pack?”

“I want a proposal that feels like a proposal.”

“Diva,” I tease.

“Tyrant,” she shoots back.

I am planning a proposal that will be worthy of her. The details are hidden in my office, a lot better than the file on her background was.

I am hard at work in my office, working on those very plans, when Daniel interrupts with a swift knock on the door.

“Tell me we can get flamingoes,” I say as he walks in.

He shakes his head curtly, and I notice that he is not alone. Two men walk in behind him. Simple human men, wearing simple human suits.

“These are detectives to see you, Ma?tre .”

To say that my entire body goes cold with that announcement is an understatement. I look at them, trying not to seem guilty. Fortunately, I have found that blank disinterest usually translates as authority.

One of them is younger than I am with a full head of dark hair and a mustache that is clearly an endeavor to make him look older. He is not too much of a threat, I do not

think. The older one makes me feel far more concerned. He is in his early fifties and has the expression of a man who has seen even more than I have. He has not said much, but his head is on a swivel.

“Detective Gaulle and Detective Barbier,” the older detective says, indicating that his name is Barbier.

“How can we help you, gentlemen?”

“We are investigating a case of two missing detectives.” Barbier cuts right to the chase.

“Oh?”

Suddenly, I am aware that Beatrix is lurking in the doorway. I can practically see her ears pricked, her eyes focused on them with a keen expression.

“Yes. Two officers went missing while on routine patrol in Bordeaux. They were called to a disturbance outside a crypt, and from there they were not seen again. However, one of the gendarmes had a trackable tag activated in his pocket. His wife was convinced he was having an affair. That tag has been tracked to this chateau.”

“Do you think they came here?” I frown slightly, as if I am confused. “We have not had any law enforcement visits from the city...”

Detective Barbier produces a piece of paper with a judicial seal emblazoned at the bottom.

“We have a warrant to search these premises. The tag is not as accurate as we might like and...”

Beatrix has disappeared.

We're caught. They're going to find the bodies and there will be no way of explaining our way out of it. I decide to play along until such time as I can no longer play. This isn't over yet, but it feels very close to the end of the game.

"Let me assist you. I can open anything that might be locked, and ensure that your search is as thorough as possible," I say smoothly.

"Thank you, Monsieur de Lune."

They begin their search inside the chateau with me by their side. I am doing my best to appear helpful, while not too obsequious. There are many locked doors, but that is because there are a lot of private rooms and offices. None of them contain missing gendarmes.

"We can't go in there," I say as they stop outside one of the study doors.

They immediately look at me with raised brows and a sort of excitement that I know means they think there's something inside the room.

"We can go where we please, Monsieur de Lune."

"I think you'll find..."

Gaulle opens the door, flinging it open in a way that is guaranteed to make the whole situation that much worse.

Mr. Volkov surges up, noticeably annoyed. He stood the second he heard voices, I'd bet, and now he is blocking the door, preventing their entrance. He even goes so far as to walk out and shut the door behind him, forcing them to move back so as not to

be walked into.

“Mr. Volkov, these are detectives,” I explain. “They’re here investigating some missing persons.”

“And they think these missing persons are likely to be in my therapy session?”

Mr. Volkov gives the detectives a fearsome look. For the first time, I am glad for the fact this man does not give a fuck about authority in any of its guises. He’s very annoyed at having his session interrupted, and he is not shy about showing it.

“We are searching the chateau for two gendarmes who went missing on the fourteenth,” the detective says. “Have you seen any...”

“There are no dead officers in my therapy room.”

The detective gives him a keen look, eyes narrowed, tone tense as he acts as though he’s just made a major breakthrough.

“Now, why would you say dead, monsieur ? They are merely missing.”

Oh, god. I feel that cold wave of sickness again. Mr. Volkov has just made himself a suspect. He’s not going to go down for us; he’s not even part of the pack. And I am pretty certain he hates me. We have not had a single positive interaction the entire time he’s been here.

But he doesn’t skip a beat.

“I assume if there were two missing living gendarmes running about the chateau I would have run into them from time to time,” Mr. Volkov says, smooth as silk. “I also assume that they don’t send search parties with warrants for people they assume

are alive. And I hope that nothing short of dead men is a good enough reason to interrupt my session. I will be available in another twenty minutes if you'd like to ask any other obvious and pointless questions."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. The man is an asshole, but it's really working for us right now.

I am so grateful, but I cannot express it, not even slightly. I am working overtime to not look like a man who has two dead gendarmes buried in his back cemetery. As he turns away from the detectives, Volkov flickers a slight wink at me. It's the first positive facial expression he's ever given me, and I find myself stunned by the fact he didn't drop me in it the first chance he got.

"Mr. Volkov takes his role as therapist very seriously," I explain as the door is closed.

Detective Gaulle tries to deflect, having just been thoroughly shamed by the therapist. I know how it feels to come away from an interaction with Volkov feeling less than. Now I'm getting the backlash.

"What would you call this place? Not a family home, is it? Too many people living here?"

"This is the ancestral home of myself and other families. It's now run as a going concern, so there are family members living here, and business associates."

"So, a commune," Detective Barbier says.

"Or a cult," Detective Gaulle shoots back.

I don't care what they think we are doing as long as they don't find the dead men.

Unfortunately, inexorably, we are eventually required to go outside. They wander the gardens and then look toward the cemetery. I try my best to calm myself. There's no reason for them to assume that the men are buried here.

The younger detective pulls out his phone. "Looks like we're getting closer," he murmurs.

They approach the cemetery and I wonder who the pack will decide to be the alpha next. In the absence of an heir, my father's lineage will end. I have disappointed generations of ancestors, and I will likely end my days rotting in a cell on a charge of murder while God knows what happens to Beatrix.

"Well, well, what is this?" Detective Barbier snorts.

I steel myself for a terrible discovery.

When I look in the direction the detective is pointing, there are no bodies, but the graves are open, recently dug up as if by animals. I know immediately what has happened, and where Beatrix went.

I have no idea what she's done with the bodies, or the tag. In the immediate moment, I don't care.

"We have been having trouble with the local wolves. They're running low on prey," I explain. "They can turn to scavenging if we are not careful. The graves were fortunately dedicated to pets."

They give me suspicious looks.

"Climate change," I explain. "The deer have less forage, which in turn puts pressure on the..."

“Is that a train?” Detective Gaulle looks for anything to get him out of this conversation, and he finds it.

“It is a train,” I say, moving toward the little station at the side of the chateau. The train is looking good today, gleaming in the sun. I keep it spotlessly clean so there is no day it does not look good.

“Mind if we...”

“Of course not.”

The two men love the train almost as much as I do. It is an impressive piece of engineering and workmanship, and there is no limit to their admiration. I even begin to forget that they came to look for the police my mate killed and has now presumably dragged off somewhere.

“You must have a lot of money,” Detective Gaulle says.

“My family has been blessed in that regard.”

“It is steam?”

“A very refined version of steam, yes. It chugs and choos less than your average engine, but it does run on coal. Powered rails are a danger for wildlife and ramblers, so the decision was made to keep it old-fashioned.”

“Monsieur, you are living the dream,” Detective Barbier says.

“If you call ahead next time, I can have my engineer ready it for departure, and we can enjoy a jaunt through the countryside if you like. In the meantime, I hope you find your comrades.”

“One probably ran off from his wife,” the older detective laughs. “And the other... there are rumors that the two of them were the reason she was jealous. It is possible they will turn up of their own accord, but we had to follow the tag, you understand?”

Men trust men who own trains. I do not entirely know why, but now that we are standing inside the cabin, these two detectives are looking at me as if I could never possibly have ever done anything wrong.

“Of course. You have my number. Please do call any time if I can be of further assistance. Would you like to come for lunch? The chef is preparing quite a spread for the household today.”

They look at one another, as if knowing they shouldn't.

“It is a long drive back to the city, no? Fortify yourselves with us.”

The pack feasts every lunch, with the chef putting on a grand spread mostly for her own edification. She often requests additional budgets for experiments and such. We are lucky to have Madame Foisin.

I do not see Beatrix at lunch. This is likely for the best, though of course I am worried about her. I occupy the detectives with conversation about the train and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. I don't think any of us actually do BJJ, but it is a safe subject for all men to discuss regardless.

“Did you know a gorilla can rip a man's face off?”

“Did you know sharks are older than the moon?”

We entertain one another with such questions until finally they stumble, drunk, back to their vehicle. I would tell them not to drive, but I want them gone as soon as

possible.

Their car drifts along the road, back and forth, barely staying in the proper lane. We should stop them. I think about sending an escort, someone to drive them back. I will do that as soon as I have found Beatrix.

“Where is Beatrix? Has anyone seen her?”

Nobody has. If anybody saw her digging up the graves, they’re not telling me. I suspect she went right there the moment she realized who the detectives were and what they wanted. I have no idea what she did after that, or where she has gone.

I am torn between going hunting for her myself, or bringing the whole pack out to hunt for her. When I take my form out by the cemetery, I do catch a faint scent of her, but most of it is masked by grave dirt and rot. There is no way to follow her.

“ Fuck! ”

I slide back into my human form and curse the wind. I curse the scent.

Mr. Volkov sees fit to make an appearance at this point. He is fully clothed and I am entirely naked and I am not in the mood for the power dynamic that ensues when this man shows up in all his psychological glory.

“My mate is missing, Volkov. If you have anything useful to tell me about her whereabouts, now would be the time.”

“She knows what she is doing. You can trust her.”

“She’s a teenage girl with two dead bodies and a tag. You often talk about her needing to be in school with a responsible adult. What are you talking about, man!”

“Yes. All of that is true. She’s also the most qualified person I know to be in the wind with two dead bodies and a tracking tag. I would imagine the tag is no longer in existence.”

“So you’re telling me to relax?”

“I’m telling you that whatever comes next, you should be prepared. Ready yourself.”

He’s a therapist, but he’s acting more like an advisor. I am tempted to listen to him. None of the others know what to do. Most of the others don’t actually know the entirety of what has gone on.

“Ready myself for what, exactly?”

He looks at me, deadpan. “The worst.”

CHAPTER 20

A rmand

The detectives arrived at about eleven a.m., and left around two p.m. Beatrix doesn't show up again until around five p.m. Those are the longest three hours of my life, stretching into interminable worry.

I take to pacing around the grounds in an effort to keep myself from going mad with stillness. I am attempting to plan what my response should be when I see her again, but my mind and heart are being pulled in too many directions all at once.

“Hey!”

Beatrix pops up out of a bush, covered in dirt, a broad smile on her face. “How much fun was that! I never thought I'd get to hide bodies from the police before. And you took care of them so well. Took them on a little tour of the train, wined and dined them. I'm so proud of you.”

She gives me that little speech, including the part where she tells me that she is proud of me without so much as a hint of irony. She's talking full speed, not only not afraid of what has happened, but entirely thrilled by it.

I stare at the woman I love, and I realize in this moment that my young mate is completely out of control. Worse, she has me out of control. Before I met the love of my life, I never lied to homicide detectives. I never worried about the location of bodies. I drove my train around the countryside and I enjoyed the company of my

pack mates and I completely failed to appreciate the true joy of being an alpha without this intimate responsibility.

I grab her and I hug her tightly, smacking her ass at the same time hard enough to make her yelp. “I love you so much, but you are in more trouble than you can imagine.”

“Calm down. It’s not that bad.”

Nobody in life has ever been calmed by being told to calm down. I am no exception to the rule. I carry her inside, keeping her held tight as I go. I never want to let her go.

“You’re not used to being in trouble,” Beatrix says. “That’s your problem. You freak out because you’re used to being in charge.”

“Alright. Enough.”

“Do you want to know what I did with them? They were a little gross. Inedible.”

I take her straight to my room, of course, and put her directly into the bath, not even bothering to remove her clothing. She is a filthy mess, and now, having carried her, so am I. I strip my outer clothes off to get the fetid stench of the dead off me, and with my mate sitting in the tub, I take the handheld showerhead and proceed to douse her with enough water to get the worst of the dirt off.

“Hey! This is not how baths work, you know.”

She’s in a very good mood, and in spite of my sternness, so am I. The relief of having her back in my care, entirely intact, is huge. If I never take my eyes off her again, I will be happy.

“You smell like dead things. Those clothes are ruined.”

“Well, you try digging up corpses and coming back smelling nice!”

She’s absolutely incorrigible, and not sorry at all. What does she have to feel sorry about? From her perspective she’s fixed a problem, again.

Tiring of being showered in her attire, she strips her filthy clothes off and drops them outside the tub, her curvy body now completely bare as she starts to soap herself down. The cleaner she gets, the hotter she gets, until I can barely think, because all I want to do is bend her over the tub and spank and fuck that ass of hers until she’s sore and sorry.

She giggles as she takes in my expression. “You always try to fight your instincts, Armand. Why don’t you just follow them for once?”

“If I was going to follow my instincts, you’d have my cock deep inside your ass.”

She blushes.

“If I was going to follow my instincts, I’d fuck your ass, then put you down in the dungeon for a good year or two, teach you a lesson about being a decent member of society, and then, when you’d learned it, I’d fuck a baby into you.”

“Christ, Armand...”

“That’s what you’re looking at,” I tell her. “That’s the truth of me. That I don’t trust you out of my sight, and I’m starting to think you’d make a very cute little captive fuck bride.”

I reach for her hair and fist it in my hand, wet locks easy to grasp as I free my cock

and start to pleasure myself the way I need to. Her body is going to give me release for all the tension she built up in me.

Pulling her dripping from the bath, I bend her forward against the wall and start fucking her with long, claiming strokes. I was so fucking scared I had lost her, and here she is, unharmed, soaked for me, willing to take my cock, hungry for another breeding.

“You’re such a naughty, perfect... God, I love you,” I say, leaning over her body, reaching around to toy with her clit as I push her closer up to the wall little by little until I am fucking her up against it, lifting her up so I can go as deep inside her as I can go, using every bit of her, feeling every bit of her, claiming her from her wild behavior and putting her back under my protection.

She enjoys every moment, arching back against me, her head on my shoulder, her pussy locked tight around my cock as she comes and my knot forms and we fall into a cascade of pleasure.

“There’s something wrong with you,” she grins afterward, when we are toweled and clean and in bed like civilized people. “I like it.”

I pull her close and agree. There is something wrong with me. But there’s something deeply wrong with her too. Between the two of us, we are barely making a single emotional person.

“I do feel better. Not sure I’ve solved any problems, but I do feel better. What did you do with the bodies?”

“Don’t worry. I know you wanted them to have a proper burial. I dug new graves for them out in the middle of the countryside, and I filled them in, and I put stones in to make sure that wild animals wouldn’t get to them. They’re nice.”

I try not to look disapproving at the idea of her out there in the countryside, digging graves for men who had been buried once already. Most people and wolves would be disgusted and appalled by such a task. For Trixie, it is just another task that needed to be done.

“You’ll have to show me in a few days’ time, once the dust has settled. For now, we’re going to bed.”

“It’s like six p.m. We haven’t had dinner.”

“We’re having dinner delivered to bed and we’re staying here. This is the one place I can be assured we’re not getting into more trouble. Nobody gets murdered in the bed.”

“Is that like a rule, or...”

CHAPTER 21

A rmand

I decide to be responsible. I've avoided Volkov for quite some time for all the obvious reasons, the fact that he's a judgmental fucker and is only of dubious use, and says things that piss me off every time he opens his mouth, and the fact that his big old tattooed self seems to think he is better than me.

But I'm going to see him, because he's the one person I can say things to who can't freak out about them. If I tell any of my pack mates all that happened, or how certain I am that Beatrix is so out of control that there is no reasonable, rational way to imagine containing her, I will sow discord and uncertainty.

"Surprised to see you," he says.

He is such an asshole.

"I thought you were supposed to be quiet and kind and empathetic. I thought that's what therapists are. Every time you open your mouth it's snark."

He smiles. "I simply said I am surprised you made another appointment."

"Why?"

"I'm a therapist, Mr. de Lune. I am not an assassin for hire. Or a crime scene cleaner."

“Oh, I see,” I growl. “You’re rubbing it all in my face.”

“I don’t know if I am rubbing it in your face, but the outdated, useless, and rather cruel practice of rubbing a pup’s nose in its business if it does it in the wrong place does come to mind.”

“So you are. I’ve come for therapy, and you’ve decided to be antagonistic.”

“No,” he says. “I’m sorry, Armand. This is a safe space.”

I laugh at that declaration, my voice taking on a slight edge of madness at the idea of any space being safe.

“The chateau is in chaos.”

“I don’t know that it is. I think you are, but the pack, as a whole, seems very calm and orderly to me. Most of the chaos seems to be contained to you and your mate.”

“That’s good,” I say. But I know there is a point at which it will affect them.

“Shall we discuss what happened a couple of days ago?” he suggests.

“Beatrix handled the whole situation much better than I did. She’s ahead of me in so many ways. The pack could be brought down completely. My lineage could end. And she is happily running about the place, evading the law...”

“Would you like to sit down?”

I stay standing—and pacing.

“She’s a monster. A menace. And I should be capable of handling her. And

sometimes I think I am, but the police are...”

Pew!

A bullet comes through the window, shattering the glass and missing my head by a hair. I’m so stressed about the detective situation I can barely be bothered worrying about it, but I suppose it’s one more thing I have to address.

“And now someone’s trying to kill me,” I sigh, stepping away from the window, taking refuge by a bookcase with some level of inconvenienced annoyance.

“Jenny, I imagine.”

“Shit. I forgot to deal with her. Can we do this another time?”

“A time you’re not mid-assassination attempt? Certainly.”

“Thank you.”

I have a good idea where she shot from. To hit the room from that angle from outside, you have to be in bushes at a particular spot. I have thought about this a thousand times over. An alpha must know all the potential assassin lairs around his abode. The place she shot from is a series of bushes that will have to be cut down now. Pity, really.

I could call on the pack security, but I don’t bother. I go down by myself, circle around the back and follow the smell. The widow’s scent has been quite strong lately, bitter and sad and afraid. I follow that smell while skirting out and around in case she has a smaller weapon. I have to wonder where she got a rifle from, but I suppose the old man of hers might have had one.

“Jenny. I think we need to talk,” I say, standing behind her with my arms folded over my chest, an expression of faintly paternal disappointment on my features.

The woman lets out a small shriek and scrambles away from the gun, her eyes wide.

“That was quite a good shot,” I say. “If you’d accounted for the wind then right now I wouldn’t have any problems anymore.”

She stares at me, as if she expects me to kill her on the spot. Fortunately for her, killing women is not on my agenda, and given the spate of murders I’m already desperately trying to cover up, adding an extra body to the count feels like a bad idea.

I offer her my hand.

She doesn’t take it.

I reach down and I pull her up by the fabric at the scruff of her neck. “In my office, Jenny. Now.”

I nudge her ahead of me and she traipses in front of me, her head down, bowed in, well, probably not shame, but the facsimile of it. I pick up the rifle and put it under my arm and we both go back to the chateau where I am going to have to deal with this issue once and for all.

When we reach my office, I disassemble the rifle, just to remove the threat of the thing.

“It only has a basic scope,” I note. “That was a good shot given the circumstances. Well done.”

She stares at me, wide-eyed. I note that she put on a camouflage jacket and pants for

this attempt. None of it quite fits her. More of her late husband's things, I suppose. She is petrified, poor thing, no doubt expecting a brutal end. I perch on the desk and fix her with a firm but kind look.

"Jenny, you can't kill me right now. Not yet. Give it a few years, you can take all the shots you want, but right now it's just not a good time."

She chokes on her words. "Not a good time? I can't kill you because it's not convenient for you right now?"

"It's not convenient for anyone. You're mourning your mate, but there's a point at which you'll realize it is for the best. I've initiated stipend payments so you don't have to worry about losing any of your assets. Your house is yours. I suggest you take the time you were spending plotting my demise and think about what you want for yourself."

She gives me an incredulous stare.

"You're not going to hurt me?"

"I think I have hurt you enough. I am sorry for the pain I caused when I killed your mate. I maintain he deserved it, and you are better off without him, but I caused you hurt nonetheless and you are understandably furious. I don't blame you for wanting revenge. I just ask that you serve it more coolly."

This might seem merciful, but it is at its core, practical. I have wronged the woman, and she is right to try to gain her vengeance.

"Is this because of the detectives who were here?"

Brave question.

“No, Jenny. It’s because you just tried to explode my skull.”

“Oh.”

“Do I need to assign a detail to babysit you?”

“No, that won’t be necessary, Ma?tre .”

I disagree there. I need to know that she is being taken care of, and that there is someone ensuring that the darkest plans emerging from her miserable mind do not come to fruition.

I pick up my phone and send a voice message. “Beau, can you come to my office, please?”

Beau is similar to Jenny in age, which is to say, significantly younger than her mate was. He served in the foreign legion for a time, and is a big man with blue eyes and dirty blond hair with a lighter trimmed beard to match.

“Do you know Jenny?”

“Barely,” he says, with a little bow to her. “ Enchante, mademoiselle .”

For a woman who was just on the verge of murder avenging her mate, she is remarkably receptive with a hint of an answering smile.

“I need you to ensure that Jenny is comfortable, safe, and not getting into anything she shouldn’t,” I tell him. “For the next thirty days, I’d like you to be her constant companion and bodyguard.”

“Understood, Ma?tre .”

“Very well. The two of you may be on your way.”

I sit down in the aftermath of the attempt on my life and I am surprised by how calm I am. My mate is God knows where doing God knows what with bodies and tags, I just had a bullet whistle by my skull by the grace of the same deity, and now I am left wondering if this is the end of things. Have we covered our tracks? Will we atone for our sins? Beatrix especially.

Ironic that I just sent Jenny away with an armed guard, but my murderous little scamp is doing as she pleases.

I also have the strangest feeling I’m still forgetting something. I used to be on top of all pack business. No matter how many irons were in the fire, I used to feel as though I had everything under control. Now I wonder if anything is under control.

I take a deep breath.

“Ma?tre ...”

“Yes, Antoine?”

“We’ve discovered a vehicle accident on the backpack road. Must have happened a couple of days ago.”

“The detectives!” I suddenly remember what I forgot to do. “I meant to send an escort after them. Was anybody hurt?”

“Well, the tree they hit isn’t happy. But they’re missing.”

“Missing?”

“The car is empty. There’s blood in it, but nothing else. We followed some tracks not far off and found a collection of bones. As if they’d been eaten by wild animals. But there are no wild wolves in this region.”

He gives me a pointed look. We all know what this means. She’s struck again. I really thought I’d gotten through to Beatrix. Calmed her down. Made her behave, but it feels as though the second my back is turned she is off murdering people.

I cover my face with my hands. “Can you please bring my mate to me, if it’s not too much of an inconvenience for her, if she’s not in the actual act of murdering an authority figure.”

“I believe she was speaking to Mr. Volkov, Ma?tre , and he is very aggressive if interrupted.”

“Fine. I’ll get her.”

* * *

Beatrix

“I just feel like this is what I was made to do. Clean up. Take the rubbish out. Keep bad people away from those I love. The dreams I had... the memories. They’re all times I couldn’t stop something bad happening. And now I can.”

“With one easy trick: killing people,” Volkov says.

“Exactly! You get me.”

He really does seem to get me.

I'm still not sure I like him, but I have been able to open up more lately, and when I tell him things that everybody else would freak out about, he just takes it in stride.

"But Armand doesn't like it. It scares him because of what might happen if we ever get caught. I just don't think we will because of the plausible deniability of animal attacks. People don't believe in werewolves, but they do believe in animals."

Volkov nods. "Can you imagine a time when you will feel safe without having killed anybody?"

"Maybe? I guess it depends if men keep showing up and telling me they're going to save me, or look after me, when I know all they really want to do is use me and hurt me. Those officers in the alley? The ones who started this? I could smell what they wanted to do to me, and it wasn't help me. If they'd separated me from Armand..." I give a little shudder.

"You think you would have been hurt?"

"Every time a man gets his hands on me, I am hurt. Armand's the exception."

"Is he?"

"Yes. Because what he does to me, I want. He smells like family. He smells like home. And he smells like love. He worries about me, and for me. He wants me to be happy. You can smell all of that. The others are sniffing for a whole different experience."

"When you explain things that way, they make sense to me. You put a lot of stock in your senses. Do you think there's any chance..."

I'll never know what the question is, because an impatient knock at the door heralds

Armand's arrival. He walks in without waiting to be invited, like he owns the place, because he does. The intrusion annoys Volkov more than it does me.

"I need to speak with my mate," he says. "You can fix the damage I do afterward."

"That's a very flippant..."

I don't get to hear the rest of Volkov's sentence, because Armand has grabbed me and is physically abducting me.

"Hey! I was doing therapy!"

"You're beyond therapy," he declares as he carries me off.

* * *

Armand

I have come to a decision. Enough is enough. An alpha has to take responsibility. Has to do things that he does not want to do, and will not necessarily make him popular.

I put her down in the hall for a brief moment.

"Tell me you didn't kill Barbier and Gaulle."

"Okay, I didn't kill Barbier and Gaulle." She pauses for a moment, then cocks her head to the side. "Who are Barbier and Gaulle?"

I lose my temper. I don't want to, and even as I lose it, I try to keep it in, but there's some part of me that just can't believe she's done it again. I'll never be able to trust her, and that breaks my fucking heart.

I'm going to have to treat her like a prisoner. I'm going to have to constantly keep watch over her. She's never going to have freedom the way other pack members do because she just can't be trusted.

"Christ, Beatrix! They were on their way home! It was over! Now there's going to be an investigation to find out where the investigators went after they crashed."

"They might think they wandered off and fell off a cliff? Or that wild animals ate them. They think there are wolves here. One attacked a man in the village not that long ago," she says, speaking as if she's not the responsible party.

"They might. Or they might think that it is a little odd that every officer who comes near this place ends up missing."

"The world is a strange place," she says. "Remember the Bermuda Triangle?"

"Nobody remembers the Bermuda Triangle."

"Exactly."

"You have to stop killing people."

She takes a deep breath and looks at me with those beautiful deep brown eyes of hers. There's so much contained there, so much I miss when I focus on her chaos.

"I didn't kill those men."

"They didn't dismember themselves in the bushes."

She snorts, grins, then breaks and outright laughs at my curt response. "I'm sorry," she says. "That just sounds so funny when you say it that way, makes me think of

what it would be like if they tried...”

“This is serious,” I growl. “You have to take responsibility...”

I trail off mid-sentence. How the hell is she going to take responsibility when she is so clearly constantly out of control? I am asking for something she cannot give. I have to stop doing that.

At her core, Beatrix is terribly afraid. Her tendency to violence and her insistence on justice come from the same place. But these men were leaving. They had an accident. Or maybe she created it. Maybe she took her wolf form and ran out in front of them. Maybe she hid in the back of the car and made it crash. I’ll never really know. I don’t really want to know the details. They’ll only be more incriminating when I’m inevitably interrogated.

“I am not going to let anybody hurt you. When the authorities come, and they will come now, you will be well out of the way, and you will not hurt anybody. Don’t fight this, Beatrix.”

“Don’t fight what?” She frowns slightly, then screams as I throw her over my shoulder.

“You can’t stop yourself? That’s okay. I can stop you. I had this prepared for you earlier,” I tell her. “I hoped I wouldn’t have to use it, but I see I will have to.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she giggles. She still thinks this is funny. We will see how funny it is when I start handling her as she deserves to be handled.

The stairs to the private dungeon go down from our room, winding down through the chateau unseen, hidden in walls until it hits bedrock and keeps going into the earth.

This is the dungeon I threatened her with, a space prepared for her to be held captive. It has all the basic creature comforts, including a bed, which I sit on as I throw her over my knee and spank her hard, relentlessly, my palm landing on her ass with the kind of slap that leaves a bright red mark every time it lands.

She yelps and wails, but this is only the preamble. I have much more thorough punishments planned for her. I spank her long and hard, until her toes drum against the floor and her ass turns bright red. I spank her upper thighs and her inner legs when she swings them open in the futile attempt to escape.

I hear a few incoherent snatches of words from her, but I am not listening to apologies or explanations. I am punishing her roughly and thoroughly, my hand bounding off her bouncing bottom time and time again as I thrash the lesson into her.

A bottle of lubricant stands on the night table. I pick it up and drench the cleft of her hot red cheeks with it, watching as the clear fluid runs down her parted ass.

“You’ve been a very bad girl,” I lecture, my tone imparting real weight to those words as I press my thumb to her ass and slowly push it in, claiming that last little bit of her. The part I had left untouched, because it felt too filthy, too defiling. It was the last piece of her physical innocence and I might have let her have it if not for the fact that she insists on disobeying me time and time again in the most brutal and sanguine of ways.

I pull my thumb out and replace it with my fingers. The lubricant is doing a good job at enabling this conquest.

“I warned you so many times,” I say, smacking her cheeks with my free hand. “And you’ve pushed me to this, haven’t you?”

A little mumbled yes floats to me.

“I’m going to fuck this tight little ass. You’re going to take my cock right here,” I say, plunging my fingers in and out of her tight hole.

She is tight. And she is sorry. The sound of her well-spanked whimpering is very appealing.

I have been so patient with my little mate. I have tried to give her the chance to relax, to feel safe. I have tried to keep her from danger, but she insists on becoming the danger. We will see how she feels about that now she is going to suffer the consequences.

I pick her up and bend her over the bed. She has very little to say for herself and that is good because I do not want to hear words or excuses. I just want to hear her wail as I fuck her.

“Breathe,” I order. “It will make it hurt less.”

With that, I start to slide my rock-hard cock into the tight, hot interior of her asshole. Little by little, she takes this humiliation, her empty pussy dripping with arousal beneath the hole I have decided to claim.

Her ass grips my cock tightly as she submits to me, giving me her obedience now that it is too late to mean anything for the lives I was trying to save.

I fuck her with short, firm, punishing thrusts. I don’t want to actually harm her, but I do want her to feel disciplined. I want her to know that she is in trouble, and her hot little hole is paying for it.

I am careful to keep my knot outside her as I rut her toward my orgasm, not hers. She will not come tonight. She will have her ass fucked and spanked and then she will go to sleep in this dungeon alone. That is the punishment I have decided on.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” I growl down at her. “It hurts to have your sore, spanked bottom fucked nice and hard by your alpha, doesn’t it?”

I slide my fingers into her mouth, effectively gagging her from replying.

My orgasm is already building, the satisfaction of having her submitted as hot as the sensation of her tight ass taking its first fucking. I pin her down harder and fuck harder, my cock stretching that naughty ring of muscle until I cannot take it anymore.

I pull free, fist my cock, and direct the flow of my cum as my seed splashes over her spanked ass.

“Fuck, yes,” I grunt, smacking it into her bottom. “This is what you get now, Beatrix. You get fucked and used and left in my cum, marked with my cock and my seed.”

She whimpers, but stays in position as I tuck my still turgid cock into my pants, turn, and leave her in the prison of her own making.

CHAPTER 22

A rmand

Mr. Volkov comes to see me the next day. I expected he'd show up eventually. I am back in my office, working on my proposal with a few changes to reflect new circumstances.

"Where is my client, Maître ?" He leans against the door of my office, arms folded over his chest. He's wearing a skintight t-shirt, and his tattoos are very visible. I suppose he's not technically at work now, and can dress as casually as he likes, even masquerade as a Russian dock worker, if he likes.

"Your client has killed five men, Volkov. Several of them after meeting you. I'm going to suggest that your methods are less than effective. I'll keep you on because the pack in general seems to enjoy having someone impartial to talk to."

The fact that one of those clients of his tried to assassinate me is, well... I'm keeping an eye on it. If it happens again, I'll consider it a pattern.

"I'm going to suggest she's responsible for her own actions," he says.

That's the problem with these therapists. They have all this influence. They get you in a room alone, twist your thoughts, bond with you, lead you down paths of belief and action you might never have taken on your own. And then they claim no responsibility at all. Nothing is ever on them. Nothing is his fault. Not the four people who have died since he showed up, or the bullet I almost took to my skull.

He's right, though, in a twisted way. Responsibility is a tricky thing. Nobody really has it, unless they claim it. It's an alpha's job to claim it.

"I am responsible for her actions. And there will be no more killing. I guarantee it. You can go back to work, Mr. Volkov, or unloading containers from an ocean liner."

He frowns, ignoring the petty jibe. "Armand, what have you done?"

"The only logical thing."

"Armand..."

"I tried doing things the civilized way, Volkov. I tried talking. I tried therapy. I tried understanding and warning, and light discipline. I tried being her lover. Now I'm going to be something else. What she's needed from the beginning. I'm going to be her alpha."

* * *

Beatrix

My ass aches.

He was rough. He was merciless.

He was fucking hot.

I suppose I can't tell him, but it would be worth killing a couple of guys every now and then just to feel his power that way, potent and just barely restrained.

He meant to punish me, but the truth is I felt reward in that untrammelled,

unrestrained act of pure lust and discipline. It might be the first time in my life I've ever felt truly met, entirely seen, and completely put in my place.

I am already settling into what I am told will be my new life.

The dungeon is bigger than I expected it to be. The stone walls are lit with what look like torches, but are electric, and there's a UV lamp to ward off rickets. I'm well set up with a king-sized bed covered in velvet brocade and all the creature comforts of a medieval captive.

I was surprised when he brought me down here, but I didn't beg. Didn't cry. I should probably have seen this coming, but I guess I thought Armand's patience was pretty much endless. Turns out it wasn't.

Perhaps I should be panicking, but I got used to being locked up a long time ago. I could waste time feeling betrayed, but I know I pushed him to his limits. So maybe this is fair.

Armand comes down the stairs, his shirt open almost all the way to his waist, chest bared. His legs are clad in tight black pants, his hair is pushed back from his head in a dark mane.

It's one of those moments where I look at him and realize how incredibly hot he is. Not just attractive, but truly dominant, actually made for this role. He has a tray in his hands, silver-covered plates on top of it.

I am sitting cross-legged on the bed, as he approaches, setting the dinner down on a side table.

His eyes are darker down here. There's not enough light to reflect the moon, so they are a kind of deep gray.

He doesn't say anything, and neither do I. We just look at one another in a so it has come to this sort of way.

"We're going to be married," he says, finally breaking the silence.

I cock my head to the side. "Is that your proposal?"

He fixes me with a firm stare, his chest rippling as he removes one of the silver lids to reveal a plate with bloody steak on it. My mouth waters.

"You forfeited your right to a proposal and the chance to choose when you decided to murder five men. You will marry me. I have decided."

He's sexy when he's finally had enough.

"And where will we be married? In the corner by the bed, or... are you going to keep me down here forever?"

"I'm going to keep you down here until I can trust you. When will that be, Beatrix?"

He starts cutting into the steak. There is not a plate for him and a plate for me, there is just one between us. I watch him, wondering what the game is now. He cuts a piece and offers it to me at the end of the fork.

No freedom for me. No utensils either.

He feeds me steak one bite at a time.

It's sensual, being his captive. He is careful with me. Considerate. The punishment is the confinement, I think. Though there may be more coming.

“You’re mine,” he says. “My perfect little problem. And when you are my wife...”

“Everything will still be the same,” I say. “I’ll still be who I am. And these walls won’t hold me forever.”

“I’ve decided I’m going to tame you,” he says. “All creatures can be tamed given enough time.”

I laugh. “It’s one thing to keep me captive, Armand. I understand that. But you can’t change who I am, or what I am. They tried that already. They beat me. They hurt me. They drugged me. They lied to me. If you can’t beat the wildness out of a pup, you can’t beat it out of me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says. “I’m going to love you so ferociously there is nothing left in you but love. Are you still hungry?”

I shake my head. I’ve eaten enough.

He is yet to have his fill.

Without question, without invitation, simply taking me as he wants to take me, Armand picks me up and pins me against the wall, my hands above my head, wrists in shackles, because this truly is a dungeon, sanitized as it may be. Arousal flows between my thighs. I want to be fucked. I want him to take me, to mate me. I want to be his.

I don’t care that I am captive, because I know that I will always be his prisoner, one way or another. I’ve been his since the moment he looked at me and threw ten million dollars at the worst man I’ve ever met to take me without question.

His teeth run down the side of my neck, bite lightly, nip and tease as his big hands

trace my curves all the way down to my hips, then my thighs. He grips and spreads them, and I know what comes next. His eyes on mine, my sex wet for him, waiting for him to do what he has to do.

Because I, unlike him, will never deny him the true expression of his nature.

His cock surges inside me, rough and dominating. This is his true nature, stripped of the veneer of propriety he has been trying to cling to all this time. He fucks me like he owns me.

Last night he took my ass, and today it is my pussy that will be punished. He is merciless in his rough rutting, pounding inside me over and over as my breasts bounce and are occasionally sucked into his mouth, nibbled, even lightly bitten as he uses me for his pleasure and mine.

I wrap my legs around him, draw him in, let him have me. We rut until he comes inside me, his cock forming that thick alpha knot that keeps his seed inside me, doing what cum does.

We don't talk about what is going to happen inevitably from all this mating. We never discuss what life is sparking between us. I could be pregnant. I might not be. At any moment, some new little creature could emerge between us and then we will both have even more problems than we already do.

"I don't know why," Armand says as we lie together in the aftermath of our rough mating. "But the more you submit, the more I feel as though I'm not getting through to you at all. You've made this all too easy."

"Maybe I like being captive. Maybe this keeps me safe. Maybe not everybody was made to be free."

Armand wraps his arms around me and sighs into my hair.

“You were made to be free. You just need to understand that there are other ways to be safe besides killing every man that moves.”

“Arguably...”

“No,” he says firmly. “We’re not having this discussion. Killing equals captivity, equals you being kept in a dungeon and fucked until you bear my pups. Until you start to think differently, that’s how it’s going to be.”

“You wouldn’t keep me down here pregnant.”

“I would,” he says. “I’d do anything to keep you out of trouble, Trixie. I love you, and if that means you live the rest of your life as my captive fuck mate, then so be it. Plenty of our ancestors were kept this way. There’s no reason you can’t be too.”

He’s so fucking hot when he’s mercilessly medieval.

CHAPTER 23

A rmand

“Ma?tre?” Daniel taps on my door one afternoon not long after I confined my mate to the dungeon to be my sweet little fuck toy. The guilt I felt at the beginning is starting to fade, because it is working. She is contained, she even seems happy. It’s the strangest thing.

Perhaps things are starting to finally come to order. Jenny Duplante seems happy enough with Beau, who seems happy enough with her, and the world is no longer at risk from Beatrix. The attack on the detectives seems to have been put down to wolves; wolf stories are rife at the moment.

I’ve banned the pack from shifting anywhere outside our immediate territory for the moment. There are rumors of hunters flying in with the intention of killing these man-eating beasts. But, all things considered, I’d say I have things under control.

“What can I do for you, Daniel?”

He lifts both his brows and breathes in a way I know heralds the end of my hopes of peace and quiet.

“What is it?”

“I have reason to believe we are being invaded by Russian wolves,” Daniel says. His tone is almost bored, faintly annoyed. I love this man like a brother, though he is only

a cousin. I should say that aloud one day, he'd find it funny. Maybe when we are not being invaded.

I look out the window, but the sky is blue and the grass is green and there doesn't seem to be an invasion anywhere about. I tap my pen on the desk blotter and look at him questioningly.

"Are they out the back? Coming down the chimney?"

"They're in the town," he says. "Two people died last night in wolf attacks. Their bones were found scattered around the old cemetery."

The hair rises on the back of my neck.

"What did you just say?"

"You don't actually want me to repeat that, do you, Ma'tre ?"

"No," I say. "But it's not possible. Beatrix is locked up, and I was with her last night. She didn't escape the dungeon, kill two people, and come back. The security on those doors is..."

"I don't think it was your mate," he says. "Actually, I know it wasn't."

"How?"

"They shot one of them," he says. "The wolves, that is. But they missed, they think, and accidentally shot a nudist hiding amid the graves. A Russian nudist."

He slides his phone across the desk to me. There's a picture there from the local chat page. It's a man looking sorry for himself, and nursing what looks to be a patched-up

wound. The locals are raising funds and food for him, because they do not know a predator when they see one.

“We need to get this man into our custody immediately,” I say, standing up. “Let’s go get him. Bring the boys.”

“Are we taking the train?”

“Yes, and two cars. We’ll offer hospitality, the villagers will be relieved, and we will have these creatures where we want them.”

I am mobilizing the men when Mr. Volkov makes an appearance.

“If I could speak with you...”

“Not now, Mr. Volkov, we have important pack business to attend to.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder. I was not looking at him before. I am now. This man has been in my pack for weeks, getting deep inside the minds and hearts of everybody he speaks to. I have allowed him because I have regarded him, tattoos and strength and taciturn demeanor aside, to be mostly harmless. He does not look harmless now.

His expression is stoic as he looks at me. “We need to speak.”

I look him over, really look at him. I try to tell what has shifted and changed, why he suddenly seems more like a threat than a guest.

He’s wearing suit pants and a tight white shirt. I make a mental note to offer him the services of the chateau’s in-house tailor. Having a member of staff going about looking like he is about to burst out of his clothing is a poor showing.

I sit back behind my desk, well aware that I am in the process of being blindsided. Fortunately for me, I am quite used to being surprised by bad things, thanks to Trixie's murder spree. I keep calm, because I truly do feel calm. Whatever this is, I feel equal to it. It could be delusion, could be confidence, could be the fact that I no longer care. Hard to say.

"I am not a therapist," Mr. Volkov says.

I feel the internal clicking of things settling into place. Of course he isn't. Of course the only man I could find capable of therapizing a pack is actually not a therapist at all. Werewolf therapist isn't really a thing. But pretending to be a werewolf therapist? Well, that's the perfect cover for someone who needs to add an inch to his neck size.

I have fucked up. I know that immediately, but I refuse to make a big deal of it. He is waiting for me to respond in shock, or surprise, or to curse him. I do not give him the satisfaction of any of those responses.

"Makes sense. You are terrible at it."

I don't ask him who he really is. I just wait while that burn sinks in, knowing that these events are all linked. Beatrix never trusted him. I was so concerned with helping her, changing her, that I never stopped to wonder if he needed to be trusted.

"I am Maxim Volkov, alpha of the Lesnik Siberian pack," he declares. "My lineage is ancient."

I stare at him blandly. "Do you want me to gasp, Mr. Volkov? Shall I faint? Or do you realize that quite literally everybody in this room has an ancient lineage and two thirds of us are alphas."

"It's like walking into a cake shop and calling yourself a fudge slice. Nobody cares,"

Daniel adds helpfully.

Volkov makes an annoyed face at me and carries on with his grand reveal, which I am sure is already beginning to feel very anticlimactic. Sometimes, one of the greatest weapons of war is making your opponent feel like, as the British say, a complete wanker.

“Beatrix is one of ours,” he presses on bravely. “You’ll never contain her. But we respect the mate bond, so we’ve given you the chance to breed her. You can be assured she will be happier in more remote climes, with more opportunity to express her true nature. And your whelps will be well taken care of.”

He says all of that as if all I need are the bullet points of the situation. He’s a Siberian alpha. He intends to take my mate. I get the satisfaction of having knocked her up, and that’s the end of it, apparently.

“You mean dumped in an orphanage when you inevitably all get yourselves killed? I think not. I know you think we are weak, obsessed with pleasure, and given to frivolity. But I can assure you, Mr. Volkov, that we will tear you to pieces if you so much as try to touch my mate.”

“With what, Ma?tre ? Your pack is full of sad ladies, old men, painters, artists, librarians, cooks, financiers, almost nobody with any fighting experience. The most dangerous wolf in your pack is your mate, and you cannot control her. I have called in my pack—wolves all with Beatrix’s nature. Can you begin to imagine?”

“I can. I think it would be a bloody and inefficient invasion, and I suspect half of your force would be distracted by killing the wrong people. I think they have already started to do that in the village.”

“My pack is better trained than your wild mate,” he says. “We have actual discipline,

not a little slap and tickle when it takes our fancy.”

“My dad could beat your dad,” I respond, as the conversation devolves into a sort of childish set of threats. He cannot intimidate me, because I am single minded when it comes to Beatrix. I will do anything, be anything to keep her.

Volkov narrows his eyes further, until it seems I am being peered at by two pieces of cut glass.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Armand, but I will if I have to.”

“That’s funny, because I do want to hurt you, and I definitely will.”

I have to give him credit of some kind for announcing this before we went to town and started rounding up his pack. It was actually somewhat sporting of him, and it is why we are not fighting right now.

“Did you expect us to roll over?”

“You can’t keep her in the basement forever. You know that. You can’t give her what she needs—a steady stream of prey, and praise for doing what comes naturally to her. We are all animals, Armand. But you are trying to stop what she is. You won’t do it. She was born in blood, and she will die in blood. Any peace you manage to wrest from her will be temporary and end in tragedy. This is the destiny written in her DNA.”

Those words make the silence a lot heavier.

“You might be right. But I will not give up on her.”

“Then you will not...” he draws in a breath, “do this alone. Our kind is dwindling as

it is. Especially when it comes to those with significant percentages of the blood. We cannot afford to fight.”

“I thought you were going to take my mate from my bleeding hands,” I frown. “Explain yourself, Volkov.”

“I thought the threat might absolve you of any guilt associated with giving her into our care. If I threatened you, then you could tell yourself you did what you did for your pack.”

“Enough games. Enough brinksmanship. What do you want, Volkov?”

“I have called my pack here, but they are not an invasion force. Not if you do not want them to be.”

“They’ve killed two people in the village.”

“Four, actually. The two in the village, and the two detectives. I am sorry for both those incidents. They were the products of misunderstandings.”

I stare at him, remembering how Beatrix told me she didn’t kill the detectives. She only said it once, and I did not believe her. She has not tried to defend herself since. She just took the burden of the blame. I need to talk to her.

“The wolves nearby, the ones I have called to us? They are her kin. Distantly related, because the massacres killed all her direct relatives, but they will give her context.”

“So we’ve gone from you stealing my mate to infiltrating my pack with yours.” I lean back again. I don’t think this is what it first seemed to be at all. I don’t think this is an aggressive move. I think this is a cry for help. He does have Beatrix’s bloodlines. He doesn’t know how to just ask for what he needs. He has to fuck around in the edges

of things, posturing, threatening, sneaking, anything other than just being clear.

“What is it you need, Volkov? Besides a new tailor?”

I shouldn't have added the snark.

He sighs and he sits down, staring out the window as all pretense of power fades. In this moment, he is another supplicant in front of my desk, another dependent who needs something.

“Volkov, you've helped us. I think. We've talked enough shit. If there's something I can do for you, then tell me. If it's something that can avoid bloodshed, even better.”

“I will be honest. My pack only contains nine shifters. Our numbers have dwindled over the years. Beatrix is the first of our kind in a long time to be pregnant. There are only three females left, and all of them are in their forties and fifties. None of them bred. There are three younger males, their sons, but no daughters. We are facing extinction if we cannot find mates, and we cannot find mates in the Siberian tundra. The Russian packs will not blend their blood with ours. So, we have come here.”

The problem he is facing is a problem many shifters have faced. It was the very problem I suffered. Being unable to find a suitable mate, being unable to locate anybody who makes the mate bond sing. The news that he's brought three young Siberian shifters with Beatrix's bloodline is enough to make any alpha pale with concern, but I have enough dungeon space for them all if necessary.

I decide to welcome them. I wanted them in my control regardless, having them as guests suits me, saves on the shackles and the fighting.

“Why don't the nine of you invade the east wing,” I suggest. “On the following stipulations: No killing on site. No killing off site. And no encouraging my mate to

kill.”

“We are better behaved than your mate.”

“A body count of four suggests that’s not entirely true. If you are not, there will be consequences. Now, please, Volkov, go and get your pack before it tears up my favorite town.”

“Thank you, Ma?tre ,” he says, rising to his feet and leaving the room.

I know what it cost him to call me ma?tre . I know what it means. And I cannot say that there is not a significant sense of satisfaction in it. All that posturing, all those threats, and in the end he submitted because he has to acknowledge that, murder brat or not, I have my pack in check and my world is in order.

This is the most therapeutic thing he could have possibly done for me.

“Some people really don’t know how to ask for a favor,” Daniel says, slinging himself into the chair Volkov just vacated.

“Did he call this an invasion, or did you?”

“I might have taken poetic license,” Daniel grins. “But he did want to take Beatrix. I heard it all when I was waiting for my session. He was on the phone. I speak Russian of course, so I understood it all. He’s been planning this for a while, I think. Sounded desperate.”

Strength is a horrible burden to have to bear, to have to posture with aggression when what one really wants is sanctuary. I realize that the man who came to me in the guise of a helper really needs help himself.

“One Siberian wolf has been so entertaining,” he adds. “I’m sure adding eight more, nine including Volkov, will be fun for the whole pack. Sounds like they’re all older ladies and younger men. And a couple of loose cannons and Volkov.”

“We’ll take them as they come,” I say, getting up. “I need to go free my mate.”

CHAPTER 24

B eatrix

The dungeon walls are comforting. They shouldn't be. Everything I ever thought I knew about myself. Everything I ever thought about life. You're not supposed to crave the prison. You're not supposed to feel secure tucked up below ground.

Or maybe I am. Maybe it's the denning instinct. I don't have any decisions to make down here. I don't have to worry about killing someone that I shouldn't. I don't have to worry about being good or bad, because down here the only thing that matters is what Armand wants—and what he wants is what I want.

I am comfortable. For the first time in my life there is no pressure, no fear, just the very real and very comforting reality of being kept. Other people's worst nightmares are my dreams. And my nightmares? Few could stand them.

I hear him coming down the stairs. Is it day? Is it night? I don't know. I don't care. I mark time by his presence, or lack thereof.

He looks at me with those deep slate eyes that only flash silver now and then when they catch torchlight.

“Is it just me, or are you more at peace here than you've ever been?”

He brushes the hair away from my face as he asks the question.

“I like it down here,” I say. “I haven’t been in trouble since you put me down here. I haven’t had a problem. All I’ve had is the hottest fucking sex I could imagine.”

His expression is a little morose as he hears that. “Well, as much as I’d like to keep you captive forever. I don’t know how long I can keep you down here.”

“I thought you said I could stay down here forever.”

“That’s when I thought you were relentlessly and remorselessly hunting down anything with a pulse and a role in authority. But now I know better. You didn’t kill those detectives.”

He says it almost like an accusation.

“I never said I did. I actually think I said I didn’t. You didn’t believe me. It’s okay.”

“It is not okay. I should have believed you.” He shakes his head at me. “I really thrashed you, Trixie. I fucked your ass hard... I punished you, and you just took it.”

“Maybe I liked it?”

He lifts a brow at me. “You liked it?”

“Is that a bad thing?”

Armand kisses me passionately, deeply. “It’s not a bad thing,” he says when he breaks the kiss, my head dizzy with desire. “ Mon dieu , you are an intense little thing. I feel like I am only beginning to scratch your surface. Maybe it will always feel that way with us. But at the very least, I owe you an apology. I never meant to punish you for a crime you did not commit.”

“Bad boy,” I smirk, unworried. I can tell he feels guilty, but the truth is, I felt like I did deserve the treatment on some level, and I certainly enjoyed it on another.

He chuckles, and shakes his head at me. “Sometimes I get so caught up in the things I feel I need to fix about you, or that need to be controlled or unearthed... I forget to notice all the incredible traits you have. You are powerful, you do what is right even if it will cause you harm, you take blame, sometimes even when you’re not to blame, and you make the best of what little life gives you.” He looks at me with a fierce passion. “I will not allow myself to be one of the many monsters who makes you act like one. I will not deny you what you deserve, blame you for what you are, or give you anything less than my full trust.”

I listen to him, feeling my inner self welling with what feel like tears, but they’re not from sadness. He’s suddenly seeing me. I don’t know how, or why. Something must have happened up above ground.

“Do you know what that sounds like?”

“What?”

“Almost sounds like a proposal.”

He slides to the side of the bed, down on his knees, looking up at me with silver eyes that seem to hold tears of the same emotion I feel.

“Trixie, will you marry me?”

“Of course,” I say. “I have to. You paid ten million dollars for me and you’re holding me captive in your sex dungeon.”

He frowns slightly. He wants me to be earnest. He wants this moment to matter. And

it does. So I stop being an asshole.

“I would marry you even if I wasn’t currently imprisoned, Armand. You’re the only person who has ever made me feel loved. You are my safe place. That’s why I don’t mind being down here. Whenever I am with you, I know I am going to be okay. I don’t have to want to spend the rest of my life with you, I know I am going to.”

“You are perfect,” he says, cupping my face in his hands. “And you are mine.”

We breathe in the moment together.

And then I have to break the silence, because I have a question that has to be answered.

“How do you know I didn’t kill the detectives?”

“That’s a long answer. I can give you the short version: I found out someone else killed them. But it’s related to the next thing I have to tell you. Some of your family are arriving soon.”

“They are?” I pause. “They’re already close and they’ve been killing people, haven’t they.”

“Yes. And you’ve already met one of them.”

“I have?” I narrow my eyes a little, thinking... and then it hits me. “Not Volkov. Tell me it’s anyone but Volkov. Tell me it’s someone I ate. Tell me it was Duplante.”

He winces as I talk.

“I’m sorry, but it is Volkov.”

“Fuck. No. I’m related to that guy? Why?”

“I don’t know why,” he laughs. “If it helps, I don’t think he’s a close relative. A second cousin or something like that. I am guessing. He may be even more distant. Everybody coming is a distant relation, I think. Your immediate family...”

“Died because of all the killing, because that’s what happens when you’re a violent, murderous creature. Eventually, the murder comes for you.”

“Something like that.”

I throw myself back on the bed. “Can I not meet them? What if they’re all like him? Can you not tell them I’m serving time in your fuck dungeon?”

“Nothing is ever as I expect it to be with you,” Armand says with a smile. “You don’t have to see anybody you don’t want to see. Not Volkov, not any of them. I’ve offered them a place to stay, but I will banish them if you like.”

“Banish them,” I laugh. “No, don’t do that.”

“I think your entire extended pack have fallen on hard times. There’s a reason they couldn’t come for you in that orphanage. The part of the world you come from has been at war for a very long time.”

“So they sneaked a therapist here?”

“Volkov is the alpha. When I put the call out, he heard about it. Also, when you pay ten million dollars for a shifter girl in an orphanage, people hear about it. I think he came out of curiosity. And when he realized who you were... he started putting events in motion.” He lies down next to me. “I think he was going to kidnap you, but thought better of it.”

“He was going to kidnap me?”

“That’s my guess. He didn’t say that. He did say something about trying to take you to live with his pack, but I think that might have been bluster. I don’t think there’s anything left.”

“So we’re all ending up here, in your pack. A whole pack of murderous shifters. Are you worried?”

“No more than usual. Are you ready to be released from captivity and welcomed into the bosom of your family?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll stay here for now. You can stay down here as long as you like. I’ll keep you safe from yourself and everybody else.”

He wraps his arms around me, and makes a nuzzled apology in my ear.

“I’m sorry, Beatrix. I’m sorry for all this shit. If I had just left it alone, Volkov wouldn’t be here, we wouldn’t have gone to Bordeaux, there would never have been a file, no bad dreams. I could have made this so simple, but I fucked it up for both of us by trying to dig because I had this stupid obsession with whether or not anybody else had ever been with you. I’ve blamed you for all of this, but most of the time it was me putting you in situations you should never have been in.”

“So I’m down here because of you. Not because of me,” I say, trying not to be too smug, but being a little smug anyway.

“Maybe you should have been down here all along. Maybe down here isn’t so much a place as it is a state of being. Locked away, just you and me, focusing on ourselves,

not worrying about our pasts, or what people want from us. And maybe I should worry less about what you do in the world. Maybe murder is a viable way of handling people who are problems...”

He’s never this open with me. Maybe the therapy has done him good, even if it wasn’t actually therapy.

“I don’t kill anybody who isn’t a threat,” I say. “I never have.”

“Why didn’t you say that when I put you down here?”

I let a little smile emerge. “Because I like it when you’re forceful and possessive and when you make the decisions.”

“You like it when I am the alpha.”

“Yes.”

“Twisted little monster,” he growls lovingly. “Do not worry. I will always be your alpha, and this dungeon will always be here if you need it.”

CHAPTER 25

B eatrix

I am even more shy to meet my family than I was to meet his, but I let myself be taken up to the wolves who have, as I understand it, been causing havoc in the village and surrounds. The first thing I see are three young men. They could be brothers. They look strong. They look like they're trouble. I recognize the expression in their eyes as one that I've worn many times myself, and just like that a sense of belonging washes over me. It's not that they look like me on the outside, though they do have strong features and dark hair, it's that they feel like me in the room.

"Oh, my goodness!"

An elderly woman grabs me by the face, her hands clasped on my cheeks, looks into my eyes, and cries. She keeps saying something over and over. I don't recognize it, because I don't speak the language. It sounds old.

"She says you are the image of her little sister," Volkov tells me. He's here looking formal and together and respectable, when in truth he is every bit the snake I always thought he was.

"This is my aunt?" I ask him the question while I formulate a plan of what to do about him.

"This is your aunt's cousin. Her little sister was your mother's... I lost track of the connection. She's a relation."

“Excuse me,” I say to the woman, lifting a finger and moving back from her, sliding her hands from my face because I need to attend to something else. “I just have to do one thing. It’s very important. I’m so sorry. I just...”

I take a step up on a chair, so I can get the right kind of height, and I smack Volkov right in the face. He takes the blow with grace, or like a brick wall would. Either way, he takes it.

I see Armand out of the corner of my eye. He starts to make a move toward me, then decides against it. Good decision. I start my rant, to the laughter of the younger wolves.

“You were related to me, and you didn’t tell me. You were sitting right in front of me, pretending to be a fucking therapist, hearing all my thoughts, and you just... didn’t tell me. You could have told me the first day you were here. But you sat silently in a room, and...” I trail off, inadvertently giving him a chance to explain.

“I had to be sure of who you were. I didn’t know right away. Then you ran off to the city and killed some gendarmes and in addition to the man in the village, and then of course, the file.”

“The file.” I widen my eyes.

“I didn’t really know until you threw the evidence in my face. And by then I felt as though I had come too far. I am sorry to have deceived you.”

“You were such an asshole.”

“I am an asshole,” he says with a half-shrug. “I am the alpha of this pack, small as it is, and my ways are the old ones. You are also very difficult to handle, and Armand seemed to be struggling. I wanted to help.”

“Armand was not struggling. He has never struggled. He’s always been perfectly in control of everyone but me, and that is because I am an outlier.”

I want to hit him again, but he’s just a bit too sad to bother to hit, which is frustrating because I am suddenly feeling all sorts of surges of aggression.

“You weren’t even nice to me,” I add. “All the times I was in your office, what a fucking prick you were.”

There. There’s a reason. I smack him again. This time he catches my hand, stares at me with that icy blue gaze and I see violence in him, violence I am programmed to both draw out and meet with the same.

“Unhand me! How dare you touch me when I am trying to hit you!”

Armand loops an arm around my waist and pulls me away. “Now, dear,” he murmurs. “We don’t viciously attack the guests, or the men who pretended to be therapists so they could track you down and possibly kidnap you only to realize there was nowhere to take you after all.”

“I’m going to kick your ass,” I tell Volkov. “You’re the reason this was so difficult.”

“Blaming me isn’t going to change the fact you won’t tell your mate anything about yourself. You barely even told him you didn’t kill the detectives. You go along with things, hiding yourself, you make yourself small, and you let him be the arbiter of what you are, so he never really knows you. That’s not my fault. That’s your fault.”

It’s one thing to snipe back in an argument, it’s something else to take someone apart.

I lunge for his throat, taking my wolf form halfway through, becoming uncontrollable by Armand as my weight multiplies, my teeth become keen and long...

What ensues is an absolute dogpile of a fight. Volkov is forced to shift to avoid having his throat ripped out. Armand shifts too, in the effort to contain and control me. The three young Russian males drop their human pretenses and so do Armand's men at arms. In a matter of seconds, the room is full of biting, snarling beasts attacking anything and everything in sight out of sheer blood lust and instinctual ferocity.

“Enough!”

Armand stands in the middle of us all. He is bloodied, but human, his voice imbued with enough authority to cut through the animal passion in the room. Even I stop with my teeth sinking into someone's furred hide, and slide back into my human self, kneeling on the floor in the middle of it all.

“You will all take your human forms, you will all go get cleaned up, and you will present yourselves to dinner, where, if anybody so much as makes a snarl, I will throw you all into the dungeons. And yes, I do mean all. Even you.”

He fixes me with a heated silver stare that instantly turns me on.

I am in trouble, and he is in control, and neither one of us can wait for these others to shamefacedly shuffle out of the lounge and back to their rooms, tails between their legs.

“That was naughty, Trixie,” he growls at me. I am still kneeling where he was when he yelled at us all, entirely naked and not at all ashamed.

“That was hot, Armand,” I smile, too excited and invigorated to even begin to pretend to submit. The act of fighting, getting to tumble around and express my full self with others of my kind who aren't victims or prey, but my equals was invigorating. And now I have him all to myself, gorgeous, naked, muscular, and dominant. He's

everything I ever dreamed of, and everything I'll ever need.

He reaches out, slides his hand through my hair and pulls me close to him, my mouth at the right height for his cock to slide between my lips. I let him claim me, opening for him, lapping my tongue against the underside of his cock.

“Yes,” he growls, his hand fisted in my hair. “Yes, Trixie. Give me your mouth. Give me everything.”

He takes everything. He takes me all the way to the back of my throat, disciplining me with rough thrusts of his cock that fill me more and more as he swells with desire. I started this with my mouth, and he is going to finish inside my mouth, taking care to keep the rough knot of his cock outside my lips so I am not trapped on his dick when he comes down my throat, pulling me close, making me feel intimately, passionately used and punished.

This is what I need. This is what centers me, stills me, calms me. Others might see rough treatment and cruel domination, but what I feel is pure relief.

“You are not going to lean into the wildness of your ancestors,” he growls. “Not while I am in charge. You are going to lead them into civilization. You are going to show them that life is safe and good, and you are going to do it all with a very sore ass.”

He spans my ass hard as he says that last part, hard enough to bring me up onto my toes. It might have been a mistake to reveal how much I enjoy him being the alpha, because he is every inch the dominant right now.

I see no more forgiveness without discipline in my future.

“Starting a brawl on their first day here? No, no, Trixie,” he says, marching me across

to a couch and putting me over the back of it. He pulls off his belt, loops it in two, and proceeds to snap it against my ass over and over, hard cracks that make me gasp as the hot pain sears through my skin.

“We are not playing anymore, Trixie, not now I know what you really need.”

The belt lands again, across my thighs this time, punitive and intentional and enough to make me squeal.

He returns to spanking my ass with the belt, until it feels hot and tingly and almost numb. He doesn't drop the belt until I am sniffing with hot tears in my eyes.

“These people are going to depend on us for structure. We might be younger than they are, but we are the alphas of this pack. So you are going to be held to high standards. You are going to be disciplined when you do not live up to them, and...” He steps in and thrusts his cock inside me, no warning, just the rough claiming of an alpha punishing his mate. “You will be fucked until you are sore if you fail me.”

I almost come there and then, my pussy gripping his cock with desperate arousal as his words and his demeanor and all the heat of the whipping combine to make me melt into orgasmic need.

He fucks me, comes in me, waits until the knot is big and thick inside my ravaged pussy, then starts to tease my nipples and my clit, forcing me through orgasms that don't seem to subside until another one starts. He is playing my body as if it is an instrument that belongs to him, making me writhe on his cock as I completely lose control.

“Ow,” I whimper when he finally slides from my ravaged pussy and lets me stand up. I am unsteady on my feet, so he helps keep me balanced, his hands on my hips.

“Ow,” he agrees, tilting my face up toward him. “I bet that ass hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, Ma?tre .” I never call him ma?tre , I’m not even sure how the word got into my brain, but there it is.

He smiles, pleased. “That sounds fucking hot coming from your punished mouth,” he growls. “I’m going to be sterner with you from now on, Trixie. I’m going to make things hurt when I think they should hurt. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I nod as he pats my bottom, not soothing, just claiming. “I understand that was hot.”

He nuzzles me and pulls me close, his seed slowly dripping from my legs as he lets me rest against him. “It was,” he says. “Now, are you ready to behave in a civilized fashion? Or do you need another round of whipping before dinner?”

“You wouldn’t,” I gasp.

“Pup, I would happily spank you from now until the dinner bell is rung if I thought it would make you behave. These people have been through a lot.”

“If only I knew how that felt.”

“I know you do, which is why you need to be a good influence.” His fingers drift down my stomach and find the hood of my clit, pressing on my mound so it pulls up, massaging just above my pussy, driving me crazy all over again, one finger tapping the super sensitive bud of my clit.

“If you’re not a good girl, I’ll spread you open and whip your pussy,” he says.

“Mnnghh,” I moan.

“Or maybe I’ll do it if you’re good,” he says, cocking his head to the side.

He perches me on the back of the couch and slides his fingers into my aching sex, drawing out our wetness and using it to lubricate my exposed clit, which he spans with two fingers, tapping and swatting at my swollen sex.

“You really do like this,” he says as wetness drips from the core of me. “Exposed, punished, hot, sore, fucked, and you still want more.”

He slaps my spread pussy with a stern stroke, watching my expression as I flush and writhe. “Oh, it feels good, doesn’t it, right now everything that hurts feels good. You’re so horny, so wet, so in heat...”

He pushes two fingers inside me, finding me soaked.

His cock is starting to get hard again as he twists those digits inside me, and I know he’s going to mate me again. The look in his eyes makes my pussy being stretched wide an absolute inevitability.

This time, it is on hands and knees, on the floor, my face pressed to the rug, my hips high.

“Like the animal you are,” he growls, standing over me and lowering himself down, legs bent to dip his cock back inside my wet pussy, almost teasing me with the tip. I take the submissive animal pose and he masters my body and my mind, fucking me from a completely dominant position, which twists the both of us into positions not made for comfort, but for heat.

At some point, we tumble forward, his cock in my pussy, his hands on the floor behind my ass, his toes holding him up in a bridge position as he fucks me with my legs bent over my head. We are contorted, we are animal, we are coming apart and

together, collapsing onto the floor in a tangle of pulsing sexes.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask the question when I regain the power of speech.

“A ravaging. While we’re young, and flexible, and that doesn’t put our backs out,” he grins. He is in a much better mood for having come twice and punished me thoroughly, and funnily enough, so am I.

* * *

Later...

I try to make polite dinner conversation with Armand’s cum sliding out of me. The entire pack has been assembled for dinner to welcome my family, our guests, complete strangers who somehow feel like home.

I look down the length of the table and I see Jenny smiling with a new, younger man. I barely recognize her at first because of how much happiness has transformed her. She no longer looks pale. She no longer seems to be apologizing for her existence with every breath. I feel a sense of satisfaction, knowing that the fight I started my first night here has led to her happiness.

Volkov is sitting opposite me. Armand is at the head of the table, to my left. To my right, one of the ladies who seems so overwhelmed every time she looks at me picks at her meal while hanging on my every word. Her name is Svetlana, and she tells me she has dreamed of finding the lost little ones of their pack.

“It wasn’t just me?”

“Six,” she says. “All the little children who were too small to shift were sent away, scattered across the world. We thought we would find them later, when the war

ended. But the war didn't end. We did. The pack now, the one Volkov leads, it is not really a pack. It's a collection of strays held together by tragedy." She speaks elegantly and with great depth and loss.

"I am sorry," I tell her.

"I should be the one apologizing to you. I was one of the ones who failed you. I am sorry you grew up without a mother or father, without a pack, without anything but the hunger that hollows us all out if it is not sated. I am glad you were found. I am glad you have fed."

She's referring to my various crimes of vengeance and justice. There is no judgment besides approval in her tone. She does not have the same values that Armand does. Hers are the same as the ones that live in me.

"So, do you all kill people, or..."

"We have learned to tame our wilder instincts. We cannot survive a modern world with a hyper-violent approach. The civilized will not tolerate it. They hunt us down and eradicate us. We have to at least pretend to be good people."

"Have you met people? Almost none of them are good. That's why killing them is so moreish."

Armand runs a warning hand over my shoulder.

"I mean, wrong," I say, refining the sentence. "Deeply, deeply wrong."

Svetlana smiles. "We are all beings in a changing world," she says. "We must adapt, or die."

I'll take that as a yes. I sit among my people, feeling the coiled animal instincts in us all. Yes, even in Volkov. I am starting to think I hated him so much not because he didn't feel like family, but perhaps because he did. Because I saw myself in him. Felt myself in him. Because his proximity made my yearning all the worse, ignited all the pain in me, and made me want to hide in a dungeon, kept like a monster, rather than feel any of it.

That's gone now. The sadness, the angst. I feel belonging. I feel like I am home.

EPILOGUE

B eatrix

Armand and I are married in a beautiful ceremony at the old medieval church in Fontlune. My dress is handmade by the women who came to live with us, the survivors of the wars that took my mother, my father, my family, my sense of self and safety. They have worked on it tirelessly while telling me stories of the days gone before, the horrors they endured, and the love they held onto.

They rely on us now, on Armand and me.

As we make our vows, I feel the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders. We are the alphas of the de Lune pack. We are the progenitors of a new generation... I can feel the squirming of life inside me even as the pastor performs the ceremony.

I am not only promising myself to Armand. I am promising myself to the future, to our babies. To those who will come after us. I am promising that we will never allow the same kinds of war that broke my pack and destroyed my family to come to ours.

It's all very serious. I never imagined a wedding day would have so much weight to it. I never imagined a wedding at all; even when Armand would talk about it, it felt like something for other people, not for me.

But here I am, a bride, surrounded by her family. True family. People who love me, care for me, want me to be happy, and are excited for the future generations yet to be born.

* * *

Armand

Beatrix is beautiful, radiant in the white lace gown that was stitched by hand by the ladies who constructed every part of it, including the veil, over long nights.

I do not think she understands her beauty the way I do. But I think she understands her power. There is some solemnity in my mate, a ferocity that burns even here, at the altar.

She does not take these vows lightly, nor does she take impending motherhood with anything other than the utmost seriousness. She is young, but she is clear-eyed. I have heard her quizzing the ladies, asking them what happened in the terrible nights of war that took her from her family forever.

Le curé prompts us for our vows, and looks on approvingly, along with all of our family, as we promise ourselves to one another.

“I promise to defend you, to possess you, to love you, to cherish you, to own you, to protect you, and to have and hold you every day of my life,” I vow.

Beatrix blushes. I can see tears forming at the corners of her eyes. I know she is overwhelmed. I am sure none of this feels quite real to her, and yet here we are, finally getting married.

“I promise to love you, to disobey you, to...” She trips over her words as she realizes what she just said, laughter rising from the pack as they dab their eyes. This has been an emotional ceremony for us all, a journey in which I have transformed from a young alpha yet to be tested to the leader of a pack that is expanding rapidly, shedding dead wood and experiencing new growth.

There is no longer doubt in the pack, because there is no longer any doubt in me. I am where I have always been destined to be, and I am with the only woman in the world I would ever want by my side.

She blushes so furiously I think she might faint. I reach for her, clasp her close, and reassure her by stroking her back.

“I love you,” I murmur in her ear. “You can do this.”

“Is it too late to elope?” she whispers back.

“A little.”

The two of us whisper like a pair of naughty whelps at the altar while everybody patiently waits for Beatrix to find her verbal footing.

“I promise to be yours,” she says. “I promise to be true.”

“You may kiss the bride,” Le curé declares.

Cheers go up as I kiss my wife for the first time, happiness suffusing my body, my mind, my soul as I claim her before the eyes of the world, the pack, and all creation.

“We should shift as we leave the church and run away,” Beatrix whispers in my ear.

I grip her arm a little tighter. “There are people here. It is the middle of the day. We cannot expose ourselves...”

“I’m gonna do it,” she whispers, giving me that bright-eyed look of mischief that I know bodes poorly.

“If you want to spend your wedding night being caned in the dungeon, and not

getting laid, be my guest,” I growl under my breath. “Start our marriage by defying me, and I will make sure you regret it.”

Her lashes lower and the blush descends from her face down to her chest and the top of her breasts, revealing her arousal upon hearing that threat. My bride adores testing me. Our life together is only just beginning, and not a moment of it will be easy. There will be pain, there will be tears, and there will be more pleasure and love than I could ever have imagined.

I would not have it any other way.

The End