



# Rescued (Southwestern Shifters #1)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** A wounded wolf, a destined bond, and a love worth fighting for.

When Gabe Staley rescues a wounded wolf, he doesn't expect to find his fated mate—and he certainly didn't plan on falling for a brooding shapeshifter with a dangerous past.

Gabe has always been a misfit in the small town of Shasta, Texas, but his big heart and fierce determination to protect the vulnerable set him apart. When he crosses paths with Mika Blackwell, a wolf shifter cast out from his pack, their connection is undeniable.

Mika Blackwell lost his pack for being gay, but Gabe makes him believe he's finally found where he belongs. Their bond is undeniable, but in a town ruled by hate, love comes at a price. When Mika's former pack resurfaces—along with the Alpha who cast him out—he's forced to confront the past he tried to leave behind.

With danger closing in and tensions rising, Gabe and Mika must stand together—because some things are worth fighting for, and neither of them is backing down.

Perfect for fans of Charlie Adhara and TJ Klune, *Rescued* is an action-packed, heart-pounding romance about destiny, love, and the courage to stand together against all odds.

**Note:** This expanded edition of *Rescued* has been revised in first-person, present tense for a richer, more immersive experience.

**Total Pages (Source):** 22

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Gabe

I finish feeding the last dog in the kennels, crouching to let my fingers comb through Jojo's coarse, speckled fur. The blue heeler stiffens for a moment, his muscles tense under my touch, before he leans into my hand. A soft whine escapes him, the sound half hesitation, half trust.

I smile, scratching behind his ears. "Good boy, Jojo. You're getting there," I murmur. It's been slow progress with him. He's smart but cautious—his wariness carved into him by whatever hell he lived through before finding his way here. Most of the animals I take in bear similar marks, whether on their bodies, their minds, or both.

Straightening, I close the gate with a soft click, double-checking the latch. Jojo watches me with those amber eyes of his, curled in the far corner of the kennel like he's still not quite sure what to expect from me. "You're safe now," I whisper, though I'm not sure he believes it.

My boots crunch softly on the gravel as I move to the barn door, pausing to glance back. Jojo circles his spot once, twice, before curling into a tight ball. He keeps one eye half open, still watching me. I shake my head, the familiar mixture of frustration and anger bubbling under my skin. Some people shouldn't be allowed within a mile of an animal.

This barn, converted into a makeshift shelter, isn't perfect. Rows of chain-link pens line both sides, each one equipped with a doggie door leading to a small, fenced run. The space is functional, the result of months of work. I wanted a place where the dogs could feel less confined, at least a little. It's not much, but it's better than what waits

for them out there.

In Shasta, stray animals don't get second chances.

Out here in this small Texas town, cruelty is the norm. Todd Benson, one of the few decent people I know and a deputy for the Sheriff's department, has filled me in on the horrors. Sheriff Kaufman takes pride in dealing with strays his own way—cruel, vicious, and needlessly brutal. No one here seems to care, either. It's just the way things are.

Todd, Adam Soames—the local vet—and I are the only ones trying to make a difference. We've built a network of sorts, rescuing as many animals as we can, one at a time. Some days, it feels like we're bailing water from a sinking ship, but giving up isn't an option for me.

I glance over the pens one last time, my eyes scanning each latch, each gate, until I'm sure everything is secure. Most of the dogs are already settling down, full bellies and warm blankets doing their work. Jojo still keeps one wary eye on me, but he looks calmer now, his body relaxed for the first time today.

The sun is low, throwing golden light across the fields as I make my way back to the house. It's quiet out here, the kind of quiet that sinks into your bones. Sometimes, it feels peaceful; other times, lonely. My house sits on the edge of a few acres, a simple structure that's been my refuge for years.

I inherited it from my grandparents after they passed away. A car accident took them both in an unchangeable instant. It still hurts when I think about it, the band around my heart tightening with a fierce throb, but there's some small comfort in knowing they went together. Their love for each other was unwavering, and I know the idea of being separated in death would've been unbearable for them.

I came to live with them long before the accident, after my parents made it clear I wasn't welcome anymore. Coming out as gay wasn't something I planned to do—it was something I had to do. Pretending to be someone I wasn't had been suffocating.

But my parents weren't interested in understanding. Their rejection was swift and absolute.

My grandparents were my lifeline. They took me in without hesitation, offering the kind of love I thought I'd never feel again. They showed me that faith doesn't have to be a weapon, that family can mean something more than judgment and shame.

Reaching the front steps, I pause to stretch, working out the stiffness in my back from hours of bending and lifting. A hot bath sounds perfect right now, but the thought barely takes hold before my phone buzzes in my pocket.

I pull it out, glancing at the screen. Todd.

"Hey, Todd," I answer, pressing the phone to my ear.

"Gabe," Todd says, his voice low and urgent. "You're not gonna believe this. I found a wolf."

My steps falter. "A wolf? Are you sure?"

A wolf. Here.

Wolves aren't unheard of in New Mexico—they've been reintroduced into the Gila National Forest. But northern Texas? That's something else entirely.

"How bad is he hurt? Where do I need to meet you?" I ask, gripping the phone. A dozen questions tumble through my mind, but these are the ones that matter most

right now.

Todd's voice comes through, quick and steady. "Well, I got a call from Mrs. Schumaker. She thought she saw a big dog hanging out by her barn, figured it might be rabid or something. Anyways, I get out here, and damned if it isn't this huge black wolf lying behind the barn. He's just...there, Gabe. Barely moving. Looks like he's been starved, maybe sick. I don't know. Adam's already on his way, but I could use you out here. Can you head over?"

A wolf. Starved, sick, or both? My mind stumbles over the thought, even as I find myself nodding. "Yeah. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Adam's involvement in rescues has been a lifesaver for me and Todd. I still remember how hesitant I was to ask for his help. I'd gone to him with a stray, a Lab mix with a shattered leg, thinking I'd have to beg him to discount the surgery. Instead, Adam had waved me off mid-sentence, taking the dog back into surgery without so much as a fee.

It wasn't until my third or fourth visit with another rescue that Adam finally pinned me with one of his steady, questioning looks. "What's going on, Gabe? You keep showing up with these dogs—injured, malnourished, some barely alive. This isn't just you taking in strays, is it?"

I'd come clean, explaining the mess with Kaufman and the horrific treatment of animals in Shasta. Instead of balking, Adam had listened, his expression darkening by the minute. When I finished, he stood up, grabbed a pad of paper, and said, "Tell me what you need."

Since then, Adam's been the quiet backbone of our little operation. Medications, vaccines, spaying and neutering services—he provides it all. I don't know much about his personal life, but professionally, he's one of the most dependable people

I've ever met.

I toss the phone onto the counter and grab what I can think of—a few towels, a blanket, and my old digital camera. For a moment, I hesitate by the cabinet where I keep some basic first-aid supplies. Gauze, alcohol wipes, a few syringes—it's not much, but it might help. Then I remember Adam will be there, and his supplies will be far more thorough.

Tossing everything into the truck, I climb in and start the engine. My thoughts churn as I drive toward the Schumaker property, the back roads familiar but somehow longer tonight.

A wolf. How the hell does a wolf end up here, in Shasta of all places?

The idea of approaching a wild animal—a wolf, no less—has me gripping the wheel tighter. Todd said the animal is too weak to be a danger, but I can't help the edge of nerves twisting in my stomach. A wolf is still a predator, no matter how starved or sick it looks.

I just hope Todd's right about this one.

By the time I pull into the Schumaker property, twilight is settling over the fields. Todd's cruiser is parked near the house, its headlights cutting through the dimming light. He's standing by the barn, gesturing for me to drive around to the back.

I park near him, but I don't kill the engine. Call it nerves, but I like having the option of a quick getaway if something goes sideways.

“Kind of a wimpy move, huh?” I mutter to myself as I step out of the truck.

Todd doesn't seem to notice—or if he does, he doesn't care. His focus is on the

ground, and I follow his gaze to the heap of fur lying a few feet away. My breath catches as I take in the sight of the wolf, his body a tangle of limbs and fur that looks more like a shadow than a living thing.

For a moment, I think it's already too late. Then I see it—the faint rise and fall of his side, the shudder, the shallow intake of breath.

“Still alive,” Todd murmurs, his voice low.

I nod, relief warring with the ache of seeing an animal in this condition. The wolf is massive, his fur dark and matted with dirt. His ribs stand out beneath the coarse hair, each breath rattling in his chest like it's an effort.

The sound of an engine pulls my attention away. Adam's car rolls to a stop behind my truck, and he steps out with his medical bag in hand. I glance back at the wolf, a strange pull in my chest.

For reasons I can't explain, I feel desperately like I need to help this animal.

“Look at him, Gabe,” Todd says, his voice thick with sympathy as he gestures toward the poor animal laying on its side. “The poor thing's barely alive.”

I nod silently, my stomach twisting with anxiety. The wolf looks even worse up close, a ghost of the powerful creature he must've once been. Strange how, somewhere along the drive here, I'd stopped thinking of him as dangerous. I can't pinpoint when it happened, but now, standing here, any fear I might have had is eclipsed by something else.

Determination.

I step around Todd without a word, my eyes locked on the wolf. His ragged breaths

stir the dust beneath him, his body so still it's almost unnatural. Behind me, I hear Adam's sharp voice cutting through the air.

"Gabe! Wait! Be careful—"

His warning barely registers. All I can think about is reaching the wolf. Something in me says I need to.

I move slowly, each step deliberate, not wanting to startle him. The air feels heavy, charged with tension, but I push through it, the pull toward the animal too strong to ignore.

The wolf stirs as I approach, his muscles trembling weakly. His head tilts ever so slightly, his whiskey-colored eyes cracking open. For a moment, they lock with mine, sharp despite the exhaustion shadowing them.

Then comes the growl—a low, guttural sound that rumbles deep in his chest.

I freeze. It's not a threat, not entirely. It feels more like a warning, a way to say "don't come any closer" without the energy to back it up.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I murmur softly, even as I know he doesn't understand the words. My voice seems to calm him, though. His growl quiets to a faint rumble as I crouch just a few feet away.

The wolf struggles to roll onto his belly, his limbs trembling with the effort. His head turns, those amber eyes meeting mine again. The intensity of his gaze makes the air rush out of my lungs in a whoosh, like he's stripped me bare with nothing but a look.

Recognition flares, sharp and inexplicable. It's ridiculous—I've never seen this wolf before in my life. And yet, something inside me shifts, like I've been waiting for this



moment, this connection, without even realizing it.

I lower myself further, kneeling beside his shoulder. Slowly, I extend my hand, palm out, toward his muzzle.

“Gabe, don’t,” Adam growls his voice urgent. “He’s hurt and wild—”

The rest of his warning fades into the background. The wolf sniffs my hand cautiously, his damp nose brushing my skin. Then, to my shock, he licks it—just once, a quick, deliberate motion before settling his head back down.

I exhale slowly, my fingers trembling as they move to the nape of his neck. His fur is coarse but soft beneath my touch, and I let my hand rest there for a moment, feeling the faint warmth of his body.

“Hey, Adam,” I speak quietly, leaning forward to inspect the animal more closely. “Come look at this. What the hell happened to him?”

There’s a wound between his shoulder blades, jagged and scabbed over like it’s been there for days. The edges are raw, the fur around it crusted with dried blood and dirt.

Adam steps closer, his footsteps crunching softly on the dirt. The wolf shifts uneasily, his breathing quickening as Adam approaches. A low growl escapes him again, weaker this time but still warning enough.

I glance back, frowning as I catch sight of the hypodermic needle in Adam’s hand.

“Put the damned syringe away,” I snap, my voice sharper than I intend.

Adam bristles, his grip pinching the syringe. “Gabe, that’s not reasonable. This is a wild, wounded animal. If he lashes out, anyone nearby could be seriously hurt.

Including you.”

“He’s not going to lash out,” I say firmly.

“Gabe—”

“Just put it away,” I interrupt, turning back to the wolf.

I let out a slow, steadying breath, willing myself to exude calm. Animals can sense your emotions. I’ve always believed that. Maybe, just maybe, this wolf can too.

I keep my hand on his neck, fingers moving gently through the thick fur. He trembles beneath my touch, but the growling stops. His head lowers slowly until it’s resting by my knees, his eyes fluttering closed with a soft whimper.

“He’s fine,” I say quietly, glancing back at Adam. “Look at him. He’s too weak to do anything but lie here.”

Adam doesn’t move at first, his expression skeptical. I press on.

“Just come take a look at the wound. I’ll stay here, by his head. You get on my right side, closer to his hips. That way, if he does snap, it’s me he gets, not you.”

Adam sighs, but finally, he slips the syringe into his pocket. As he crouches on the wolf’s other side, I feel the tension ease from the air, my own breathing steadying as I stroke the animal’s fur.

“You’re okay,” I murmur softly, whether to myself or the wolf, I don’t know.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Adam looks at the wolf carefully, his brow furrowed as if he's trying to piece together a puzzle that doesn't quite make sense.

I take a quick look over my shoulder, catching sight of Todd near the front of the barn. He's on high alert, his eyes scanning the property like he expects Sheriff Dickwad himself to come storming in any second. Knowing Kaufman, that isn't entirely off the table.

Adam bends closer to the wolf, his hands moving with deliberate care. He leans in, studying the wound on the wolf's back, and a muscle jumps in his cheek. "Shit," he mutters, prodding the area with cautious fingers. "Looks like someone creased him, probably to slow him down so they could catch him."

His voice is calm, measured, but I can hear the disgust underneath.

"Dumb fuckers," he mutters under his breath. The words are quiet, but they hit me like a hammer. My own anger flares, hot and immediate. Someone deliberately shot this wolf—not to kill him, but to wound him. Why? To capture him? For what purpose?

I clenched my fists, struggling to keep the heat rising in my chest under control. My thoughts spiral. If they'd been even a little less careful—or a little less lucky—they could've killed him outright. The fact that he's alive at all feels like some kind of miracle.

Adam slides his hand around the wolf's neck, his fingers brushing gently over the dark fur. His movements are calm, but the look in his eyes tells a different story.

There's a quiet fury there, one that mirrors my own. If I didn't know him as well as I do, I'd think he wasn't affected by any of this. But the tension in his shoulders and the curses slipping from his mouth say otherwise.

"Feel here," Adam says, tilting his head toward the wolf's neck. "It's raw all the way around."

I hesitate before reaching out, not wanting to disturb the wolf further. My fingers brush over the fur, and I wince as I feel it—the rough, raw skin beneath. A wound encircles his neck, deep and angry, like something had been tied or chained there for days.

My hands start to tremble as I brush the fur back. What the hell had been done to this animal? Who thought they had the right to do something so cruel? I clench my teeth, my anger bubbling over. If I ever find out who did this, they're going to regret it.

I glance at Adam, catching his gaze. The same anger burns in his eyes, reflected right back at me.

"So they creased him, caught him, and chained him up," I say, and my voice comes out clipped. "Looks like they had him for a few days, right?"

Adam nods grimly. "Yeah. I'd bet on it. Probably some dumbass who thought keeping a wolf as a pet would be cool. They must've realized pretty quick what a mistake that was. You can't domesticate a wild animal, no matter how much you want to believe otherwise."

He shakes his head, his hands moving over the wolf's body in a practiced, efficient way. His fingers trail down the wolf's sides, prodding his ribs, his hips, his legs. I watch the wolf carefully, noting the way his muscles twitch under Adam's touch.

When Adam's hands slide down to the wolf's belly, the reaction is immediate. The wolf tenses, his body going rigid beneath Adam's fingers. I stiffen, alarmed, but Adam waves me off with a small shake of his head.

"It's fine," he says, sitting back slightly. He quirks a small smile, the tension in his face easing. "And as I just confirmed, this beautiful wolf is definitely male. That's probably why he tensed up—I groped the poor guy."

Despite everything, I feel a flare of irritation at his comment. I brush it off, chalking it up to the stress of the moment.

Adam chuckles softly, nodding toward me. "I need you to move around to his head. I want to check his mouth next."

As I shift positions, I murmur quietly to the wolf, hoping my voice will keep him calm. His amber gaze follows me, sharp despite the weakness in his body.

"You're okay," I whisper. "It's going to be okay."

The wolf doesn't react much, but his breathing slows as I settle near his head. I watch Adam as he lifts a fold of the wolf's skin, pulling gently to check for dehydration.

"Bad, but not the worst I've seen," Adam mutters to himself. He moves on, opening the wolf's mouth and peering inside. His fingers are sure and steady, no trace of the earlier hesitation I'd seen.

It's strange, but I realize I'm not worried anymore—about the wolf biting Adam or lashing out.

And I think Adam knows it, too.

Adam works methodically, his hands moving over the wolf's body with practiced care. His brow furrows as he checks each limb, his touch gentle but firm. The wolf lies still, his breathing uneven but steady enough to make me hope we've caught him in time.

"I don't feel any obvious breaks," Adam finally says, sitting back on his heels. "But it wouldn't hurt to get a series of X-rays to make sure. I'd also like to draw some blood, run a few tests, and check for internal injuries. That kind of trauma could hide under the surface."

The thought of taking the wolf to the clinic sets me on edge immediately. Adam must see it on my face because he doesn't move to pack up his tools just yet.

"The clinic's in town," I remind him, my voice forced. "There's a law against wolves and wolf hybrids inside town limits. You can't tell me Kaufman wouldn't jump at the chance to use that law against us. If he gets wind of this, he'll push for euthanasia, no questions asked."

I grit my teeth at the thought of Kaufman, that smug bastard, finding out about this wolf. The sheriff takes pleasure in enforcing his brand of 'justice', which usually amounts to cruelty for cruelty's sake. I've seen too much of it to take the risk lightly.

Before Adam can respond, the wolf whimpers, the sound soft but insistent. His body shifts slightly, and I feel his weight press closer against me. The movement nearly knocks me backward, and I fling out an arm to catch myself before I end up sprawled in the dirt.

I freeze, my breath catching as I realize how close he is now, leaning into me like he understands the conversation—or at least the emotions behind it.

What the hell?

A wave of protectiveness washes over me, fierce and almost overwhelming. I glance down at the wolf, his golden-brown eyes flickering open for a moment before they close again .

Mine.

The word springs to mind unbidden, sharp and clear as if it had been waiting for this exact moment. I shake my head, trying to shove the thought away. I can't start thinking like that. This wolf isn't mine. He's a wild animal, not some pet I can claim.

And yet...

I swallow hard, keeping my hand on his neck as if the contact will ground both of us. "Do you think there's internal damage, Adam?" I ask, my voice quieter now.

Adam doesn't answer right away, his gaze fixed on the wolf as he continues his inspection. "I don't think so," he says eventually, his tone cautious. "But I can't swear on it, Gabe. That's the problem. Internal injuries aren't always obvious during a quick exam."

The wolf whimpers again, pushing closer until his head rests against my leg. I feel the warmth of his body against mine, his fur coarse but comforting under my fingers. It's like he's trying to tell me he doesn't want me to leave, and I can't help but feel the same.

"I don't think taking him to the clinic is worth the risk," I say firmly, meeting Adam's gaze. "Kaufman's just waiting for an excuse to show up at your place with a citation—or worse. We can't give him that chance."

Adam sighs, sitting back on his heels. "You're probably right. We'll take him to your place instead, get him on an IV to rehydrate, and clean and dress these wounds. I'll

leave you some sedatives in case you need them.”

He reaches out, his hand brushing over the wolf’s head, his fingers scratching gently behind one twitching ear. The wolf’s body relaxes slightly, his breathing slowing, and Adam lets out a soft hum of approval.

“ You’ll need to keep a close eye on him,” Adam says, his voice calm but serious. “If there is internal damage, you’ll see the signs pretty quickly. He’ll go downhill fast if something’s wrong.”

I nod, but my attention lingers on Adam’s hand as it moves over the wolf’s head, stroking the dark fur with a care that seems almost...possessive.

Something sharp and ugly twists in my chest. Jealousy.

The realization hits me like a slap, and I bite down on the wave of frustration rising in my throat. What the hell is wrong with me? I’m acting like a jealous lover, not someone trying to help a wounded animal . I force myself to look away, focusing instead on the wolf’s breathing.

Todd jogs toward us then, breaking the tension. He waves frantically, his face drawn tight with tension, as his eyes dart from us to the road.

“Y’all need to hurry it up,” Todd says, his voice low but urgent as he steps closer. He glances toward the road, his unease radiating off him in waves. “Kaufman radioed to check on what’s taking so long, and he sounded suspicious. I wouldn’t put it past the fucker to come screaming down the drive any minute.”

His gaze shifts to the wolf for a moment before flicking to Adam. “Think he’s going to be okay?”



Todd's question lingers in the air, but I catch the way his eyes drift over Adam as he speaks. He's not just worried about the wolf—he's watching the vet with an intensity that tells me everything I need to know. I've suspected for a while now that Todd has a...thing for Adam. The stolen glances, the way he talks about him with a little too much admiration—it all adds up.

Adam, of course, doesn't seem to notice. He's focused entirely on the wolf, his broad shoulders hunched as he checks the animal's position one last time. Todd's gaze lingers a beat too long before snapping back to the road, his cheeks flushed as if he knows I've caught him staring.

I bite back a sigh as Adam and I move to lift the wolf. The animal doesn't stir much, just a soft whimper as we cradle him between us. He's heavier than he looks, but the weight isn't what makes the situation difficult. It's Todd, standing there like a coiled spring, tension rolling off him in waves.

If there was any clue—any hint—that Adam might feel the same way about Todd, I wouldn't worry so much about my friend's situation. But Adam's a mystery. I've never seen him with a woman, but I've never seen him with a man either. He's a private guy, one who keeps his personal life locked down tight. Todd, on the other hand, has been hiding in plain sight for as long as I've known him.

It's not hard to figure out why. Todd's family is as old-school as they come, and in a town like Shasta, being openly gay isn't just frowned upon—it's dangerous. Sheriff Kaufman would find a reason to fire him in a heartbeat if he ever suspected, and Todd knows it.

Hell, I've tried to bring it up before, to let him know I'm here if he wants to talk, but Todd shuts it down every time. Still, I know. And Todd knows I know.

“Let's move,” I say, adjusting my grip as Adam and I carry the wolf toward the truck.

Todd jogs ahead, pulling open the door to the crew cab and holding it wide.

The wolf whimpers faintly as we slide him onto the blanket in the back seat. Adam murmurs something under his breath, soothing and steady, as he arranges the animal as gently as possible.

Todd stares at the road again, his jaw clamped shut. He's spooked, and I don't blame him.

"Let's go!" His barked order is sharper than usual, cutting through the tension like a whip.

Adam and I exchange a quick glance before sprinting to our respective vehicles. I slide into the driver's seat of my truck, my heart thudding as I rev up the engine. Adam's headlights flash behind me as he pulls out, following close.

I make a U-turn and press down on the gas, the truck's tires kicking up a cloud of dust as we head back toward my place. The wolf shifts slightly in the back seat, letting out a soft whine, and I glance at him in the rearview mirror.

"We're going to get you home," I murmur. "Just hang on."

Todd's warning rings in my ears as I drive. Kaufman won't need much of an excuse to cause trouble if he catches wind of what's going on. For now, though, the road ahead is clear.

So far, so good.

All we have to do is make it back to my place without running into that bastard.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Gabe

Back in the washroom, I check the IV Adam set up for the wolf before he left, his detailed instructions still fresh in my mind. I glance at the animal lying on the blanket, his chest rising and falling in shallow but steady breaths. The stark black fur glints under the dim light, dense and sooty, a contrast to the white towel edges beneath him.

He needs a name.

All the dogs I rescue get names. Calling him 'the wolf' feels impersonal, and something about this one demands more. He's not just another rescue—there's a gravity to him, something I can't quite put my finger on.

I crouch beside him, one knee on the ground, and tilt my head as I study his features. His eyes remain closed, but the wolf isn't entirely still. His ears twitch slightly, a soft movement that tells me he's aware of my presence.

“Okay, buddy,” I say, my voice soft. “We’re going to have to come up with a name for you.”

One of his eyes cracks open, the rich brown of his gaze locking onto mine. There's something too human in that look—too understanding. It's like he's waiting, like he already knows we're connected somehow.

I grin, a sense of camaraderie bubbling up unexpectedly. “You’ve got a lot going on in that head of yours, don’t you?”

The wolf lifts his head slightly, his tongue darting out to lick my hand. The rasp is rough, but it makes me chuckle. “Okay, okay I’ll take that as a vote of approval.”

My hand trails over his neck, slipping through the thick coat of fur. It’s unexpectedly soft, silky even, despite the dirt and grime. My fingers move instinctively, burying into the dense warmth and skimming over the hard muscle underneath.

“How can something so smooth and soft be part of a big, tough wolf like you?” I murmur, almost to myself. “You’re a study in contrasts, aren’t you?”

He lets out a low rumble, and I pause, my fingers hovering over his fur. The sound isn’t a growl—it’s something deeper, more resonant. It reminds me of contentment, almost like a dog’s version of a purr.

“You like that, huh?” I ask, my voice light as I keep stroking him.

The wolf shifts closer, and I feel his warmth seep through my jeans. His head lifts again, this time to rest against my lap. It’s such a trusting gesture, one that takes me by surprise. A dull ache settles in my chest as I watch him, my hand still tangled in his fur.

Without thinking, I sit down fully, leaning back against the wall. The wolf doesn’t move, his head heavy on my thigh. “Don’t blame you, buddy,” I say, my voice dropping to a murmur. “Everyone needs to be petted every now and then.”

Another low rumble echoes through the quiet room, and I can’t help but smile. The bond between us feels unshakable already, though I know how dangerous it is to let myself feel this way. Releasing him back into the wild, where he belongs, is inevitable. But the thought already twists something deep inside me.

“Not gonna worry about that right now,” I mutter, my voice husky with sleep.

I glance down, catching the way his body shivers under my hand. Is it my voice causing that, or just a reflex? Either way, I keep stroking him, moving my fingers more slowly now. The heat of his fur and the steady rhythm of his breathing pull at me, dragging me under.

“S’okay, buddy,” I murmur, my words slurring slightly. “We’ll figure out a name for you...”

My fingers still, sinking into the wolf’s coat. Sleep takes over before I can resist, creeping in slow and seductive until I can’t hold my eyes open any longer.

When I wake, pain stabs through my body with enough force to make me groan. My hand is still buried in the wolf’s fur, warm and comforting against my palm. But it’s my other hand that sends heat flooding to my cheeks—it’s pressing against the front of my jeans, stroking the hardness beneath.

Dreams of a man with dark hair and golden-brown eyes flash through my mind. His hands had been warm, rough in the best way, drowning me in a haze of desire.

“Jesus,” I mutter, yanking my hand away from my cock. The pressure lingers, hot and needy, and I grind my palm against it once more before shoving myself upright.

The wolf’s head lifts, his amber gaze watching me steadily. There’s no judgment in those eyes, but the intensity of his stare feels like a spotlight on my unraveled state.

“Not a word,” I say to him, half joking as I step toward the bathroom. But the heat of that dream, and the way those eyes seem to follow me even now, make my chest feel tight all over again.

Muttering under my breath and walking with a decidedly uncomfortable gait, I check the IV hooked up to the wolf one last time. Everything looks fine—the slow, steady

drip doing its job. The wolf is calm, his body still except for the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest.

But me? I'm far from calm.

I can't get the dream out of my head. Those golden-brown eyes, the dark hair, the feeling of another man's touch on me—it's all so vivid, so real. My body feels like it's on fire, and there's no way this erection is going away on its own. Not anytime soon.

I head for the shower, my hand already moving to the button of my jeans. The heat between my legs feels unbearable, the images from the dream replaying in my mind, sharper and hotter with every step. By the time I'm in the bathroom, the zipper's down, and I've got my cock in hand, hard and aching for release.

Stepping into the shower, I groan as the lukewarm water splashes over my skin. It's not cold enough to calm me down, and I'm not sure I want it to. Closing my eyes, I let the dream take over.

The man's face is hazy, but his presence is seared into me. I imagine his hand sliding over my shaft, firm but smooth, his thumb pressing against the sensitive slit at the tip. My own hand mimics the motion, and a shiver races down my spine as I grip myself.

In my mind, his lips replace his hand. Full, firm, and perfect, they glide over me, and I gasp, my hips jerking forward as if I can push deeper into the phantom sensation.

A groan escapes me as I lean against the wall, my free hand trailing down my back. My fingers slide into my crease, seeking the hidden opening there. When I find it, my middle finger presses against the tight muscle, tapping experimentally. A spark of pleasure shoots through me, sharp and electric, making my knees buckle.

I moan, louder this time, as the tip of my finger breaches my hole. Heat floods through my body, radiating from my ass to my cock, building higher and higher. My hips thrust forward erratically, my hand pumping faster along my shaft, the pre-cum and water lubricating my way as I squeeze my cock and twist my wrist to add more friction. Sensation shoots from my groin into my legs and my thigh muscles clench, my hips thrust forward as my balls pull up tight and I jerk my fist hard and fast.

My orgasm hits me like a freight train.

My back arches, my mouth falling open in a hoarse yell as pleasure detonates through me. My cock pulses in my hand, thick, creamy ropes of cum spilling out and splattering against the tiles before the water washes them away.

I slump against the wall, gasping for breath as the last waves of my orgasm fade. The euphoria is brief, giving way to an aching emptiness that settles low in my stomach.

I watch the water carry the evidence of my release down the drain, the whirlpool pulling it out of sight, and I feel a pang of something I can't name.

What's wrong with me?

The need still lingers, an intensity I don't understand. It's not just physical—this feels deeper, more primal, like something's missing. The sensation burns under my skin, sinking into my muscles, my tendons, my very bones.

I try to puzzle it out, but after several minutes, I give up.

For now, I rinse off and finish my shower, the ache still simmering inside me, and decide that what I need is a glass of water. If I can't cool my libido in the shower, a cold drink will have to do.

I lean against the kitchen counter, my hair still damp from the shower, debating whether to drag my sleeping bag into the washroom. The wolf's care requires attention, especially with the IV, and it would be easier to monitor him if I just camped out there.

But the thought of sleeping in the same room as the wolf fills me with something I can't explain. It's not fear—at least, not entirely.

I've always had a strong connection to dogs. But this is different. This wolf feels different. It's like something inside me resonates with him, something I can't identify.

I shake my head, trying to focus on practical matters.

There's also the anger I felt earlier. The rush of possessiveness when Adam touched him— where the hell did that come from? It's not rational, and I can't even begin to unpack it.

The blaring of the alarm rips me from a restless sleep for the fourth and final time. I groan, my body aching with exhaustion. It feels like I haven't slept at all, even though I managed to snatch a few hours here and there. But those hours had been anything but restful, filled with vivid, sensual dreams that cling to me even now, refusing to fade.

Dark hair, warm brown eyes, and the sweetest, most perfect ass I've ever seen.

The man in my dreams had been beautiful, magnetic in a way I couldn't explain. But that wasn't what unsettled me the most. His presence seemed to blur and shift, blending with the wolf's image before snapping back to the man again. It didn't make sense.



And then there was the name.

Mika.

It had floated from his lips, spoken in a voice so sultry it made my toes curl even in sleep. Mika. It wasn't a name I would have thought of, not something I'd ever encountered before. Where had my subconscious pulled it from? The whole thing was bizarre, layered with an intensity I couldn't shake.

If I ever went to a psychiatrist—which I won't—they'd probably have a field day analyzing this dream. A man who turns into a wolf? And sex so mind-blowing it made my skin tingle just thinking about it?

No thanks.

I shrug off the lingering fog of confusion, tossing the blankets to the side. I'd decided my bed was the best place to catch a few hours' sleep and had ambled there from the kitchen late last night. My body is as restless as my mind, my morning erection pressing insistently against my boxers. For a moment, I consider taking care of it, relieving the tension clawing at me, but guilt flares hot and sharp.

The wolf.

I can't justify seeking my own pleasure when there's still an injured animal in the house. It feels wrong, even if I know he's probably fine. Shoving the thought aside, I pull on my boxers and hope they'll at least hide my situation. Wandering into the washroom with a raging hard-on would just feel...weird.

Smiling in anticipation, I push open the washroom door.

The smile dies instantly.

I freeze in the doorway, my heart lurching in my chest as my eyes dart around the room. The IV bag hangs limp and empty, the drip line lying abandoned on the floor with a needle still attached.

But the wolf is gone.

“What the hell?”

I shout into the room, my voice echoing off the tiles as I search frantically. There’s no sign of him. My pulse pounds as I scan every inch of the space, my mind racing. He couldn’t have gotten out.

Could he?

My stomach twists painfully as I bolt into the hallway, calling out, even though I know it’s useless.

I search every room in the house, tearing through the living room, the kitchen, even my bedroom. Nothing.

And then I see the window.

I’d left it cracked open last night, unable to resist the cool breeze drifting in. Now, the screen hangs slightly ajar, the latch unhooked. But something’s off.

The latch isn’t torn or broken. If the wolf had gone out through the window, he would have ripped the screen right off the frame, and the noise would’ve woken me. I would’ve heard something—anything.

Wouldn’t I?

My breath comes in short, ragged bursts as I race outside, my bare feet slapping against the dirt. The house doors are still closed, the locks untouched. Not that I lock them much anyway, but it's not like the wolf could've opened them.

Thumbs are kind of necessary for that.

Desperation makes the air catch in my lungs as I check the garage, the kennels, every inch of the property where the wolf might've gone.

But there's nothing.

No tracks, no fur, no sign he was ever here.

I drop onto the porch steps, my knees weak as I bury my face in my hands. Something vital feels missing, a strange hollowness gnawing at me like a hunger I can't satisfy.

Tears prick my eyes, and I clench my fists, angry at myself for the reaction. I need to stop acting like this, damn it. I don't cry, especially not over things I can't control.

But then icy fear floods my veins.

What if Kaufman came here while I was sleeping? The sheriff wouldn't have taken the wolf alive—that much I know. If Kaufman had been involved, there'd be nothing left of the animal to find.

It doesn't seem likely, but it's the only explanation I can think of.

Swallowing hard, I push myself to my feet and head inside, my hands already reaching for my phone.

I need to call Todd.

“Lo?” Todd’s groggy voice comes through the phone, and I immediately smack my hand against my forehead. Of course, he’s tired. He’s working second shift. I should’ve remembered that before calling. Not that it would have stopped me—I need answers—but still.

“Todd, hey,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “Sorry to wake you, man. There’s a problem here.”

I close my eyes, trying to calm the whirlwind of thoughts racing through my head. A low rustling sound comes through the phone as Todd clears his throat.

“What’s up, Gabe?” His voice sharpens, the grogginess disappearing as he shifts into alert mode. It’s one of the things I admire about Todd—he can go from half asleep to fully switched on in seconds.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to speak clearly. “I woke up this morning, and the wolf...is gone.”

There’s a beat of silence before Todd responds, and I launch into an explanation of the morning’s events. I recount everything as best I can, from finding the IV line on the floor to the open window screen. Todd interrupts now and then with questions, his tone thoughtful, but most of the time, he lets me ramble. By the time I finish, both of us are quiet, turning over the situation in our heads.

Finally, Todd speaks. “I’m guessing you’re wondering if Kaufman had anything to do with this?”

The idea had been gnawing at me since I noticed the wolf was gone, but hearing Todd say it out loud makes my stomach churn. “I don’t know what to think, Todd,” I

admit. “It doesn’t seem cruel enough to be him, but...shit, can you think of anything else?”

Todd exhales, the sound crackling faintly through the phone. “You’re right—it’s not Kaufman’s style. He’d make a mess of it, leave some kind of calling card just to piss you off. Still, it’s weird. If the sheriff was involved, he’d need help to take the wolf. You saw how much work it took for us to get him into your truck. He wasn’t moving on his own yesterday.”

I nod, even though Todd can’t see me. The image of the sheriff hauling the wolf away doesn’t quite fit. But if not Kaufman, then who?

Something cold runs down my spine as a fleeting image flashes in my mind—the wolf standing on two legs, opening the door with an eerie, human-like precision before walking out into the night.

No. That’s ridiculous.

Shaking the thought away, I pinch the bridge of my nose and focus. “There had to be some way the wolf got out,” I say finally. “Maybe he swiped at the door handle just right and got it to turn. Or...” I hesitate, the absurdity of my next words making me wince. “Maybe he turned it with his mouth. I’ve seen that happen on TV.”

Todd snorts softly, but his tone stays neutral. “Did you check for tracks outside?”

“I didn’t see anything,” I admit. “But I’m not exactly an expert tracker. If he stayed on the grass, I probably wouldn’t be able to find any prints.”

“Still, it’s worth considering,” Todd says. “Wolves are smart. You saw the way he looked at you yesterday—there’s something going on behind those eyes. If he figured out how to open a door, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Something about his words twists in my chest, leaving an ache I can't shake. If the wolf left on his own, does that mean he wanted to? The thought stings more than I expect, and I rub at the hollow feeling growing beneath my ribs.

Why does it hurt so much?

Todd's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts. "Tell you what," he says. "I'll swing by the vet clinic later today, before my shift, and ask Adam about your vanishing wolf. He might have some ideas on whether it's possible the wolf got out on his own—or how to find him if he did."

The idea of Adam helping is a small comfort, but it doesn't ease the gnawing worry in my gut. Todd continues, "Maybe the wolf's instincts kicked in, and he headed back to his native territory. It's not like he got a warm welcome here."

That thought makes my stomach churn even worse. The idea of never seeing the wolf again claws at me, and I try to tell myself it's just concern for his welfare. That's all it is—concern.

It's not safe for him here. Kaufman's version of 'animal control' is a death sentence, and even if I found a way to keep the wolf here, it wouldn't last. Shasta isn't changing anytime soon.

Still, the thought of him being gone—really gone—leaves me feeling strangely hollow.

"Thanks, Todd," I say, my voice quieter now. "Let me know what Adam says."

"Will do," Todd replies.

I hang up, staring at the phone in my hand for a moment before setting it on the

counter. The ache in my chest doesn't fade, no matter how much I try to rationalize it.

The wolf is gone.

And it feels like I've lost more than I had to begin with.

The idea of finding the wolf only to release him somewhere safer—and never see him again—sits heavy in my chest, like a weight pressing down. It doesn't make me feel better. Hell, it makes me feel worse.

It's wrong. I know it's wrong to want to keep him for myself. He's a wild, magnificent creature, and he doesn't belong to anyone. But no matter how much I tell myself that, the feeling lingers.

It's more than just a sense of connection. I can't shake the idea that the wolf is mine.

Which is bullshit.

The wolf doesn't belong to anyone. He's a creature of the wild, meant to roam free. Yet, even as I think it, a strange notion whispers in the back of my mind.

Maybe I kind of belong to him...

I pause, the thought leaving me unsettled. It's ridiculous—just as ridiculous as the dreams and the strange emotions that have been swirling in me since he arrived.

Shaking my head, I focus on the present. I finish my call with Todd, thanking him for his help, and head to my room. The other dogs still need me, and I've already wasted too much time searching for the wolf. As much as I want to keep looking, my responsibilities can't wait.

Turning into my room, I force my mind away from the wolf and toward my to-do list. The dogs need feeding, the kennels need cleaning, and there's always more to handle around here. My morning erection has long since deflated, forgotten in the midst of my frustration and worry.

Jerking open a dresser drawer, I start digging through the mess of clothes I never bother folding properly. "Where are my freaking sweats?" I mutter, shoving aside T-shirts and mismatched socks. "I swear they were here..."

The loud pounding on the front door startles me so badly that I slam my fingers in the drawer as I shove it closed.

"Ouch! Shit!" I hiss, clutching my hand. My heart pounds, partly from the surprise and partly from dread. Who the hell is banging on my door this early?

The only person I can think of is Kaufman.

The idea draws a groan from deep in my chest. If it's him, this day has officially gone from bad to worse and it's only just started. It'd be just my luck for him to show up now, right when I'm at my wits' end.

Muttering a string of curses, I march to the door, frustration boiling over. If Kaufman's here, he's getting a piece of my mind.

I yank the door open, ready to let him have it—but the words die in my throat.

Standing on my porch isn't the sheriff. It's a man.

And not just any man.

He's wearing my missing sweats and an old Alice in Chains concert shirt that I



washed last week. My heart stutters as I take him in, my breath catching.

It's him . The man from my dream.

I blink, half expecting him to vanish like some kind of mirage. But he doesn't. He stands there, solid and real, and he's even more stunning in person.

His shoulder-length black hair falls in soft waves around his face, framing sharp cheekbones and a straight nose that somehow makes him look both regal and wild. His full, sensuous lips curl into a small, half-hearted smile, but it's his eyes that hold me captive.

They're deep brown, warm and familiar, like they've been watching me my whole life.

My body reacts instantly. Heat floods through me, and my cock hardens painfully, pushing against the waistband of my boxers as if it has a mind of its own.

His nostrils flare, and for a moment, I swear he can smell my arousal.

The thought makes my face burn. I jerk my gaze away from his, my heart hammering. My gaze drifts lower—and stop dead.

There, peeking out from the neckline of my shirt, are faint scars.

My breath catches as I take in the almost-healed wounds around his neck, wounds that look exactly like the ones I saw on the wolf.

My mind races, trying to process what I'm seeing. Black dots dance in my vision, and a strange buzzing fills my ears. This can't be real.

“What the fuck?” I mutter, my voice strangled and weak. My brain screams that it’s impossible , that I must be losing my mind. But no matter how much I try to deny it, the familiarity of those scars won’t let me go.

“Who are you?” I manage to choke out, my throat dry and tight.

The man tilts his head slightly, his lips parting as he speaks.

“I’m Mika,” he says, his voice deep and rich, rumbling like distant thunder. The sound settles over me, and I feel the ground sway beneath my feet as the darkness rushing in finally overtakes me.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Mika

S hit.

I dive through the doorway, catching Gabe just as his knees buckle. He's heavy, all long limbs and solid muscle, but I manage to get my arms around him before his head can slam into the floor.

This is not how I imagined our first real meeting would go!

Not that I'd expected some romantic, cinematic moment where Gabe takes one look at me, throws his arms around my neck, and professes his undying love. I'm not that naive. But this? Watching him faint at the sight of me? Definitely not part of the plan.

I adjust him in my arms, holding him steady as I glance down at his face. He looks pale, his breathing shallow but steady. It's enough to calm my immediate panic, though there's a weight in my chest that I can't shake.

What the hell was I thinking?

I had options—or at least I thought I did. Then again, maybe I never did. With no clothes, no money, and no transportation, I was stranded. Everything I owned had been left behind on my former pack's land, and I hadn't exactly been in a position to negotiate with them to get it back.

Still, breaking into Gabe's room while he slept and borrowing his clothes probably wasn't my finest moment. I don't mean to linger, but...

I can't help myself.

Gabe is beautiful. Even in sleep, with his brow furrowed slightly and his lips parted just enough to make me ache, he drew me in. The long, lean lines of his body, his muscles taut under that warm, bronzed skin—it was all I could do not to reach out and touch him.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

Instead, I crept out of his room, trying to convince myself that being direct was my best option. Clearly, I'd been wrong about that.

"Maybe I should have tried harder to think of another way," I mutter under my breath as I carry him into the bedroom. Too late now.

I settle onto the bed, leaning back against the headboard with Gabe cradled in my lap. The weight of him feels right somehow, his head resting against my chest like he belongs there. My arms tighten around him briefly before I force myself to loosen my grip.

As I lay with him tucked against me, the scent of worn hide and clean musk has me clinging to the last shred of control as the memory in the washroom comes flooding back.

I watch Gabe retreat through the door, his broad shoulders stiff as if he's holding something back. His scent lingers in the air, warm and rich, filling my lungs and settling like a balm over my aching body.

The moment Gabe arrived at the barn, I knew. That pull, sharp and undeniable, hit me with such force it almost overshadowed the pain of my wounds. My mate. I found him—or maybe he found me—but it doesn't matter. What matters is that he's mine.

The bond was instant. It started as recognition, a rush of relief and desire all at once. And then the dream solidified it. Linking our minds, slipping into his thoughts while he slept—that wasn't just coincidence. It was proof of what I already knew in my heart.

The dream was more than just erotic; it was a declaration. A claiming. There's no way to establish that kind of connection unless we're fated for each other.

Fated mates.

The thought is almost too much. I never thought I'd have this—someone who is mine, someone I can belong to. Being cast out stripped everything from me—my pack, my home, my identity. It left a gaping wound inside me that I thought would never heal.

Out there, alone and hunted, I'd resigned myself to death. I thought it would be better to let the emptiness consume me than keep fighting a battle I was destined to lose. But now...? Now everything has changed.

Gabe doesn't know yet. He doesn't understand who I am or what I am. It's going to shake him to his core when he finds out.

I won't blame him for that. A man like Gabe—a human with his feet firmly planted in a world of logic and rules—isn't going to accept the existence of shifters easily. But I have faith in us.

I feel the bond strengthening every moment we're near each other. The pheromones are already starting to take hold, nudging him toward me even if he doesn't realize it yet. It's subtle for now, but it's there. The way he stroked my fur, the gentleness in his hands—he already feels it, even if he doesn't understand why.

It won't be long before the connection between us becomes impossible to ignore.

I stretch slightly, careful not to aggravate the wounds along my back and neck. They're healing slowly, the pain a dull throb compared to the heat building under my skin. It's not from the injuries—it's something deeper, something primal.

It's the bond.

Gabe might think I'm just a wounded animal, but I'm more than that. I'm a wolf, yes, but also a man. And soon, Gabe will see me for everything I am. I won't rush him. He needs time, and I'll give it to him.

But tonight...? Tonight I couldn't resist.

The dream I shared with him wasn't accidental. I wanted him to feel me, to see me—not just the wolf, but the man, too. I didn't expect it to be so powerful. His pleasure rippled through the bond like lightning, igniting every nerve in my body.

I can still feel it now, the echoes of his release pulsing in my chest as if it were my own. It made me ache, but not with pain. No, this ache is deeper, hotter. It's the longing to claim him, to finish what we started in the dream.

Soon.

Gabe's voice drifts through the air from the shower, soft and low. I close my eyes, letting the sound wrap around me like a well-worn coat on a cold night. It's a good voice—strong, a little rough around the edges. The kind of voice that soothes without even trying.

I shiver despite the warmth of the room, the intensity of my feelings almost overwhelming. I've waited so long for this, for him. The loneliness I carried for so

many years threatened to destroy me, but now it feels like a distant memory.

There's still a long road ahead. Gabe's acceptance won't come easily, and I know the truth will shock him. But I trust in what we are, in the bond that ties us together.

I'll take it slow, step by step. I'll ease into his dreams, filling them with the image of the wolf and the man, until he sees the connection between us as clearly as I do.

Fate brought us together for a reason. And I won't let anything stand in the way of claiming what's mine.

Ah, God. My mate is aroused.

The thought flares through me, sharp and undeniable, as I watch Gabe through barely slitted eyes. His chest rises and falls unevenly, his breaths catching every time his hand moves over his body. My sensitive nose picks up the faint but unmistakable scent of pre-cum, and it ignites a fire in me that I can barely contain.

Gabe's hand moves more insistently, palming his cock through the rough fabric of his jeans. Soft noises slip from his lips, low and breathy, and it takes everything I have not to shift right then and there.

I could. I could shift, cross the space between us, and free him from the confines of those jeans. My mouth waters at the thought of taking him into my throat, swallowing him down until I can taste him fully. The idea makes my muscles tense, my claws itching to release and claim him.

But it's too early.

I need to stay in this form, stay patient, and let the IV do its job. The ordeal I've been through has drained me more than I want to admit, and as much as I crave him, I

know I'm not ready yet. My body isn't ready yet.

I nudge Gabe's leg with my muzzle, trying to rouse him, to snap him out of the dream before I lose all control. My mate stirs but doesn't wake. His hand keeps moving, the friction of denim making my ears twitch.

Damn it.

I nudge him harder, a little less gently this time, my nose pressing into his thigh. He lets out a soft groan, shifting slightly, and then, finally, his eyes flutter open .

The dream hasn't completely left him; I can see it in the heat lingering in his gaze and the flush on his cheeks. But at least he's awake.

As Gabe stumbles out of the room, I let out a sigh of relief, my body sagging against the floor. Relief doesn't last long.

The sound of his moan carries through the quiet house, followed by the faint but unmistakable rhythm of skin on skin. My imagination fills in the rest, painting a picture so vivid it's almost painful. Gabe, standing under the spray of the shower, his brown hair damp and clinging to his forehead. His green eyes closed tight, his lips parted as his long, sinewy muscles tense with the buildup of pleasure.

Fuck.

The thought of him stroking himself off, his release hitting him hard enough to make him yell—it's almost too much. I feel the shift beginning, the heat racing through my veins as my body teeters on the edge of transformation.

No.



I lock every joint in place, digging deep to stay in wolf form. The need to go to him, to touch him, to claim him, is overwhelming, but I know I can't give in. Not yet.

By the time I hear his final groan of release, my body is trembling with effort. My claws dig into the floor as I focus every ounce of my strength on staying in this form.

My gaze drifts to the IV bag still hooked up to my leg. The fluids are helping, and my shifter healing is kicking in, speeding my recovery. I can already feel the strength returning to my limbs, the pain fading to a dull ache.

Soon, I won't need this. Soon, I'll be strong enough to shift and stay that way.

The thought of staying away from Gabe if this happens again is laughable. My cock throbs, hard and insistent, as my mind replays the vision of my mate in the shower. Once this bag is empty, I'll shift. Then, I'll figure out how to bring him closer without scaring him off.

Gabe stirs, his lashes fluttering as his eyes open. I feel him stiffen almost immediately, his muscles going rigid as he pushes against me.

I let him go.

The sharp pinch in my chest as he scrambles off my lap is unexpected, but I force myself to stay still, my hands clenching at my sides as he stands unsteadily at the edge of the bed.

Our gazes meet.

There's fear in his green eyes, wariness that makes me ache to reach for him, to pull him close and tell him everything will be okay. But I don't. I can't.

Instead, I wait, my hands trembling as the silence stretches between us. My body feels like it's on fire, every nerve screaming at me to claim him, but I fight it. I can't screw this up.

"Let me see your back," Gabe says suddenly, his voice firm and steady despite the uncertainty in his posture. His arms are crossed over his chest, and his jaw is set, but I can feel the hesitation beneath his resolve.

I nod, keeping my movements slow and deliberate. Meeting his gaze, I lean forward and reach for the hem of my borrowed shirt.

The fabric slips over my head, and I toss it aside before lowering myself further, my stomach brushing my thighs as I turn slightly to give him a clear view.

His sharp intake of breath is immediate.

"Oh fuck," he whispers, and I glance back just in time to see his mouth fall open in a perfect little 'o.'

His hand rises slowly, hovering over the puckered scar at my back—the place where the bullet had torn through flesh and tissue.

The heat of his touch sends a jolt through me, and I can't stop the low moan that slips from my mouth.

I brace myself, expecting him to jerk away, but he doesn't.

Instead, his palm settles over the top of the wound, his fingers tracing the edges of the scar with a gentleness that makes my throat feel like it's closing.

I close my eyes, savoring the sensation even as my heart pounds in my chest. Gabe's

touch feels like everything I've ever wanted, everything I've been missing.

His fingertips stroke the scar again, and I can't help but shiver under his touch.

This is it.

This is my mate.

Logic and desire war within me, a battle I'm losing fast. My cock throbs, painfully hard, each pulse matching the rapid beat of my heart. The slick heat of pre-cum smears against my skin, the sensation sharp and almost unbearable. Every instinct screams at me to act, to claim, to take what's mine, but I force my body into submission.

Gabe's presence overwhelms me, his nearness tightening the bond between us until it feels like I can hardly breathe. My mate.

I can't let my desire overtake me—not yet. Gabe watches me, his green eyes flickering with confusion and something deeper—something I dare to hope is the same need clawing through me.

I wait, straining against the silence, unsure of what he will do next. When the tension becomes unbearable, I reach back, my hand closing gently around his wrist.

“Please, Gabriel,” I say, keeping my voice as steady as I can. “Sit with me. I promise to do my best to explain.”

He hesitates, pulling his wrist free. The moment feels like an eternity, my stomach twisting in knots as I fear he will pull away completely. If he leaves me now, I don't know how I will survive it.

I close my eyes, trying to block out the ache in my chest and the sharper ache between my legs. I will beg if I have to. Pride means nothing compared to the need to keep him near me—to keep him, period. The pull between us is more powerful than I ever imagined it could be, the intensity of it frightening in its raw, primal force.

When I open my eyes again, I find Gabe staring at me—not at my face, but at the very obvious bulge straining against the borrowed sweats. His green eyes are wide, his lips parted slightly, and the heat of his gaze sends another jolt of need through me.

A groan slips out before I can stop it. My cock jerks, responding to his attention as if it senses his interest.

“Gabe,” I mutter, my voice rough with frustration, “you can’t look at me like that and expect me to concentrate on talking.”

His gaze shoots up to meet mine, and his face flushes bright red. God, he’s beautiful. The embarrassment creeping over him only makes him more so, his lips trembling slightly as he struggles to form words.

“It’s just...ah, that cock is...distracting,” he mumbles, his voice low and unsure. He darts another glance downward, and the sight sends my heart racing.

Distracting.

The word makes me want to laugh, a burst of hope breaking through the haze of tension. My mate isn’t immune to me, isn’t unaffected by this bond.

So, he feels it, too.

The realization gives me the strength to hold back, to temper my need and focus on what matters—keeping Gabe close, no matter what. I can explain, at least enough to

keep him from pushing me away. Words first. Action can come later, if it needs to.

“Gabriel—”

“What are you?” he interrupts in a fast burst, his sharp gaze locking onto mine with an intensity that steals the breath from my lungs.

The question stops me in my tracks. Of course, he would ask. How could he not? But answering isn’t as simple as it seems.

Fear churns in my stomach, hot and sharp. What can I tell him? How much can I say before it becomes too much? The truth could tie us together, but it could just as easily drive him away.

I’m not strong enough to lose him.

I’ve lost everything already—my pack, my home, my place in the world—and the pain of it nearly destroyed me. Gabe is my second chance, my only chance. If he rejects me, if he tells me to leave, I don’t think I’ll survive it again.

“Are you certain you want to know the answer?” I ask, keeping my voice low. Words, once spoken, can’t be taken back, and the truth will change everything.

He trembles, and I catch the faint scent of fear mingling with confusion. But underneath it, I sense something steadier—a determination that sparks a flicker of pride in me.

Gabe straightens his shoulders, standing tall despite the emotions I know must be racing through him. “I need to know the answer,” he says firmly.

His eyes sweep over me, lingering briefly on the straining bulge at my groin before

snapping back to my face.

“You were there,” he continues, confusion clear on his handsome face, his voice softer now. “Somehow, in my dreams...”

He reaches out as if to touch my cheek, his hand trembling, but he stops at the last second, letting his hand fall back to the bed.

The ache in my chest sharpens, my breath catching. My mate is so close, yet the distance between us feels impossibly wide.

How can I feel the loss of a touch that hasn't even happened?

The phantom warmth of his hand lingers on my skin where it might have rested. I can't stop myself. I reach for him, and brush my fingertips over the firm, warm skin of his hand before clasping it in mine.

This time, he doesn't pull away.

Hope blooms, tentative and fragile, but enough to send my pulse racing. His hand in mine is like a tether, grounding me even as the storm of emotions inside me swirls stronger. I caress his wrist with my thumb, a small gesture that feels impossibly intimate.

“You have some idea of what I am, yes?” I ask, my voice soft but steady.

His gaze searches mine, but he doesn't answer. The weight of his silence bears down on me, yet I can't stop my thumb from its gentle sweep over his skin. Even this chaste touch sends heat flaring through my blood.

I shift slightly, trying to relieve the aching pressure between my legs. Watching Gabe,

I catch the slight squirm in his posture, the telltale discomfort that mirrors my own. His arousal is thick in the air, unmistakable to me.

My attention drops, taking in the evidence of his desire. The damp spot spreading across the front of his boxers draws a low growl to the back of my throat, one I swallow just in time.

It's maddening. He's making it nearly impossible to think clearly.

"Perhaps I should take care of that first," I murmur, sliding my free hand from his arm to his thigh. The heat of him sears my palm, even through the fabric. Slowly, I let my hand travel upward, brushing lightly against the thick ridge straining beneath his boxers.

Gabe groans, the sound hitting me like lightning, igniting every nerve in my body.

For one agonizing moment, he pushes his hips into my touch, his body arching toward me, as though he's drawn by the same unseen force that grips me.

Then, just as suddenly, he catches my hand and pulls it away, his grip firm despite the tremble I feel in his fingers.

"No," he says, his voice ragged. "We can't... I can't..."

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, his gaze locking onto mine with a mix of need and confusion. "I need to know what's going on here, Mika. Please, help me understand. I mean, there was a wolf, and then the dreams, and now you're here, and this is all...all fucking unbelievable!"

The plea in his voice is impossible to ignore. His eyes, warm and filled with questions, seem to reach straight into my soul.

I nod slowly, releasing a deep breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. Turning my hand under his, I lace our fingers together, the simple connection enough to steady me.

How much do I tell him?

The question churns in my mind. If Gabe were a shifter, this would be easier. He would already understand. But he's not. He's human, and I can't assume he'll accept any of this—our bond, my nature, or the truth of what's happening between us.

Even so, I can't lie to him.

I want him to know me—not just as his mate, but as Mika, the man. As much as this bond pulls us together, I need him to want me for who I am. But if I tell him too much too quickly, I risk scaring him away. And if he leaves...

The thought claws at me, threatening to tear me apart.

"All right," I say finally, my voice quieter now. "I can do that, Gabriel. I'll try to explain."

The words feel woefully inadequate, but they're all I have.

I take a steadying breath and bring our joined hands up to rest over my chest, right above my heart. I hope he can feel the rhythm beneath his palm, the raw sincerity of what I'm about to say. I pull him down onto the bed so that we're sitting side by side.

"I know you'll have questions," I begin, holding his gaze. "But if you could let me speak first—before I lose my nerve—I'll try to answer them after."

For a moment, he doesn't respond. His forehead furrows, as though he's weighing my



request. Then, he nods, his lips pressing into a thin line of determination.

“Okay,” he says, his tone clipped but not unkind.

His gaze flickers down to my groin briefly before returning to my face, and the interest I catch there makes my cock throb painfully. I force myself to focus.

He arches an impatient brow, and I almost laugh despite myself.

All right, Gabriel. Let’s get this over with .

“Ah, so,” I begin, my voice shaking just slightly, “I’m a...shape shifter. A wolf.”

Gabe tenses immediately, his body stiffening as the words sink in. I watch him carefully, my heart pounding as I wait for his reaction. At first, there’s nothing—no words, no movement, just silence as he stares at me.

It’s not rejection. Not yet.

The absence of outright disbelief gives me the smallest sliver of encouragement. At least he hasn’t jumped up and called me crazy. Yet.

“That has to be pretty out there, I guess,” I continue, my tone as careful as my words. “I mean, hard to believe. This might surprise you, but we aren’t exactly uncommon. Just a well-kept secret—for obvious reasons.” I pause, gauging his expression. “Okay so far?”

Oh, no. There it is.

The look .

The one that says my mate thinks I've completely lost my mind.

Gabe blinks, his incredulous stare pinning me in place. "I don't know about okay, Mika. I mean, seriously? Okay?"

I wince, my heart racing as I realize how badly I'm screwing this up. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself, trying not to panic.

"Gabe, I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I don't know the right words for this, how to explain it in a way that makes sense. All I can do is tell you the truth. I thought—" I halt, swallowing hard. "I thought the dreams might help you accept it, but I—"

The words barely leave my mouth before Gabe jerks his hand free, scrambling off the bed. He's on his feet in an instant, glaring down at me like I've betrayed him.

"So you can read my mind too? Mess around in my head?" he demands, his voice sharp and angry.

I jump up, my chest throbbing with emotion as his words hit me like a slap.

This is it.

I've ruined everything, and I don't know how to fix it.

Guilt twists in my gut as I struggle to find the right thing to say. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut. Maybe I should have stayed gone when I slipped out the window this morning, sparing him the confusion and myself the pain.

I look toward the window, my thoughts spinning wildly.

What do I do now?

“Mika.”

My name comes softly, a whisper that pulls me from my frantic thoughts. Gabe’s fingers brush my cheek, tentative and gentle, and I freeze at the unexpected touch.

“Mika, you look so lost,” he says, his voice trembling with something I can’t name.

His words hit me harder than anything else he’s said. My heart clenches painfully, and I instinctively reach for the window, the need to escape surging through me.

The wolf rises within me, desperate to run. Thick, coarse fur begins to spring from my arm, and I feel the shift pulling me toward freedom.

“No!”

Gabe’s voice cracks like a whip, sharp and commanding, but I can’t stop. The wolf pushes forward, determined to escape before I can be hurt again.

Then Gabe moves.

Before the shift can fully take hold, his body slams into mine, driving me backward. My breath rushes out as I hit the mattress, Gabe’s lean, muscled shoulder pressing into my diaphragm.

“No,” he says again, his voice low and firm.

I open my eyes to find him above me, his glittering moss-colored gaze holding mine. His hands clamp around my wrists, strong and unyielding, and my wolf retreats, coiling deep inside me at his command.

Fine tremors work through my muscles as fear, desire, and pain twist under my skin.

“Let me go, Gabriel,” I whisper, my voice a barely audible growl. “Just let me leave.”

It comes out as more of a plea than I’d like, but I can’t help it. I’ve already pushed him too far. I can’t risk making it worse.

Gabe’s grip tightens, his fingers digging into my wrists almost to the point of pain, but I don’t fight him. I won’t.

I’d rather let him crush me than risk hurting him.

“It will be better if I go,” I say, my voice trembling. “For both of us.”

But even as the words leave my lips, a small, aching part of me hopes he won’t let me go.

I can’t survive losing him—not now, not after finding him.

“You can’t, can you?” Gabe’s voice is low, tinged with curiosity and something deeper. “Read my mind?”

The question hits me hard, sending a jolt through my chest. My throat strains, too many words pressing to escape, yet none feel adequate. How do I explain the mind link to him? How do I describe what it means to find your mate, to feel the pull of a soul so entwined with your own that existing apart becomes impossible?

I can’t. Not yet.

Shaking my head, I give the only answer I can for now. “No.”

“Mika,” he says, my name slipping from his lips in a soft sigh that makes my pulse race.

Before I can process his intent, his lips brush against mine, tentative at first but quickly settling with firm, confident pressure. My lips part in surprise, and his tongue slips inside, stroking and teasing until a moan escapes me.

I give in, twining my tongue with his, surrendering to the taste of him.

“Like that,” he whispers into my mouth, his voice husky and full of want. “Like that.”

He shifts, his hard cock pressing against my belly as he rises onto his knees, straddling my thighs. The heat of his body against mine sends a fresh wave of need surging through me, and when he rolls his hips, bringing our cocks together, I can’t hold back a guttural groan.

“Oh God,” Gabe murmurs, his breath coming fast as he thrusts again. “What is it about you? You make me want you so damn bad. I’m not like this...”

His words trail off as I pull my hands free from his grip, unable to resist the urge to touch him. I skim my palms down his back, reveling in the heat of his skin beneath my fingers. I nip at his lips, capturing them briefly before trailing kisses along his jawline.

The scent of him—arousal, sweat, and the unmistakable musk of my mate—makes me so hard it almost steals my breath.

I clutch at the waistband of his boxers, tugging and pulling, my fingers tangling with his as he reaches down to help me. Together, we wrestle with the fabric, urgency driving every movement.

Gabe’s nimble fingers find the waistband of my borrowed sweats, brushing over my cock with a light touch that sends sparks of pleasure racing through me. I tilt my hips as much as I can, letting him push the fabric down.

When his hand closes around both of our cocks, I groan deeply—the sound raw and unrestrained.

I can't stop my hips from thrusting, each movement meeting the rhythm of his strokes. The heat, the friction, the press of his cock against mine—it's overwhelming. Pleasure shoots through me in electric bolts, building higher and higher until I feel like I might shatter.

His long, strong fingers squeeze our cocks tightly together as he glides his hand up and down, jerking faster. I rear up and snag his bottom lip with my teeth, and suck it into my mouth, licking deeply into him, our tongues tangling in a messy frenzy.

The release comes like a storm, every muscle in my body tensing and flexing as I come. Jets of seed spill between us, slicking his hand, our cocks, and our stomachs.

Gabe groans into my mouth, the sound so deep it vibrates through my entire body. He jerks his hips once, twice more, then freezes, his own release surging hot against my skin. I reach out and gather some of our combined cum, sucking it from my fingers and groaning at our tastes together. Gabe's eyes go wide, and he licks his lips, so I grin and kiss him again, giving him a taste of how good we are together.

The mingled scents of our orgasms fill the air, intoxicating and primal. My cock, refusing to soften, throbs with renewed need as I hold Gabe against me, his weight pressing me into the mattress.

"Sorry," he mutters against my neck, but he doesn't move. Instead, he buries his hands in my hair, threading his fingers through the dark strands and holding me close.

I grip him with everything I've got, savoring the moment even as my mind spins with the implications of what we've just shared.

When our breathing slows, and the sticky mess between us becomes impossible to ignore, Gabe finally stirs. He releases my hair, pushing himself up onto his knees until he's once again straddling my thighs.

I look up at him, my chest aching with an emotion I can't name.

Every detail of him etches itself into my memory—the flushed hue of his skin, the faint sheen of sweat glistening in the low light, the way his eyes soften when they meet mine.

This is my mate.

And I will do whatever it takes to keep him.

I watch him closely, waiting for something—though I'm not sure what. His expression? His next move? His thoughts? The stillness inside me feels unfamiliar, a charged quiet that I can't quite name.

Then Gabe smiles.

The sight startles me, though I don't know why. The curve of his lips is soft but sure, a little mischievous, and entirely too captivating. My chest tightens, the weight of what I'm feeling pressing against my ribs. I won't let myself wonder what that smile means—there's no sense in hoping for more than I can have.

“I don't know what's going on,” Gabe says, his voice breaking the silence. “Why I feel so compelled to jump you that it's hard to resist, but you...”

His smile doesn't waver, but his eyes flicker, studying me.

“You look so serious, Mika. Even after... You still look like you might run.” His

voice softens, warm and steady, but the steel underneath it is unmistakable. “But you can’t. You can’t.”

There’s no give in his words, no hesitation. It’s not a question or a plea—it’s truth, plain and binding.

Something inside me shifts at the sound of it.

He’s right. I can’t run. Not from him, not from this.

Running would be easier—less complicated, less terrifying—but I’ve done that before. And the ache it left behind nearly broke me. I won’t do it again, not when I’ve found what I’ve been searching for all along.

“Okay, Gabriel,” I say, the words rough in my throat. They come out garbled, almost unrecognizable, but he hears them. I know he does because his eyes light up and his smile widens.

“Your word, Mika,” he says, tilting his head, his gaze holding mine.

“You have it,” I reply. “I won’t run.”

The promise feels heavy on my tongue, weighted with more meaning than he probably realizes. I mean it. I won’t leave. Even if it gets hard, even if it hurts. I’ll stay.

Though I can’t help the niggling thought that Gabe might wish I’d run when the explanations begin.

He narrows his eyes at me, tilting his head in that curious way I’m already starting to recognize. “You’d better mean that. I mean, here I am, trying to wrap my mind



around the fact that you're my—a wolf. ” He lets out a huff of breath that's part laugh, part frustration. “And all the while my hormones have spun out of control like they're on some major crack. I swear, I can't keep enough blood up north to get my brain to function.”

The laugh that escapes me is unbidden and genuine. I can't help it—his honesty is disarming in a way that makes my chest feel warm.

I understand his struggle better than he knows. The pull between mates is relentless, and the intensity of it is something I've lived with since the moment I saw him. It's no wonder our kind bonds for life—no one else could compare.

“What I told you,” I say, my voice softer now, “it's the truth.”

Gabe chews on his bottom lip, his teeth worrying the plump skin in a way that distracts me far too much. After a moment, he tips his head in acknowledgment, the movement hesitant but deliberate.

“I think maybe it is,” he says finally. “And that makes me feel a little bit better, actually. I was having some uncomfortably weird feelings for the wolf.”

The pink creeping into his cheeks makes my pulse quicken.

“Uh, yeah, so...” He glances away, his embarrassment clear, but his words keep coming. “And I feel that weird-ass connection with you...like, in this form too, is what I mean, I guess.”

My heartbeat stutters, then leaps at his admission.

The hope I've been trying so hard to suppress blooms in my chest, and I feel the faintest flicker of relief. Maybe—just maybe—he'll accept me in time.

“I felt it, in both forms,” I admit, my voice wavering. “It’s very...ah, strong.”

Understatement of the century.

The bond between us isn’t just strong—it’s woven into my very soul. Every breath I take feels tied to his, every beat of my heart a reminder that he’s mine.

Gabe nods, his smile softening but never fading. He tugs at my hand, pulling me off the bed with an ease that surprises me.

“All right, then,” he says. “Let’s get ourselves clean—there are rescued dogs waiting for breakfast out there.”

His grin turns playful, but his tone remains firm. “Then we’ll talk. I have a shitload of questions, and you can explain to me what the hell just happened between us.”

I let him lead me to the bathroom, the warmth of his hand in mine a lifeline.

I can only hope that by the time the talking is done, he’ll still be smiling.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Gabe

I 'm giving myself an internal pep talk while Mika and I feed and exercise the dogs. Focus, Gabe. Just focus. Keep it together. Don't think about how you tackled the man and practically dry-humped him into the bed earlier.

I'm not a prude—God knows that—but this unrelenting, primal need I feel for Mika is shaking me. It's not just attraction. It's something deeper, something that bypasses logic entirely and drills straight into me.

And then there's what happened when Mika started to...change.

I still don't fully understand what I saw. One moment he was standing there, looking like he was about to bolt, and the next, fur was sprouting from his arm. My brain short-circuited, and every thought I had was replaced by a wild mix of panic and possessiveness. Before I even realized what I was doing, I tackled him.

Maybe it wasn't the smartest move, but it worked. He stayed.

Now I can't stop thinking about him. The feel of him under me, the taste of him, the way he looked when he came—it's burned into my mind, and no matter how hard I try to focus, my body keeps reminding me that I want more.

I toss a ball for Jojo, trying to shake off the thoughts. The heeler bolts after it, a blur of energy and enthusiasm that makes me grin. But when Jojo trots back with the ball, it isn't to me.

It's to Mika.

He's sitting nearby, his hand outstretched as Jojo drops the slobbery toy into his palm.

Mika looks at me, his cheeks flushing as he shrugs apologetically. "Sorry, it's an...alpha thing," he says, his voice unsure.

An alpha thing?

Guilt and irritation twist together in my chest. If Mika's the alpha, what does that make me? The beta? The...bitch?

"I don't think so," I mutter under my breath, the flicker of resentment surprising even me.

Jojo clearly doesn't care who flung whom onto the bed earlier.

The thought is so ridiculous it makes me laugh out loud, the sound bursting from me before I can stop it. Mika glances up, startled, but I shake my head, grinning despite myself. Of course Jojo would see Mika as the alpha—the man is part wolf, for God's sake. And no matter how crazy it sounds, I can't deny the pull I feel toward him.

I fold my arms, arching an eyebrow at Mika. "You two about done?"

He kneels and gives Jojo a final round of praise, his hands gliding over the dog's short fur with a gentleness that makes something in my chest tighten.

"Sure," he says as he stands.

I look away quickly, but not before I catch myself envying Jojo. I know how those

hands feel—just not as well as I want to.

“ So...” I clear my throat, forcing my voice to sound casual as we head back toward the house. “Breakfast, I guess? Any preference? What do...uh...”

God, I’m fumbling . My cheeks burn as I stumble over the words, feeling like some awkward teenager trying to impress a crush.

Mika’s lips twitch, amusement lighting his face. “Shapeshifters?” he offers, his tone teasing.

I glare at him, but it only makes him smirk.

“Right,” I say, my voice flat. “Shapeshifters. So, uh...what do you eat? Regular food, or do you have some kind of special diet?”

The question feels absurd even as I ask it, and I know my face is probably glowing red.

Mika doesn’t seem fazed. He considers the question seriously as we step into the kitchen. “Pretty much whatever you eat, Gabriel—”

“Gabe,” I interrupt, stopping short to face him. “Just Gabe is fine. I mean, I did just have my hand wrapped around your cock and your cum on my fingers...and stomach...and...”

Mika’s eyes darken, the heat in his gaze slamming into me like a physical force. My words trail off as my brain grinds to a halt, my body reacting faster than my mind can process.

I lean into him, my palms finding his chest. The solid warmth of him steadies me

even as confusion and fear swirl inside me. I don't understand this pull, this need, but I can't resist it.

My stomach growls, loud and insistent, breaking the moment. Mika lets out a breathless laugh, stepping back slightly.

"Come on," he says, his voice rough as he takes my hands and presses them to his chest. "Let's get you fed."

His touch lingers as he pulls me toward the stove, and I know I'm in trouble.

"Breakfast, Gabri—Gabe. And maybe some kibble, if you have extra."

The teasing warmth in Mika's voice sends a flutter through my belly, though I narrow my eyes at him, pretending to take offense.

"I should give you kibble, just for that. And for backing away from that kiss. That was just cruel, Mika."

I smile, softening the sting of my words. The last thing I want to do is hurt him. From what I've seen, someone else has already done that far too well. There's a lost, hurt look in his eyes that tugs at something deep inside me, like a mirror to the way I felt when my parents kicked me to the curb.

If it hadn't been for my grandparents...

I shake off the thought. I can't leave someone else feeling like that. Especially not Mika.

"Let's see what we have," I say, tugging him by the hand toward the refrigerator.

I open the door and bend over, making a point to bump my ass into his groin. The sharp hiss of indrawn breath behind me makes me grin like a lunatic as I pull out bacon and eggs.

But before I can fully straighten, strong arms wrap around me, locking across my belly. The food nearly slips from my hands as Mika's lips brush the side of my neck. The caress sends a shiver down my spine, but when he sucks hard and his teeth graze my skin, my knees nearly buckle.

"Gonna drop the...breakfast," I manage to gasp.

Mika doesn't seem to care. He tugs me toward the table, taking the bacon and eggs from my hands and setting them down. My head spins, my pulse hammering in my veins so hard it makes me dizzy.

Then I see his eyes.

The raw heat in his gaze sends need and panic tumbling through me in equal measure.

"No. I...can't."

I shake my head for emphasis, the words leaving my mouth before I can think. The effect on Mika is immediate. He freezes, his expression shifting as a flicker of pain cuts through his features.

I feel like shit.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly, running trembling fingers through my hair as I glance away. "I shouldn't have teased you."

I take a steadying breath, forcing myself to face him again. "I don't know why I did

it. I mean, I want you—who wouldn't? But this, what's going on between us, it scares the shit out of me."

I can feel the heat rising in my face as I try to put words to the hurricane of emotions swirling inside me.

"There's this clawing need in my gut to...to..."

The blush spreads to my ears, and I have to look away again.

"It's like all I want to do is taste you, touch you, feel you," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

And then it hits me—a humiliating flash of insight that makes my stomach drop. My breath hitches, and my heart thunders in my chest as the realization claws its way to the surface. The feeling isn't entirely mine, though. It's foreign and yet familiar, like it's weaving itself into me through the bond I share with Mika.

It's overwhelming.

Heat floods through my body, a flush that starts deep in my chest and radiates outward, making my skin feel too tight, my senses razor sharp. It's a sensation that doesn't belong to me—or at least, it shouldn't. But through Mika, I'm aware of every flicker of tension, every surge of need as if it were my own.

"Shit," I mutter, my voice trembling. The word catches in my throat, thick and clumsy as I try to make sense of it. "I don't even know how the fuck I know this, but I feel like..."

I trail off, heat prickling my skin as the truth settles over me, thick and suffocating. I don't want to say it, but I can't hold it back.



“I feel like I’m in heat around you.”

The words barely leave my mouth before shame and confusion rear up like a wave, threatening to drown me. It doesn’t make sense—how could this be happening to me? My human body wasn’t built for this, wasn’t supposed to feel like it’s on fire with need so intense it borders on primal.

But I do.

Through the connection, I can feel it rolling off Mika like an inferno, his own longing, his instincts bleeding into me. It’s not just physical—it’s something deeper, something ancient and wild that my human mind can’t quite comprehend. My body is reacting to him as if it’s answering a call I didn’t know existed.

The heat isn’t only arousal—it’s a compulsion. My body feels drawn to his in a way that’s terrifying and thrilling at the same time. My pulse pounds in my ears, and every inch of me feels hyperaware of him. His presence is magnetic, pulling me closer even when I’m not moving.

I can feel the change happening inside me, as though my body is syncing with his on a level I’ve never experienced before. This is emotional, mental, even spiritual. Like my entire being is reshaping itself to fit with his, as though the bond between us is rewriting the very rules of what I am.

The sensation is equal parts intoxicating and unsettling. My breath comes in short, shallow gasps, my body buzzing with a need I can’t control, and I hate it.

I hate the loss of control, the vulnerability of it. But at the same time, I can’t help but crave it. To lean into it. To see where it takes me.

“What the fuck is happening to me, Mika?” My voice is low, ragged, desperate. I

don't even know if I'm asking him or myself, but I need answers—need him to help me make sense of this.

I meet his gaze, and the intensity there is almost too much. His eyes burn with something I can't quite name, but it settles me in a strange way, like he's my anchor in this storm.

Through the bond, I can feel Mika's own emotions swirling—desire, protectiveness, and something deeper that feels a hell of a lot like awe. It's grounding and overwhelming all at once.

He steps closer, his hand cupping my jaw, and I realize I'm trembling under his touch. "You feel it too, don't you?" he asks, his voice soft but charged with meaning.

I nod, swallowing hard. There's no point in denying it—not when it's written all over me, inside and out.

"It's the bond," Mika murmurs, his thumb brushing over my cheek. "I'm sorry, Gabe. I didn't know it would be like this."

I close my eyes, leaning into his touch despite myself. His words make sense in a way that cuts through the chaos in my mind. As disorienting as it is, I can't deny how right it feels, even as it terrifies me.

"Mika," I whisper, the word trembling on my lips, "what do I do?"

His hand slides to the back of my neck, guiding me with the strength of his grip. "You don't have to do anything, babe," he says, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine. "Just let me take care of you."

My hands are shaking. I can feel the panic and I've no doubt it's as plain as day on

my face. I dart a glance at Mika.

What I see stops everything else cold.

His shoulders are slumped, his fists now clenched at his sides as he takes a step away, and the look on his face is so hopeless it's like a punch to the chest.

It's not frustration or impatience. It's...resignation.

That one look pulls at me harder than any of the other emotions I've been wrestling with. The panic fades, replaced by an uncontrollable need to fix it, to comfort him.

I finally take a deep breath and step toward him without thinking, the urge to soothe him stronger than anything else.

I push off the countertop and close the distance between us, covering Mika's white-knuckled fists with my hands. His tension is palpable, radiating off him in waves, and the sight of his tightly clenched fingers makes my chest ache.

I can't resist leaning in, brushing my lips against his. The soft contact sends a shiver through me, my own desperation to comfort him almost overpowering. Hell, at this point, I'd drop down on the floor and spread myself wide open if it meant getting rid of that cloak of dejection hanging over him. If I can feel him through the bond, he must also be able to feel my emotions.

Not smart, jackass.

It's that sort of unrelenting need that freaked me out in the first place.

Well, that and the whole wolf thing.

I press another kiss to his lips before resting my forehead against his. The warmth of him relaxes me, steadies me even as my heart races. “It’ll be okay,” I whisper. “Eventually. I’m sorry I freaked out on you. It’s just confusing, and pretty fucking scary to be honest.”

Mika’s pain flickers, momentarily visible in his eyes, before it starts to fade. I feel the tension ease out of him, his fists unclenching beneath my hands. He turns his palms upward, linking his fingers through mine, his grip light but steady.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” he says softly, his lips quirking into a smile that should come with a damn warning label. The sight of it sends a jolt straight to my gut, a mix of warmth and heat that makes it hard to think.

“But it isn’t just you,” he continues, his voice dropping lower. “I know it’s new and frightening. I feel the same way. It’s like nothing matters other than burying my cock as deep inside you as I can and—”

“Oh shit, you can’t say things like that when I’m this damned horny!”

The words tumble out of me before I can stop them, my entire body shivering at the image his words plant in my head. It takes everything I have not to throw caution to the wind and let him do exactly what he just said.

If we both feel this pull, this need, then why shouldn’t we act on it?

My prick certainly thinks it’s a great idea, throbbing insistently as if to emphasize its point. But no matter how persuasive that argument is, I’m not ready to let that particular part of me take the lead.

I take a half step back, putting just enough distance between us to keep myself from losing control entirely.

“No matter how bad my body wants you—and believe me, it wants you very bad—I can’t just shut off my brain.” My voice comes out uneven, my breath catching on every word. “I don’t understand this, but you said you feel it, too. Yet...” I narrow my eyes, studying him. “This doesn’t surprise you. Not really.”

Mika releases one of my hands, his expression thoughtful as he gently guides us back to the counter where the makings for breakfast sit forgotten.

“ You’re wrong, partially,” he says, his voice steady but quiet. “Finding you—that surprised the living hell out of me. But this feeling...” He pauses, his gaze meeting mine. “It’s something I’ve heard of before, among shifters.”

I reach up, cupping his chin and forcing him to meet my eyes. “I think I found you, buddy.”

The words come out stronger than I expect, a small surge of confidence bubbling to the surface. “As for the other, you can explain it after we eat.”

Mika smiles, his lips twitching with that grin that does dangerous things to my self-control. A rush of heat pools low in my stomach, and I have to grip the edge of the counter to keep myself from giving in.

Some of my inner struggle must show in my expression, because Mika’s grin falters. His eyes darken, his gaze turning feral for a brief, heart-stopping moment before he shakes his head and exhales slowly.

“I don’t think so, Gabe,” he says, his voice dropping into a low growl that makes my pulse race.

His hand moves, stroking me through my jeans, and a near-breathless moan tears out of me. My hips jerk forward instinctively, chasing the pressure, and I grab his hand,

trying to hold it against my aching cock.

But Mika shakes his head again, gently pulling his hand away.

“You’d regret it,” he says softly, his tone filled with certainty. “Once we were done, you’d regret it. And I don’t want that.”

I groan, letting my chin drop to my chest. Mika’s right—I know that. Intellectually, anyway. My body, however, isn’t interested in reason.

Mika releases my other hand and steps toward the table, pausing with one hand on the back of a chair. He watches me carefully, waiting for what I assume is permission to sit.

“Do you need help with breakfast?” he asks, his voice steady but soft.

I sigh, frustration threading through me as I shift, trying to ease the pressure of my cock against my zipper. “No, go ahead and have a seat. It won’t take long to fix this stuff.”

I turn away before I can watch him sit down.

Big mistake.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of him settling into the chair, and my breath hitches. He looks...right. Too right. Like he belongs there, at my table, in my house.

I want to keep him.

And he wants to stay.

The thoughts send a small shiver through me, one that's equal parts excitement and unease.

Smiling to myself, I grab a skillet and set it on the stove. It's not just my body anymore—my head's finally caught up. I want to keep Mika.

As I lay strips of bacon in the pan, I can't hold back a bigger grin. It looks like I'm going to have to broaden my horizons, open my mind, and let go of whatever reservations I'm holding on to. That's what it'll take to have the man sitting at my table.

Twice now, I've seen that broken, hurt look sweep over Mika's face, like a shadow he can't quite escape. I don't know why it's there, and maybe I'll never fully understand what's happening between us.

But I do know this—I'll do everything I can to make sure he never wears that look again.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Mika

I sit on the couch, my fingers plucking at the nubby fabric beneath me, unable to keep still. Across the coffee table, Gabe watches me, his gaze steady, patient, and unrelenting. He leans back in the big leather recliner, his body relaxed, but I can feel the weight of his focus pressing down on me.

It's not fair. He looks so at ease, like this moment doesn't hold the power to shatter me entirely. I'm the one unraveling here, trying to figure out how to say what needs to be said without losing him in the process.

I want him.

God, I want him so badly it's starting to feel like a physical ache, a need rooted deeper than just desire. I want to wake up beside him, to see the blissful, sated look he wore earlier after we both came, or maybe that hungry, predatory heat he had in the kitchen.

I want it all, every version of him, every moment.

But wanting doesn't make words come easier, and right now, every word I need to say feels impossibly heavy.

"Quit stalling, Mika," he says, his voice soft, calm, but insistent. "Just...explain the dreams, at least. Please."

His words tug at me, their quiet urgency impossible to ignore. I take a deep breath,



trying to steady myself.

“The dreams were...are possible because of this,” I say, gesturing between us. “This pull, or need, whatever you want to call it. I don’t have words strong enough to describe it, Gabe.”

I glance at him briefly, just enough to see his reaction, but his face gives nothing away. I go back to toying with the couch fabric, my fingers twitching against the rough texture.

“It’s something,” I continue, the words spilling out despite my nerves. “The dreams, and even being able to...to speak to each other without words.”

I risk another glance at him, trying to gauge whether he believes me or not. His expression stays calm, unreadable, and the silence stretches between us like a taut wire.

“So this happens with everyone you have sex with, then?” he asks.

The question hits me hard, and I freeze. What answer does he want? What will he think if I give him the truth?

“No,” I say, my voice low but firm. “Not everyone. Not anyone, ever, except you. And we haven’t even had sex. Not really.”

I let that hang in the air, needing him to understand. It’s like this because it’s us.

“It’s like that for us,” I add, forcing the words out. “Sometimes—a very rare sometimes—a shifter will find someone who...who they can link minds with. ”

Gabe tilts his head, studying me with those sharp green eyes that seem to pierce right

through me. It's like he's peeling back every layer, reading things I'm not even sure I understand about myself.

"So why us, Mika?" he asks after a moment. "What don't you want to tell me?"

I suck in a breath, the calm patience in his voice cutting through my defenses. My fingers still their nervous fidgeting as I meet his gaze.

"It's us because we're right together," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "We fit. It's—"

"It's part of the whole shapeshifter thing, then, right?" he interrupts, his tone sharp but not cruel.

The abruptness makes me flinch, and when he glances away, doubt and fear claw their way back to the surface. I can feel them, pulling at me like an undertow.

"Yes," I say quietly. "It's complicated."

And isn't that the understatement of the year?

Gabe doesn't answer right away. He trails his fingers over the arm of the chair, tracing slow, deliberate patterns against the leather. My gaze fixes on his hand, on the way it moves with such careless grace.

It's distracting.

More than distracting—it's maddening.

All I can think about is how those fingers would feel on my skin, on my cock, tracing soft, teasing patterns like he's doing now.

Heat floods my throat, and before I realize it, I'm lost in the fantasy, my body aching with the need to close the distance between us.

When Gabe finally calls my name, his voice low and raw, it takes me a moment to register it. My name falling from his lips pulls me back into the room, into the reality where I'm still sitting here, my nerves fraying as I struggle to hold it together.

I lift my eyes to his, and for a split second, I swear I see something flicker in his gaze—something just as desperate as the need burning through me.

Gabe's words hit me like a punch to the chest.

“Mika, I think maybe we should wait after all. For the explanations. I, uhm, need some time to digest this...whole shapeshifter thing, you know? And I think you need some time to deal with whatever is happening between us, too. We both do.”

Fear surges inside me, clawing at my ribs. It's a living thing, vicious and relentless, battering against my heart.

“What do you mean by needing time? And dealing with what's happening between us? Do you...?” I swallow hard, pulse hammering and choke out the next words. “Are you saying you want me to leave?”

Please, no.

The urge to run, to protect myself from the pain of rejection, is smothered under the weight of a greater need—the need to stay, to convince Gabe we belong together. But what if he really does ask me to leave? Can I do anything other than grant his request?

The thought alone threatens to tear me apart.

Before I can spiral further, Gabe rises from his chair and kneels before me. His hands cup my face, warm and gentle, anchoring me in the moment. His lips press softly against mine, a kiss filled with reassurance and quiet strength.

“It’s okay,” he says, his voice steady, his green eyes glittering with compassion. “Whatever this is, it’s okay.”

The tension inside me starts to ease, unraveling thread by thread as he continues.

“I just meant that right now, this constant need I feel with you, for you, explains enough. I want to know the why’s and everything being with you entails, but I want to know you, too. All the answers in the world won’t help me do that like just being with you will. Those answers might muddy my thinking instead, distract me when all I really want, for now, is to focus on us.”

His words settle over me, soothing my fears.

I can be patient—for him, for both of us.

“Are you expecting someone?” I ask, the sound of an approaching car pulling me out of the moment.

Gabe leans back slightly, his hands still stroking through my hair. The gentle motion drains away the last vestiges of worry from our conversation.

“No,” he says. “Why?”

“Because,” I say, rising from the couch, my senses sharpening, “I just heard a car slowing down to turn...”

The sharp banging on the door makes Gabe jump up and dart past me, his expression

shifting from calm to alarm in an instant.

“Shit, Mika. I haven’t thought of a reason you’re here, how we met, anything.”

I can feel his panic, but I shake my head. “It’s okay. I can sit in the bedroom, if you want.”

Even as I offer, I know I don’t want to hide. Gabe hesitates, and I see the conflict in his eyes. I know it would be easier for him to send me to the bedroom, but I also know what that would mean.

Hiding me would make me feel like a dirty secret.

Gabe’s jaw locks, and his expression hardens with resolve. “No. No way in hell, Mika. Just drop down on the couch, and we’ll deal with whatever happens. Besides, it’s probably Todd or Adam.”

I nod, but something feels off. Tipping my head up slightly, I take in the scents carried through the air, trying to pinpoint the source of my unease.

This isn’t Todd or Adam.

The stench hits me first—something foul and acrid, like anger and cruelty rolled into one. My hackles rise, and I lower my head to meet Gabe’s questioning gaze.

“If those are the friends who were with you before, this isn’t them,” I say, keeping my voice low. “This is a man who smells...bad. Like mean and trouble.”

Gabe frowns, processing my words even as his hand reaches for the door handle.

The moment he swings it open, the source of the stench is confirmed.

I step out of the house and see Kaufman leaning against his cruiser, and I can feel the tension radiating off Gabe like a live wire. The sheriff's posture is lazy on the surface—slouched with one hand resting too casually on his holster—but his eyes give him away. He's sizing Gabe up, calculating, like a predator deciding whether to lunge or wait for a better opening.

“Sheriff Kaufman.” Gabe's tone is clipped, just shy of outright hostility.

I stand behind him, every muscle in my body tensing as I take in the smug expression plastered across the sheriff's face.

“Staley,” Kaufman drawls, his voice oozing condescension. “Heard you were on old lady Shumaker's property.”

My instincts scream at me to protect Gabe, but I hold myself back, staying silent as I watch the exchange unfold. This man isn't here for idle chit-chat—he's trouble.

And whatever he's about to say, I know it won't be good.

“And?” Gabe asks, keeping his tone neutral.

“You ain't gonna deny it, boy?”

Ah, there it is. A classic intimidation move, throwing out 'boy' like it's supposed to make him feel small. Never mind the fact that we've both got a good six inches on the man. It's never going to work, but he still tries it like it's some kind of magic word.

Gabe stays relaxed, loose, letting the insult roll off him.

“Why would I bother doing that?” he replies, shrugging. “It's pretty clear you know I

was there. So, are we going to banter back and forth, wasting taxpayer dollars, or are you going to cut to the chase? Either is fine with me, by the way, but since you're an elected official..."

Gabe trails off, and I'm biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself speaking as I see the angry flush rising up the sheriff's neck.

Gabe doesn't push him further, clearly knowing it's a bad idea. Kaufman isn't just coming across as petty—he's unhinged. If I weren't standing behind Gabe, he'd probably say something even sharper, but with me here, he's going to need to keep this from escalating.

"Damn it, Gabe, you're always causing trouble," Kaufman says, his tone carrying a mocking snarl that sets my wolf on edge.

I step closer, staying just behind Gabe. My presence isn't meant to overshadow him—this is his fight—but if Kaufman makes a wrong move, I'm ready.

"Trouble?" Gabe crosses his arms, his voice steady despite the anger I know is simmering under the surface. "You mean rescuing animals you can't be bothered to care about?"

Kaufman's sneer deepens, the lines around his mouth pulling tight. "I'm talking about interfering. You don't see the bigger picture, Staley. These strays are a threat—disease carriers, dangers to livestock. You're too soft to make the hard calls."

Soft? Gabe? I almost laugh at the absurdity of it. But I stay quiet, letting Gabe handle it his way—for now.

"You think blasting stray dogs is a 'hard call,' Kaufman?" Gabe's voice is calm, but there's a sharpness to it that makes the sheriff's smirk falter. "Because it seems to me

you enjoy it just a little too much.”

Kaufman freezes for the briefest moment, his expression flickering with something dark—something I recognize all too well. That’s the look of a man whose mask has slipped, showing the ugliness beneath. Then he recovers, letting out a low, cold laugh.

“You’ve got no idea what it’s like, playing cleanup in a town like this,” he says, his voice dripping with condescension. “Strays bring problems, and I deal with them. That’s my job.”

“That’s not a job,” Gabe counters, stepping closer. “That’s a power trip.”

Pride surges in me, even as my wolf snarls at the escalating tension. Gabe’s not backing down, and Kaufman knows it. The sheriff’s eyes narrow, his gaze darting to me for a split second before locking back on Gabe.

“You don’t know shit about power trips, boy,” Kaufman spits, his tone laced with disdain. “You’ve had everything handed to you. Your fancy degree, your bleeding heart crusades. You’ve never had to make real sacrifices.”

Tension coils in Gabe’s jaw, and I can see the effort it takes for him to keep his voice steady. “You don’t know a damn thing about me. What I do know is this—your obsession with killing strays isn’t about the animals. So, what is it, Kaufman? What’s the real reason?”

For a moment, Kaufman’s mask slips again. His jaw twitches, his hands balling into fists at his sides. Then he leans in, his voice dropping to a venomous hiss. “You think you’ve got me figured out, huh? You don’t. This town doesn’t need people like you—sticking their noses where they don’t belong, flaunting their... perversions.”



That word hits like a slap, and I feel my wolf rear up, claws ready to tear. But I force myself to stay still, focusing on Gabe. This is his moment, and I won't take it from him.

Gabe doesn't flinch. If anything, he stands taller, showing his defiance. "I'm not the one flaunting anything, Sheriff. You're the one stomping onto my property like you own it, hurling insults because I dared to challenge you."

As I wait for Kaufman's next outburst, I notice his gaze shifts to me. He's glaring over Gabe's shoulder, his face darkening.

Gabe glances back, and I feel my stomach clench. I rest my hand on his shoulder, standing sentry just behind him, offering a solid and reassuring presence.

Gabe turns back to Kaufman whose face twists with contempt, his sneer so pronounced it's practically cartoonish.

"Been spending time with your... friend?" he sneers, drawing out the word like it's coated in filth.

The implication doesn't escape me, and anger sparks sharper in my chest. But the ridiculousness of it strikes me just as quickly. Kaufman isn't wrong—we're exactly the kind of 'friends' he's implying, though the idea of him thinking about our relationship in any way makes me want to take a shower.

I shrug, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

Then, with a grin, I step forward, sidestepping Gabe to face Kaufman head-on.

"Mika Blackwell, Sheriff," I say smoothly, extending my hand.

Kaufman doesn't even look at it. He just glares at me like he's trying to figure out how to make me disappear by sheer force of will. After a moment, I let my arm drop, my expression calm and unaffected.

I almost laugh, because the tension is so thick it feels absurd. If we're having some kind of silent contest, I know exactly who's going to win.

The sheriff takes his time looking me up and down, like he's sizing me up. It's a pathetic attempt at intimidation. Kaufman looks like a bantam rooster trying to puff himself up in front of an eagle.

"Where'd you come from, Blackwell?" Kaufman asks finally, his tone sharp and suspicious.

"New Mexico, Sheriff," I reply, my voice soft but steady, with just the faintest hint of a smile tugging at my lips. "Is that a problem?"

Kaufman doesn't respond. Instead, his glare shifts back to Gabe, his patience clearly worn thin.

"Staley, where's the goddamn wolf you took off old lady Shumaker's property?"

The sheriff's voice is brittle, his stance rigid. He's given up on the games he obviously likes to play, cutting straight to the point.

Gabe steps up beside me, resting a hand on my lower back. It's like he's drawing strength from me or I'm offering my own.

"Gone, Sheriff," he says, keeping his tone calm. "Not that it should matter. I'm not in the town limits, remember?"

I see the flicker of frustration in Kaufman's eyes. It's the truth, and he knows it. Whatever he wants to pull, he doesn't have jurisdiction here.

The sheriff's jaw twitches, his gaze flicking between me and Gabe. I shift slightly, keeping a cool, steady presence—a stark contrast to the storm brewing in Kaufman's expression.

If the sheriff is planning something, I can't tell what it is yet. But I know one thing—this man doesn't like losing, and we just gave him no ground to stand on.

“What do you mean, gone? If you turned that son of a bitch loose—” Kaufman's voice is already rising, climbing toward his usual self-righteous indignation.

But I don't let him finish.

“He means the wolf is gone,” I say, cutting the sheriff off mid-sentence. My voice is cold and leaves no room for argument. “It escaped from the kennels.”

Gabe glances at me, a grateful look on his face. We hadn't exactly come up with an explanation for ‘the wolf's’ disappearance, and I'm not in the mood to play games.

Kaufman curses, launching into a tirade about how Gabe has doomed the town to its death by letting a vicious beast run loose. His words spiral higher and higher, painting a picture of chaos and carnage that would be laughable if it weren't so damn ridiculous.

I keep my expression neutral, but my patience is wearing thin. Gabe mirrors me, outwardly composed, but I can feel the tension radiating off him. His fists are clenched at his sides, and the sharp edge in his voice tells me he's close to snapping.

“You about wound down now, Sheriff?” I ask, cutting through Kaufman's rant. I'm

ready for this fool to leave before his little power play turns into something worse.

“Am I wound down? Let me tell you something, you damned quee—”

Kaufman never finishes.

I move fast, stepping between us and pushing Gabe back gently with one hand. I lean in close to Kaufman, and I see the fear flash across the sheriff’s face as he takes in the rage he sees in my eyes.

“I seriously doubt you want to continue that sentence, Kaufman,” I say, my voice a low growl, but every word is laced with warning. “You need to really, really think before you let your mouth run off like that.”

My hands flex at my sides just itching to punch the slimy fucker, and Gabe steps closer, pressing just enough against my back to let me feel him there.

“You threatening me, Blackwell?” Kaufman snaps, though his voice wavers slightly. “It’s a crime to threaten—”

I cut him off with a sharp motion of my hand, slicing through the air.

“Of course not, Sheriff,” I say casually, almost too casually. “Just stating a fact. Wouldn’t want you to slip up and say something like that out where other people could hear it now, would you? It’s such a narrow step from words like ‘queers’ into hate crimes territory.”

The air goes heavy as my words sink in, and I can practically see the gears turning in Kaufman’s head. It’s not a direct threat, but it might as well be—and it’s a smarter, sharper one than anything physical could ever be.

Kaufman straightens, his expression locking into that cold, calculating mask again. But I can see the fury simmering beneath it, a storm waiting to break.

“Watch yourself, Staley,” he says to Gabe, but he’s still staring at me, his voice low and threatening. “This town’s patience only goes so far.”

“Funny,” Gabe shoots back, taking another step forward. “I was about to say the same thing to you.”

The tension crackles between them, sharp and electric. My wolf pushes at the edges of my control, growling for me to intervene further, but I hold firm. Gabe doesn’t need me to fight his battles—he’s more than capable on his own.

Finally, Kaufman breaks. Without another word, he turns on his heel, stalking back to his cruiser. The door slams shut, and the tires spit gravel as he speeds away, leaving the air heavy with unspoken threats.

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding and glance at Gabe.

The scent of Kaufman’s bitterness and bile still lingers in the air, and it’s all I can do not to shift and chase him down, tearing apart whatever put that smug look on his face.

Gabe’s still standing beside me, his shoulders squared, his chest heaving, as though he’s been holding in the same breath. When I glance at him, his green eyes burn, not with lust, not with amusement—but with fury. Raw and untamed, it radiates off him in waves, more intense than anything I’ve seen from him before.

“I hate him.” Gabe’s voice is low, guttural, like it’s being torn from his chest. “I hate the way he looks at us, the way he talks about us like we’re less than nothing. Like we’re something vile.”

His words are sharp, each one cutting deeper into the knot of anger and helplessness that's been building in my chest. "You're not," I say, my voice rough. "You're not vile, Gabe. He's the one who's fucking broken."

"Then why does it feel like he's winning?" Gabe snaps, whirling to face me. His hands are trembling, his jaw tight. "He gets to walk around this town, hiding behind his badge, spreading his poison—and what do we do? Stand here and take it?"

I reach out instinctively, gripping his arm, but he shakes me off. The rejection stings, but I can't blame him. I've felt this same frustration clawing at me for years, the helpless rage of knowing someone like Kaufman thrives while people like Gabe—and Todd, and me—pay the price.

"We don't just take it," I say, though my voice feels hollow even to my own ears. "We fight back."

"How?" His laugh is bitter, broken. "How do we fight someone who has the law on his side? Who can do whatever the hell he wants, and no one stops him?"

For a moment, I don't have an answer. What can I say to him that isn't just empty words? That it'll get better? That people like Kaufman always get what's coming to them? I've lived long enough to know that isn't always true. Sometimes, the world is cruel. Sometimes, the bad guys win.

But I can't tell Gabe that. Not now. Not when the fire in his eyes is all that's keeping him from collapsing under the weight of it all.

"We fight," I say finally, stepping closer. My voice is steel now, sharper than the claws I feel itching just under my skin. "We fight by being exactly who we are. By not letting him dictate how we live. By standing together, no matter what he throws at us. That's how we win."

Gabe's gaze locks with mine, the anger in his eyes tempered now by something else—something more fragile, like hope. He swallows hard, his throat working, as though he's trying to hold back words he can't quite say.

For a long moment, he doesn't move, doesn't speak. Then, slowly, his arms wrap around me, his grip firm, grounding. The anger in the air doesn't dissipate—it's still there, burning low, waiting—but it shifts. It's not helpless anymore. It's something we can use.

When he finally steps back, his eyes meet mine, and there's a new resolve in them. "I believe you," he says quietly. "But if he comes after us again—after anyone we care about—I won't hold back."

"Neither will I," I promise, the truth of it settling deep in my chest.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Gabe

I sit at my computer, staring at the screen, trying to concentrate on a customer's website that desperately needs updating. The project should be simple enough—just a basic refresh—but my brain refuses to cooperate.

It's been a stressful couple of days. Between trying not to completely give in to my body's incessant demands for Mika and attempting to untangle the mess in my head, I'm exhausted. Sleep has become a cruel joke. Every time I lie down, all I do is toss and turn, arguing with myself about whether I should just march into the guest bedroom and beg Mika to fuck my brains out.

And honestly? I'm afraid I might actually beg.

The man's restraint is maddening. Mika's been holding back, keeping our sexual encounters limited to slow, careful hand jobs, saying he doesn't want me to feel rushed. It's sweet, considerate, kind—all those good things I should be grateful for.

But it's also not enough .

I bite my tongue to keep from muttering as I refocus on the task at hand. Or try to, anyway.

Today, shaping up Rick's Rockin' Rods is proving to be impossible. For one, the name has absolutely nothing to do with hot rods, and for another, my mind keeps wandering to Mika. Our conversation about holding off on questions circles in my head.



I thought about pressing him for answers, but the look on his face when I almost did stopped me cold. There was something raw there, a pain I couldn't stomach. My curiosity isn't worth that—not when whatever's drawing us together clearly needs time.

Time for Mika to trust me. To believe I won't hurt him the way someone else obviously has before.

I glance over my shoulder at the couch, where Mika is napping. He looks peaceful for once, the tension that's always in his shoulders finally eased.

God, it's nice having someone here.

I didn't realize how tired I was of being alone until now. And it doesn't hurt that the someone happens to be sexy as hell. Just looking at him makes my cock twitch.

“Down, boy,” I mutter, shifting in my seat to relieve some of the pressure building in my jeans. Now's not the time to play. After I finish this website, though...

Sighing, I try to steer my thoughts back to Rick's ridiculous site. My erection is relentless, pressing against the seam of my jeans like it's determined to break free.

A soft chuckle from behind me breaks my focus.

Mika's awake.

He leans over my shoulder, peering at the screen, and his proximity sets my skin on fire. I swear I can feel the heat of his body without him even touching me.

Of course, he notices my problem.

His low laugh brushes against my ear, and I feel the blush creeping up my neck and spreading across my face. Damn it.

Mika straightens, crossing his arms over his chest as he smirks at me, that wicked twinkle in his eyes making my blood simmer.

“I’m thinking,” he drawls, “you’d look really good riding Rick’s Rabid Rammin’ Rocket.”

My head whips around to the screen, where he’s pointing. And there it is—an obscenely huge dildo on the site, bold as day.

Oh, hell no.

My face burns hotter, but this time, it’s not just from embarrassment. It’s a mix of mortification and sheer terror too. That thing’s got to be twelve inches long, at least. I clench my ass cheeks so tight I’m surprised I don’t pull something.

“No way in hell, buddy!” I bite out, my voice a mix of indignation and horror.

Mika’s grin widens, and damn it, it’s infectious. I let go of the outrage and glance back at the monstrous dildo on the screen. Okay, it is kind of funny.

I grin up at him. “You come at me with that thing, and there’s gonna be a fight. Loser takes all—literally.”

Mika bursts out laughing, the sound rich and genuine. It’s a sight I’ll never get tired of—his head tipped back, his eyes crinkling at the corners, his whole body shaking with mirth.

For a moment, the tension I’ve been carrying disappears.

Yeah, I could get used to this.

What the hell—Rick's website can wait.

I reach out, grabbing Mika by the waist, and press my face against the soft cotton of his T-shirt. The fabric is worn and familiar, but what's underneath it? That's a whole different story. Hard, defined muscle meets my cheek, the contrast sending a shiver through me.

Everything about Mika fills my senses. The warmth of his skin radiates through the thin shirt, the steady rise and fall of his chest grounding me. I close my eyes, letting the textures and heat soak into my memory.

Then I feel it—the sudden pressure of his cock pressing against my neck through his sweats.

I pull back slightly, my breath catching as I glance down. The bulge is unmistakable, and I can see the damp spot spreading where the tip is leaking into the fabric. My mouth waters at the sight, the scent of his arousal filling the air, and I reach for him without thinking.

My hand slides from his hip, gliding over the thick, heated length straining against the cotton. I stroke him slowly, my palm dragging across the rigid shaft, wishing I could feel his bare skin instead of this damn barrier between us.

I want to taste him, to draw those drops of pre-cum onto my tongue and savor them.

But Mika has other plans.

He pulls me up from my chair, steering me toward the couch. His hands are quick, unbuttoning and shoving my jeans down my legs so fast I barely have time to kick off

my shoes and socks. I step out of the rest of my clothes, watching as he strips in front of me.

Holy shit.

Mika naked is a goddamn work of art. Every muscle on his tall, lean frame seems carved from stone, his dark skin glistening slightly as if lit from within. My throat dries up, then floods with saliva, and I have to swallow hard before I embarrass myself by drooling.

Before I can process how devastatingly gorgeous he is, Mika's hands are on me again. I'm a willing participant, eager to surrender myself to him. His body covers mine completely, from head to toe, and I can't help but feel consumed by him—his heat, his scent, his very presence. His weight presses me into the cushions, and I relish the sensation of being pinned beneath him. He grabs my hands, lacing our fingers together with an urgency that sends a thrill through me. His grip is firm, almost to the point of pain, but it's a good kind of pain—the kind that makes you feel alive.

"I need..." Mika's voice is low and shaky, the rough edge making my heart race like I've just run a marathon. He doesn't finish his sentence, but he doesn't have to—I can feel what he needs. His hips grind down onto mine, our cocks sliding together through the thin fabric of our underwear. The friction is maddening, the heat unbearable. It's like being trapped in a fever dream, one where every sensation is amplified tenfold.

He grinds his hips down, and I can't help but arch into him. I try to move, to help him, but Mika holds me captive with his body, holding me in place, completely in control. His hips are moving, keeping up that steady rhythm that threatens to drive me out of my mind. I can't touch him, can't even move my arms—all I can do is feel. It's almost too much, this overwhelming sensation of being at someone else's mercy.

The friction is maddening, the heat unbearable.

The realization sends a jolt of excitement through me.

But there's one thing I can do.

I lift my head and catch his lower lip between my teeth, biting gently at first before increasing the pressure when I hear his soft groan. His lip feels full and perfect against mine, like biting into a ripe plum. I let the edge of my teeth drag along it before pulling back slightly.

"I know, Mika," I murmur, my voice trembling. "Me, too."

Mika's, grinding against me with just enough force to send pleasure rippling through my body. He doesn't falter in his thrusts, but his breath hitches at my words. My balls burn with each thrust, already straining to spill.

"Oh shit, Mika, I can't... I don't want to yet."

I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping to keep control, but it's useless. The image of him above me—his sweat-slicked chest heaving, dark hair falling into his face, lips parted as little grunts escape him—is burned into my mind.

He lowers his head, his warm breath brushing against my ear, and pants, "I need you, Gabe." Those three words are like a match striking against the kindling of my desire. They shatter me, sending a surge of heat straight to my balls, and I'm coming undone, crying out his name. Mika bites down on my neck, his teeth catching my carotid as he sucks hard. The sensation is exquisite. I feel like I'm on fire, every nerve ending alight with pleasure and I lose it completely.

"Mika!" I shout, my body locking up as I come harder than I ever have before,

streams of hot seed spilling from me in pulsing waves. The release crashes through me, leaving me gasping and trembling.

Mika's fingers grip mine, almost to the point of pain, his hips jerk spasmodically as he follows me over the edge. I feel the hot wetness of his release spill between us as he shudders, whispering my name like a prayer.

When he finally stills, his body heavy against mine, I press my forehead to his and close my eyes.

This is everything. I feel it in every breath, every touch. And damn it, I don't want it to stop.

We're a mess—sweat-slicked, cum-covered, gasping for breath—but fuck if it isn't the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. We stay like that for a moment, our breaths syncing up, our hearts beating in time.

"Holy fuck, Mika." My voice comes out shaky, barely above a whisper. "This is more than sex," I say quietly. "Isn't it?"

Mika opens his eyes, looking down at me with an intensity that makes my heart stutter. "It's everything it's meant to be, Gabe. Everything we're meant to be."

I tug at my hands, struggling to free them from his grip. Mika lets go willingly, a small smile playing on his lips as he watches me wrap my arms around him and pull him close. There's no part of me that isn't affected by this—by him. My body feels like it's been through the wringer, but in the best possible way. "You know," I say, tracing circles on Mika's back with my fingertips, "we haven't even had real sex yet."

Mika chuckles softly, his breath warm against my neck. "What do you consider 'real' sex, Gabe?"

I shrug, feeling a little shy all of a sudden. “You know...penetration. Cock in ass kinda stuff.”

Mika lifts his head to look at me, his eyes sparkling with amusement and something else—something deeper. He growls, “Is that what you want, Gabe? To feel my cock stretching your tight little hole? To have me fucking you so hard you can’t walk straight for a week?”

I swallow convulsively, feeling my cock twitch at his words. Fuck, when he talks like that... “Yes,” I sigh out. A slow, predatory grin takes over Mika’s face.

I should probably be scared of how overwhelming this is, but I can’t bring myself to be. Nothing has ever felt this right before, and it’s not just the physical part.

I let myself enjoy the moment—Mika’s head resting beside mine, his penetrating look caressing my face, the comforting weight of his body on top of me, and yeah, even the sticky mess of spunk between us.

The sudden shrill of the phone makes both of us jump, but when Mika starts to move, I clutch him like I’d fall apart without him.

“They can wait, whoever it is,” I say quickly, not ready to let this end. “Just, let’s rest for a—”

The answering machine clicks on, cutting me off.

“Hey, Gabe, this is Adam. Got a rescue for you here, need you to come get him ASAP. Todd told me about the wolf escaping. I’m assuming he’s still gone? Come by as soon as you can, ‘kay?”

My eyes snap open as Adam’s message ends, a groan escaping me.

“Shit! I forgot to call Adam about the wo—” I stop myself mid-word, realizing how stupid it would sound. “About you, uh, escaping.”

Reluctantly, I let my arms fall away and push myself up as Mika does the same.

“We need to go to the clinic—if you want to come with me,” I add, stumbling over the words. “You’ll need clothes, though. Unless you have something stashed somewhere?”

I stare at him, and my thoughts derail for a moment. The man is bigger than me, and the sweats and T-shirt he wore earlier had clung to his body like a second skin. All those taut muscles, the way his cock looked under the fabric... Damn .

I shake myself, frowning as a strange feeling wells up. Am I feeling possessive ?

Mika shakes his head, pulling me back to the present. “I left the... I didn’t take anything with me. I headed out with just the clothes on my back. I was...in a hurry.”

That broken look flashes across his face again, and my chest tightens. But it’s gone almost as quickly as it appeared. That’s progress, I tell myself. It’s something.

“I’m glad you headed down this way, Mika.”

I lean in for a quick kiss, sweet and soft, but it leaves me wanting more. I back up before I get too tempted to keep him here longer.

“Where’s all your stuff?” I ask, my tone light but curious. “Clothes, ID, things like that?”

The question makes him hesitate. Mika tugs at the waistband of his sweats, keeping his gaze away from mine.



“Are you sure you want to talk about this, Gabe?” His voice is quiet, almost hesitant, but when he glances at me, there’s a flicker of something else. His eyes heat, turning sultry as they drop lower, reminding me that I’m still very much naked.

“Yeah, I do,” I say, trying to sound firm despite the flush crawling up my neck. “And you need to.”

I plop back down on the couch, only realizing too late that maybe I should’ve grabbed something to cover up first. Mika’s gaze lingers, dragging over me in a way that has me half hard again in seconds.

Grunting, I grab my shirt off the arm of the couch and toss it over my lap, shrugging when Mika’s eyebrows lift in amusement.

“Quit stalling and spit it out, babe,” I tease, trying to coax him into talking.

Mika’s smirk softens, but his shoulders tense slightly as he moves to sit beside me. I can tell he’s still weighing what to say, still deciding how much to share.

I stay quiet, letting him work through it. Whatever it is, I’ll take it, bit by bit. The man has his secrets, sure, but I’m not going anywhere. Not until he knows I’m here for all of it — him .

“I’m not...fine.” Mika’s voice is strained, and his body language tells me he’s ready to bolt.

He peeks toward the leather chair, taking a step as if to put some space between us. No way am I letting that happen. I reach out, grab his hand, and tug firmly.

“Uh-uh,” I say, pulling harder when he hesitates.

Mika gives in, sitting down on the couch beside me. He doesn't try to free his hand, which is a good sign, but he still won't meet my eyes.

Yeah, no. We're not doing this distance thing.

"Who'd you kill, Mika?" I tease, grinning as I toss out the most ridiculous question I can think of.

His head snaps up, those deep, whiskey-colored eyes wide with surprise. He studies me intently for a moment, and I see the faintest twitch at the corners of his eyes—like he's fighting not to smile.

"Very funny," he mutters, his voice dry. "I thought for a minute you really believed—"

Whatever Mika was about to say cuts off with a sharp exhale as my elbow jabs him lightly in the ribs.

"That's for even thinking something so stupid," I say, shaking my head. "I was just trying to show you that whatever this is, it's not the worst thing in the world. I know you didn't kill anybody. So, how about you tell me what did happen? How'd you end up here with nothing?"

I take his other hand, gently pulling it away from where it's been nervously picking at the couch cushion. His fingers feel warm but shaky in mine.

Mika exhales a trembling breath. "Really, I didn't do anything. Being gay—that was enough for my pack to decide they didn't want me. They kicked me out, shunned me, whatever you want to call it. I left everything there..."

His voice hitches, and before I can stop myself, I'm sliding my arms around him. I

hold him firmly, resting my head on his shoulder as he pulls me closer.

“I could have taken some things,” Mika continues, his voice rough. “Personal stuff, I guess, but my home was pack property.” He shrugs, jostling my head slightly. “I should have stayed calm, thought things through before just walking away. But I couldn’t. I was angry and hurt, and so fucking shocked. How could they do that? How could my alpha let them? Christ.”

A knot forms in my chest, anger and sorrow twisting together in a way that’s hard to contain. “I’m so sorry, babe. That’s...that’s seriously fucked up.”

I’m trying to keep my voice calm, to hold back the sharp, biting anger bubbling under the surface. But it’s hard not to blurt out something like, “How backward and inbred is your pack?”

“How can they even do that?” I ask instead, forcing my tone to stay level. “And what about other gay shifters? There’s no way you’re the only one.”

“I can smell it, you know,” Mika murmurs, his lips brushing the top of my head. “Your anger. It has a sharp, almost smoky scent to it.”

He kisses me there, just soft enough to soothe some of my tension. “It flatters me that you’re so indignant on my behalf, Gabe. But as for how they can do what they did...well, the alpha is the pack leader. What he says goes. I’d thought Zane—my alpha—was a friend. But when members of the pack came to him and said they wanted me gone, he sided with them.”

Mika’s voice is rough, and I can feel the hurt radiating off him.

“Granted,” he continues, “the ones who spoke out were high-ranking. And there were a lot of them. But all Zane would have had to do was say, ‘Tough shit,’ and it

would've ended there. He didn't, though."

Mika's holds me close, and his head tilts slightly as if he's working through the memory again.

"And I've never heard of any other gay shifters in Zane's pack," he says, his voice quieter now. "If there had been, they probably left before anyone could find out."

I squeeze him, not sure what to say. I want to tell him that his pack doesn't deserve him, that he's better off without people like that in his life. But I know those words won't erase the pain of being rejected by the people who were supposed to be his family.

For now, I just hold him, letting the quiet settle around us. Whatever he's lost, I can't fix it—but I can be here for him now. And I'll be damned if I let anyone else hurt him like that again.

I lean back, still holding Mika in my arms, but needing a little distance to look him in the eye. His warmth against me is comforting, grounding, but I can't ignore the need to say this out loud.

"Okay, first off," I begin, making sure my voice is firm but light, "your alpha sounds like a pussy who caved to pressure."

Mika's mouth opens, probably ready to fire back, but I raise a hand, cutting him off.

"Ah-ah, let me finish."

He snaps his mouth shut, his expression and one of curiosity.

"Second," I continue, softening my tone, "is there anyone above him you can go to?"

Someone who could reverse this if you wanted to be reinstated in the pack?”

The words feel heavy as they leave my mouth. I don't want Mika to go back to New Mexico—not if it means losing him. But if that's what it takes to make him happy, I'll deal. I'd just have to go with him, that's all.

Mika shrugs, his body stiffening slightly in my embrace. “I guess I could appeal to the Civitas alpha—the one in charge of all the packs in New Mexico. He's first in the chain of command over Zane. But honestly? I don't know if it's worth the effort.”

The casual way he says it takes me by surprise. I'd expected more hesitation, more longing, but he seems almost...resigned.

“We have a hierarchy,” Mika adds, smiling faintly when he catches the look on my face. Yeah, I'm not exactly hiding my surprise. A hierarchy? This is news to me.

“There's the pack alphas,” he explains, his tone patient. “Then Civitas. Above that is the Dux Ducis, and so on up the chain until you reach the Alpha Anax. He's the big bad alpha at the top of the whole system.”

I blink, processing the information. A whole hierarchy of alphas? For some reason, I'd always assumed there were just a few scattered packs, operating independently.

“I just don't see the point,” Mika says, breaking through my thoughts. “They've already done what they've done. Even if I could force Zane to take me back, I'd never go. That's not my home anymore.”

Before I can respond, Mika leans down and kisses me. The sweetness of it catches me off guard, and I have to blink a few times as emotion grabs me. His lips linger, soft but sure, as if he's trying to pour every unsaid word into the kiss.

When he pulls back, his voice is low, steady. “I don’t want to go back, Gabe. I want this. With you.”

The words settle deep in my chest, heavy and warm. I hold on to them, letting them wrap around me.

Still, my mind lingers on what he said about the hierarchy. It’s fascinating, but something about it feels...off. I study Mika, taking in the tension coiling through his body. He’s holding back, I realize. There’s more to his story, more to the way he left his pack, but he’s not ready to share it yet.

And that’s okay.

I won’t push him. Whatever happened back there hurt him deeply—so deeply that trust doesn’t come easily anymore. I can wait. In the meantime, maybe I can offer him something of my own. Something that might help him feel less alone.

I take a breath, letting my hands slide up to cup his face. His golden-brown eyes meet mine, filled with a mix of sympathy and hope that hits me right in the gut.

“I understand how much that hurt, Mika,” I say softly. “When I told my parents I was gay, they didn’t just disown me. They told me I was an abomination, a mistake, going to hell—you name it. At the time, I thought I’d never get past it.”

Mika’s gaze sharpens, his fingers tightening slightly on my waist as he listens.

I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. “If it hadn’t been for my grandparents, I don’t know where I’d be. They took me in, loved me, made sure I knew I wasn’t broken. But it still took me a long time to stop feeling like there was something wrong with me, you know?”

Mika doesn't say anything, but the way he's looking at me—like I'm the only thing that matters—makes my throat start to close.

I've never felt so vulnerable, so exposed. It's terrifying and freeing all at once.

"Mika," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know where this is going, but I need you to know...you're not alone anymore. Whatever you went through, whatever you're still dealing with, I'm here. Okay?"

His eyes glisten as he nods, and I know—I just know—this is the start of something neither of us could have imagined.

"Anyhow. Then I came here, to my grandparents. They loved me unconditionally, and that healed a lot of the damage my parents did. I'm sorry you didn't have anyone to turn to when your pack kicked you out." My voice softens, and I feel the raw edges of my own pain resurfacing as Mika's dark, intent eyes meet mine. I give his shoulders a light squeeze, hoping to ground him—and maybe myself, too. "But you do now."

Mika's gaze holds mine, his expression shifting into something softer, steadier. "I'm sorry, Gabriel. For what your parents did. But I'm glad you had your grandparents...and grateful you found me. That we have each other."

His voice doesn't have the wounded tone from earlier, and that reassures me. He's getting there, piece by piece.

"Yes, we do." I give him a grin, trying to lighten the mood. "And we both smell like a teenage boy's sheets—sweaty and cum-covered."

Mika's laugh is low and rumbling as I stand and gesture for him to follow.

“So your clothes, your ID, pretty much everything—it’s still on pack property?” I ask. “Will they toss it out, or can we go get it?”

“I don’t think they’ll throw it out.” Mika shrugs, his body still relaxed, though there’s a shadow of tension in his shoulders. “I left in a hurry, sure, but they’ll probably pack it up and ship it if I ask. They wouldn’t want me to have a reason to come back. I’ve got some money tucked away in a couple of accounts. I just need to access it.”

He nods toward the computer, giving me a questioning look. “If it’s okay, I’d like to use your computer for that. Then I’ll get cleaned up real quick.”

“Of course,” I say, but my mind latches onto his words.

They don’t want him to come back.

The thought churns in my gut, sharp and ugly. I don’t like it. It’s bad enough they cast him out in the first place, but not even letting him return to collect his things? That level of rejection feels petty and cruel, and the fact that it happened to Mika—my Mika—pisses me off more than I care to admit.

He doesn’t seem fazed, though, moving toward the computer with a quiet focus. I’ll let it slide for now. But the more I think about it, the angrier I get.



Mika

I study Gabe's profile as we drive toward Shasta. The sunlight catches on his jawline, highlighting the firm set of his features, and something about it pulls at me. His focus is steady, his hands gripping the wheel just tight enough to betray the tension he's holding back.

The connection between us hums, constant and undeniable, but I can't shake my unease. Gabe hasn't asked about the mind-link or what it means to be mates, and I don't know how long to wait before bringing it up myself. He said we needed time, but how much time does he mean? The thought of him rejecting me outright—of him turning me away—is unbearable. I'd rather take small steps, learning about him bit by bit, than risk losing him by rushing too fast.

"How did you get started rescuing strays out here?" I ask, keeping my tone light but genuinely curious.

He slants a quick look at me, the corner of his mouth quirking into a small, wistful smile before he focuses back on the road. "I don't mind you as king," he says. "It started with Todd, actually. One morning, not long after he started as a deputy, he tracked me down at Chaz's Diner. I was finishing breakfast, and he walked in looking like hell. Pale, tired—off."

Gabe's fingers go white on the wheel for a moment, he's gripping it so hard, his expression clouding. I reach out, resting a hand on his thigh to offer what comfort I can. He glances at me again, his lips pressing into a grateful line as he takes one hand off the wheel and twines his fingers with mine.

“He pulled me aside, out of earshot from the regulars, and told me about a call he’d been on with Kaufman. It was about some strays on old man Markum’s property.” Gabe takes a deep breath, his shoulders stiffening. “When they got there, Markum had penned up three dogs. Kaufman sent the old man inside and then grabbed a baseball bat...”

He trails off, and I feel the surge of emotion rolling off him. The anger in me builds to a steady burn, but it’s Gabe’s quiet pain that keeps me grounded.

“What did Todd do?” I ask, keeping my voice calm even as my muscles tense. “Don’t tell me he just stood there.”

The flash of irritation in Gabe’s green eyes is instant, and I immediately regret the way my words came out.

“Todd isn’t a wuss, Mika. You don’t know him, or what he’s been through.”

I hold up my free hand, trying to soothe the sting of my comment. “Then tell me,” I say softly. “Help me understand, so I don’t do something stupid when I meet your friend.”

He starts to pull away, but I tighten my grip, refusing to let him retreat. Whatever bond we’re building, I won’t let him close himself off from me—not now.

“Todd was green,” Gabe admits after a pause, his tone gentler now but no less firm. “Kaufman outranked him, and Todd was barely a deputy at the time. He tried to stop him, tried to step in, but Kaufman pulled rank. Told Todd to shut up and learn how things were done.”

A low growl rumbles in my chest, my anger threatening to boil over. Gabe squeezes my hand, grounding me again.

“That’s when Todd came to me,” he continues. “He didn’t know what else to do. He wanted someone to help him figure out how to fight back without getting fired—or worse.”

I exhale slowly, letting my anger settle into something cooler, more controlled. “He came to you for help,” I say. “And you’ve been helping ever since.”

Gabe nods, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “We couldn’t save those three dogs, but we’ve saved plenty of others since.”

The pride in his voice is clear, and I can’t help the swell of admiration I feel for him. This man—my mate—is something extraordinary.

“You’re incredible, Gabe,” I say quietly, the words slipping out before I can overthink them.

He chuckles softly, glancing at me with a mix of gratitude and something deeper. His hand in mine says everything.

I watch Gabe’s profile closely, the tension in his jaw and the faint hitch in his voice betraying the emotions he’s trying to keep under control. It’s hard to see him like this, carrying the weight of something so heavy. My chest compresses, my wolf pacing inside me, restless to do something, anything, to soothe him.

“I used to spend summers here with my grandparents. That’s how I got to know Todd. He was about the only friend I had here. He’d come over, and we’d hang out. At first, I didn’t think anything of the little bruises I saw here and there, but one day when he showed up, he was really stiff. When I asked him about it, he just paled and brushed it off.”

My stomach twists, a low growl vibrating in my chest that I quickly stifle. I don’t

need Gabe to spell it out to understand what Todd endured. Abuse. The word flashes through my mind like a dark stain, the thought of it setting my teeth on edge. In shifter packs, hurting a child is unthinkable. But this isn't a pack, and Todd wasn't protected.

"Later on," Gabe continues, quieter now, like the words are clawing their way out, "we were joking about some stupid shit, and I clapped him on the back. He just...dropped to his knees. Didn't yell or anything, just hissed out a breath and collapsed."

I grip my thigh hard, trying to keep my anger in check. My wolf bristles, ready to tear into whoever hurt Gabe's friend. But I force myself to stay calm, to listen.

"I yelled for Grandma," Gabe says, his voice deep with emotion. "Both her and Grandpa came running. Todd was just...out. Unconscious. When Grandpa got him inside and peeled off his shirt..." He pauses, shaking his head, his knuckles white as they grip the steering wheel. "God, Mika. I've never seen anything like that. I'll never understand how parents can be so fucking cruel."

The pain in his voice feels like a physical blow. My own anger simmers beneath the surface, but it's nothing compared to the ache I feel for Gabe. I lift his hand to my lips. "I'm sorry, Gabriel," I say softly. "Sorry I called Todd a wuss, sorry about his parents...and yours."

He glances at me, his green eyes shimmering with gratitude. I kiss the back of his hand, holding it firmly in mine. "Some people are just born mean, and others are made that way," I add. "But you and Todd? You're stronger for not becoming like them."

He squeezes my hand, his lips curving into a faint smile. "Thank you, Mika. It helps, you know? Just hearing you say that."

The warmth in his smile hits me like a ray of sunlight, breaking through the storm clouds of his story. I feel my chest squeeze, my pulse quicken. How did I get so lucky to find him? How did I find someone this strong, this kind, this... mine ?

“Anyway,” Gabe says, his voice lighter now, though his hand still grips mine tightly, “Todd was paralyzed with fear back then, swamped with guilt. When he told me what happened, I had to beg him to keep his job.”

I arch a brow, curious despite the lingering tension from his story. “You had to beg him?”

He grins, a hint of mischief creeping into his tone. “Yeah. I told him he needed to stay on the force and let me know anytime they got a call about strays. I built the kennels in the barn, set up a website, and made sure Kaufman knew I was dogging his heels—so to speak.”

I groan, but his smile is infectious. My wolf settles, content for now, as the happiness returns to Gabe’s voice. The more he talks, the more I realize just how extraordinary he is.

“You’re a pretty special guy,” I tell him, my voice quiet but firm. I don’t care if I sound like a fool. He needs to know. He deserves to know.

The tips of his ears turn red, the blush creeping across his cheeks visible even from this angle..

Yeah, that’s too adorable to resist. I unbuckle and slide across the seat, leaning in to chase the flush of red on Gabe’s ear with my tongue. He lets out a soft, breathy moan that shoots straight to my cock, but the moment is cut short when the truck jerks onto the shoulder. Gabe wrestles with the steering wheel, cursing under his breath.

“Jesus, Mika!” he growls, his voice more exasperated than angry.

I c huckle and scoot back to my side of the cab, snapping my seatbelt into place. He shoots me a heated glare, the kind that promises retribution I’d gladly endure.

“You know, that’s a good way to get us killed,” he mutters.

I smirk, gesturing to the obvious bulge straining against his jeans. “Yeah, well, I see two bigger problems that might cause trouble.” I glance down at my own sweats, where my erection isn’t exactly subtle. “You’re gonna have to take the long way to the clinic or something because these aren’t going to go unnoticed.”

Gabe groans, slumping a little in his seat. “Fair point.”

Without arguing, he cranks up the air conditioning, angling two vents directly at his groin. I raise an eyebrow and adjust the remaining two vents toward myself, but the icy air barely dents the heat surging through me. It’s laughable, really. We’re trying to cool a raging fire with a hand fan!

By the time we reach the clinic, I’ve just managed to get my breathing under control. Gabe pushes through the door first, his body radiating tension that has nothing to do with the wolf rescue.

Adam greets us in the reception area, his sharp eyes flicking to the hand I’ve placed at the small of Gabe’s back. His eyebrows rise slightly, but he doesn’t say anything, just steps forward and offers a hand.

“Hi, Gabe.” His gaze shifts to me. “And you must be...?”

I take his hand, shaking it firmly but without challenge. “Mika Blackwell. Pleasure to meet you.”

Adam studies me with open curiosity, his eyes lingering longer than polite introductions warrant. I hold his gaze, calm but unwavering, until he finally looks to Gabe, clearly waiting for an explanation.

“Mika’s a friend,” Gabe says, his voice even but deliberate. “A very close friend.”

The way Adam’s brows arch just a fraction higher tells me he’s reading between the lines. I don’t mind. I let my hand rub gentle circles at Gabe’s back, hoping to ease some of the tension I can feel coiled in his frame. Adam nods, his expression thoughtful.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Mika,” he says amiably, though he watches for a beat longer than necessary. “Did you hear about the wolf Gabe rescued?”

Before either of us can answer, the door swings open again. Todd strides in, his broad frame and easy confidence filling the room. His gaze sweeps over us, and he freezes mid-step when he spots me. His jaw slackens slightly, his eyes widening as his gaze flickers between Gabe and me.

“Hey, Gabe,” Todd says, his voice faltering. “I saw your truck and thought I’d—” He cuts himself off, his focus locking back on me with a mix of surprise and open admiration.

The intensity of his stare would be flattering if it weren’t making Gabe’s tension spike. I can practically feel the glare Gabe shoots Todd’s way, even as he keeps his voice light as he makes the introductions.

“This is Mika,” he says simply. “Mika, this is Todd.”

I extend a hand, offering a polite nod. Todd hesitates for half a second before taking it, his grip firm but his gaze a little too focused. When he lets go, his roaming eyes

drift back to me, flickering with curiosity and something I don't quite want to name.

Across the room, Adam's watching this exchange with a raised brow, though he keeps his expression carefully neutral. Todd's gaze shifts to Adam then, lingering longer than I think he realizes. It's quick—a glance, a flicker—but it's loaded, and I don't miss it.

Neither does Gabe.

He clears his throat, clapping a hand on Todd's shoulder, breaking whatever spell had settled over the room. "Todd, we've got work to do. Unless you plan on standing there all day?"

Todd snaps back to attention, his cheeks flushing as he straightens. "Right. Work. Let's get to it."

I meet Gabe's gaze, catching the faintest twitch of amusement in his eyes. Whatever unspoken dynamics are at play here, Gabe seems to take them in stride. I admire that about him—his ability to navigate the messy complexities of relationships with a level head.

And messy they are, I think, watching Todd throw another look Adam's way before moving toward the back of the clinic.

From the way Todd's brow arches, I know he's noticed something—and so have I. My eyes flick down before I can stop them, catching the unmistakable tent in his pants. Amusement bubbles up, and when I eyeball Gabriel, the sharp glare he shoots my way only makes it worse. He elbows me lightly in the ribs, but I can't stop the snicker that escapes.

I nudge him back, bumping my hip against his, my grin widening as I see his



exasperation waver. The man is trying so hard to stay annoyed, but he's failing miserably. His face softens, and I let my gaze trail lower. Gabe might not want to admit it, but he's just as affected as I am. The bulge in his jeans is proof enough.

The way it grows under my gaze, the heat of his reaction so visible, wipes away the humor in me. Lust surges in its place, so raw and immediate that I know he can feel it. His eyes meet mine, wide with a mix of warning and want.

"Stop it," he hisses, his voice low and rough. I want to laugh at his attempt to scold me, but I don't. Not when I know he's right. At this rate, neither of us is walking out of here without embarrassing ourselves.

"So, you all talking about the wolf getting away?" Todd's question interrupts, pulling my focus back to the room. Adam's attention snaps to Gabe, curiosity sparking in his expression.

"Actually," Adam says, his tone calm but inquisitive, "I've yet to hear the details from Gabe himself."

Gabe clears his throat, and I can see the faint flush creeping up his neck. "The wolf escaped," he starts, his words measured. "I think it was through a window I left open—or maybe I didn't close a door all the way. It happened after the third time I got up to check the IV. I spent at least an hour looking for him, then..." Gabe hesitates, and I catch the slight hitch in his breath. "Then Mika showed up."

The way his cheeks redden further makes me want to wrap my arm around him right there, shield him from the weight of Adam and Todd's curious stares. Instead, I slide an arm around his waist, tugging him gently against me. Gabe's warmth seeps into my side, grounding me.

Adam's gaze sharpens, and a knowing gleam lights his eyes. "Busy, huh?" he asks,

his voice full of laughter.

Gabe's flush deepens. I clench my arm around him, offering silent reassurance even as his fingers dig into my side—a wordless plea for support. “Gabe takes on a lot with the rescues,” I say, keeping my tone steady. “Losing the wolf really had him upset.”

The explanation feels hollow, but it's enough to redirect the conversation. Gabe reaches behind me, giving my ass a quick squeeze, and I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips. It's his way of saying thanks, and I'll take it.

Todd, however, isn't done. “I've never heard you talk about Mika before,” he says, his voice carrying a hint of suspicion. “Where'd y'all meet?”

I squeeze Gabe's waist lightly, a silent warning to let me handle this one. “We met in San Antonio,” I say smoothly, meeting Todd's gaze head-on. “Gabriel was delivering one of his rescues for adoption, and I was down from New Mexico visiting family. We decided not to mention our relationship in case things didn't work out, you know?”

It's a simple explanation, one Gabe doesn't contradict. Todd nods, though I can tell he's not entirely convinced. I don't blame him—humans are often suspicious by nature.

“You sure the wolf escaped, Gabe?” Adam asks, his tone shifting to concern. I can see where his mind is going, and I admire his dedication to the animals he cares for.

“Yeah,” Gabe says firmly. “Sheriff Kaufman stopped by to raise a fit about me taking in a wolf. And there were no tracks from another person at my place. If that moron had done anything to the wolf, he would have been bragging all over about it.”

I bite back a growl at the mention of Kaufman. The man's name alone stirs my wolf, a protective surge rising unbidden.

"That man is fucking batshit insane," Adam mutters, echoing the thoughts I know Gabe and Todd share.

"You left off asshole," I add, my voice dry. "He's a fucking batshit insane asshole."

That earns a round of laughter from all three of them, and I let myself relax a fraction. The tension in the room breaks, replaced by something lighter—something I can almost call camaraderie.

As Todd heads out, his duty calling him away, I catch the way Adam's eyes trail after him, lingering just a bit too long. I file the observation away for later, curious but unwilling to pry.

Adam's anger is palpable as he grits out, "Got a golden retriever pup, four months old, jumped out of the back of the owner's truck bed." His voice strains with frustration. "The pup broke his hip. I told the owners he needed a pin in his hip, but they didn't want to pay for it. After I checked the x-rays again, I called them and told them we could put a cast on it instead. Told them it wouldn't be perfect, he'd probably have some arthritis later, but it'd be a hell of a lot cheaper. Guess what they said?"

The sharp edge in his voice cuts through the room, leaving a heavy silence in its wake. Gabe and I exchange a glance. I've seen plenty of anger before, but this is raw and righteous. It's the kind of fury that comes from someone who cares deeply. It's...familiar.

I can feel Gabe tensing beside me, his green eyes soft with sympathy. "I'm thinking they said no?" he offers cautiously, though he already knows the answer.

Adam shakes his head, the disgust rolling off him in waves. “Not only no, but flat out told me to euthanize him. Like he’s some defective tool they don’t need anymore.” He clenches his jaw and exhales sharply. “Sorry, it just really pisses me off when people treat their pets like disposable possessions.”

Adam’s words resonate. A low growl builds in my chest, but I bite it back and let out a chuff instead. I’ve seen enough callousness in my life to know how deep it cuts—how easy it is for people to throw away what they should cherish.

Adam turns and leads us into the kennel area, his anger slowly easing as he focuses on his patient. We follow him to the far wall where the smaller recovery cages are lined up. He stops in front of one, gesturing to the little golden retriever puppy inside.

The pup looks up at us with big, trusting brown eyes, his tail wagging in an awkward, hopeful rhythm despite the bulky cast wrapped in bright purple wrap. He’s a tiny thing, all fluff and optimism. My heart clenches, and I don’t even need to glance at Gabe to know he’s already lost to this pup.

When I do look at him, though, it’s all confirmed. Gabe crouches down, his hand reaching toward the cage. The puppy struggles to sit up, his tail thumping harder. I swear I can see Gabe melt, the way his shoulders soften and his eyes warm. This puppy isn’t going anywhere. Not to another home, not to another person. He belongs to Gabe now, just as surely as Gabe belongs to me.

“You know I won’t be able to part with this one,” Gabe says softly, his voice carrying a warning for both me and Adam. His green eyes flicker to mine, searching. I smile at him, reaching out to stroke his cheek.

“I know,” I say simply. I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Adam grins wide, his earlier frustration melting away. “Love at first sight, huh?”

“Yeah,” Gabe agrees without hesitation, his voice thick with emotion. “It sure is.”

I watch him closely, the need to hold him, to claim him, flaring hot and fast inside me. He looks up, meeting my gaze, and I know he feels it, too. That connection, that pull that has been there from the start. His eyes widen slightly, then heat with the same intensity burning in me. His lips curve into a smile that’s as sexy as it is knowing.

Adam snorts, his voice playful but pointed. “You know, I don’t know what you two are doing, but even with my back turned, I’m feeling the need to blush. Seriously, get gone.”

Gabe and I laugh, the tension easing just a little. We gather the supplies Adam hands us, the pup tucked safely in Gabe’s arms. The little guy looks so content already, like he knows he’s finally found his forever home.

As we step out into the sunlight, heading for the truck, I glance at Gabe and our new addition. My heart feels full in a way it hasn’t in years. I reach over, resting a hand on Gabe’s back, and he leans into the touch.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Gabe

We carry the puppy inside, navigating carefully so we don't jostle his hip. The little guy looks up at me with big, trusting eyes, and I already know I'm in deep trouble. No way am I letting him go. Mika, watching me with that knowing smile, probably figured that out before I did.

We set him up in the extra bedroom, deciding it's the best place for his portable kennel box. He needs to stay confined to prevent further damage to his hip. The room is close enough for me to check on him easily, but far enough away that any accidents won't ruin the air. At least for me. Mika, with his shifter senses, might pick up on it from miles away. But he doesn't complain, just gives me another one of those supportive glances that makes me feel steadier than I should.

"You want dinner, Mika?" I call from the kitchen as I dig through the freezer. There's a couple of steaks in here somewhere, and they seem like the perfect thing to celebrate our new addition.

I let out an embarrassing squeak when strong hands grab my ass, pulling me back into a firm chest. My heart stutters as Mika purrs into my ear, "You on the menu, Gabriel?"

His voice is rich and low, and it hits me right in the gut—and lower. My cock swells fast and hard, so quickly that it's almost painful. Jesus, this man is dangerous. I shove back against him, grinding my ass into his palms.

"Can be," I manage to get out, but the rest of the sentence is lost when Mika spins me

around and claims my mouth with a kiss that's nothing short of devouring.

I respond just as hungrily, our tongues mimicking the act we're both desperate for. Clothes are discarded in a frenzy as we stumble to the bedroom, leaving a trail through the house. By the time my back hits the mattress, I'm panting, my body already aching for him. Mika follows me down, bracing himself on his forearms above me, his weight just enough to make me feel pinned but not trapped.

A sudden thought cuts through my haze of lust. "Condoms," I groan, smacking Mika lightly on the chest. "I don't have any condoms!"

The frustration in my voice is nearly enough to make me cry. I need him. Now. But I can't—won't—risk it without protection.

Mika stills, his golden-brown eyes locking onto mine. "Look at me, Gabe. What do you see?"

I blink up at him, confused. My brain is a foggy mess of want, and concentrating is next to impossible. "What?" I shake my head, trying to make sense of his words.

"You didn't notice that all my wounds are healed? Not even a scar?" Mika's voice is low, almost smug, as he shifts slightly, letting me touch his side.

My fingers move on instinct, tracing over the spots where the bullet had torn through him. The skin is smooth and flawless. Not a mark remains. "You...healed," I murmur, still trying to process. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Mika dips down to nip at my cheek, his lips curling into a grin, "that shifters heal fast. We're immune to almost every disease, except for things like cancer. That's rare, though."

My heart pounds, the implications of his words sinking in. “So we don’t need condoms?” The thought alone makes me squirm, my cock throbbing painfully. I fucking love the idea of barebacking with him.

Mika watches me carefully, his gaze softening. “I’ll understand if you’re not comfortable with that. I’ve always used condoms with non-shifters. We can wait—”

“No!” I cut him off, the word bursting out of me without hesitation. I’m not even embarrassed by how eager I sound. “No, Mika. I trust you. I can see for myself that you’re...perfect.” My pulse races as I admit, “I’ve never barebacked before, but I want this. I want you. Like this, now.”

I pull him down into another kiss, open and desperate, and feel him relax against me. His weight, his warmth, his presence—all of it floods me with need. There’s no hesitation left in me.

“Thank you,” Mika murmurs against my lips. His voice is soft, almost reverent, and I know what he means without him having to explain. He’s thanking me for trusting him, for believing in him. But he doesn’t need to thank me, not for that. I bite his lower lip, tugging gently to make my point. The way his golden-brown eyes darken with heat tells me he gets the message loud and clear.

Mika grinds his hips into mine, and the friction of our cocks rubbing together pulls a moan from deep in my chest. Our mouths meet again in a clash of need, all sucking, nipping, and devouring. My head spins from the intensity of it, from the way he makes me feel like I’m about to fly apart.

When he pulls back, I almost protest, but the words die on my lips as Mika’s tongue trails down the side of my neck. He moves lower, his mouth finding one of my nipples, and he bites lightly. The jolt of sensation arcs through me like lightning, my back arching off the bed as I clutch at his head.



“Fuck! Mika, please!” My voice is raw, hoarse with desperation. “Again!”

He obliges, raking his teeth across the sensitive bud while pinching the other between his fingers, hard, sending sensation straight down to my raging hard-on and making it pulse. My eyes roll back, pleasure coursing through me in waves. I’ve never felt this out of control, this alive.

“Soon, Gabriel,” Mika says, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine. “Just let me taste you.”

I barely register his words before his shoulders are between my thighs. “Bend your legs, babe,” he urges.

I jerk my legs up so fast that my heels slap my own ass. Mika’s laugh is deep and rich, filled with amusement, but it’s quickly replaced by a groan as he leans in to lave my balls with his tongue. His hands come up to part my cheeks, his thumbs brushing over my hole in featherlight strokes.

“Oh God,” I groan, trying to push back against his thumbs, needing more. The tease is maddening, the pleasure he’s building almost unbearable.

Mika doesn’t leave me wanting for long. He takes the head of my cock into his mouth, his hot tongue swirling around it just as one thumb presses inward, breaching my hole. I feel the warmth of his breath, then the wet heat of his tongue swirling around my tip. A sound escapes me, something between a groan and a gasp, as I tangle my fingers in his hair. He takes control, his hands wrapping around my base, working up and down in rhythm with his mouth.

He toys with my frenulum each time he glides up, sending jolts of pleasure straight to my core. His tongue is magic, flicking and teasing, driving me closer to the edge.

“Just like that,” I pant out, my voice ragged with desire. “You look so fucking hot with my dick in your mouth.” He moans around me, sending vibrations through my length, making me shudder.

I can feel his fingers digging into my thighs as he holds himself up, his short nails leaving halfmoons in my skin. The grip on his hair pulls taut as I start to move, thrusting upwards, fucking his mouth with abandon. He takes it like a champ, his eyes watering but never breaking contact with mine.

“Fuck, Mika—” My words dissolve into a strangled cry, my entire body straining with the force of it.

I can feel the saliva building up, running down his chin, coating his fingers, making the glide around my balls slick and easy. He slurps and gags, coughing around me, but he doesn’t stop. He keeps sucking, keeps taking me deeper into his throat.

I’m close, so fucking close. The sensation builds in my balls, tightening like a coil ready to spring.

I don’t warn him, other than a grip of my fingers holding the silky threads of his hair at the back of his head—and I come so fucking hard, my cum filling his mouth, coating his throat.

Before I can even fully compose myself, his hands cup my face, his mouth crashing onto mine.

I taste myself on his lips and deepen the kiss, pulling him even closer, my hands gripping his ass. He moans into my mouth, and I nip his lower lip, making him gasp.

“Lube,” I hear him say, his voice husky with desire. It takes me a second to process the word, but I fumble for the nightstand drawer, pulling it open and grabbing the

bottle. My hands are shaking as I toss it onto my belly, watching through half-lidded eyes as Mika grabs it.

He squeezes a dollop of the slick gel onto his cock, stroking it over the thick, veiny length. I reach down to help, but Mika catches my wrist, gently pushing it away.

“If you touch me now, I’m gonna come before I even get inside you,” he grits out, his voice trembling with restraint. “And I need to be inside you when I come.”

My cock gives a weak twitch at his words, and I bite back a moan. Mika squirts more lube onto his fingers, working one into me with slow, careful movements. I can’t help the way I push back against his hand, the stretch burning in the best way.

“Fuck, babe, every inch of you is holding me. You squeeze me just right,” Mika growls, his voice thick with need. “So hot.” He slides a second finger in, scissoring his fingers to stretch me out, and the fullness has me gasping, my cock hardening again despite how spent I feel.

When he curls his fingers just right, brushing over my prostate, stars explode behind my closed eyes. I cry out, clutching at the sheets as my body bows off the mattress.

“Mikamikamika!” I cry out, my voice breaking as pleasure shoots through me in waves. “Do that again!”

He does. God, he does, his fingers thrusting inside me, stroking that spot that sends sparks of fire racing through my veins. My body arches off the bed, desperate for more, and I can’t stop the noises spilling from my lips. Mika’s touch is everything I need and more, but it’s not enough. Not yet.

I feel the loss acutely when he pulls his fingers out, my body clenching at the sudden emptiness. Before I can complain, he’s crawling up my body, his weight pressing me

into the mattress, pinning my hand between us when I reach for myself.

His cock presses against me, thick and hot, and I know what's coming next. My breath hitches as he leans down to kiss me, his lips firm and claiming.

When he pushes forward, the blunt head breaching me, my gasp is swallowed by his mouth. My eyes snap open as a sharp, burning stretch overtakes me, and I clutch at his shoulders, needing something solid to hold on to.

"Relax, Gabe," he murmurs, his voice rough but gentle. "Let me in, baby. Please."

I try. God, I try, focusing on the soothing strokes of his hands on my hips and the warmth of his voice. "Trying," I manage, though it comes out shaky. "Oh shit, Mika!"

He doesn't push further, just waits, his kisses softening, his body radiating patience. Slowly, the burn eases, and I take a deep breath, willing my muscles to relax. He's so fucking big .

"Please, Mika. Move!" I beg, pulling my legs up to give him better access.

The look in his eyes is pure fire as he starts to press deeper, inch by agonizing inch, until his hips are flush against mine. My body stretches to accommodate him, the fullness almost overwhelming but so damn good.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice rough with restraint.

"B-b-burns a little," I stammer, sucking in air. "Just a minute."

He kisses me, his lips soft and reassuring, and strokes my sides as I adjust. The burn fades, replaced by a heat that's deeper, richer.

“Move,” I whisper, and he does.

His thrusts are slow at first, deliberate, like he’s savoring every moment. I meet him halfway, rolling my hips to match his rhythm, and the burn dissolves into pleasure that builds with every movement.

“Harder,” I gasp, my hands sliding down to grip the backs of my thighs, holding myself open for him.

He doesn’t hesitate, his hips snapping forward faster, harder, deeper, the sound of our bodies meeting filling the room. Every stroke sends white-hot sparks of ecstasy shooting through me, and when he hits that spot again, I shout his name.

“Fuck! Mika!” My hand flies to my cock, stroking in time with his thrusts. I’m so close, the pleasure twisting tight inside me, ready to snap.

The orgasm tears through me like a storm, my whole body bowing off the bed as I spill over my hand and stomach. I shout Mika’s name again, the pleasure so intense it borders on pain.

“God, Gabe,” Mika groans, his rhythm faltering as he thrusts a final time.

I feel his cock jerk inside me, his release hot and deep, and the sensation pulls me into another wave of pleasure. He leans down, sucking at my neck, and I know he’s leaving a mark, claiming me in a way that makes my chest ache with something more than lust.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, his voice rough and full of awe as he collapses onto me.

“Yeah,” I breathe, my arms wrapping around him as I pull him close. “Damn.”

His weight presses into me, his body still inside mine, and for a moment, everything feels perfect. I press a lazy kiss to his lips, smiling when he leans into it, his hands brushing over my sides.

“Stay,” I murmur, my voice heavy with exhaustion but full of meaning.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he whispers, his forehead resting against mine.

And as my eyes drift closed, I believe him.

I roll over, stretching lazily, my arm flopping out across the bed to find...nothing. The sheet is cool, empty. My eyes snap open, and I sit up quickly, glancing around the room. Where the hell is Mika?

Stomach growling, I stumble out of bed, feeling the pangs of missed dinner. “Mika?” I call out, rubbing a hand over my face and trying to shake off the last remnants of sleep.

“In here with the pup, babe,” Mika’s voice drifts back, calm and steady. “Had to give him his antibiotics and pain meds.”

Oh. Crap. The puppy. How the hell could I have forgotten about the injured pup? Guilt stabs through me. I didn’t mean to crash so hard, but the combination of physical exhaustion and the emotional whirlwind that is Mika had knocked me flat. Still, that’s no excuse. I hurry toward the spare bedroom, not even bothering to grab clothes.

The sight of Mika crouched in front of the kennel greets me as I step into the room. His sweatpants hug his ass in a way that’s downright criminal, and I can’t stop my gaze from lingering. Damn. I’m officially a sex maniac now, but at least it’s only for one man. That’s got to count for something, right?

“How’s the puppy?” I ask, forcing my attention to the dog instead of the glorious view in front of me.

“ Good, all things considered,” Mika replies, his tone focused but gentle. “I think the pain meds knock him for a loop, though.”

I hum in agreement, watching as Mika gently rubs the pup’s head. The care he shows is heart-melting. I should probably be paying attention to that instead of his ass, but, well, I’m only human.

“Uh, Mika?” I venture, as a thought suddenly pops into my head.

“Yeah, babe?” he answers distractedly, still crouched by the kennel.

“Do you...heal from everything?” The question sounds dumb as hell coming out of my mouth, but now that I’ve asked, I can’t backpedal.

Mika finishes securing the kennel and stands, turning to face me. He points to his neck as he starts to explain. “We heal incredibly fast, but no, not from everything. Silver doesn’t harm us unless it’s a bullet through the head. But any bullet to the head, a long fall, car crashes, decapitation...those things are fatal. Severe trauma can still kill us.”

I watch as a shadow of something flits across his face—pain, maybe—but he shrugs it off and flashes me a wink.

“I take it that’s a werewolf thing?” I ask, trying to keep my tone light but secretly enjoying the way Mika’s eyebrows slam together in irritation.

“I’m a shifter, not some Hollywood monster,” he splutters, looking so offended I have to bite my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Well,” I press, unable to resist, “what’s the difference?”

Mika frowns, clearly unimpressed with my teasing. “Werewolves aren’t real. We are. We don’t change only on full moons; we can shift whenever we want. And shapeshifters don’t attack random people. We can’t turn anyone into a shapeshifter just by biting them anyways.”

Okay, well that was real clear. Not. Then, hey—

“What do you mean you can’t turn someone into a shapeshifter ‘just’ by biting them?” My curiosity spikes. He wasn’t offering any information up before, but now that he’s cracked the door open, I’m shoving it wide.

“It’s, uh...” Mika hesitates, running a hand through his hair. “It’s an exchange of blood and...other fluids.”

The blush creeping up his cheeks makes me raise a brow. “Really. What fluids, exactly?” I’m curious. I mean, because, if there aren’t any other gay shifters, then how could anyone know what has to be exchanged? Unless there has been instances of a female shifter changing a male, which is where I’m thinking the information must have come from.

Mika groans, his hand flying to the back of his neck. Well, it’s... To exchange, uh, each person has to...shit!”

“What? That’s fucking wrong, Mika!” I blurt, and I just know my eyes must be bugging out of my head.

Mika’s jaw drops open then snaps back together with a click of teeth. “No! No, I meant ‘shit, I’m fucking this up’! Swear to God, Gabe...”



And that's all it takes. I lose it. My sides shake as laughter bursts out of me, uncontrollable and ridiculous. "God, Mika," I manage between gasps. "Your face!"

"Yeah? Well, you were looking pretty freaked out yourself, buddy," he retorts, his tone half annoyed, half amused. He crosses his arms, glaring at me, but the corners of his mouth twitch like he's fighting back a smile.

"C'mon," I say once I've caught my breath, reaching out to grab his hand. "Let me throw some jeans on, and I'll make us some steaks. You can finish explaining this whole...fluid exchange thing."

Mika eyes me warily, but when I tug him toward the kitchen, he follows. He doesn't let go of my hand the whole way there, and that alone makes my chest feel warm.

I set the plates on the table, each piled high with thick, perfectly grilled steaks, crispy baked potatoes, and golden corn on the cob. The smell alone has my stomach growling in anticipation. I've always loved cooking a full meal on the grill—there's something satisfying about being outside, enjoying the fresh air, instead of sweating over a hot stove.

Grabbing a couple of beers from the fridge, I hand one to Mika and take a seat across from him. He accepts it with a small nod, and we clink bottles before I take a long sip.

"So," I say, setting the beer down. "You want to explain the exchange while we eat?"

Mika freezes mid-reach for his fork, his eyes darting to mine. A slight flush creeps up his neck as he shakes his head. "Maybe...after," he mutters, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

I bite back a chuckle, regretting my earlier laughter at his expense. Poor guy's still

flustered. I watch him dig into his food, though, and it pushes all thoughts of teasing aside. Mika doesn't just eat—he devours, savoring each bite like it's a feast fit for a king. The sight is strangely mesmerizing, sensuous, and before I know it, my body reacts. Heat coils low in my belly as I feel myself harden, my cock pressing insistently against the fabric of my jeans.

Seriously? Just from watching him eat? I shift in my seat, trying to ease the pressure, and adjust myself discreetly under the table.

Mika pauses, fork in mid-air, and the slow smile that spreads across his face tells me I've been caught.

“What?” I ask, doing my best to sound casual. The effort's wasted, judging by the glint in his whiskey-colored eyes.

“ You got a problem there, Gabriel?” His voice is smooth as silk, low and teasing. It sends a shiver straight down my spine.

I can't help smirking back. “I wouldn't call it a problem. Nope, not at all. I'd call it...dessert.”

The heat in Mika's gaze intensifies, and I know I've hit the mark. “Really,” he drawls, leaning back slightly in his chair. “Well, it's a good thing I have a huge... sweet tooth.”

I groan, rolling my eyes. “Mika, that's just...” I trail off, deciding to let the innuendo slide this time. After all, he's not wrong about having something huge.

Mika chuckles, his attention returning to his plate. But just as I let my guard down, I feel his foot slide up the inside of my thigh, pressing lightly against my balls. My fork clatters to my plate as I jerk in surprise.

“Oh, you shit!” I yelp, glaring at him. His grin only widens, utterly unapologetic.

“I can always remove my foot,” he offers casually, though his tone is more a challenge than a promise.

“Don’t you dare!” I grab his ankle under the table, trapping his foot in place. “You remove this foot, and I’ll be one pissed-off man,” I warn, pressing against the pressure he’s already applying. The friction sends a bolt of heat through me, and I find myself eating faster, trying to focus on the food instead of the growing need pooling in my gut.

Mika doesn’t make it easy. His foot begins to move, sliding up and down my cock with deliberate strokes. I nearly choke on a bite of potato, coughing hard enough to make my eyes water. He pauses, waiting until I’ve recovered before continuing his torment. This time, his foot slides lower, down my cock, over my balls, and wedges beneath them. His toes wriggle playfully, and a low groan escapes me.

Before I can catch my breath, Mika withdraws his foot and stands abruptly, the force of his movement sending his chair clattering to the floor.

“You done?” he asks, his voice rough with barely restrained need. The intensity in his eyes sends a shiver down my spine.

I nod, not trusting my voice, and Mika grabs my arm, pulling me up so quickly my head spins.

Backing me against the kitchen cabinets, he leans in close, his breath warm against my neck. “Get your pants off, babe. Now.”

Fumbling, I reach for my belt, my hands shaking as I work to undo the buckle. I shove my jeans and boxers down in one motion, leaving them pooled around my

ankles. Mika kneels in front of me, pulling the fabric away with a swift, practiced motion.

He pauses, his hand sliding over the arch of my foot. His touch is light, reverent, as though he's savoring every inch of me. Then he leans down, his tongue darting out to trace a line over the curve.

The sensation sends an unexpected jolt through me, and I squeal, jerking involuntarily. "Damn it, Mika! That tickles!" I manage between gasps.

Mika grins up at me, entirely too pleased with himself. "Good to know," he murmurs, his voice thick with mischief and something deeper, something primal.

"And it's obviously bad for my health since it could lead to the separation of my head from my shoulders," Mika teases, his tone light but full of heat. His lips press soft kisses up my calves, and his hands follow, the light brushes of his fingers leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I can't keep still, squirming under his touch as my arousal spikes, overwhelming my senses. If I'm feeling it this strongly, I can only imagine what it's doing to Mika.

He presses gently at the insides of my thighs, coaxing them wider. My face heats as I realize just how much of myself is on display for him—spread open, vulnerable. Mika pauses, his gaze dark and intent, his breath hitching as he takes me in.

One trembling hand rises toward me, stopping just short of touching. His eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe.

"I don't even know what to touch first," Mika murmurs, his voice thick and rough. "That pretty cock bobbing against your belly, dripping with those little pearly beads? The sac hanging low and heavy? Or..."

I almost lose it then and there, the filthy promise in his words unraveling me. I reach down quickly, twisting my balls in desperation to stave off the orgasm threatening to crash over me.

“Are you trying to kill me, Mika?” My voice comes out shaky, desperate. “Or maybe you need help. Suck me. Put my cock in your mouth.”

Mika grins, wicked and knowing, and doesn’t hesitate. His hot tongue circles the head of my cock, teasing before he takes me all the way down in one smooth motion. The heat of his mouth and the tight suction steal every thought from my brain. His nose presses into my pubes, and I cry out, my fingers tangling in his hair.

Mika works me with ruthless skill, his throat flexing as he swallows, his tongue swirling and teasing. The sensations build too fast, too strong, and I’m powerless against the tidal wave of pleasure. My back arches, and I shout his name as my release rips through me. Hot pulses of cum shoot deep into his mouth, and I gasp, my hips jerking as he milks every drop from me.

If Mika wasn’t holding me steady, pinning me against the cabinet, I’d be a heap on the floor. My legs feel like jelly, trembling with the aftershocks of the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had.

Smooth as ever, Mika rises, his body sliding against mine. The friction of our cocks rubbing together pulls a groan from me, my hips twitching instinctively.

“Let me take care of you,” I whisper, running my hands down his chest. But Mika is already latching onto my neck, his teeth nipping and his lips sucking in a way that has me groaning all over again.

“Just...put your hands on me, Gabe. I can’t... Not gonna last much longer,” he rasps, his voice rough and desperate.

I don't need more prompting. I wrap my hand around his cock, stroking him firm and fast, while my other hand dips lower, cupping and kneading his balls. Mika growls, his hips snapping forward into my grip.

The sound he makes when I squeeze gently at the base of his shaft is primal, guttural, and it shoots straight to my still-recovering cock. His teeth sink into my shoulder, hard enough to sting but not quite breaking the skin. The zing of pain sends a fresh rush of arousal through me, and I moan, stroking him faster.

Mika jerks against me, his cock twitching in my hand as he comes hard. Hot jets of cum spill over both of us, his hips spasming as his release rocks through him. The sight of him—head thrown back, mouth open, eyes dark with passion—leaves me in awe. He's magnificent, and he's mine .

"Fuck, Mika," I whisper as he collapses against me, his head resting on my shoulder. His breath is hot and ragged against my skin, and I wrap my arms around him, holding him close as we both come down from the high.

He finally lifts his head, his eyes catching on the bite mark he left on my shoulder. His face falls, guilt darkening his features as he reaches out to trace the mark with trembling fingers.

"I— Shit, Gabe, I didn't mean to— "

"Hey." I cut him off, cupping his face in my hands. "It's okay. It felt...amazing, actually. That little bit of pain spurred on a much, much bigger jolt of pleasure. Can't you tell?" I thrust my cock against him, half hard and already stirring back to life.

Mika stares at me, his guilt melting into something warmer, something darker. I don't have to convince him. With a low growl, he grabs my hand and leads me toward the bedroom.

He doesn't need to drag me far—I'd follow him anywhere.

Mika

I watch Gabe carefully, trying not to laugh at my mate's reaction on how a mate was converted into a shapeshifter. Having avoided the conversation for days, I'd finally given in.

"Are you shitting me? That's just...gross. Wrong. Fucked up. The sixty-nine from hell."

Gabe's green eyes are sharp, questioning, and I know he's trying to piece together what I'm saying. I completely agree with him. Having anyone, mate or not, bite my cock hard enough to draw blood as I come... The thought alone makes me shudder and has my cock aching with imaginary puncture wounds.

"So, you shifters can just run around biting other people's parts and swapping a little blood and, wham ! A new shifter is born? Bet y'all would be really popular at a BDSM club." The teasing light in Gabe's eyes doesn't manage to dispel the tightness in my stomach. I look at him, trying to judge whether or not the man was ready for the truth about mates.

"I know that look, Mika." Gabe frowns at me. "What is it?"

"You pretty much forbade me to talk about anything to do with...us," I point out, and know my mate had been right in doing so. Gabriel had needed time to digest what had to be, to him, an almost fantastical situation. There's no way I want to jeopardize the relationship we're building.



Gabe has the decency to look embarrassed about his demand for silence. “Yeah, well, it was a lot to accept, you know? But, I, ah, I think that maybe from here on out, we need to be honest. Not that you’re lying; that’s not what I meant. Just...I want this, you know?” He gestures between us. “I want you, so I’ll deal with everything else. It’s not fair of me to refuse to acknowledge who and what you are. You deserve better, and I should be a better man.”

“The need we feel for each other,” I start again, my voice steady, even though my nerves are raw, “physically, emotionally—it’s not random. The ability to share a mind-link, the way I could change someone into a shifter if I had to...those things only happen with very specific people.”

Gabe’s expression shifts slightly, his forehead furrowing. “Specific people?” he repeats, his tone calm but curious. He’s not shutting me out, which feels like the tiniest lifeline I can cling to.

I nod, swallowing against the lump in my throat. “Yeah. They’re called mates. It’s rare, Gabe. Some shifters never find theirs.” I pause, the words sticking for a moment before I can force them out. “But when we do, it’s...everything.”

The silence stretches, and I can’t help the nervous energy building inside me. I don’t know what I’ll do if Gabe doesn’t accept this. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart, trying not to read too much into his expression.

“So, you’re saying I’m...your mate?” His voice is cautious, but there’s no anger in it. Just curiosity mixed with the slightest edge of uncertainty.

I nod again, taking a step closer to him. “Yes, Gabriel. You’re my mate. My one true mate.” The words come out quieter than I mean them to, but the weight of their meaning feels almost too much to voice. “That’s why I showed up at your place that night. I couldn’t stay away, even when I thought it might be better for you if I did.

The pull...the bond between us...it's unbreakable."

His jaw stiffens, but it's not in rejection. He's thinking—I can see it. His eyes flicker over my face, searching for something. "You said some shifters don't find their mates," he says finally, his voice low. "What happens if they don't?"

The question hurts in a way I wasn't expecting. It's not about me, not really, but the thought of shifters who live without ever feeling what I feel for Gabe...it's a hollow ache. I glance down at the floor for a moment before meeting his gaze again.

"They survive. Most of them do, at least," I admit, my tone softer now. "But it's not the same. Mates...they complete us. Without them, there's always this emptiness. Most shifters will settle for someone else, and it can work, even be good sometimes. But it's never like this." I gesture between us, letting my hand drop to my side. "This is... It's different. It's everything."

Gabe stays silent, and the weight of his attention feels almost unbearable. I can't tell what he's thinking, and it twists my gut into knots. But then he nods slowly, his eyes softening. "So, I'm your mate. Does that mean you've always known? Like, from the moment you saw me?"

"Not exactly," I admit, rubbing the back of my neck. "I felt the pull before I even saw you. When I was still in my wolf form. I couldn't explain it at the time, but I knew I had to find you." I take a breath, forcing myself to keep going. "And then, when I shifted, when I saw you face-to-face...yeah, I knew. My wolf knew it, too."

Gabe exhales, the tension in his shoulders easing just a little. "You've been carrying this around the whole time, haven't you?"

I dip my head in acknowledgement, a small smile tugging at my lips despite my nerves. "Yeah. I didn't want to overwhelm you. Hell, I didn't even know if you'd

believe me. But you're handling it better than I thought you would."

A short laugh escapes him, and he shakes his head. "You're giving me a lot of credit here, Mika. I'm still wrapping my head around half of this." His voice is lighter now, teasing but warm. "But I'll admit...it does explain a lot."

Hope flares in my chest, tentative but real. "Does that mean you're okay with this?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Gabe tilts his head, studying me for a moment before he steps closer. He reaches out, his hand brushing lightly against mine. "It means I'm not running, Mika. And I'm not going to." His smile is small, but it's there, steady and sure. "We'll figure this out. Together."

Relief washes over me so intensely it's almost dizzying. I don't know what I expected—fear, maybe rejection—but not this. Not Gabe meeting me halfway, willing to take this on, willing to take me on.

"Thank you," I murmur, my voice cracking slightly.

"Okay, and...?"

Gabe's question catches me off guard, not because I didn't expect it—eventually—but because of the way he asks it. The faint blush creeping up his neck, the way he can't quite meet my eyes, and the nervous shift in his posture...it's endearing in a way I never imagined seeing in my mate.

I take his hand, squeezing it gently, letting him know it's okay to ask me this. "You want me to shift?"

His eyes dart up to meet mine, searching, maybe for hesitation or resistance, but

there's none. "Yeah," he says softly. "I mean, I know what you are—sort of. I've seen you, kind of. But I haven't really seen you, you know?"

I do know. Shifting in front of him would make this real in a way nothing else has. It's not that I don't trust him; I just don't want to scare him. But the hope in his eyes, the curiosity mingled with something deeper, reassures me. He's ready. Or at least as ready as he's going to be.

"Okay," I say, my voice steady. "But you might want to step back. Not because I'll hurt you," I add quickly, seeing the flicker of apprehension in his eyes. "It's just...the process takes up a little space."

Gabe nods, releasing my hand and moving back a few steps. His gaze never leaves me, and there's something in the intensity of it that fills me with warmth.

I strip off my shirt, then step out of my sweatpants, leaving myself bare. No sense ruining clothes when I don't have many to begin with. Gabe's eyes widen slightly, his gaze trailing over me in a way that has heat pooling low in my belly. Even now, his attraction is palpable, and it strengthens my resolve.

Ah, hell, I love Gabe. I've been circling the words for days, holding them back like a coward. When did I become so damn afraid? The thought spurs me into motion, shrugging off my clothes and letting them drop to the floor. When I'm completely naked, I glance at Gabe, intending to speak, but he's already caught on something else entirely. His gaze is locked on my cock, his lips parting just enough to drag his tongue across them. The sight makes me twitch, heat pooling low in my belly.

It takes a few snapped fingers to bring him back to the moment. "Gabe," I call softly.

"Huh?" His head jerks up, his expression like a kid caught sneaking candy. "What?"

I can't help the grin tugging at my lips. "Watch me," I say, my voice quiet but firm. Then I take the leap I've been too afraid to make. "I love you, Gabriel."

I barely register the widening of his eyes before I drop to my hands and knees. My heart pounds in rhythm with his sharp intake of breath, and I know this is as much a test as a confession. Bones pop and stretch, the familiar pain of the shift grounding me as muscles twist and reform. Dark fur flows over my skin in waves, my face elongating into a snout, jaws heavy with sharp teeth. The world sharpens and shifts, sounds and scents overtaking sight for a moment.

When it's done, I shake out my thick black fur and glance up. Gabe looks stunned—his mouth open, his eyes wide. I wag my tail, unable to resist, then throw my head back and howl. The sound echoes off the walls, full of emotion I can't put into words.

"Holy fuck!" Gabe yells, his voice halfway between shock and laughter. "You shit! How dare you say that and then just...just shift like that!" He's ranting, but the wide grin on his face tells me everything I need to know. His eyes are bright with something wild and warm, and my chest swells with relief.

Still, I wait. I sit back on my haunches, my gaze locked on him, unblinking. This moment feels too big, too critical to rush. My wolf instincts churn, urging patience while my human heart aches for his answer.

Gabe crosses the room in a few quick strides, then sinks to his knees beside me. I stay perfectly still, letting him come to me, hoping I haven't overstepped. Then his arms are around my neck, pulling me close. His face presses into the thick fur of my scruff, his breath warm against my skin. The scent of him—man and mate—floods me, and I feel more grounded than I have in days.

"I love you, too, Mika," he murmurs, his voice muffled against my ear. The words hit

me like lightning, electrifying every nerve. My wolf wants to howl again, to claim this moment for the world to hear. Instead, I let the shift take me, faster this time, almost seamless as I transition back to my human form.

I pull him into my lap the second I'm fully human, my hands cupping his face as if to anchor myself to this moment. "You do, do you?" I ask, grinning as my chest feels like it might burst. "I think maybe you should show me, Gabe. You know, since actions speak louder than words."

He raises a brow, clearly unimpressed with my teasing. Then, with a wicked glint in his eyes, he pinches my ass, hard enough to make me yelp. "Oh, you'll get plenty of action, Mika."

I laugh, the sound unrestrained, feeling lighter than I have in weeks. Gabe smirks, clearly pleased with himself, and it's everything I need to remind me that this is real. This is us. We're okay.

The laughter fades as I lean in, brushing my lips against his. It's not the heated, desperate kisses we've shared before, but something softer. Deeper. A promise in its own way. Gabe's hands find my hair, tangling in it as he tilts his head to deepen the kiss. His body presses closer, and the heat between us builds, familiar and electric.

I pull back just enough to rest my forehead against his. "You're mine, Gabriel," I whisper, the words slipping out unbidden but utterly true.

"That works both ways, lover," Gabe says with a teasing grin as he grabs my ankle and gives it a firm tug, pulling me down to the floor on my ass.

"Stay right there, don't move," he adds, his voice low and laced with mischief.

I watch him stand and start to strip, every movement slow and deliberate. My cock

pulses in anticipation as he teases me with each item of clothing he removes. By the time his shirt—a final barrier between me and that gorgeous body—is off, I can't help myself. My hand wraps around my shaft, stroking slowly as soft moans slip past my lips. My gaze stays locked on him, burning with hunger I'm not even trying to hide.

Damn, he's magnificent.

Gabe saunters over, his grin deepening as he sits beside me, hip to hip. His brow arches, a wicked gleam in his eyes, and I feel a shiver of anticipation run through me. Then the realization hits—the position, the angle, what he's suggesting. My hand stills, and a wave of heat flushes through me, followed quickly by a chill as the idea takes root. Sliding to the floor, I feel my face pale, unsure if I'm ready for what's coming.

Gabe laughs, a warm, genuine sound that cuts through my sudden tension. “Without the biting, mate! Relax... I won't bite if you won't.”

The word mate hits me like a thunderclap. My entire body trembles at the significance of it, the way it settles in the air between us. He said it so casually, but the weight of it makes my chest ache. He's calling me mate now, not in hesitation or testing the waters. It's a declaration. The thought overwhelms me, both thrilling and humbling. How did I get so lucky?

Gabe seems to sense it, his grin softening as he slides closer. He shifts down until his hips are level with my shoulders, then lies on his side, pressing his body against mine. His hand trails down my stomach, and I suck in a sharp breath at the warmth of his touch.

His fingers comb through the coarse curls at the base of my cock, tugging firmly, urging me to turn toward him. When I do, he wraps his hand around my shaft, the

contact strong and sure. He leans in and takes me into his mouth, his tongue circling the head and teasing the slit.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan, my hand instinctively gripping his hip, pulling him closer.

I don't think. My mouth moves on autopilot, taking him in, savoring the weight of him on my tongue. I swallow him down to the root, humming at the sheer perfection of it. I let my free hand slides down his back, tracing the curve of his ass before finding its way lower. I press my fingers against his entrance, then retreat briefly as I wet them alongside his cock in my mouth.

When I return, his body relaxes instantly, letting me press inside. His heat surrounds me, clenching and fluttering as I move in rhythm with the bob of my head. Gabe groans around my cock, the vibrations shooting through me, and I know he's close.

Twisting my wrist, I find that smooth spot inside him, pressing just enough to draw a strangled shout from him. His body tenses, his cock jerking hard against my tongue as he comes. I swallow reflexively, letting him ride the wave of his climax until he collapses, spent.

It takes him a moment to recover, but when he does, I feel his mouth wrap around me again. The heat of it pulls a grunt from my throat, my hips bucking instinctively. He doesn't relent, taking me deeper, his fingers digging into my hip.

“Shit,” I manage to choke out as the pleasure builds fast and sharp. My body coils tight, trembling on the edge. When he hums around me, it's over. My orgasm slams into me, leaving me shaking as I spill into his mouth. He swallows me down, every last drop, until I'm nothing but a boneless puddle on the floor.

He flops beside me, his chest heaving as he grins up at the ceiling. “See, Mika? No biting.”



I laugh, low and breathless. “Yeah, no biting, but if it’s always that fucking hot, I don’t think even biting my prick would stop me. Maybe.”

His laugh joins mine, rich and full of the joy I’ve come to crave.

“Well, let’s not test that theory anytime soon, ‘kay?” he says, tapping my hip lightly as we sit up.

We help each other to our feet, gathering our scattered clothes with easy smiles and we make our way outside to relax for a while with drinks gathered from the kitchen enroute.

The moonlight bathes us in silver as Gabe sits across from me on the porch, his hands cradling a steaming mug. He’s looking at me like I hold all the answers, but I’ve never felt more uncertain. The warmth in his green eyes makes something twist in my chest—a yearning I haven’t let myself feel in years.

“You don’t have to talk about it more than you have already,” Gabe says softly, his voice envelopes me like the warmth of a summer sun. “But if you want to, I’m here. About the pack. About...what happened.”

My wolf stirs uneasily, the memories clawing their way to the surface. I draw in a shaky breath and look away, focusing on the stars. They’re so far away, untouched by the mess of this world.

“It wasn’t always bad,” I start, my voice barely above a whisper. “The pack was my home for a long time. My family. I believed in the pack, in Zane, in the rules we were raised to follow.”

Gabe doesn’t say anything, but I feel his steady presence, his silent encouragement.

“I hid who I was for years,” I continue, my throat contracting. “It wasn’t just fear of rejection—it was shame. They made us believe that being different was...wrong. That it made us weak, unworthy of the pack.” I swallow hard, the bitterness rising like bile.

“And then Jared happened,” I say, the name like a curse on my tongue. “He wasn’t just another wolf; he was my best friend. We grew up together, trained together. I trusted him. Thought I could share my secret with him.”

Gabe shifts, his fingers tightening around the mug, but he doesn’t interrupt.

“I told him how I felt,” I admit, my voice cracking. “I told him I...I cared about him, more than a friend should. And at first, I thought he felt the same. He kissed me, Gabe.” I laugh bitterly, the memory cutting like glass. “He kissed me, and then he turned me in. Told the council I’d tried to corrupt him.”

“Jesus,” Gabe breathes, his face a mix of anger and disbelief.

“They didn’t even ask for my side of the story,” I continue, the words spilling out now. “They called me a threat to the pack’s stability, a danger to our traditions. Zane—” My voice falters, and I have to take a moment to steady myself. “Zane didn’t say a word in my defense. He just stood there, letting the council decide my fate.”

I close my eyes, the memory of that day vivid and sharp. The council chamber, the cold, hard stares. The humiliation of standing there while they tore my life apart.

“They exiled me,” I finish, my voice hollow. “Told me I wasn’t welcome anymore, that I wasn’t a wolf worthy of the pack name. And then they turned their backs on me. All of them. Even Zane.”

Silence stretches between us, heavy and suffocating. When I finally open my eyes, Gabe is staring at me, his expression raw and unguarded.

“They didn’t deserve you,” he says fiercely, the conviction in his voice catching me off guard. “Mika, you’re better than all of them. They were cowards, every last one of them. And Zane... I don’t care what his reasons were. He failed you.”

I blink, the heat rising behind my eyes. I don’t cry—I haven’t in years—but Gabe’s words hit something deep inside me, something I didn’t know was still there.

“You’re not alone anymore,” Gabe continues, his voice softening. “You’ve got me now. And I promise you, I’ll never turn my back on you. Never.”

I reach out, gripping his hand. “Thank you,” I whisper, the words feeling inadequate but all I have at the moment.

For the first time in years, the ache in my chest eases, just a little.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Gabe

Mika's words stick with me long after he's gone inside, leaving me alone on the porch with the quiet hum of crickets. He'd laid himself bare tonight, shared a pain so deep it seemed to take something out of him just to say it aloud. My heart aches for him.

The way he described it—betrayed by someone he trusted, abandoned by his family, his pack—God, I can't imagine living through something like that. And yet, I see the strength in him. He's survived it, even if the scars are still there, hidden under the surface.

I tip my head back against the porch post, staring up at the stars. My grip tightens around the mug in my hands as I think about what Mika's been through, what it says about the kind of man he is. He didn't let their hatred break him.

And yet, I can't help but feel the edges of guilt creeping in. Mika's been exiled, torn away from his life, and here I am, living in relative peace, surrounded by people like Todd and Adam who accept me for who I am. Sure, my parents kicked me out when I came out, but at least I had my grandparents. Mika didn't even have that much.

I wish I could take some of that pain away from him. Share the burden. But I don't know how to fix this, don't know if it's even something I can fix.

I push to my feet, pacing the porch as my thoughts churn. I don't want to pity Mika—that's not what he needs, not from me. What he needs is someone who sees him, all of him, and still stands by his side. Someone who won't flinch at his scars or

his anger or the way he sometimes tries to hide behind that tough, unshakable exterior.

He's more than his past. More than his pain. And damn it, I'm going to make sure he knows that.

And now we're going back.

Leaning against the porch railing, I try to focus on the cool night air, hoping it'll settle the firestorm inside me. I know I can't fix what happened to Mika, can't undo the years of pain and loneliness he's endured, but the thought of stepping foot onto that land—onto the soil where they tried to break him—makes me want to scream with frustration.

They don't deserve him.

I ball my hands into fists, knuckles whitening as I grip the railing. How could they do that to him? How could they look at someone like Mika—kind, brave, loyal to a fault—and decide he wasn't enough?

My thoughts drift unbidden to my own past. Funny how pain echoes like that—one person's story ringing a bell in someone else's.

I lean against the porch railing, staring out into the darkness, as I remember the day my parents threw me out. I was sixteen, confused and scared, trying to explain something I barely understood myself. My mom's face had gone pale, her lips thinning like she was holding back bile. My dad... Well, he hadn't held anything back .

“You're not my son.”

I'd always had a strained relationship with my folks and knew there was a good chance that they wouldn't accept me for who I was. But even so, those words still cut, deeply.

But luckily for me, it wasn't the end of my story.

When I showed up at my grandparents' house with a hastily packed bag and tears streaming down my face, I was ready for more rejection. I was ready to sleep in the barn or under the stars if it meant staying away from my parents' contempt.

Instead, Grandma opened the door, took one look at me, and pulled me into the kind of hug that feels like home. "Gabriel Staley, what's got you lookin' so torn up, sugar?" Her voice was as warm as the biscuits she used to make every Sunday morning.

I couldn't answer her, not right away. I just sobbed into her shoulder while she rubbed my back and whispered soft reassurances. Grandpa came up behind her a minute later, his old flannel robe tied haphazardly over his pajamas.

"What's goin' on here, boy?" His tone was gruff, but his eyes were sharp, searching my face for answers.

I stammered out the truth, expecting the worst. "I... I told them I'm gay, Grandpa. Mom and Dad. And they—they threw me out."

For a moment, the only sound was the cicadas buzzing in the summer night. Then Grandpa let out a low, rumbling sigh. "Well, hell. Guess we're gonna have to get that room upstairs fixed up for you."

Grandma smacked his arm lightly, though her smile told me she wasn't upset. "Don't you worry about a thing, sugar," she said, guiding me inside. "You're home now, and

that's all that matters."

That was the first night I'd felt safe in months.

Over the years, they didn't just give me a roof over my head—they gave me a foundation. Grandpa taught me how to fix the old tractor, but more importantly, he taught me that being strong didn't mean shutting people out. Grandma showed me how to make her famous peach cobbler, and she reminded me every day that love is louder than hate.

They didn't just accept me; they celebrated me. When I graduated high school, Grandma made a banner that read *We're Proud of You, Gabriel* in big, bold letters and hung it across the front porch. Grandpa grumbled about how the neighbors would talk, but even he got misty-eyed when I walked across that stage.

The porch creaks under my weight as I shift, dragging myself back to the present. I'm not sure who I'd be if it weren't for them. Probably someone a lot angrier, a lot lonelier.

Mika's voice drifts out from the kitchen, low and warm, and I smile despite the ache in my chest.

It's not lost on me that our stories could've ended the same way. Mika's pack turned their backs on him, just like my parents did to me. But the difference is, I had someone to turn to. He didn't.

That's why I'll never take this for granted—him, us. I want to be for Mika what my grandparents were for me—a safe place, a reminder that love can survive even the hardest of trials.

When I step back inside, Mika looks up from where he's sitting. His smile is small

but steady, and it wraps around my heart like one of Grandma's hugs.

"You okay, babe?" he asks, his voice soft.

"Yeah," I say, crossing the room to pull him into my arms. "I am now."

I plop myself down next to him on the sofa with a deep sigh. Mika slings his arm over the back and across my shoulders, pulling me closer to him.

I'm not sure how long I've been staring at the firelight reflecting off Mika's face, but I know it's been long enough to make me feel like a lovesick idiot. His eyes flicker to mine, soft and warm in a way that makes my chest ache.

"What?" he asks, his voice a low rumble that wraps around me like a blanket.

I hesitate, rubbing the back of my neck. "I was just thinking about this...connection we seem to have. It's not just normal chemistry, is it?"

Mika's lips twitch, almost a smile. "Not by a long shot."

"Well, yeah," I mutter, feeling heat rise in my cheeks. "But I mean...when you talk to me without actually, you know, talkin'. Like earlier, I swore I heard your voice in my head. That's not normal. Right?"

He tilts his head, studying me like I'm a puzzle he's trying to solve. "It's not normal for humans. For mates, though? It's...natural. A gift."

"A gift?" I let out a breathy laugh.

"Shifter magic, maybe," Mika says with a soft chuckle. "It's something that happens when a mate bond deepens. The closer we are, the more in tune we become with each



other. It starts small—impressions, emotions, fleeting thoughts. But eventually, it becomes like a direct line between us.”

I blink, letting that sink in. “So it’s not just you whispering sweet nothings in my head whenever you want?”

“No,” he says with mock seriousness, his eyes dancing. “It’s mutual. You’ve probably been sending me feelings or thoughts without realizing it.”

That gives me pause. And a bit of embarrassment, given the thoughts I’ve been having about him since he landed in my life. “I have?”

Mika leans closer, his knee brushing against mine. “Yeah. Like earlier today, when you were worried about Iko. I felt it, the way your stomach twisted, the way your heart sped up. And I knew, without you saying a word, that you were thinking about how much you’d blame yourself if anything happened to him.”

We’d finally agreed on the name Iko—a compromise between Mika’s love of short, strong names and my preference for something a little quirky.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “That’s...weird.”

Mika shrugs. “It’s how mates work. We’re meant to understand each other, even when words don’t cut it.”

I glance away, my mind spinning. “So, this ‘gift’—it just...grows over time?”

He nods. “As we trust each other more, we let each other in. It’s a bond that strengthens with love, Gabriel. The stronger the bond, the clearer the connection. By the time we’re fully mated—”

“Whoa, whoa, wait.” I hold up a hand, though it’s more for myself than him. “Fully mated?”

Mika’s gaze holds mine, steady and unflinching. “It means when we’ve both accepted the bond completely. When we’re fully committed, body and soul. It’ll be seamless, like second nature.”

“Jesus,” I mutter, running a hand through my hair. “No pressure or anything.”

Mika laughs, the sound deep and rich, and I can’t help but smile. “Relax, mate. It’s not something we have to force. It’ll happen when it’s meant to.”

“Yeah, well,” I say, leaning back against the log behind me, “you might want to give me a little warning next time you plan on broadcasting your thoughts. Hearing you growl ‘mine’ in my head was not something I was prepared for.”

His grin turns feral. “Then maybe you should be prepared, Gabriel. Because that’s just the beginning. Wait ‘til I get started on the dirty talk.”

A shiver runs through me, equal parts anticipation and nerves. But as I look at him, all sharp lines and confidence, I feel something else, too—something warm and unshakable. Trust.

“Okay,” I say softly, more to myself than him. “Let’s see where this bond takes us then.”

Mika reaches out, his fingers brushing mine. The warmth of his touch is almost enough to drown out the whispered words that slip into my mind like a caress. “Together, Gabriel.”

I look up from the list of adoption applicants I printed out from Small Town Dog

Rescue just in time to catch Mika on the floor with Iko. They're playing with one of the stuffed toys Adam dropped off earlier this week, the puppy wagging his tail like it's a full-body workout. The pup's doing great, all things considered. Adam's supposed to swing by soon to check on him, and I asked Todd to come, too.

Maybe a little nudge would work things out for those two, one way or another.

Mika picks Iko up, cradling him like the overgrown baby he is, and heads outside to the fenced backyard. I hear him murmuring softly to the pup, and it tugs at something deep in my chest. He's really good with Iko. Better than good, honestly. Mika has this way of making everyone feel safe, like they belong, and seeing it in action only makes me fall harder for him.

When he comes back in, he leans down and nips the back of my neck, making me jump and curse as I rub the spot.

"Did you find homes for Max, Moe, and Annie?" Mika asks, all innocent curiosity like he didn't just try to bite me.

"Yeah, I did," I answer, glaring at him. It doesn't stick, not when he's grinning at me like that. "We have to take M and M to Lubbock. Annie is going to El Paso. Normally, it's about a nine-hour drive to El Paso, if everything runs smoothly. But, we'll be tacking on some extra miles on the drive there since we have to detour through Lubbock."

Mika nods, already tracking the logistics, but I'm not done. "While we're that close to New Mexico, I figured we could drive up to Gila and get your stuff. It's only another four or five hours."

Mika's expression flickers for a second—surprise, maybe amusement—but then his lips quirk into something knowing. "You want me to get my stuff, or do you want to

bitch out Zane?”

Caught. Damn it. I shrug, trying for innocent, but Mika’s laughter ruins me. He grabs my arm and pulls me in for a kiss, soft at first but quickly turning into something deeper, something consuming. We stumble to the couch, still tangled together, his weight pressing me down as his hips grind into mine.

My hands slide down to grab his ass, pulling him closer, and I’m about to lose myself in him when—

“Ah... We can come back later, guys.”

Todd’s voice cuts through the sensual haze like a bucket of ice water. I groan, tilting my head back to see him standing in the doorway with Adam right behind him. Mika doesn’t move, not right away. Instead, he slows the kiss down, ending it with a soft brush of lips before resting his forehead against mine.

“You might want to open your eyes, babe,” his voice is low and teasing. “Both your buddies are here.”

Great. Just great.

I groan, my face burning with embarrassment while my cock still throbs insistently. It’s hard to focus on anything but how mortifying this whole situation is. Mika’s mental voice, smug and teasing, bounces around in my head, but instead of freaking out like I used to, I shove at him. What’s the point of resisting anymore? I’ve already accepted everything else.

Still, there’s no getting around the fact that my ‘buddies’ are about to get an eyeful. Mika and I are both hard as hell, and there’s no way to hide it or wait it out.

Mika grins like he's enjoying this far too much. He stands and pulls me into a sitting position, all casual confidence, while my cheeks feel like they might actually combust. I glance up and see Todd and Adam standing there, both trying—and failing—not to look completely embarrassed. Well, at least I'm not suffering alone.

“Sorry,” I mutter, rubbing the back of my neck. “Guess we didn’t hear you knock.” Understatement of the year.

Mika drops down beside me on the couch, looking utterly unbothered, which is just not fair. Meanwhile, Todd looks like he's trying to find a black hole to crawl into, and Adam's fighting a grin that's slowly taking over his face.

Adam finally loses the battle and lets out a laugh. “No, you didn’t hear us knock. Or pound on the door. Or holler when we walked in. I think Todd had to repeat himself a couple of times before he finally, uh, got through.”

Todd nods, his gaze fixed firmly on the floor.

“Great,” I mutter, shooting them both a glare. Then, for good measure, I reach over and pinch Mika on the belly. His startled yelp is so satisfying I can't help but grin, especially when he looks at me like I've just committed the ultimate betrayal.

“What was that for?” Mika demands, his tone so indignant that Adam bursts into laughter again. This time, it's contagious, and soon Todd's chuckling too, even as he sneaks another glance at the floor.

I give in, laughing along with them, the tension finally breaking. “Oh, come on, Mika,” I manage between breaths. “You were looking way too pleased with yourself while I was over here dying of embarrassment. I had to do something!”

Mika narrows his eyes but doesn't look too angry. “I see, mate. Just

remember—payback’s a bitch. And don’t think a peck on the cheek will get you out of it.”

His voice slides into my head, rich and teasing, and this time, I don’t push it away. In fact, I kind of like it. What I don’t like is that I can’t answer him back—or, better yet, get him back. We’re going to fix that as soon as Todd and Adam leave. Unless, of course, I get distracted.

The guys finally settle down, Todd taking the chair to the left and Adam the one to the right. Todd’s doing a terrible job of sneaking glances at Adam, who either hasn’t noticed or is pretending not to. Meanwhile, Adam’s grinning like he knows something we don’t, his gaze darting between me and Mika.

He leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees, and says, “You know, Gabe, Mika, you two seem...” He pauses, tilting his head thoughtfully. “You two just seem right. I don’t know how to explain it, but it gives hope to the rest of us. Or to me, anyways.”

Mika and I glance at each other, startled. I mean, it’s not like I don’t feel what Adam’s talking about, but hearing someone else say it so matter-of-factly is...a lot.

Adam leans back, looking oddly content, like he just dropped some profound truth and is now waiting for us to process it.

“Well, uh, thanks?” I say, my voice coming out more uncertain than I’d like. I glance at Todd, whose cheeks have gone pink again, but he doesn’t meet my eyes. Instead, he’s looking at Adam with something that might be hope—or longing.

Mika gives my knee a reassuring squeeze, his touch grounding me as always. “I’d say you’re not wrong, Adam,” Mika says, his voice warm but firm. “Though I think maybe the rest of you could use a little push in the right direction.”

Adam raises an eyebrow, clearly catching the hint, while Todd shifts in his chair, looking like he's ready to bolt.

I grin, leaning into Mika's side. "Yeah, we're happy to help if you need advice. You know, from people who are 'right'."

Mika laughs, low and deep, and I can't help but join in. Todd groans, burying his face in his hands, and Adam just shakes his head, his own grin breaking through.

This might actually work.

"Thank you, Adam. Gabe and I are just that—just right together." Mika's voice is calm and certain, and the hand he rubs along my back only makes his words feel more solid.

I nod in agreement, flashing Adam a quick smile. "Yeah, we are. I think if you're open to it, love can find you. And that, my friends, is my gay, poetic thought for the day. Can we stop talking about the emotional stuff now?"

Not that I mind it, really, but there's an agenda here—getting Adam and Todd to leave so Mika and I can have some time to ourselves. First, though, we have to hash out the details about the dogs. I shove my impatience aside and focus on the conversation as Mika picks up the slack.

"—a couple of extra days, if that would be possible?" Mika's voice catches my attention. He's likely referring to the extension we need for our trip to New Mexico.

"Not a problem for me, guys," Todd says, leaning back in his chair. "I like coming out here and playing with the dogs."

Adam nods in agreement. "Same here. Just let me know if anything comes up."

With the arrangements sorted, we go over the care plans for the animals, making sure every detail is covered. Adam lingers to gather up Iko, but I stop him with a hand on his arm before he can leave.

“I just wanted to, uh, say thanks, Adam.” I hesitate, stumbling over the words. Damn, why does this kind of thing feel so awkward? “And to tell you that, uh... Goddamn it.”

Adam’s grin spreads wider, clearly enjoying my discomfort. I groan inwardly, but Mika jumps in smoothly to save me.

“I think what he’s trying to say, doc, is that we both enjoy your company. You’re welcome back anytime.” Mika’s eyes sparkle with humor, and I can’t help but marvel at how effortless he makes this kind of thing seem.

“Yeah, that. Exactly,” I add, feeling a bit sheepish. To cover it, I pinch Mika’s side, earning myself a smirk as Adam thanks us with a knowing look.

We follow Adam to the spare bedroom and say a quick goodbye to Iko. Watching the little guy’s tail wag as Adam carries him to his car, I can’t help but feel a pang of longing. The pup’s been good company, but it’s for the best. Iko needs proper care while we’re gone.

The door clicks shut behind Adam, and Todd sinks back into the chair, his shoulders slumping like the weight of the world is pressing on them. He glances at me, then quickly away, his jaw working like he’s trying to chew through his own thoughts.

I sit down across from him, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. “You okay, Todd?” I ask, careful not to sound pushy.

He shrugs, his hands gripping the armrests. “Yeah, I’m fine.”



Lia r.

“Todd,” I say, my tone sharpening just enough to make him look at me. “I’ve known you too long for you to try that crap with me. What’s going on?”

He sighs, dragging a hand through his hair. “It’s nothing, Gabe. Just...stuff. You know.”

Stuff. That’s Todd-speak for everything I don’t want to talk about but can’t stop thinking about.

“Is it Adam?” I prod gently. His gaze snaps to mine, and the answer is written all over his face before he even opens his mouth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he mutters, his cheeks flushing.

“Bullshit,” I say, leaning back and crossing my arms. “I’ve seen the way you look at him, Todd. And I’ve seen the way he looks at you. You’re both circling each other like nervous pups, but you’ve got to stop letting your past hold you back.”

Todd stiffens, his jaw clenched. “It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?” I press. “You’re scared. I get it. Hell, I’ve been there. But you can’t let what your parents did to you keep you from having a life.”

Todd shakes his head, looking out over the yard instead of at me. “You don’t get it. You’ve always been braver than me. You stood up to your parents. I...” He trails off, his voice cracking.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “I wasn’t brave, Todd. I was scared out of my mind when they kicked me out. But I had my grandparents to pick up the

pieces. You didn't have anyone, and yet you survived. That's a hell of a lot braver than you give yourself credit for."

Todd finally looks at me, his eyes shining with unshed tears. "You don't know what it was like, Gabe. Every time I stepped out of line, even just a little, they'd beat the 'sin' out of me. I remember thinking if I could just be perfect, just be the son they wanted, maybe they'd love me enough to stop."

I grit my teeth, rage boiling under the surface. I know Todd's parents were awful, but hearing the words from him, the weight of his pain, makes it hit harder.

"You didn't deserve that, Todd," I say firmly. "None of it. You were a kid, just trying to survive. And you did. Hell, you're one of the strongest people I know."

Todd lets out a shaky breath. "I'm not strong. If I was, I wouldn't be so scared of what people would say if they knew. I wouldn't be so scared of Adam knowing."

"He already knows, Todd. And he's still here. Doesn't that tell you something?"

Todd blinks at me, processing my words. "I'm not like you, Gabe. I can't just...be out there. It feels like the whole world's watching, waiting for me to screw up."

I reach out, squeezing his shoulder. "It's not about being like me, Todd. It's about being you, the real you. Adam sees that. He sees past the walls you've built, and he still wants you. Don't let your parents' poison ruin what you could have."

His laugh is bitter, harsh. "You think I can just forget all the shit they drilled into my head? That I can stop hearing their voices every time I think about..." He trails off, his eyes flicking away.

"About being happy?" I ask quietly.

Todd doesn't answer, but the silence says enough. I lean forward again, my voice soft but firm. "Todd, I'm not saying it's easy. But I'm saying it's worth it. You deserve happiness. You deserve Adam. And he deserves you, too."

He's silent for a long moment, staring down at his hands. Finally, he nods, just barely. "I'll think about it," he says, his voice rough.

"That's all I'm asking," I say, clapping him on the shoulder. "Just don't take too long. Adam's a good guy, but he's not going to wait forever."

Todd gives a short laugh, shaking his head. "Yeah, I guess not."

Mika and I stand at the doorway, watching as Todd drives off. As soon as the car disappears down the road, Mika turns to me, his expression sharp and playful.

"I have one word for you, babe," he says, his tone low and ominous, though his eyes betray his amusement.

I cross my arms, feigning nonchalance. "Oh yeah? And what word would that be?"

His lips curl into a wicked grin. "Run."

I barely have time to register the word before Mika lunges at me. Laughing, I dodge his grab, bolting down the hall as his laughter echoes behind me. His footsteps pound against the floor as he chases me, and I'm grinning like an idiot by the time we tumble through the bedroom door.

We land in a heap on the bed, both of us breathless and laughing so hard it takes a moment to catch our breath. Mika's weight presses me into the mattress, and as his laughter fades, his gaze locks onto mine. There's something electric in his eyes—a mix of love, desire, and joy—that makes my heart race for reasons entirely unrelated

to the chase.

“Gotcha,” he murmurs, leaning in to press a slow, lingering kiss to my lips.

“Yeah, you got me,” I whisper back, threading my fingers through his hair. And damn it, I hope he never lets me go.

Mika

I drive down I-20, humming along with the radio, stealing glances at Gabe as he naps in the passenger seat. We'd hit the road well before sunrise, wanting to make it to El Paso and Annie's new home before dark. The adoptions for Max and Moe went smoothly, and their new families seem like good ones. Gabe was happy to see them go to loving homes, but I can tell he's going to miss them. There's this quiet sadness lingering in his eyes, even though he knows it's for the right reasons.

My mate is a damn fine man—hell, the best I know. I glance at him again, sprawled out in the seat, his head tipped back and his lips slightly parted. Peaceful. Beautiful. Sexy as hell. Just looking at him stirs something in me, and my cock twitches, already hardening as the heat pools low in my stomach.

I clench the wheel tighter, white-knuckling it as I fight the surge of desire. How far are we from a place to stop? I glance at the GPS, groaning when I see the marker for Odessa. Hours. We're hours from El Paso, and there's no way I can drive this worked up for that long.

Another glance at Gabe. Still asleep, oblivious to my struggle. Damn it. One hand slips off the wheel, sliding down to press against the aching bulge in my jeans. A soft moan escapes before I can stop it, and I freeze, darting a quick look at Gabe. Nothing. He's still out.

I take a steadying breath, my cock throbbing in time with my pulse. Carefully, I work open the button on my jeans, steering with my knee for a second as I tug the zipper down. Lifting my hips just enough, I push my jeans down far enough to free my dick,

sighing as the cool air hits it.

The truck swerves slightly, and I grab the wheel again, heart pounding. Focus, Mika. Eyes on the road. But the urge is too strong to resist, and my free hand trails back down to grip the base of my cock, thumb swiping over the head to spread the pre-cum pooling there.

“Need some help with that?” Gabe’s voice cuts through the quiet, sleepy but unmistakably amused.

I jolt, the truck jerking to the side before I correct it, slamming both hands back on the wheel. “Shit!” My heart races as I glance at him. “You scared the hell out of me, Gabe!”

He just laughs, low and husky, sliding over until his thigh presses against mine. His attention drops to my lap, and his lips curve into a grin that has my cock leaking even more.

“Mmm, you should’ve woken me up,” he murmurs, his hand resting on my thigh. “Kind of cruel not to, don’t you think?”

His fingers slide higher, and I bite back a groan as he cups me, his touch warm and firm.

“Gabe,” I warn, my voice strained, “I’m trying to drive here.”

“You’re trying,” he agrees, leaning closer to brush his lips against my neck. His tongue flicks out, teasing, and I choke out a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl.

“Keep your eyes on the road,” Gabe murmurs, as I lift up slightly allowing him to

free my dick. His left hand grips my cock and pumps it twice before wrapping his right hand around his own thick length. He starts stroking both of us, his movements perfectly in sync. He rubs a throbbing vein on the upward stroke with his thumb, making me twitch in his hand.

“Goddamn, Gabriel,” I rasp, barely holding it together. My focus is a war between the road ahead and the sinful sight in my peripheral vision—Gabe stroking himself while his hand works me over with the same delicious rhythm.

With a deep growl, I grab a fistful of his silky hair, forcibly guiding his mouth down to my hard cock and make him take it all. He fights not to gag as my tip hits the back of his throat, and then moans in surrender, sucking hard on the way back up.

Each pull with his perfect mouth sends me spiraling closer to the edge. He pops off, licking the slit, then his thumb swirls over my swollen head, and I swear I’m seeing stars even with my eyes open. His free hand cups my sensitive, full balls, as he deepthroats me again.

Gabe groans around my length, and I glance down between gasps to see his hand working his big cock faster, keeping time with his mouth as he slurps up and down my ridged, pulsing length.

“Shit,” I groan, my voice strangled as my orgasm slams into me, tearing through me so violently I think my balls have been turned inside out. I shout, barely keeping the truck steady as the first shot of cum spurts from my cock.

Beside me, Gabe arches up from the seat, a matching groan spilling from his lips as thick ropes of his release coat his hand and abs. The scent of sex fills the cab, wrapping around me like a tangible thing. My cock twitches again, somehow still ready for more.

Gabe notices. Of course he does. He rolls his eyes, glancing at me with a teasing grin.

“Jesus, Mika,” he mutters, shaking his head. “I feel like the bottom of my feet just blew off with that orgasm, and your Mr. Happy is already trying to perk back up? My ego may never recover.”

“You’re naming my cock Mr. Happy now?” I ask incredulously, my voice rough from everything he’s just pulled me through.

He leans over to rummage in the glove compartment, flashing me a sly look as he retrieves a packet of wet wipes. I’m too blissed out—or maybe just too dumbfounded—to consider what he’s up to until it’s too late.

Gabe pulls out one of the wipes, his grin widening. He places the cold cloth directly on the head of my dick.

“Shit! That’s fucking cold !” I yelp, jerking at the icy shock.

“Whoops,” Gabe says, his voice full of fake innocence as he snickers. “So it is. But look, Mr. Happy decided to take a nap after all.”

I growl at him, but he doesn’t seem the least bit concerned.

I glare at him as he pulls out a second wipe, his expression saying he’s seriously considering going for my balls next.

“Nope. Not happening.” I swat his hand away with a snarl, cupping myself protectively.

Gabe bats his lashes at me like the world’s most infuriating angel. “What’s the problem? I’m just trying to help, babe.”



“I don’t think so, smart ass,” I grumble, shifting away from him in case he tries anything else. My poor, deflated cock and thoroughly traumatized balls need time to recover.

Still smirking, Gabe rolls his eyes and pulls out a couple of wipes for himself. Unlike me, he has the sense to rub them between his hands to warm them up first.

“See?” he says, wiping away the remains of his release. “Nothing to it.”

I narrow my eyes, watching as he tucks his now-softened prick back into his pants and refastens them. The picture of innocence.

“What?” he asks, blinking up at me like he has no idea why I’m pissed.

I just shake my head, muttering under my breath about payback. Because, oh yeah, he’s going to pay for this.

Gabe

El Paso comes into view late in the afternoon, the skyline shimmering faintly in the distance. The drive has felt both too long and too short—stretched out by stops to feed and walk Annie, but also filled with moments of love and teasing that made time slip away. Despite Mika’s best efforts to keep me distracted with his creative—and often sinful—ways, I can’t shake the heaviness creeping over me now.

Annie is about to go to her new home.

I know this is good for her. Hell, it’s great. But damned if I won’t miss her like crazy.

Mika’s hand slips over mine, his body heat cutting through the melancholy like a balm. That quiet support he offers me without words? It’s everything.

Traffic on I-10 is surprisingly light, and the GPS leads us to a house on Yandell Drive without a hitch. The place is charming—mid-sized, with a large, neatly fenced yard. It’s clear the family takes pride in their home.

Before we even step out of the truck, the front door opens, and a couple steps out, holding hands with their little girl.

“Ethan and Betta Basquez, and their daughter, Elida,” Mika murmurs, his voice soft and reassuring.

I nod, unbuckling my seatbelt. My heart squeezes as I climb out of the truck, but as I take in the family approaching us, something inside me loosens. There’s a sense of

rightness here, a quiet certainty that these people will be great for Annie.

“They’re good people, Gabe,” Mika says gently, stepping up beside me. “This will be an excellent home for her.”

His words wrap around me like a warm hug. How the hell did I ever manage this before him?

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Basquez, Miss Elida,” I greet them with a smile, my voice steady. “I’m Gabriel Staley, and this is Mika Blackwell.”

Ethan steps forward with an easy smile, extending his hand first to me and then to Mika.

“Please, call me Ethan,” he says. “And this is my wife, Betta. Thank you for rescuing Annie for us.”

I like that—rescuing Annie for them. As though she was theirs all along and we were just the bridge that brought them together.

Betta steps forward next, shaking my hand and then Mika’s, her expression friendly and grateful. Their daughter, Elida, hangs back a little, her shy smile blooming as she peers curiously toward the truck bed.

I crouch down, meeting her gaze with a soft smile. “Would you like to meet your new family member?”

Her eyes light up, and she nods quickly. “Please?”

I extend my hand, and she takes it, her small fingers curling trustingly around mine as I lead her to the back of the truck. When her eyes land on Annie, her mouth falls

open in awe.

Annie, ever the charmer, wags her little nub of a tail as if she's been waiting her whole life for this moment. She lets out a soft whine, her bright eyes fixed on Elida.

Mika climbs into the truck bed and picks up Annie's red leash. His voice turns gentle, almost reverent. "Hey, Annie, look at your new girl," he murmurs, his tone making my heart ache in the best way.

Elida presses closer to the truck, her excitement bubbling over. "Can I pet her?"

"Of course," I say, stepping aside so she can have her moment.

Mika clips the leash onto Annie's collar and lifts her carefully, bringing her down to meet her new family. Annie's tail wags furiously as Elida crouches down, giggling as she strokes the dog's soft coat.

Betta and Ethan exchange smiles, their pride and joy evident as they watch their daughter bond with Annie.

"She's perfect," Betta says softly, her eyes glistening as she glances between Annie and Elida.

I swallow past the lump in my throat, my own emotions threatening to overwhelm me. This is why I do this—to give dogs like Annie the love and security they deserve.

Mika steps back to my side, his arm brushing against mine. "You made this happen," he says quietly, just for me to hear.

I nod, unable to speak. For all the loss I feel at saying goodbye to Annie, there's an undeniable rightness to this moment.

After leaving Annie with her new family, we decide to rent a hotel in El Paso for the night instead of pushing straight on to New Mexico. We've considered heading up to Silver City tonight, but it's too close to the Gila packlands. Mika and I agree that it's better to show up unannounced.

Mika goes out to pick up dinner while I carry our bags to the room. Tossing them near the bed, I give the place a quick once-over. It's clean, nothing fancy, but it'll do. I make a quick call to check in with Todd and Adam, then head straight for the bathroom.

Peeling off my clothes, I can't help but grin. Let's face it—I probably smell like cum and wet wipes after today's adventures.

The shower heats quickly, and I step under the spray, thankful for the hot water. Too many hotel stays have left me with lukewarm drizzles, so I'm not about to waste this. As the water sluices over me, I think about Mika. Even though we're still hours away from the packlands, I can't help but worry about what's ahead.

I'm just reaching for the towel when the bathroom door creaks open.

Mika steps in, his eyes dark and smoldering as they rake over me. My heart pounds, and a coil of lazy heat zings low in my belly.

"So beautiful," he whispers, his voice rough and full of want.

He walks toward me, taking the towel from my hand and letting it drop to the floor. His gaze flickers over my body, but there's something else in his expression—a hesitation I don't recognize. The sight of him like this, a little unsure, takes me off guard. This is Mika, confident and bold. What could possibly unnerve him?

He looks into my eyes, and I brace myself. Is this the moment where he tells me

something terrible?

“I need you, Gabriel,” Mika says, his voice trembling just slightly. “I want you. Inside me.”

The words hit me like a lightning bolt.

“No one has...I’ve never let anyone fuck me before. But I need this. I need you. Just you.”

His words are rough, raw with need, and they wash over me like fire.

My eyes widen, and my cock swells instantly. I’ve wanted Mika—I mean really wanted him—but I’ve been perfectly fine with letting him take the lead. Hell, it’s not like I’ve ever felt unsatisfied. I had wondered, though, if he’d ever...been on the receiving end, but I didn’t know how to bring it up. Now, here he is, offering himself to me in a way he’s never offered to anyone.

It’s overwhelming.

I feel honored, full of love, and so turned on I think I might come just from the thought of being inside him.

“Mika...” My voice breaks on his name.

He steps closer, his hands sliding to my waist, his touch grounding me as much as it ignites me.

“Are you sure, Mika? We don’t have to.” I try to keep my voice neutral, not wanting to let my own overwhelming desire pressure him. But damn it, I want this.

Mika doesn't hesitate. He grabs the towel I'd been using and wraps it around my waist, using it like a sling to pull me against him. The heat of his body, the water still dripping from me soaking into his clothes, makes my head spin. His shirt clings to every chiseled muscle, outlining his frame in a way that's nearly sinful. I don't resist when he presses his mouth to mine. The kiss is fierce and consuming, a clash of lips, teeth, and tongues.

I grind against him, desperate to be closer, my hands gripping his shoulders, as though I might fall if I let go. But then Mika steps back, leaving me panting and dazed .

Slowly, he unbuttons his shirt, his fingers working each button free with a deliberate, maddening precision. My cock throbs, my whole body aching for him. The shirt falls open but doesn't slide off, leaving a tantalizing view of his smooth, muscled chest as he kicks off his shoes.

He moves backward, out of the bathroom, and I follow as if pulled by an invisible thread of desire.

When he stops beside the bed, he continues undressing, and I'm mesmerized. His fingers glide to his waistband, unbuttoning his pants with the same unhurried sensuality. As he pushes them and his boxers down, the tails of his shirt part, revealing his cock, already hard and dripping.

That's it —I can't just stand here anymore.

I step forward, sliding my hands inside his open shirt, gliding over his chest, his shoulders, then down his arms, pushing the fabric free. Our mouths meet again, this time for a tender, lingering kiss as I ease him down onto the bed.

I guide him to the center of the mattress, lifting his thighs and spreading his legs

wide. My hands move down his legs, removing his socks before I sit back to take him in.

He's breathtaking.

Mika lies before me, thighs open, exposing every part of him—his cock, his balls, and that virgin pink hole I'm dying to claim.

"Fucking perfect, Mika. Perfect."

Leaning over the side of the bed, I rummage in my bag until I find the lube. I set it down on the mattress, my gaze returning to him. I'm almost overwhelmed with the need to touch him everywhere, all at once.

"Where to begin..." I murmur teasingly, trailing a finger from the head of his cock, already slick with pre-cum, down to his balls. I let my touch wander lower, until I'm lightly caressing the tight, untouched entrance beneath them.

Mika groans, his hips jerking involuntarily. "Gabe, please, I need..."

"Need what, Mika?" I press just firmly enough to tease but not enter, stroking back and forth over his sensitive skin. "Tell me. Tell me exactly what you need."

He pushes against my fingers, grinding his hips as if seeking relief, but I don't give it to him. Not yet.

"Tell me what you need."

"Fuck me, Gabe," he finally gasps, his voice raw with desperation. As he groans his voice answers inside my head, "I need you inside me so much that I ache with it."



He twists and writhes—his body begging even when his words don't come fast enough. The sight is the most erotic thing I've ever seen. I know, without a doubt, that this moment, this memory, will stay burned into my soul forever.

“Soon, Mika, just let me... Have to get you ready. I don't want to hurt you.” My voice is barely steady as I lean down, running my tongue over the head of Mika's cock, savoring the salty taste of him.

He moans, hands tangling in my hair, guiding me closer. “Gabe, please...” His words are desperate, urging me on.

I grab the tube of lube and pop it open, refusing to rush this. As I coat my fingers, I focus on him, laving the sensitive underside of his prick, feeling the hot, firm weight of it against my tongue. My slick fingers trail along the crease beneath his balls, teasing until I brush against his entrance. His body jerks, and I let my fingers circle there before pressing one inside.

“Okay?” I manage to ask, my voice thick with need.

“ Oh, fuck, Gabe. More!” Mika's response is a guttural plea, his hips bucking forward into my mouth and back against my finger, his entire body desperate for more.

“You're so hot, Mika. Fucking love stretching you,” I murmur, sliding in a second finger. I crook them slightly, searching until I feel the telltale ripple as I find his gland. His whole body trembles, a sharp cry tearing from his lips as I press there again and again.

Mika writhes beneath me, his cock twitching against my tongue. “Gabe, I can't—I'm gonna—”

I feel him tense and then spurt after spurt of his release hits the back of my throat.

Swallowing around him, I push a third finger inside, gently scissoring, preparing him even as his orgasm rips through him.

Sliding my fingers free, I reach up and grab the pillows beneath his head. “Lift your hips,” I urge, guiding him as I shove the pillows beneath his ass and hips. The sight of him spread open, his hole pink and glistening, has my cock throbbing painfully. “So perfect, Mika. Pink and wet and ready for me.”

“Ready,” Mika breathes, his voice rough and needy. His dark eyes find mine, and I see nothing but trust and desire there. “Now, Gabe.”

I slick more lube over my cock, the cool gel doing little to ease the fiery heat coursing through me. Sitting back on my heels between his thighs, I nod. “Grab the backs of your thighs for me.”

Mika complies, pulling his legs back and opening himself wider. My hands settle on his hips as I line up, my cock brushing against the unyielding ring of muscle. I press forward, breaching him slowly.

His body resists at first, the tight heat gripping me as I inch forward. Mika grunts, his hands straining on his thighs as his brow furrows. I pause, forcing myself to hold still despite every instinct screaming at me to keep going.

“Bear down, babe,” I murmur softly. “Let me in. I promise it’ll feel so good.”

Mika takes a deep breath, his body relaxing just enough for me to slide in deeper. My cock sinks into him in one long, agonizingly slow thrust until my hips are flush with his. I groan, overwhelmed by the feel of him surrounding me, squeezing me.

Mika hisses through his teeth, his chest heaving as he adjusts. My panic flares briefly, worried I’ve hurt him, but then I see it—the discomfort easing from his eyes, replaced

by something raw and electric. He clenches around me once, his muscles rippling in silent invitation.

“You okay?” I ask, my voice shaky.

His lips curl into a small, almost defiant smile. “More, Gabe. Move.”

That’s all the permission I need.

“So good, Mika, so fucking hot. You’re gripping my cock so good babe.” I drive my hips harder, watching as Mika’s eyes roll back in his head, his lips parting on a guttural moan. Pulling back just a few inches, I thrust in again, as deep as I can go. God, it feels incredible. I can’t stop myself—I have to do it again.

I fuck him in short, firm strokes, each one wringing moans from both of us, the sound raw and addictive. My hips snap forward, my cock slamming into him, and his body grips me like a vise. I pull out almost completely, then sink back in, angling just right to hit his prostate. Mika’s shout tears through the room, and my cock twitches at the sound.

“Yesyesyesyes! Like that, Gabriel, again!”

I adjust my angle and pound into him, faster, harder, each thrust rubbing over his gland. Mika’s cries and grunts drive me wild, my gaze locked on the way my cock disappears into his tight, perfect body. He reaches down, wrapping his hand around his own cock, stroking himself in time with my thrusts.

“Ah, Mika! Come for me, baby, come for me!” I’m desperate now, holding on by a thread as I watch his hand move.

Mika’s body tenses beneath me, and he comes with a shuddering cry, thick ropes of

his release spilling across his stomach and chest. The sight pushes me over the edge, my fingers digging into his hips as I drive in deep, my balls slapping against him. My orgasm rips through me, filling him with hot, pulsing jets of cum as his clenching channel milks me dry.

I collapse forward, gasping for air, my cock still buried in his heat. God, I don't ever want to leave. If I could, I'd stay here forever, but my limbs are shaking, and I know I'll fall over if I don't move soon. Mika lowers his legs, letting them flop bonelessly onto the bed. He looks as wrecked as I feel.

Carefully, I pull out, shifting to Mika's side while I still have the strength. I should be a gentleman. Or something.

"Gimme a minute, Mika. When I can walk again, I'll get a cloth, 'kay?" My voice is hoarse, but I mean it.

"S'okay," Mika mumbles, his eyes heavy lidded. "Need to shower. Gonna get up soon."

We both mean it, but neither of us moves. Instead, we drift off, sated and spent, our bodies demanding rest, our souls utterly content.

Gabe

“J esus, Mika, it’s beautiful.” I can’t keep the awe out of my voice as I stare out the passenger side window. We’re driving through Gila National Forest, and the view is incredible. The afternoon sun glints in the clear blue sky, painting the mountains and lowlands in a mix of gold and green that seems to call to me. I itch to get out of the truck, to hike through the trees and feel the raw, subtle power of this place humming in the air.

But when I glance at Mika, I wonder if the tension I feel isn’t the land but him. His face is set, his jaw like steel, and his hands grip the steering wheel like he’s bracing for impact. I scoot closer across the seat, resting my hand on his thigh. His body relaxes just a little, and he drops one hand from the wheel to cover mine, grounding both of us.

The hum of the tires on the asphalt fills the cab, a steady rhythm that doesn’t quite match the tension crackling between us. Mika’s been quiet for a while now, staring out the windshield like he’s trying to see through the miles ahead. I can’t push him—not when I know the weight he’s carrying—but damn, I want to.

“Mika,” I say softly, my hand resting on his thigh. His head turns just a fraction, those dark eyes darting toward me. Talk to me, I think, half wishing he could hear the thought.

He sighs, his shoulders dropping like I’ve pulled some invisible string. “You want to know about Zane, don’t you?”

I nod, keeping my gaze steady on him. “Only if you want to tell me.”

For a moment, he just watches the road. Then, like a dam breaking, the words start spilling out. “Zane wasn’t a bad alpha. That’s what makes this so fucking complicated. He wasn’t cruel or vindictive. He didn’t go out of his way to hurt me. But when the pack found out I was gay, he didn’t stop them, either.”

My stomach twists at the way his voice breaks on the last word. “What did he do?”

“He called me to his cabin,” Mika says, the words tense, clipped. “He told me the pack needed stability, and I wasn’t worth the risk. That he couldn’t have my...my ‘lifestyle’ causing division.”

“Bastard,” I mutter before I can stop myself.

Mika shakes his head, a bitter laugh escaping him. “It wasn’t that simple. He thought he was protecting the pack. Sacrificing me for the greater good. He even had the nerve to say it wasn’t personal.”

“Not personal?” My voice rises, anger sparking in my chest. “It sounds personal as hell to me.”

He glances at me, his lips twitching into something that’s not quite a smile. “Yeah, it sure felt that way.”

Silence stretches between us for a moment, heavy with unspoken words. I tighten my grip on his leg, my fingers brushing against the worn fabric of his jeans. “Mika, you didn’t deserve that. None of it.”

“I know that now,” he says quietly. “But back then? I let him convince me I wasn’t worth fighting for.”

Something in his tone cracks me open. I ask him to pull the truck off onto the shoulder, and as the wheels crunch against gravel I turn to him. “You listen to me, Mika Blackwell. You are worth fighting for. Zane was wrong—dead wrong—and so was anyone else who couldn’t see that.”

His gaze locks on mine, and for a moment, I see something shift in his expression. Like he’s letting the words sink in, maybe even believing them.

“I’ve got you now,” I add, my voice steady, even as my chest feels too heavy. “And I’m not letting you go.”

He leans into my touch, “Thank you, Gabe,” he murmurs.

“Don’t thank me,” I say, brushing my thumb along his jaw. “I know you’re tense, love, but it’ll be okay,” I say, trying to reassure him. My words hang in the air for a beat, and I rethink them. “Well, it’s not like your pack can kill us or anything. Right?” A ripple of unease hits me as I realize I probably should’ve asked that before we started this trip.

Mika barks out a laugh, the sound sharp and short. His hand squeezes mine. “No, no, they wouldn’t do something like that, most likely,” he says, though his tone carries a hint of something darker. “I suppose there’s always a chance Zane might try to kick my ass.”

I snap my head toward him, wide-eyed. “What the hell do you mean, ‘most likely’?” My voice rises in pitch as my stomach flips. “I don’t want to hear a ‘most likely’ in a sentence like that!” Damn it, this really was a stupid idea.

Mika lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to my knuckles. “Relax, babe,” he murmurs. “I only meant that if there were a fight for the alpha position, I’m pretty sure Zane would lose.” He cuts me off with a sharp look before I can launch into

another panic-fueled rant. “There won’t be a fight, Gabe. A challenge for leadership only happens when both parties want to be in charge. I don’t want that. Never have. Most likely, we’ll just get some disgusted stares and rude comments.”

He grins, and I can’t for the life of me figure out why he looks like he’s actually enjoying the thought of getting harassed. What the hell?

“Um, why does that idea make you look happy? That’s just bent, dude.” I narrow my eyes at him, but I admit I prefer the grin to the anxious, sad look he was wearing earlier.

“It’s not that I’m looking forward to it,” he says, his grin stretching wider. “I don’t want you subjected to any of it, trust me. But if something does happen, I know you’re going to unwind on their asses, and that is a sight I would dearly love to see.”

The low heat in his voice sends sparks straight to my groin, and I shift in my seat, trying to ignore the way my body reacts. Damn it, we’re a couple of horndogs—or is it a horndog and a hornwolf? I snort quietly. That doesn’t sound right at all. Maybe I’ll workshop it later.

“So, let me get this straight,” I say, trying to focus on his words rather than the simmering heat between us. “You like the idea of me getting harassed, losing my temper, and probably getting my ass kicked in the process?” I arch a brow, giving him my best skeptical look.

Mika’s laughter fills the cab, low and rich. “No one’s going to kick your ass, Gabriel,” he says, his voice dropping an octave. “Not while I’m here. But watching you go all fiery on someone would be...hot.”

The way he says it makes my stomach flip again, but this time it’s from something entirely different. My lips twitch into a reluctant smile. “You’re impossible, you



know that?”

He hums, his hand stroking mine gently. “And you’re mine. So, yeah, I know. ”

I stare at him for a long moment, feeling something deep and unshakable settle in my chest. He’s mine too, no question about it.

Mika laughs, his eyes sparkling. “Anyway, it would never come to a physical fight. First off, it’s against pack rules to assault a non-shifter. Second, you’d shred their egos in the blink of an eye with that sharp tongue of yours—and probably pinch the dogshit out of them, too, for good measure.”

I glare at him, seriously considering pinching him right now. He makes me sound like a damn shrew. But deep down, I know if anyone dared to mess with Mika, I’d do a hell of a lot more than pinch. They could say whatever they wanted about me, but no one gets to fuck with my man. The thought alone has my blood heating. God, I’m already pissed just imagining it. At this rate, I might as well start swinging at the first shifter who looks at us sideways.

Mika’s grin spreads wider, and I know he’s watching me work through every single thought, feeling my anger and protectiveness through our bond. “ All for you, ” I think, the words unspoken but loud in my mind. Juvenile as it might be, I suddenly want to tear into someone just to impress him. Great. I’m regressing into a teenage boy. I growl softly at myself.

“God, babe, I love you! You’re so cute when you go all protective and snarly!” Mika’s amused voice in my head has me jabbing an elbow toward his ribs on instinct. He’s ready for it, though, dodging the blow with ease before pulling me against his side.

“I’ll be quicker next time,” I mutter, earning another laugh from him, deep and warm.

“Is this even a road?” I ask, raising a brow.

“It’s a creek bed,” Mika replies casually, keeping one hand steady on the wheel. “Almost always dry unless there’s flash flooding. It’s a back way into packlands, less obvious than coming around the other side o f the park.” He grins at me, a little mischievously. “Pretty much a no-no to bring non-pack members in through here, but since you’re my mate, they’ll just have to deal with it.”

The truck jolts and bounces over rocks and dips as we follow the uneven trail. It feels like we’ve been at it forever, though when I glance at the dashboard clock, it’s only been twenty minutes. I roll my eyes, already over the ride. That’s when I notice Mika stiffen beside me. His jaw locks tight, and his eyes keep darting toward the driver’s side window, scanning the tree line.

“Mika?” I ask, my voice sharpening. “What is it? Your buddies here already?”

He grunts, nodding. “Figured there’d be someone—probably a few someones—guarding the creek bed. I’m just trying to figure out who the three of them are.”

Three of them. I sit up straighter, trying not to look like I’m craning my neck as I glance past Mika toward the trees. I catch the faintest hint of movement—just a blur—but it’s enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The whole thing feels...off. Like we’re being hunted. It’s enough to give me the creeps, and when something spooks me, it only makes me angry.

“Why don’t you stop the truck? Let’s get out and meet the assholes stalking us.”

Mika

I give a quick look over at Gabe and see the fire in his eyes. He's ready to leap out of the truck and raise hell, but I've got this. " Nah, this works, " I look at him, cutting off whatever rebellious thought he's about to fire at me. "At least one of them will run back to Zane and let him know we're coming. I can assure you they know it's me. And you know what? I'm actually looking forward to this confrontation now."

Gabe's brow furrows, but I press on, the words coming out like a challenge. "The pack decided I was an abomination. Unnatural. If that's the case, then how did I end up with a mate?" I meet his gaze with a grin that's all teeth. "This should fuck with their heads but good."

Before Gabe can fire off a reply, a large gray wolf steps out into the middle of the creek bed, muscles rippling under its coat. Oh, so it's Zane himself, stepping into this little reunion . Gabe's fingers grip the door handle, his body tense with the need to act. I know what he's thinki ng. The guy's always ready to jump in, protect me, fight for me. It makes my heart swell, even though I have to keep him in check for now.

"That's Zane," I place a calming hand on his shoulder. "Give me just a minute with him. Then, if you want, you can join me. Please, Gabe."

I can see the reluctance in his eyes, but he nods once, jaw set. He doesn't like it, but he'll let me take the lead. Unless Zane—or any of these shifter pricks—tries something stupid. Then I know all bets are off.

I climb out of the truck, the crunch of my boots on the dry creek bed loud in the

silence. I walk to the front of the vehicle, leaning casually against the hood like I don't have a care in the world. Maybe I should be worried. Hell, maybe I am, but I won't let Zane—or anyone else—see that. Not when Gabe is watching, ready to jump in at the first sign of trouble.

Three smaller wolves flank Zane, their forms bristling with tension. I glance back at the truck and catch Gabe cracking the door open slightly, his expression pure fury as he glares at the pack. My lips twitch into a small smile. God, I love that man.

“May as well shift, Zane,” I call out, my voice loud and steady. “You too, Fernando, Azrael, Jared. There are no secrets between Gabriel and me.” I nod toward the cab, where Gabe sits, all fire and defiance. My grin widens, sharper now. “Though, if you're feeling shy, you might want to jog back to the tree line and grab one of your secret stashes of clothes first. Wouldn't want you worrying that this queer might jump your bones.”

I let the words hang there, enjoying the way Zane's hackles rise slightly. The other wolves give fleeting looks at each other, then at Zane, waiting for his signal. It's hilarious, really. Like I'd ever be desperate enough to even consider any of them. I keep my eyes locked on Zane, refusing to look away, refusing to drop my gaze in deference. I'm not part of this pack anymore. I don't owe them that respect.

Zane gives a curt nod to the other three, and they trot off toward the tree line, probably to shift and grab some clothes.

I glance back at Gabe, my mate still perched in the truck like a coiled spring, ready to launch himself at the first sign of trouble. The sight of him, poised and fierce, sends a warm wave of pride through me.

I let a genuine smile break through the tension and call out to him, holding out my hand. “Join me?”

Gabe is at my side in seconds, his hand reaching for mine, our fingers intertwining in a firm grip. “Don’t ever do that to me again,” he fumes, his voice low and sharp. “It was hell sitting there, waiting for one of those assholes to do...whatever.”

I nod, not daring to argue, even though I’d only wanted to keep him safe. I’m not sure he realizes it yet, but he just spoke to me through the link. I think back to what I told him yesterday— Stronger together. My voice softens in his mind. “I’m sorry, babe. I was only thinking of protecting you.”

“ Same goes,” he mutters, turning his head to glare at the four men walking toward us. Zane suddenly stiffens, his head snapping up as his nostrils flare.

His whole body locks up, eyes going wide for just a fraction of a second before he schools his expression into something harder, unreadable.

But it’s too late. I saw it.

He knows.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

I let my grin sharpen, waiting for it to sink in, waiting for him to really process what he just scented. But Zane just stands there, silent, the muscle in his jaw ticking like he’s grinding his teeth so hard they might crack.

It must be eating him alive.

The great, noble Alpha of the Gila pack, standing face to face with the ‘unnatural abomination’ he helped exile. The same abomination who somehow—impossibly—has a true mate.

A shifter's true mate.

I see it now, the way his hands twitch, like he wants to shift, like his wolf doesn't know whether to attack or run. He's struggling, his instincts at war, because this isn't supposed to happen . Not to someone like me. Not to someone his pack decided wasn't worthy of anything beyond rejection.

I can practically hear the thoughts racing through his head. This isn't real. This isn't possible. Mika shouldn't have a mate.

But I do.

And he can't deny it.

Gabe notices immediately. "What's he doing?"

"He's scented that we're mates," I explain. "It's impossible to miss. All shapeshifters can scent mated pairs. And he can't ignore it." The look on Zane's face makes me want to laugh, and his three subordinates falter in their steps, no doubt catching the same undeniable scent. I can't stop a smirk from spreading across my face. Gabe bites his cheek, visibly fighting not to laugh. I'm impressed by his restraint.

Zane stares at me, his confusion evident. "How...?" he starts, his voice thick with disbelief. "What the fuck?"

"You smell it, don't you?" I say, keeping my voice light, taunting. The air between us is thick, charged, and I can feel the tension rolling off him in waves.

Zane swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing. His fists clench at his sides .

"Yes," he finally says, voice rough, like the word is sandpaper on his tongue.

I hum, cocking my head like I'm considering something deeply. Then I let my smile widen, all teeth. "You can't ignore it. You can't pretend this isn't real. I found my mate, Zane. The bond exists." I step forward slightly, dropping my voice to something more serious. "So tell me... What does that make me now?"

His throat works around a response that never comes.

I love this.

But the longer I watch him, the more something shifts in my gut. The look in his eyes—it's not just anger. Not just confusion.

It's fear.

And for some reason, that makes me pause.

Because Zane Mitchell isn't afraid of anything.

Gabe laughs then, sharp and unrestrained, and I can't blame him. Watching Zane eat crow like this is delicious. The alpha glares at me, but his posturing rolls off me like water. I don't owe him a damn thing. Still, a small part of me acknowledges that I might never have found Gabe if they hadn't banished me. Maybe I shouldn't hate them...too much.

But forgiveness? Nah.

Zane's voice comes out rough, like he's forcing the words through his teeth. "I believe you were banished."

My smile hardens into something cold and sharp. Gabe steps forward, his laughter gone, replaced with a tension that radiates from his every move. His anger is

palpable, burning as brightly as mine once had. Before he can take another step, I wrap an arm around his waist, pulling him back to my side. My grin fades as I hold him close.

“Yes,” I say, my tone sharp as a blade, “because I’m an ‘abomination,’ as the pack decided. Funny, then, that even someone like me would have a mate, huh?” I let the words hang in the air, watching as they sink in.

Mates are sacred to us—every shifter’s dream. Yet most shifters live their entire lives without ever finding theirs. I smirk at the irony. Maybe they’ve been searching in all the wrong places, clinging to their outdated beliefs. Zane’s pack had only ever known one other true mating, and that was decades ago, from someone twice my age.

Zane glances at Gabe, nostrils flaring again like he’s hoping against hope that he’s mistaken. The three men behind him exchange uneasy looks, nodding to confirm what their alpha clearly doesn’t want to believe. I feel a flicker of satisfaction but decide to show them a mercy they never gave me.

“We’ve only come to get my things, Zane,” I say evenly. Before I can add more, Gabe pinches my side, and I barely keep from yelping. I tighten my hold on him, slitting my eyes at him briefly. “I’m getting there, babe. Be patient.”

Zane narrows his eyes, clearly catching the exchange. “What is it your mate would like to say, Mika?” His voice is calm, but I don’t miss the edge beneath it. He’s picked up on more than just Gabe’s pinch—he’s noticed our link, too.

I open my mouth to answer, but Gabe’s voice cuts through, clear and measured. The calmness in his tone doesn’t hide the simmering anger underneath.

“This mate has a name, asshole. Gabriel Staley.”



Gabe tries to step up to Zane, his voice sharp and irritated, but I yank him back before he can close the distance. Zane's face flushes deep red, and his jaw works. Oh yeah, he didn't take kindly to that insult. The three wolves flanking him bristle and start forward, but Zane halts them with a sharp motion.

“My apologies, Mr Staley,” Zane says, his tone clipped. “I deserved that, but you only get one shot, the next insult will have repercussions.” His eyes narrow to slits, the unspoken warning clear.

Gabe doesn't seem to care. He's ready to let another verbal volley fly, and I know whatever comes next won't help the situation. Before he can speak, I press my hand against his chest, stopping him.

“Shhh, let's not resort to name-calling. Well, not any more name-calling, even if it is accurate.”

Gabe huffs out a breath and finally nods, though the tension in his shoulders doesn't ease much.

Turning back to Zane, I let my wolf rise to the surface just enough to lace my voice with steel. “If you threaten my mate again, I will beat you to a bloody pulp and disband this whole goddamned pack when I'm through with you.”

The promise lands heavy in the air between us. I mean every word, and Zane knows it. My gaze locks on his, unblinking, daring him to test me. He has a choice—stand down and let us finish what we came here for or push back and see how far I'm willing to go.

Through our link, Gabe's voice comes, light and amused despite the tension. “Damn, you're fucking hot when you go all caveman!”

I fight the blush creeping up my neck, but it's a losing battle. Zane notices and tilts his head slightly, studying me. To my surprise, his features relax, like he's come to some quiet understanding.

Then, something I never expected happens—Zane steps forward and bows slightly, first to Gabe and then to me. An alpha bowing to anyone who doesn't outrank him? It's unheard of.

“It would seem I must apologize again,” Zane says, his voice softer this time. “I am sorry, Mika, Gabriel. I am not used to having my...flaws...pointed out so bluntly.”

He lowers his gaze, and through the link, Gabe's thoughts ripple with unexpected sympathy. “I kind of feel sorry for him. Wait, no I don't. But I could, if he hadn't been such an asshole to you.”

I sigh, some of my own tension draining. I've made my point—the pack was wrong about me—and maybe, just maybe, this will stop anyone else from being ostracized over their sexuality.

“If we're done,” I say, my voice weary, “I'd like to gather my things so we can get back home.”

Zane hesitates, like there's more he wants to say, but after a moment, he just nods. “Of course, Mika. Your belongings should be packed and left in your house. We kept them there until we knew where to send them.”

He turns and starts toward the pack dwellings, his men falling into step behind him.

“Zane,” Gabe calls out suddenly, his tone carrying a glint of challenge.

The alpha stops and turns back, his expression cautious.

“You could always ride there with us,” Gabe says, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

I blink at Gabe, torn between pinching him for stirring the pot and pulling him into a kiss for being so bold.

Zane studies Gabe for a long moment, his nostrils flaring faintly as he scents the emotions simmering beneath my mate’s words. Then, to my surprise, Zane’s lips twitch into a grin.

“I think I’ll take you up on that, Gabriel, just because it will irritate you to have to sit by the evil alpha.” Striding toward the truck and climbs into the back seat.

I laugh as Gabe scowls and climbs in the truck, glaring at the alpha as he hops in beside him. “Oh, babe, I think your plan just bit you in the ass!”

Gabe looks at me, his grin turning coy. “This should be fun,” he says, moving closer to Zane. “Really, Mika? So you don’t mind that your former alpha is pressed up—”

I snarl, yanking Gabe onto my lap and pressing his back against the driver’s door. Zane looks a little startled, but I don’t give a damn. It’s going to be a couple of hours before we reach the heart of the Gila packlands since we have to follow the creek bed. Thanks to Gabe’s invitation to Zane, the drive is going to feel twice as long. My temper is already on edge, and there is no way in hell I’m letting Gabe carry even a trace of the alpha’s scent. That would very likely end with me doing exactly what I threatened Zane with earlier. This is going to be a long ride.

I can feel the shift in the air before I see it. Word must have spread throughout the pack because, as we load the last of my things, the curious stares multiply. The hostility that used to weigh down on me like a suffocating fog? Gone. It’s not exactly warm and fuzzy, but it’s progress. Maybe the next gay shifter born here won’t have to fight tooth and nail just to exist.

“Last box,” Gabe says, setting it down in the truck bed with a thud. He looks at me, his eyes sharp but soft around the edges, like he can already tell I’m relieved to be done here. “Ready to get out of here?”

“Oh, yeah.” My voice comes out low, gruff, but then I blurt, “I, uh, I miss Iko, ya know?”

Why that’s hard to say, I have no idea. But it is.

Gabe doesn’t laugh or tease me, just nods and starts tossing tie-down straps across the truck bed. I grab the straps on my side, locking them into place while Gabe secures his. It’s a silent, efficient routine—one that feels good, like we’ve been doing this together forever.

Finally, the truck’s loaded. We head to the cab, climb in, and just as Gabe slides the keys into the ignition, there’s a sharp rap on his window.

Gabe jerks, startled, then scowls as he rolls the window down. I don’t need to look to know who it is. The scent of Zane hits me before I see him standing there.

“Yeah?” Gabe snaps, his tone annoyed. He’s trying not to be a total ass, but it’s clear he’s not over his annoyance with the alpha. Honestly, I don’t blame him. And yet, seeing my mate’s fire makes me feel something warm in my chest. God, this man makes me happy.

“I just wanted to tell you...” Zane hesitates, his voice uncharacteristically soft. “Tell you both that you’re welcome to stay here tonight, if you’d like.”

The sincerity in his tone catches me off guard. It doesn’t erase the years of hurt, not by a long shot, but it does ease some of the sting. Gabe looks at me with a question in his eyes.

“That’ll be a no, babe,” I think, letting my lips curl into a small, wicked smile. “I have plans for you tonight that I don’t feel like sharing with my former pack. Most of them have excellent hearing—and an incomparable sense of smell.”

That thought makes Gabe grin, his eyes lighting up with a mix of anticipation and mischief.

I turn back to Zane. “We appreciate it, but...” I trail off, not wanting to list all the reasons why we’re declining.

Zane nods, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets. “I understand. For what it’s worth—which is probably nothing to y’all—I am sorry. But even if you don’t stay the night, we’re about to go for a run. You’re welcome to join us, Mika,” he says, his voice low but resonant. “It’s been t oo long.” His voice sounds heavier than before, weighed down with something like regret.

Gabe’s hand finds my shoulder, squeezing lightly. “You should go,” he murmurs. “I can stay back here.”

My throat closes at his words. There’s no jealousy, no bitterness in his tone—just encouragement and trust. He knows what this means to me, even if I haven’t fully put it into words.

Zane’s been quiet.

Too quiet.

I’d watched him as we finished loading the last of my things into the truck, his gaze flickering from me to the wolves standing nearby, then back again. There’s tension in his shoulders, something uneasy in the way he stands, like he’s waiting for something to happen.

Like he's waiting for something to go wrong.

I jump out of the truck, wipe my hands on my jeans and step toward him, lowering my voice. "All right, spill it."

Zane blinks, caught off guard. "What?"

I cross my arms. "You're worried about something."

His brows pull together, but he doesn't deny it. Doesn't even try. Instead, he lets out a slow breath, gaze shifting to the side like he's deciding whether or not to say whatever's on his mind.

That's new.

Finally, he speaks. "It's not as simple as you think, Mika."

I let out a dry laugh. "What isn't?"

Zane exhales sharply, dragging a hand through his hair. "The decisions I make. You think I could've just told them all to shove their opinions and accept you for who you are? You think I didn't want to?"

I still, the words hitting me harder than I expect. There's something raw in his voice, something real. And that throws me off.

Because I didn't expect that.

Zane shifts on his feet, voice lower now, like he doesn't want anyone else to hear. "I tried, Mika. But there's only so much I can do before they start looking for someone else to replace me."

I narrow my eyes, studying him. His posture is rigid, his expression strained. There's no pride in his stance, no arrogance in his words. Just...frustration. Exhaustion.

Fear.

I shake my head. "You were the alpha. Your word was supposed to be law."

"That's what you think," Zane mutters, voice bitter. "But even an alpha isn't untouchable."

I stare at him for a long moment, letting the words settle, rolling them over in my head. I don't want to feel anything about this. About him.

But something in my gut twists anyway.

Zane Mitchell—the same bastard who banished me—looks lost.

And that's almost worse than seeing him angry.

I glance toward the pack, toward the wolves standing at a distance, whispering among themselves, watching him more than they're watching me.

That's when it clicks.

"They don't respect you," I say, and the way Zane's jaw ticks tells me I'm not wrong. "They smell the weakness," I continue, my voice dropping lower. "They know something's shifting. And they're waiting for their moment."

Zane clenches his fists at his sides—doesn't deny it.

I don't know why I say what I say next. Maybe because, despite everything, this pack

is still my pack. And I don't want to see them tear themselves apart.

“ You need to figure out what kind of leader you really are,” I tell him, voice firm.  
“Before it's too late.”

Zane doesn't respond.

I let the moment hang between us before Zane walks over to the rest of the pack.

The low hum of voices fades as the pack shifts and stretches, their excitement vibrating in the cool night air. They're preparing for a run, the kind of group hunt that used to be as natural to me as breathing. My body reacts instinctively, muscles coiling tight and itching for the release of transformation. I can almost feel the pull of the earth under my paws, the wind rushing through my fur, the collective rhythm of the pack as we move as one.

The instinct is overwhelming, clawing at me from the inside. My wolf howls to join them, to feel the ancient bond of kinship, the unspoken connection that exists only among those who run under the same moon. For a moment, I close my eyes, letting the sound of shifting bodies and the growing growls wash over me. It's a sound I thought I'd buried, one I'd resigned myself to never hearing again.

And yet, here I am, standing on the edge of what I've craved for so long.

Zane catches my eye as he shifts, his amber gaze steady, but there's no pressure in it. He knows I'm torn, the same way I'd know if it were him. The alpha might not say it outright, but I can see the invitation in his stance. If I want to join them—if I want to let go, even just for tonight—he won't stop me. Hell, he'll welcome me, even after everything.

The thought sends a pang through me, one I didn't expect.



I glance back at Gabe, who's leaning against the car with his arms crossed, watching the pack with wary curiosity. He's out of place here, no doubt about it. His scent is wrong, too clean and sharp amid the earthy musk of wolves. He's a human standing in a world that's not meant for him.

But he's here—for me.

My wolf doesn't understand what that means, not fully. The primal part of me screams to stay, to run, to feel the blood of a kill on my tongue and the electric thrill of being part of something bigger. But the man in me? The man knows what he's already found in Gabe.

I take a step toward the pack, drawn by the visceral need to run. Zane shifts fully, his sleek gray wolf merging seamlessly into the group.

“Take care of yourself, Zane,” I shout across to him.

He's still standing there, staring, but he's not looking at me anymore.

He's looking at the pack.

And for the first time, I think he's realizing what I already know.

They're waiting .

Not to follow him.

To see if they even should.

They move together like a tide, flowing into the night, as though it belongs to them—and maybe it does. It used to belong to me, too.

I take another step, my hand twitching at my side. The need to transform is a living thing, clawing at my skin and whispering promises of what I could have, if only I let myself give in.

But then I hear it—Gabe’s voice, soft and hesitant. “Mika?”

I turn to him, and for the first time, I see the faintest trace of unease in his expression. He doesn’t say anything else, but he doesn’t have to. He knows what this is, even if he can’t put it into words. He knows what I’m giving up.

But I know what I’ve gained.

The pull of the pack fades, replaced by something deeper. A bond that’s newer, less certain, but no less powerful. Gabe doesn’t belong here, not in this world, but he’s given me something the pack never could. He’s given me a place where I can be more than my wolf. A place where I can be myself.

I take a deep breath, letting the tension drain out of my body. My wolf growls in protest, but I don’t give in. Instead, I turn fully to Gabe and close the distance between us. His hand brushes mine, and the connection steadies me in a way nothing else ever has.

“They’re gone,” he says, glancing toward the shadows where the pack has disappeared. There’s no judgment in his voice, just quiet understanding.

“Yeah,” I murmur, my voice rough with emotion. “They’re gone.”

Gabe studies me for a long moment before nodding his head in acceptance and tilting it toward the car. “Ready to go?”

I glance one last time at the forest, where the echoes of the pack’s howls linger in the

air. A part of me will always miss this, I know. It's who I am, etched into my very bones. But when I look back at Gabe, standing there with nothing but love in his eyes, I know I've made the right choice.

"Yeah," I say, with a bittersweet ache. "Let's go."

"So, where to, caveman? You want to make a straight drive home? It's almost dark now, but we could probably handle a twelve-hour drive if you're up for it."

I grin at the nickname, catching the faint scent of arousal curling off him as he speaks. God, this man. My balls tingle as the need I've been holding back all day surges to the forefront.

"No way, babe." My voice dips low, heavy with promise. "I told you I have plans for you tonight. I think Silver City is about as far as I'm gonna be able to make it before I jump you."

Sliding my hand over the bulge in his jeans, I press my palm against his hardening cock, rubbing slow and deliberate.

Gabe groans, and I can't help the satisfied smirk that spreads across my face.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

Mika

“O h, shit,” Gabe groans, his hips jerking into my hand. “You keep that up, and we’re not making it to Silver City.”

I pull my hand back, dragging it deliberately down the length of his thigh. My fingers press just enough to tease, and I smirk at the way he squirms in response. It’s so tempting to push him further, but I let him focus on driving. For now.

Gabe steps on the gas, his eyes locked on the road. I glance at the clock. Thirty more minutes. Not too bad. But as the sun dips below the horizon, I give in. I reach over, popping the button on his jeans, my fingers working to loosen them.

“Mika,” he growls, but there’s no real warning in his voice. And hey, turnabout is fair play, right?

I slide my hand inside, wrapping it around his cock. It’s hard and hot, already slick at the tip. My thumb drags over the slit, and he groans loudly, his hips bucking into my palm.

His eyes flick to the rearview mirror. “Nothing but dark,” he mutters. “That’s it!”

He pulls the truck onto the shoulder, veering farther off the road until we’re well out of sight. Shutting off the engine and lights, Gabe twists toward me.

“Glove compartment. Lube,” he orders, already climbing out.

I grin, reaching into the glove box to grab the tube. I slide off the seat, undoing my pants as I go, freeing my cock as I stand. When Gabe rounds the truck and sees me waiting, his gaze locks on me, dark with lust. His jeans are loose around his hips, hanging low enough to tease but still hiding everything I want.

“Fuck,” Gabe mutters, his voice thick with need.

He grabs me, crushing our mouths together in a kiss that’s all teeth and heat. My wolf is still close to the surface after spending time with the pack, and I growl into his mouth as I press him back against the truck. My hands fall to his waist, tugging his jeans lower until they drop to his knees. He breaks the kiss, turning and leaning over the side of the bench seat.

“Fuck me now, Mika,” he grits out, grabbing his ass and spreading himself for me.

I curse under my breath. “Goddamn, Gabriel. Look at you.”

I pop the cap on the lube, squeezing a generous amount onto my hand and stroking it over my cock. The sight of him bent over like this, offering himself to me, makes my dick throb.

“Now,” he demands, his voice sharp and desperate.

I grip his hips, lining myself up and pressing against his entrance. I try to go slow, easing in, but Gabe has other ideas.

“Fuck. Me. Now,” he grunts, thrusting back and taking me all the way inside.

“Jesus, Gabe,” I moan, my fingers digging into his hips. His heat surrounds me, so tight and perfect it’s almost unbearable. I pause, giving him a second to adjust, but he pushes back again, grinding his ass against me.

“Move, Mika. I need it hard.”

His demand snaps the last thread of my control. I pull back and slam forward, burying myself deep. Gabe cries out, his hands clawing at the seat for purchase. I set a brutal rhythm, my hips driving forward, each thrust wringing moans and curses from both of us.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” I pant, leaning over him and biting his shoulder lightly.

“Yes, Mika,” he shouts, meeting every thrust with a sharp push of his hips.

The sound of skin slapping fills the truck, the scent of sweat and sex thick in the air. Gabe reaches between his legs, fisting his cock and stroking it in time with my thrusts.

“Come for me, Gabe,” I urge, my voice rough with need.

Gabe yells as I reach around and grab his dripping cock, my hand gripping firmly as I stroke him. His body jerks, his muscles locking up as I milk him, drawing his release from deep inside. He’s clenched so tightly around me, clamping down hard as his orgasm tears through him. The sight, the feel of him, sends me over the edge. I thrust harder, my hips slamming against him, my balls slapping with each desperate movement. Gabe’s cum splashes over my hand, and I lean forward, sinking my teeth into the junction of his shoulder and neck.

The bite grounds me, pinning him beneath me as I bury myself as deep as I can, my cock pulsing and spurting my release inside him.

“Goddamn,” I groan against his skin, my voice rumbling through both of us as I shudder.

We collapse onto the truck's bench seat, spent and gasping for breath. Neither of us moves, too wrecked by what just happened. My head rests against his shoulder, my chest rising and falling in time with his.

Eventually, the haze clears enough for me to nudge Gabe, urging him to shift forward so I can pull out. He groans, shivering as I withdraw slowly, careful not to hurt him. He starts to straighten up, but I place a hand on his lower back, keeping him down.

"Fuck, babe, I'm sorry," I murmur, staring at the mark I've left on his skin.

The bite stands out starkly against his sweat-slicked shoulder, red and raw. My stomach twists at the sight. God, what if I hurt him? What if I left bruises or worse? Scratches, maybe. Gabe loves it rough—I know that—but what if I went too far?

"God, Gabe," I say again, my voice breaking. "I'm so sorry. Too rough—"

Before I can spiral any further, Gabe laughs, the sound husky and warm. He turns his head to look at me, and the soft curve of his lips eases some of my guilt.

"Uh-uh, Mika-mate," he says, cutting me off. "Don't go getting all angst-ridden on me. You were just what I needed."

He reaches back, grabbing my hand before straightening up and turning gingerly to face me. He cups my jaw, leaning in to press the gentlest kiss to my lips.

"You were just what I wanted," he whispers, his breath brushing against my mouth. "You're the one who said we were made for each other. That means what you give is what I need. If you're planning to feel guilty about it and promise never to do it again, I'll do something way worse than pinch you. Got it?"

Relief floods through me, and I laugh, pulling him into a strong hug. "Gabriel,

you're so fucking perfect for me. With me. I love you."

The words come easily now, but they still hit me with the same intensity every time. I feel him shiver in my arms, and I know he loves hearing it as much as I love saying it.

"Damn straight you do, caveman," he teases, pulling back just enough to smirk at me. "And I love you, too. Now, let's get our asses to Silver City."

I chuckle as he kisses me, his lips soft and sweet against mine. It's tender, not sappy, but it still sends warmth flooding through me. When he pulls away, he slaps my ass, grinning before heading around to the driver's side of the truck.

We climb back in, and as Gabe starts the engine, his phone rings. He glances at the screen, and I see Todd's name flash across it. The shift in Gabe's demeanor is immediate. His easy smile fades, and his jaw clenches.

Something's wrong.

Todd wouldn't call unless it was important, especially not while on shift. A chill creeps up my spine as Gabe taps the screen to answer, putting the call on speaker.

"Todd?" he says, glancing at me. I can tell he's trying to stay calm, but I see the tension in his shoulders, the way his hands grip the steering wheel just a little too tightly.

"What's wrong, Todd?" Gabe asks, his voice strained with urgency. There's no time for pleasantries. But the voice that answers isn't Todd's.

"Ah, actually, this is Adam," the vet says. His tone is shaky, and unease settles deep in my chest. "Todd's been hurt out at your place. He's —"



“Is he okay? What happened?” Gabe cuts him off, his panic rising sharp and raw. I grip his hand, trying to steady both of us.

“He, ah, he should be fine. Hopefully. I mean, the doctor said he’ll fully recover.” Adam’s voice wavers. “That’s what I’m trying to say, Gabe. I stopped by to check on things, to make sure, um, he and the dogs were okay, you know?”

The stammering gives him away. He stopped by for Todd. That much is clear, but I shove that aside for now.

“What happened, Adam?” I growl, my voice low and rough. I can’t keep the frustration out.

“Uh. I got there and found...Todd. He was out at the kennels, and he was...on the ground. Bloody, unconscious.” Adam’s voice cracks, and my fury spikes as I feel Gabe’s grip on my hand tighten. “S-someone had b-b-beaten him with...” Adam’s voice breaks, followed by a quiet sob.

Gabe slams his foot down on the gas, and the truck roars as it picks up speed. “What the fuck!”

Adam takes a shaky breath, trying to pull himself together. “There was a pipe near him,” he finally chokes out. “It was covered in blood...”

I snarl through the link, my rage spilling over. “If I was there, I could scent out who did this.”

Gabe shakes his head, keeping his eyes on the road. “Only if you knew the scent, right?” he replies, his voice calmer than I expected.

I hate to admit he’s right. I grit my teeth and turn my focus back to Adam’s trembling

voice.

“Adam.” Gabe’s tone is firmer now, though I can sense his worry just under the surface. “We’re heading back. Still in New Mexico, so it’s at least fourteen hours, but we’re hauling ass. What condition is Todd in? Were the dogs hurt?”

“He, uh, he has some broken ribs, a fractured jaw, and a pretty bad concussion. He hasn’t regained consciousness yet. The doctor said that’s normal, given the extent of his injuries. They’re running an MRI to check for brain bleeding—it should be happening any moment now.” Adam’s voice shifts, adopting a clinical tone that barely conceals his emotions. “The dogs are...they’re fine, Gabe. I should have said that sooner. I don’t know if Todd finished everything he needed to do before...” Adam trails off, his voice thick with guilt. “I can’t leave him alone up here—”

“It’s okay, Doc,” I say, though it’s anything but. My chest aches with helplessness. I glance at Gabe, who looks ready to break the steering wheel with how hard he’s gripping it.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can,” Gabe promises. His voice is steady, but I know him well enough to see the storm brewing just beneath the surface. “Just stay with him, Adam. Keep him safe until we get there.”

“I will.” Adam’s words are quiet, but there’s steel in them.

The helplessness in Adam’s voice makes me grit my teeth. I can’t imagine the pain or fear he must be feeling, finding Todd like that. If anyone hurt Gabe like this... I shove the thought away before it can fully form.

“We appreciate what you’ve done, Doc,” I say, keeping my voice calm, though my wolf is thrumming beneath my skin, itching for action. “It isn’t your fault some son of a bitch went psycho. Just stay with Todd and be alert. I can’t stress that enough.

We'll get there as soon as we can and call you when we hit town."

I can feel Gabe watching me, sensing the control I'm barely holding on to. He's smart enough to leave it alone, though. For now.

"Yeah, just listen to Mika, Adam," Gabe says, his voice quieter now but still firm. "We'll handle the dogs when we get back, and...whatever else, ok ay?" He ends the call, staring straight ahead for a long moment before turning to me, the tension in his face almost painful to look at.

"What the fuck, Mika? Why Todd?" His voice is raw, filled with worry and frustration. I don't blame him. None of this makes any damn sense.

I shake my head. "I don't know, babe. I wish I did. Seems crazy, even for that fucking batshit insane asshole, to attack Todd. I'd be more inclined to expect him to hurt the dogs." I pause, considering. "Does Todd have any enemies that you know of?"

He frowns, thinking it over, and I detest how helpless we both feel. He finally shakes his head. "No. Everyone likes Todd. I mean, how could they not? He's always polite, friendly, but he keeps pretty much everyone at a distance."

"Because he doesn't want people to know he's gay?" I ask, but I already know the answer.

Gabe nods. "I think so. He knows how my family reacted, and his folks are... You know how they are. Besides being pretty religious, you know, the spare the rod, spoil the kid religious way. I've already told you Todd wasn't spoiled, either." His voice softens, turning reflective. "Added to that, it's harder for him because he grew up here, and everyone knows him, ya know? Me being gay, well, I was pretty much an outsider anyway, and I didn't exactly rent a billboard announcing it. I just didn't hide

it, or deny it. Plus, I've never, uh..."

He trails off, looking sheepish. I can't help but smile. "You've never...what, babe?" I tease, and I'm genuinely curious.

He glares at me, and I almost laugh. "Smart ass. I meant I've never had a...partner...not in Shasta, not anywhere. I always kept my personal life private, so no one in town ever saw me with a man. Easier, probably, for them to pretend I'm not gay, although that isn't why I did it."

I tilt my head, studying him. "Why did you do it?"

He lets out a frustrated growl, the tips of his ears turning red. "Because I just...there wasn't anyone... Goddamn it, Mika," he snaps, his words spilling out in a rush. "There wasn't anyone I wanted, okay? If I got too, uhm, desperate for something other than my hand, well, that's where the adoption trips came in handy, understand? But..." His voice softens, and he glances at me, his green eyes burning with something that makes me emotional. "But those one-night hook-ups just made me feel worse in the morning. You're the first, the only man I would want by my side. And to stand beside."

Goddamn it, this man. I lean closer, running my tongue over the curve of his cheek, to his ear, tracing its shape. The way he trembles under my touch sends a bolt of heat straight to my core. "I know exactly what you mean," I whisper, letting my lips brush against his skin, "and I love you, too."

His breath hitches, and I can feel the shift in him, the raw emotion he's trying to process. Gabe isn't one to gush, but I don't need flowery words to know how he feels. His love is there, in every glance, every touch, every moment he stands with me.

I settle back into my seat, trying to focus on the road ahead. The truck hums along, but my thoughts are still tangled with his words, his emotions, the bond between us that feels unbreakable. Even with everything happening, Todd lying hurt back home, the tension of not knowing who's behind it all—I feel anchored by Gabe. By us.

And so we drive, the miles stretching out before us, the weight of what waits at home heavy in the air.

Mika

The trip home is grueling, but Gabe's determination turns the long haul into something close to a race. By the time we hit Shasta's town limits around nine in the morning, I feel every mile rattling in my bones. Gabe doesn't let up, driving straight to the little hospital that serves Shasta and the surrounding area. The sight of Adam standing out front punches me square in the chest.

Adam looks like hell. His hair's a wreck, his eyes are sunken with dark shadows beneath them, and his mouth is drawn down, making the pale lines around it stand out starkly. The dried blood staining his clothes finishes the picture, and I have to swallow hard against the lump forming in my throat.

"Goddamn, Mika," Gabe mutters, and I can hear the shock in his voice as he reaches across the seat to grab my hand. I squeeze his fingers, grounding us both before we step out of the truck. Gabe doesn't hesitate to approach Adam, and I follow, my gut twisting at the sight of the man.

When Gabe reaches him, Adam looks startled for a moment before Gabe pulls him into a hug. The move surprises me, too, but only briefly. Gabe has a heart so big it's sometimes hard to comprehend, and if someone he cares about is hurting, he's going to do something about it. My jealousy flares briefly—ridiculous, considering the circumstances—but I shove it down, knowing Gabe would never cross any line.

Adam holds on to him like he's about to shatter, a ragged sob escaping as he buries his face in Gabe's shoulder. Watching them, I feel useless. My hand comes up almost on its own, settling on Adam's shoulder in what I hope is a comforting gesture. I'm

not sure it helps, but it's all I can manage right now.

"How's Todd?" Gabe's voice is steady but soft as he pulls back from the hug. He studies Adam with sharp eyes. "You, uh, look like hell, Doc."

Adam's lips twitch in what might have been an attempt at a smile if he weren't so wrecked. "Still unconscious," he says, his voice hoarse. "But the MRI didn't show any brain hemorrhaging. That's...something, at least." He runs a hand over his face, smearing dirt and dried blood. "He's damned lucky he didn't end up with a punctured lung and a crushed skull."

There's a haunted look in Adam's eyes that has me wondering just how bad things were when he found Todd. It's clear this isn't just medical detachment—something deeper has gotten under Adam's skin. Something personal, and I wonder what happened between them during the few days we've been gone.

Gabe looks down grimly, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Good. That's good. You staying with him?"

Adam's head jerks up like he's surprised by the question, but then he nods. "Yeah. I couldn't just..." He trails off, looking down at his hands, his shoulders slumping. "As for me looking like shit, I stayed up here and stayed awake so I could keep an eye on Todd. His parents stopped by, and I, uh, well, they seemed suspicious. Of me. Being here." He shrugs. "It doesn't matter, not to me, but I know it matters to Todd."

Gabe steps closer again, his voice firm. "That's exactly where you should be. And thanks, Adam. For looking out for him. For being here."

Adam exhales a shaky breath, and for the first time since we arrived, his eyes meet mine. I don't miss the plea there, unspoken but clear. Whatever went down, it's carved into him, and I wonder how much of this mess he's blaming on himself.

“What happened with his folks, Adam?” I ask, my voice low but thick with concern. I already know it can’t be good. Gabe’s mentioned before how Todd’s parents are abusive, judgmental, self-righteous zealots.

Adam starts to turn, like he’s heading back into the hospital, but then he stops. He pivots on his heel, facing us again, his expression a mix of frustration and confusion. “What happened? Hell, I don’t even know for sure. They took one look at me, and Todd’s mom went off —ranting about hell and damnation.” He throws his hands up like he’s trying to physically shake off the memory. “I don’t get it. Why the hell would she assume anything just from looking at me?”

I glance at Gabe, raising an eyebrow. “I guess he has no idea how clearly the emotions he’s feeling are written all over his face.”

Gabe snorts softly, nodding in agreement. Yeah, Adam’s about as subtle as a neon sign when it comes to his feelings for Todd.

Adam sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face before continuing.

“And she didn’t stop there. Oh no. She went on this whole tirade about you, Gabe. Apparently being gay is contagious, and Todd caught it from you.” He shakes his head, lips curling into a grimace. “She ranted about your grandparents, summers, ‘dirty little boys’. The whole fire-and-brimstone package.”

I can’t help it—I snicker. It slips out before I can stop it, and Gabe’s elbow jabs me in the ribs, sharp enough to make me grunt. Yeah, I deserved that one.

Adam watches us with a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, like he’s grateful for the tension breaking, even if just for a second.

“I don’t understand how people can be so cruel, especially family. All Todd wanted



was for them to love him.”

Gabe’s expression shifts, softening as he speaks. “His parents are a lot like mine,” he says quietly, almost like he’s talking to himself. “He’s been too worried about them disowning him to come out of the closet. But, you know, I’ve always thought...if someone loves you, they love you whether you’re gay or straight—parent, friend, even God.”

The words hang in the air, heavy with truth. Adam and I both nod, because what else is there to say? Gabe’s right. He’s always right when it comes to this kind of thing.

We fall into step, heading toward the hospital entrance. The automatic doors hiss open, and we slip inside, the fluorescent lights casting a sterile glare over everything. The place smells like disinfectant and something faintly metallic—blood, maybe, or just my imagination running wild.

Keeping our voices down, we make our way through the quiet halls. When we reach Todd’s room, we pause, exchanging silent glances. The sign clearly says one visitor at a time, but none of us care. Rules like that don’t mean much when your friend’s lying in a hospital bed, bruised and broken.

When we step into Todd’s private room, the sight of him makes my breath catch. His face is swollen and bruised, tubes and wires connecting him to machines, and bandages covering God knows what injuries. It’s a lot to take in. Gabe freezes, and the tension in his body ratchets up until it feels like it’s going to break.

“Gabe,” I call softly, stepping closer. His eyes are locked on Todd, his expression a storm of anger and pain. “Gabe,” I say again, but he doesn’t respond. It’s as if he doesn’t hear me.

The intensity of his emotions burn through our link, slamming into me like a physical

force. My wolf stirs, agitated and ready to fight. I step in front of Gabe, grabbing his shoulders and forcing him to meet my gaze.

“Gabe, look at me. You need to calm down,” I say firmly, even as my voice trembles under the weight of his rage. His green eyes finally snap to mine, and I see the fury there—hot, untamed, and desperate. “I can feel your anger, love. It’s burning me up. My wolf wants out, wants to protect you, to destroy whatever is hurting you. If you don’t rein this in, I’m going to lose control.” I make sure not to say this out loud as Adam has no idea of my wolf side and now is definitely not the time to let it out.

Gabe’s chest heaves as he takes a deep breath, his gaze flickering between me and Todd’s battered form. “I can’t...” he whispers, the words thick with emotion.

“You can,” I insist, stepping closer. “Right now, Todd needs us here, steady and focused. You don’t want to add to his pain.”

I feel the fight leave him slowly, his body sagging as he exhales shakily. His hand reaches up to grip my arm, grounding himself in the contact. “Okay,” he says, though the edge in his voice hasn’t completely softened. “Okay.”

Behind me, Adam lets out a breath he must have been holding. “Jesus, Gabe. I thought you were going to explode or something.”

Gabe rubs a hand over his face. “Just...it’s nothing. I’m fine.”

But it’s not nothing, and he’s not fine. I can feel the turmoil inside him, barely leashed. I wrap an arm around his waist, pulling him close. “You’re not alone in this,” I remind him, and he leans into me, just enough to let me know he heard.

Todd stirs faintly on the bed, a pained sound escaping his lips. Adam is at his side in an instant, checking the monitors and murmuring reassurances.

Together, we walk to the side of Todd's hospital bed, both stunned by the extent of his injuries. Wrapping my arm around Gabe, I feel his shoulders tremble as tears slip down his face. Leaning down, he touches Todd's arm lightly.

"You need to wake up, buddy. I know you've got to be hurting like hell, even if they have you all doped up. We're going to find whoever did this, Todd."

I rub Gabe's back gently as we stare at the purple, swollen knot on Todd's jaw. Gabe glances over at Adam, his voice soft but steady. "The jaw fracture must not be too severe, thank God. His jaw isn't wired shut or whatever it is they do on those medical shows on TV."

Adam nods, brushing a hand lightly over Todd's unbruised cheek. "It's a mild fracture. Gonna hurt like hell, and the swelling will take days, maybe even weeks, to go down. He's very lucky though. It could have been much, much worse."

Gabe's gaze shifts to Todd's hands, inspecting them. He seems relieved not to see any breaks, though the bruises on Todd's forearms suggest defensive wounds. Gabe exhales heavily, his frustration palpable. "Did the sheriff come by to..?. Well, I reckon he couldn't get a statement, at least not from Todd."

Adam's face darkens with anger. "Oh, yeah. Fucking batshit insane asshole finally came by about an hour ago. Said he'd interview Todd when he could talk and told me Todd shouldn't be surprised by what happened." His voice rises slightly, trembling with suppressed fury. "You know, because he was hanging out with those kinds of people. A group that now apparently includes me. Not that I give a shit. Kaufman also said he didn't find any hint of who did this. But I don't know how hard he actually looked."

The disgust in Adam's voice is thick, and I can feel Gabe bristling beside me.

I place a hand on Gabe's shoulder, grounding him, but his gaze stays fixed on Todd, as though willing him to wake up. He runs his fingers through his hair, frustration pouring off him in waves. A knot forms in my chest as I see him struggling to keep it together. The anger, the worry—it's like it's eating him alive. And it's pulling at me, too.

"We need to step back, babe. This isn't helping you or Todd," I say to him softly through the link.

Out loud, I suggest, "We better step out before one of the nurses comes in and raises a ruckus." Taking his elbow gently, I steer him toward the door.

The three of us leave Todd's room and head to the waiting room. Adam drops heavily into one of the hard plastic chairs, looking like he's about to collapse.

Gabe, ever the caregiver, steps forward. "Adam, why don't you go home, shower, and get some rest? We can sit up here for a while."

Adam starts to shake his head, the protest forming on his lips, but I cut him off. "No, Adam, Gabe is right. You need to take care of yourself, or you aren't going to be much good to Todd."

Gabe nods in agreement, his tone firm but kind. "Let us handle this for now. Why don't you let Mika give you a ride home? Rest for a bit, then call us when you're ready to come back. One of us can come get you."

Adam hesitates, his eyes darting between us, as though weighing the offer. I see the exhaustion in his face, the heavy slump of his shoulders.

"You're not doing him any good like this," I add quietly. "Let us help."

Finally, Adam sighs, the fight leaving him as he leans back in the chair. “You’re right. I’m no good to him like this. But you’d better call me if anything changes.”

“Promise,” Gabe says immediately, his voice steady despite the turmoil I feel radiating off him.

Adam rises slowly, rubbing a hand over his face like he’s trying to wipe away the exhaustion clinging to him. He wobbles slightly, and I step forward, ready to catch him if he stumbles.

“You’re right, yeah,” Adam mutters. “Okay. Just for a few hours, though. I have to get Becky to reschedule all my appointments today. My vet tech took Iko to the clinic kennels last night, so y’all can pick him up after I get back, I guess.”

I don’t miss the flicker of disappointment in his eyes. He wants Iko with us—hell, so do I—but keeping a restless puppy in a hospital waiting room isn’t an option.

Adam scrubs a hand through his disheveled hair, his gaze drifting toward Todd’s door before finally landing on me. There’s something raw in his expression, something that makes my lungs feel too small.

“I’ll be back soon,” he says, like he’s trying to convince himself as much as us.

I agree, clapping him lightly on the back. “Take your time. We’ve got this.”

As I guide Adam toward the exit, I glance back at Gabe. He’s watching us, his fingers twitching slightly against his knee, his mouth sets into a hard line with the effort of keeping still when I know he wants to be doing something . Anything.

I hold his gaze for a beat, hoping he hears the words I don’t say out loud. “We’ll handle this, babe, together. Together and with our friends.”

Gabe exhales, some of the tension easing from his shoulders, and gives me a small nod.

Adam and I step into the hallway, leaving Gabe to wait. I know it's killing him, sitting here, helpless, but it's all any of us can do right now.

And waiting? It's the worst damn part.

The moment we step out of the truck, my wolf stirs beneath my skin, restless and ready. Something's off. The air feels wrong, tainted with something foul beneath the familiar scents of home, of Gabe, of the dogs still in the kennels.

Gabe moves ahead of me, his steps quick and tense as he approaches the porch. His whole body is rigid, like he's bracing for something, and I don't blame him. His best friend was beaten here. In our home. The place that's supposed to be safe.

I take a deep breath, sorting through the scents lingering in the air. There's Todd, of course, but beneath that, something else. Something unfamiliar.

"I need to shift," I tell Gabe, already pulling my shirt over my head. "I'll catch more that way."

Gabe looks distracted.

I press my forehead to his for a brief second, a silent promise. Then I step backward and let the shift take me.

The world sharpens as I drop to all fours, my senses flaring wide open. The stale tang of dried blood clings to the air, and beneath it, an unfamiliar human scent. It's not overpowering, but it's there, lingering like something rotten.

I growl low in my throat, ears pricking forward as I track it, nose to the ground. It leads away from the house, past the kennels, and toward the treeline at the end of the property.

Gabe follows behind me, careful not to disturb the ground as I move. His presence is a steady weight at my back, grounding me even as the wolf inside urges me to run, to hunt, to find who did this and make them bleed.

I stop suddenly, my nose hovering over a patch of disturbed dirt near the kennels. The scent is stronger here—Todd's, but also something else. Someone else.

I shift back, the change fast and brutal, leaving my muscles aching. Gabe steadies me as I rise to my feet, his hands warm against my skin.

“There was someone else here,” I say, my voice rough. “They stood here, near the kennels, watching. Waiting.”

Gabe's expression darkens. “Think they knew Todd was here alone?”

A growl slips free before I can stop it. “Feels like it. And whoever they were, they didn't come through the front. They came from the woods.”

Gabe's hands clench into fists, his jaw ticking. “That means they planned it.”

I don't need to tell him he's right. The evidence is here, lingering in the dirt, in the air, in the way my wolf still bristles, itching for a fight.

And I swear, when we find the bastard who did this—they're going to wish they never stepped foot on this land.

Iko's sharp yip carries through the house, a high-pitched demand that has Gabe

moving before I do. He strides to the door, opening it with a quick flick of his wrist, and I follow close behind. The little guy is already squirming in his kennel, paws scrabbling at the door in his eagerness to be let out.

As soon as Gabe unlatches it, Iko tumbles forward, a bundle of wriggling energy. He stretches, then prances toward the back door, tail wagging furiously.

“I’ll take him out and stay with him if you want to relax for a bit,” Gabe offers, his voice steady but tinged with tension. “No way am I leaving the little guy alone out there until we catch who did this.”

The protectiveness in his tone sends a surge of warmth through me.

I reach for the hem of my shirt as an idea forms. “Think I’ll shower real quick, then run you a bath. Unless you want to join me?”

Gabe’s gaze flickers to me, and just like that, heat coils between us. It’s instant, undeniable. His pupils darken, his lips part, and yeah—I can practically smell the shift in his arousal. My cock twitches in response, straining against my jeans, and I swear I see Gabe’s throat work as he swallows.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, voice low, rough.

I smirk, already knowing how this is going to go. “Good. So, shower, bath...and then I’m going to bend you over and eat your tight ass before I fuck you senseless. Sound like a plan?”

Gabe groans, the sound thick and needy. That’s all the answer I need.

I step in close, grab two handfuls of his perfect ass, and pull him flush against me, grinding our cocks together through layers of his denim. His breath stutters, and the



scent of his arousal spikes, filling my senses until it's all I can do not to strip him right here.

But I want to take my time with him tonight.

I nip at his neck, right where his pulse pounds, and grin against his skin when he shivers. "Don't take too long, mate."

Then I release him and head inside.

Gabe

I press a hand to my chest, trying to steady my thundering heart. Holy shit, I'm barely holding it together. Glancing down at Iko, I watch as he sniffs every damn inch of the yard. "Please, buddy, hurry up and do your business before I bust," I mutter, shifting impatiently.

Iko looks up at me, tongue lolling like he's got all the time in the world. I groan, rolling my eyes, but thankfully, he finally picks a spot that suits him. The second he's done, I practically haul him inside. By the time I reach the bathroom, I'm ready to drop to my knees and sing hallelujahs.

Peeking inside, I catch sight of Mika bent over the tub, checking the water temperature. His towel is slung so low on his hips that it leaves little to the imagination. A low wolf whistle escapes me, and I stride forward, unable to resist running my hands over that perfect, rounded ass sticking up in the air.

Mika swats at me without looking backward. "Nuh uh," he says, straightening with a grin. "I've got a plan. Strip." He adds an exaggerated leer for good measure, and that's all it takes.

I tear at my clothes like they're on fire, heart pounding and cock aching. Mika in full dominant mode is impossible to resist.

As soon as I step into the bath, a groan of pure pleasure escapes me. The water's perfectly hot, the kind that makes your skin glow pink. I sink down, letting the tension in my muscles start to melt away. Knowing Mika, that glow is exactly what

he's aiming for—to see it when he spreads me open and licks every inch of me. The thought alone has me throbbing and dangerously close to coming already.

Get it together, Gabe.

I lean back, trying to relax, though Mika's presence beside me makes that a challenge. He kneels by the tub, carefully washing me with slow, deliberate movements. It's maddening. I expect him to tease, to touch me in ways that leave me shaking, but his hands stay efficient, purposeful.

The restraint only builds the heat coiling low in my belly. The slow burn of anticipation is sweet agony.

Mika finishes rinsing my hair and gives it a playful tug. "Time to get out, babe, before the water cools." He steps to the side, holding a towel at the ready.

Reluctantly, I rise, water streaming off me. Mika wraps the towel around me and starts to dry me off, his movements slow and deliberate. At first, I feel a little silly letting him do it, but the friction sparks heat that races straight to my groin.

I reach for him, ready to beg if that's what it takes, but Mika steps back and shakes his head. "Nuh uh, mate."

I groan in frustration, but my protest turns into a gasp when Mika catches my wrists and pins them together in front of me. The dual sensations of annoyance and arousal hit me like a freight train. God, I hate the "nuh uh," but being restrained? That's fucking scorching.

His grip is firm but gentle as he leads me out of the bathroom and toward the bed. My feet move on instinct, trusting Mika completely.

“I’ve got you.”

And I know that he does. I let my eyes drift shut, surrendering myself to him.

When the backs of my knees hit the mattress, I open my eyes. Mika’s gaze is molten, his brown eyes dark and consuming. My breath catches. I’ve never seen anything as sexy in my life.

He releases my wrists and steps away just enough to give his next command. “In the middle of the bed, on your knees. Head down, ass up.”

A shiver runs through me, the raw authority in his voice making my cock twitch. Without hesitation, I climb onto the bed, moving to the center and settling into position. My cheek presses into the cool sheets, and my hands grip the bedding firmly.

Mika’s warm hands settle on my hips, holding me steady. “Perfect,” he murmurs, his voice rough with need. “Absolutely perfect.”

I think about making this move slow and deliberate, something to drive Mika wild. But I’m too strung out, too wound tight for patience. I just drop into position like he ordered, planting my head down on the bed and raising my ass high.

Mika growls low in his chest, and the sound vibrates through me, stringing out every nerve. Reaching back, I spread my cheeks, exposing myself completely.

“Fuck, babe,” Mika murmurs, his voice rough and full of hunger. “You’re killing me with that sexy ass all heated and pink, spread out just waiting for my tongue.”

A shiver races down my spine as he climbs onto the bed. The first slide of his fingertip down my crease sets my skin on fire, a teasing brush over my entrance and

down to my balls that leaves me trembling. Before I can catch my breath, Mika bites down on one cheek, sharp enough to sting, and I gasp.

“Mine,” he growls, his teeth still pressed into me before he soothes the spot with a slow, sucking kiss.

The mix of pain and pleasure leaves my voice caught in my throat, a low groan slipping out instead. Mika bites the other cheek next, and I arch into the sharp nip.

“Mine,” he repeats, and all I can do is grunt in agreement, too overwhelmed to form words.

His tongue trails down the cleft of my ass, hot and wet, from the base of my spine to my aching balls. When he envelops one in his mouth, gently sucking and rolling it with his tongue, my legs almost give out. My toes curl, my breath comes short and sharp, and I can’t help the needy sound that escapes me. Mika releases the first ball with a soft pop, only to lavish the same attention on the other before dragging his tongue back up to my desperate, waiting entrance.

When Mika pushes my hands away to spread me open himself, I feel the flush creep up my skin. His thumbs stretch me wider, and I know he’s watching, taking in every inch of me. It’s vulnerable and raw, but the way he touches me makes the anxiety ebb, replaced by trust—and something far more desperate.

His lips brush my hole, and the first broad press of his tongue against my entrance makes me gasp. But it’s not enough. The need claws at me, every nerve raw and screaming for more.

I groan, pushing back against Mika’s face. Desperate. I can feel the chuckle in his breath, warm against my skin, and it’s enough to make me groan.

“Damn it, quit teasing me!” The words snap out of me, rough and insistent, but I don’t care. I need him now.

Finally, Mika stiffens his tongue and plunges it inside me, thrusting in deliberate, sharp movements that leave me panting. He twists and swirls, and the scrape of his teeth against my skin sends lightning jolts of sensation through me.

“Fuck! Fuck, Mika! Ahh...” My voice cracks, the overwhelming pleasure pulling me under.

I can’t hold back. My hand flies to my cock, stroking hard and fast as my body clenches and my release barrels through me. Thick ropes of cum spill through my fingers, hot and sticky, painting my stomach and the bed. Mika doesn’t stop, his tongue working me through every shuddering spasm, pushing me deeper into bliss.

My thighs tremble as I struggle to hold myself up, and Mika finally pulls back. His tongue drags lazily over the sensitive skin, coaxing the last tremors from my body.

“Shit, Gabe,” Mika groans, and the sound alone has my cock twitching again. “If you could see how fucking tempting you are. All spread out, that hot little hole gleaming from my mouth...”

I glance over my shoulder, my chest heaving as I meet his gaze. He’s staring at me like I’m his entire world, his cock slick and hard, flushed with need.

“In me, Mika,” I whisper, my voice hoarse and raw. “Please.”

He doesn’t make me wait long, and I close my eyes as I feel him shift behind me. The anticipation coils tight and burning in my belly, every nerve tingling in readiness for what’s to come.

There's a snap of the lube cap, and the wet sound of Mika squeezing the tube sends a shiver down my spine. My body reacts instantly, anticipation winding tightly in my gut. I hear the cap shut, followed by the soft thud of the lube being tossed aside, and then the slick, rhythmic sound of Mika stroking himself. Goosebumps ripple across my skin.

Mika's hands grip my ass, spreading me as far as he can. The cool air brushing against my exposed hole makes me shiver. Then I feel the blunt, slick head of his cock pressing against me, and my breath hitches.

When he thrusts hard and fast, burying himself all the way to the hilt, I can't stop the shout that rips from my throat.

The fullness is overwhelming, almost too much, but fuck, it's exactly what I need. Nothing else matters—just Mika inside me, filling me completely.

He pulls out slowly, dragging his cock out until only the head remains, and then slams back in with bruising force. The sharp collision of his hips against my ass sends shocks of pleasure and pain radiating through me. It's so intense, I can barely think.

My hand moves on its own, sliding down between my legs.

"Yes! Right there!" Mika's voice explodes in my mind, raw and demanding, and I swear it makes my cock spasm.

I cup his balls, tugging gently but firmly. His growl reverberates through the room, low and feral, and his nails dig into my hips as his grip becomes even firmer. The sharp sting of his claws breaking the skin sends a thrill straight to my dick.

The thought of those marks, of Mika leaving his claim on me in every way, nearly drives me over the edge again.

Mika's thrusts grow wild, hard, and erratic. Sweat drips from his body onto my back, each droplet igniting my overheated skin. He leans down, his breath hot against my neck, his tongue trailing down my spine before stopping at the curve of my shoulder.

My body quakes, overwhelmed by the sensations, but when he grabs my cock in one strong hand and sinks his teeth into my neck, it all becomes too much.

The sharp bite sends a burst of pain straight through the core of me, but it's drowned out almost instantly by the tidal wave of pleasure that crashes through my body.

"Mika! Fuck!" I shout, my voice hoarse and broken as my second orgasm slams into me.

My cock jerks in his hand, hot spurts of release coating my stomach and the sheets beneath me. My ass clenches, spasming around him, dragging a guttural roar from Mika as he thrusts as deep as his considerable length will reach one last time.

His cock pulses, filling me with heat as his body trembles against mine. The sounds he makes—a mix of growls and groans—are raw and primal, and they leave me breathless.

I collapse onto the mattress, my legs giving out beneath me, but Mika stays on top of me, his weight grounding me. His mouth moves over the bite mark on my neck, his tongue soothing the sting as he kisses and licks the spot.

"Fuck, Mika," I murmur, the words slurred with exhaustion and satisfaction, my body aching.

He slowly pulls out, leaving me feeling empty and already missing the connection. Before I can dwell on it, he wraps his arms around me and rolls us onto our sides, pulling me close against his chest. He takes a deep breath as if to speak—



“So help me, Mika, if you fucking apologize, I will beat your ass,” I snarl, glaring at him. “You are getting into the bad habit of giving me what I want and then feeling guilty for it. I am not putting up with that shit, you understand?”

Mika’s mouth snaps shut, and for one blissful moment, I think he’s going to listen. But of course, he doesn’t. Instead, he starts to speak anyway, which makes me want to strangle him and kiss him all at once. “Okay, babe, I’m sorry...uumph—”

He doesn’t see the elbow coming this time. Got him good. Mika stares at me, wide-eyed, his hand flying to his ribs. I know I can be touchy sometimes, but damn it, this seems to be the only way to get through to him when he gets like this. If he can bite me, I can throw an elbow. Fair’s fair.

“I was only going to say,” Mika starts again, slowly, like he’s talking to a rabid dog, “that I was sorry—” He catches my elbow before I can nail him again, his eyes narrowing in warning, “—for treating you like you don’t know what you want. I swear.”

I narrow my eyes back at him, slightly mollified. Slightly. I lower my arm, though, figuring I’ve made my point.

“Well,” I grumble, crossing my arms, “as long as you’ve finally figured out that whatever happens when we’re fucking, it’s because I want it, and I am smart enough to know the difference between what I want and what I don’t want.” I flash him my best beatific smile, watching as he rubs his ribs and nods like a chastened puppy.

“Good,” I say, feeling victorious. “Glad we’re clear on that. Now, can we take a nap before it gets dark and you go all wolfie on me?”

Mika laughs, low and warm, the sound sending a shiver through me despite myself. “Let me grab a cloth and clean us up first,” he says, wiggling his eyebrows in that

ridiculous, charming way of his. “Then a nap. Maybe just long enough to recuperate for another round.”

“Sounds like an excellent plan,” I murmur, yawning, the adrenaline from earlier ebbing away as sleep creeps in to take its place.

I’m too drained to do anything but let him hold me, his breath warm against my hair as his hands rub soothing circles on my back.

Mika starts to say something, his mouth opening against my ear, but I lift my head just enough to give him a look.

“Don’t,” I manage to say, my voice a mix of affection and warning.

His lips twitch with amusement, but he stays quiet, pressing a kiss to my temple instead. I relax into him, letting the steady beat of his heart lull me into peace.

Right now, in his arms, everything else fades away.

Gabe

“ Todd’s doing better, his vital signs are stable, but he still hasn’t regained consciousness,” Adam says over the phone, his voice rough with frustration. “The doctor thinks he could wake up at any time—his EEG readings show the expected level of brain activity. And the fucking batshit insane asshole still hasn’t come by to interview him about what happened. Hasn’t even checked to see if Todd’s regained consciousness. I haven’t heard a damn thing from him.”

I clench my jaw, the frustration in Adam’s tone fueling my own. The fact that Kaufman hasn’t shown up is telling, but it’s also infuriating. Something must have pushed him to this. It doesn’t make sense. Mika and I will have to track him down tomorrow and see if we can shake any answers loose.

Sighing, I press the phone harder against my ear, knowing what I have to ask next but dreading it all the same. “Adam, did, uh...” I grimace, the words sticking in my throat. “Uh, did something happen between you two? Something Kaufman might have...objected to?”

The silence that follows is so sharp it cuts. I close my eyes, already bracing for the fallout. Adam sucks in a startled breath, and the weight of the pause that follows is crushing. When he finally speaks, his voice is tense with irritation. “I know why you’re asking that, Gabe, and if things were different, I’d tell you to mind your own fucking business. I’m still not sure that’s not the best thing to do.”

Shit. That’s not good. “Look, Adam, I really don’t want to pry— “mostly—” but if this was Kaufman, I would think something had to set him off. He’s never gone that

insane in all these years, and it couldn't have been something Mika or I did because we were gone. I'm sorry to have to ask, and sorrier still to push you to answer, but we really need to know what happened in case there's some tie-in, so we can figure this out."

Adam exhales a long, resigned sigh, and guilt claws at me. I don't want to push him into talking about something private, but there's no way around it.

"I know you're right, Gabe," Adam says quietly. "It's just, well, I've never been the type to discuss my personal life."

"I understand, Adam. I wouldn't ask if it weren't necessary."

"I know," he says again, his voice heavy. "If it'll help nail the son of a bitch who did this to Todd, I'll do whatever I have to." Another sigh filters through the line. "So, uh. Well, I knew Todd was...interested." He lets out a bitter laugh that's hard to hear. "God, that sounds so fucking juvenile."

I stay silent, knowing Adam doesn't want or need me to comment.

"Alright, short and sweet," Adam says, the words rushing out as if he's ripping off a Band-Aid. "I've been attracted to Todd for a long time. I knew it was mutual. The problem was—and maybe still is, I don't fucking know—the problem was that he seemed determined to stay in the closet. So, I didn't let him know how I felt. Not when I'd seen him...out on dates. With women."

The bitterness in Adam's voice cuts deep, and I wish I didn't have to drag this out of him. Before I can respond, Mika walks into the room. He checks the phone, then looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

"It's Adam, right?" he asks, sliding closer. Not that he needs to, to listen in. He can

hear everything quite clearly from the doorway with his wolfy hearing.

I nod absently, keeping my attention on the phone as Adam continues.

“I won’t be a secret, Gabe. I can’t. It goes against my personal beliefs. As long as Todd was keeping that door shut...” Adam’s voice trails off before he sighs. “Anyways, I went by your place the morning Todd was attacked. Uh, I told him I needed to check on a couple of the dogs, but, you know, I went because I couldn’t not go. Does that make sense?”

Oh yeah, I get that. Finding someone so irresistible that it drives you out of your own head? Been there. I grunt my agreement, reaching over to grab one of Mika’s denim-clad thighs. I let my fingers squeeze, and I smirk as Mika gives me a warning glance, his eyes flickering with something deeper.

Adam continues, his words coming faster now. “We, uh, no, I confronted him, I guess. Trying to make him—to get him to acknowledge what was between us, is between us. He wanted me to give us a shot, but keep it quiet, and I wanted him to give us a shot because I think he’s just...he’s it for me. But we both wanted it our way. The arguing got pretty loud, then...”

He stops, hesitating, and I figure I can help him out. Sort of.

“Then you went from fighting to fucking, so to speak?” Whoops. My lack of tact strikes again.

Mika tugs my hair in reproach, his startled glance saying it all. Adam lets out a strangled laugh that somehow still sounds bitter.

“No, not exactly. I mean, it didn’t get that far. We didn’t...well, we didn’t fuck. Nothing more than kissing and groping, sadly. I realized what I was doing and

stopped. Told Todd to call me when he decided to be honest with himself, with everyone, and when he felt that I was worth doing that for. Then I left in a blur of self-righteous indignation. Fuck .”

“Hey, Adam, I get not wanting to pretend. I also understand Todd’s fears, which, as you saw from his parents’ reactions, are pretty well-founded.” My tone softens as I squeeze Mika’s ass hard, earning myself a small growl. My cock perks up at the sound, but I push the distraction aside, focusing on the call. “I don’t know who was right or wrong, but if you love someone, you find a way to make it work. So, after you left, did you see or hear from Todd the rest of the day?”

“No. The next time I saw him, he was lying in a pool of blood.” Adam’s voice cracks with pain, the sound thickening as he continues. “I decided to stop by and either compromise or make him agree to do things my way. Probably more the latter. When I got out of my truck, the dogs were barking like crazy, so I went around to the kennels. And he was just lying there, looking so damn broken, Gabe.” This time, Adam doesn’t try to hold back the sob that tears through him.

Beside me, Mika stiffens. “Babe, ask him why he called from Todd’s phone. Why not his own? Where was Todd’s phone?”

Shit. We completely forgot about Todd’s cell phone. “Adam, Mika wants to know why you used Todd’s cell phone and where you found it.” I can almost hear the wheels spinning in Adam’s head as he realizes how crucial that detail might be.

There’s a string of creative curses on the other end of the line before Adam answers. “I left my phone in the truck, charging. The battery had died earlier. When I found Todd, his phone was lying about ten feet away from him, flipped open. I grabbed it without thinking and started calling EMS. You think there might be something useful on there?”

I exchange a glance with Mika. “Could be. If it was open, maybe whoever did this was using it, or Todd managed to call or record something before they attacked him.”

Mika’s expression is grim. “ We need that phone. There could be a trail there—texts, calls, something that gives us a lead.”

“Where’s the phone now?” I ask, watching Mika grab the truck keys and gesture for me to wrap up the call.

“ It’s here, in my pocket,” Adam answers. I can hear him fumbling around, then he curses. “Shit! It’s dead. I don’t have the charger for it.”

Mika’s voice filters through our link, calm but urgent. “Tell him we’re coming to get the phone. We’ll stop at the store and grab a charger. We need to check Todd’s calls and messages. Kaufman should have already looked at that call list and any texts.”

I smack my forehead, annoyed at myself for not thinking about Todd’s phone sooner. “Adam, we’re on our way to get it,” I relay. “We’ll pick up a charger, too. Just hold tight.”

As I hang up, I watch Mika gather dog toys and lift Iko into his kennel. It’s a flurry of efficient movement, and as soon as I’m off the phone, we’re ready to go.

The drive to the hospital feels endless. My mind churns with questions and theories as Mika and I discuss the phone’s potential significance. There ’s also the troubling fact that Kaufman either ignored it or didn’t think it was worth checking. Neither scenario paints a good picture of the sheriff.

“There’s a good chance the man is just an inept ass,” I point out, trying to consider all angles.

“I’d say that’s a given, whatever the case,” Mika grumbles. His jaw locks into place, his frustration clear. “He either did this and didn’t have the brains to cover his ass, or he didn’t do it and didn’t have the brains—or the desire—to gather all the evidence. The man is a fool.”

No argument here. I try to remember if there’s ever been a violent crime in Shasta that Kaufman would’ve had to handle. Something that might have given him even a shred of experience for dealing with a case like this. But nothing comes to mind. Domestic disputes, kids causing trouble, the occasional suicide—Shasta’s a quiet town. Maybe too quiet. Even the suicides have been rare.

So yeah, maybe Kaufman’s just an inexperienced idiot.

When we pull up to the hospital, Adam’s already waiting outside. He walks to the truck and hands the dead phone in through the window to Mika. I expect things to feel awkward after our earlier conversation, but Adam seems to have worked through any anger. That doesn’t mean he looks good, though. The man’s running on empty, his exhaustion written all over him.

He doesn’t need rest, I realize—he needs Todd to wake up. That’s the only thing that’s going to lift the defeated weight pressing down on his shoulders.

“Any change with Todd?” I ask, though I can guess the answer.

Adam shakes his head, his frustration palpable. “No. I wonder if...maybe it’s partially psychological? From the trauma of the attack?”

Mika looks at me thoughtfully. “Could be. It’s for damn sure the attack was traumatic.”

Adam and I both nod in agreement, the weight of it settling between us like a heavy



fog.

“I just don’t know what to do to help him, encourage him to wake up,” Adam mutters, his voice heavy with frustration.

Mika grins, wicked and unapologetic. “Well, you could go the fairy tale route and try kissing Sleeping Beauty awake. Though his jaw might make that a bit tricky.”

Adam’s blush is immediate and intense, and I can’t help but smirk. Judging by that reaction, a peck on the lips hasn’t exactly worked yet. “Or,” I suggest, trying to ease Adam’s embarrassment, “you could try talking to him. Tell him about the two of you—what you want, how y’all could make it work. I honestly believe he can hear what’s going on around him.”

Adam looks flustered, his gaze darting to the hospital entrance as if he’s considering bolting. I decide to throw him a lifeline—or maybe just to ease him a little more. “And if you really want to test if he’s listening, tell him what you’re gonna do for him when he wakes up. Or better yet, what you’ll do to him.” I waggle my eyebrows for effect. “Trust me, if he can hear you, that’ll get his attention.”

Adam’s face goes from red to scarlet, but his eyes light up with the faintest glimmer of amusement—and interest. I can tell he’s filing that idea away for later.

“Seriously, Adam,” I add, “it’s worth a shot. Mika’s pulled that whole ‘let me tell you what I’m going to do to you’ move, and let me tell you—it works.”

Adam shakes his head, laughing despite himself. “I, ah, see your point, guys. Damn. Okay, I’d better...” He jabs a thumb toward the hospital, clearly ready to make a quick escape. “Thanks for the advice.”

As Adam heads back inside, I nudge Mika with my elbow. “Damn, you think Adam’s

in a hurry to get back to Todd? The man just set a new record for hauling ass while pretending to stay casual.”

I’m still laughing when Mika grabs my hand and presses it against his cock, grinding his hips. “I know just how the man feels, babe.”

The store isn’t particularly busy, but Mika and I still draw attention as we make our way through the aisles. Most of it is simple curiosity, but a few people glare at us with barely concealed distaste. I notice it, but I don’t let it bother me. Mika doesn’t seem to care either, his focus entirely on me, as always. As long as we’re together, nothing else matters.

I’m on a mission, scanning the wall of phone chargers for something that’ll work for Todd’s phone. Ideally, I want a car charger so we can start digging through the phone on the way back to the hospital, but at this point, I’ll take whatever I can get. Mika stands nearby, silent but radiating support. I catch him grinning at me out of the corner of my eye, but I’m too focused to ask what’s so funny. The man’s just too sexy, biting his lower lip like that.

Finally, I let out a triumphant noise and yank the right charger off the rack, holding it up like I’ve just found the Holy Grail. “Got it! Let’s—” My voice falters as I glance at Mika. He’s looking at me with that heated, hungry gaze that makes my stomach flip and my cock twitch, like he wants to bend me over the display and fuck me right in the store. I can practically feel him undressing me with his eyes, and I’m not exactly subtle about staring back.

Mika’s eyes drop to my jeans, and I know he’s spotted the bulge pressing against the fabric. Damn it, my cock has zero sense of timing.

“We should, um, pay for this and go. Now,” I mumble, spinning on my heel and heading for the electronics cashier at full speed. Behind me, I hear Mika chuckle, his

footsteps heavy and deliberate as he follows.

When we reach the counter, the clerk looks up, startled. His gaze bounces between me and Mika, and his expression shifts to something I can only describe as flabbergasted. Yup, that's the perfect word, flabbergasted. I want to laugh at the poor guy, but I'm too busy trying to pretend I'm not seconds away from dragging Mika into the nearest secluded corner.

The clerk fumbles with the chargers, scanning them quickly before muttering the total. Mika doesn't say a word, but I can feel the heat of his presence behind me, a constant reminder of the tension thrumming between us.

"Will...will that be, uh, all for you?" The clerk's voice trembles like he's afraid one of us is about to jump the counter and assault him. Mika bristles beside me, and I can practically feel his annoyance simmering. If he could speak his mind without starting a scene, he'd probably ask the guy if he really thought being gay meant we wanted to fuck every man in sight—ugly ones included. Spoiler alert: we wouldn't touch this guy on a bad day, a bet, or a dare. Mika's frustration radiates off him, but I shoot him a wink, letting him know I've got this.

I turn back to the clerk, smiling just enough to make him squirm. "I can assure you, that is certainly all for me."

The poor guy's face turns beet red, and he stares at me like I just insulted his entire family. He finishes the sale in record time, practically slams our bag onto the counter, and bolts like the store's on fire. I can't help but laugh as we head for the exit.

"That was a little mean, mate," Mika chides, though his grin says he isn't mad about it. "You got that poor guy all flustered."

I roll my eyes, tossing the bag into the truck. "He was already flustered before I

opened my mouth. Ignorant, too. Guarantee you, he thinks being gay automatically makes someone a deviant pervert who humps anything male within a ten-foot radius.”

Mika slides into the driver’s seat, shaking his head. “I don’t know, babe,” he murmurs, his voice dropping to that deep, sexy tone that makes my stomach flip. “Our fucking can get kind of deviant, don’t you think?”

The heat in his words shoots straight to my cock, and I groan as he starts the truck.

“Yeah,” I admit, trying to ignore the throbbing between my legs, “but our deviant fucking stays between us. And it damn well better stay that way.”

Mika smirks, pulling onto the main road. “Oh, mate, it’ll stay between us, all right. Between us, in you, in me... Mmm.”

He tosses me a pocketknife, snapping me out of my dirty thoughts just long enough to focus on the task at hand—opening the damn charger.

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He tosses me a pocketknife, snapping me out of my dirty thoughts just long enough to focus on the task at hand—opening the damn charger.

I glance down at the package, realizing I’m in no state to handle sharp objects. My

mind's too busy replaying the images Mika just planted there.

“Babe,” Mika snaps his fingers in front of my face, his amusement evident. “Earth to Gabriel. You gonna open that thing?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumble, fumbling with the knife. “Why do they make these packages such a pain in the ass to open?” Gabe muttered. “I just know some sadistic bastard designed the packages with every intention of frustrating the shit out of people. I’ll bet he or she is rolling in the big bucks and laughing their butt off.”

Mika chuckles softly, probably amused by my mini rant, and leans back, watching me with that infuriatingly smug grin of his. I grunt as I finally rip the plastic apart, dropping the knife onto the floor in the process.

“Careful, babe,” Mika says, his voice tinged with genuine concern. “Don’t want to poke yourself with that thing.”

His words are so sweet and sincere, but damn if they don’t make me want to smack him. I narrow my eyes and jab an elbow into his side—not too hard, just enough to make my point.

“Ugh!” Mika lets out a mock groan, clutching his ribs like I’ve mortally wounded him. “I just didn’t want you to get hurt, Gabriel. It would kill me if you got hurt.”

There’s no mistaking the sincerity in his voice, and guilt hits me like a brick.

I sigh, closing my eyes for a moment to gather myself. “It’s okay, things have been bitch-inducing the past few days. Got it plugged in?”

I nod, giving Gabe a moment to turn on the phone. “What do you want me to check first? Calls or texts?”

“Calls. Incoming and outgoing. We need to see who he might have talked to after his argument with Adam. Then texts.”

“Okay, let’s see...” Gabe scrolls through the incoming call list. “I only see two numbers here after Adam left. One’s Kaufman’s, the other’s listed as ‘Folks’, so I’m guessing that’s his parents. Each call’s brief, under a minute.”

I grunt, trying to make sense of the calls. “What about his outgoing calls?”

Gabe punches a few buttons, pulling up the list. “Okay, there are calls to... huh. He called Kaufman and his parents before their call time on the incoming list. He called them first, they called back. But the calls Todd made were several minutes longer than the ones he received.”

Gabe places a hand on his stomach, pausing as he looks at me. “You know what I think, Mika?”

I glance over at him, meeting his eyes. “Probably something along the lines of what I think. What do you think?”

Gabe rubs his stomach and looks out the windshield. “I think maybe Todd wanted Adam enough to do what he asked. Maybe he called his parents, called Kaufman, told them. It’d have been easier on the phone, and if he acted on impulse...”

“Yeah, I think something like that happened, too. Can you check his texts?” My gut twists. Something about Todd’s phone feels like it might hold the key to who assaulted him. Whether it’s desperation or a gut feeling, I’m not sure.

Gabe opens the messaging box. “Nothing new in here, just some messages between him and Adam, talking about the dogs and stuff.” He presses the back button. “Huhn. Let’s see what his draft sa—oh.” Gabe lowers the phone to his lap.



“What is it, Gabe? You okay?” Gabe looks flushed, which only makes me more curious. Must be some message.

He clears his throat. “Yeah. It was just a draft of what... fuck. Yeah, what he wanted to do with Adam. Kind of more than I needed to know.”

I snatch the phone, trying to read and drive at the same time. Oh. Well, holy shit. Didn’t know Todd had it in him —though if he had his way, he’d’ve had a certain part of Adam in him days ago, according to the date on the draft. I set the phone down and glance at Gabe.

“After reading that, I have to say, I hope Adam knows what he’s getting into.” I laugh at the double entendre.

Gabe grins, linking his hand with mine. “I think Adam knows exactly what he’s getting into, and he’ll love every minute of it. Just like you will, as soon as we get home.” His hand slides away from mine, over my hip, and straight to my dick.

I slam the gas. “Oh yeah? You mean I’ll know what I’m getting into, or I’ll love every minute of it?”

“ Exactly, caveman,” Gabe laughs, and I floor the pedal. “I think you and I are both up for a bit of deviance, don’t you?”

We make it home in record time and find a very satisfying way to spend the rest of the day.

Gabe

Stepping out onto the back porch, I follow Mika into the cool night air. The porch light stays off—we need the cover of darkness if Mika’s going to scout around in his wolf form. The shadows stretch long and deep as we move toward the barn, where Mika stops to strip out of his sweats and hands them to me.

“Damn, caveman,” I tease, unable to keep my eyes from roaming over his naked body. My gaze drops lower, and I can’t resist adding, “You better change fast before I decide to take advantage of you.”

The way his thick cock begins to harden as I reach out to touch it doesn’t help my self-control. My fingers are nearly brushing him when Mika groans, grabbing my hand and holding it tight.

“If you touch me,” he growls, his voice rough with need, “I am going to fuck you, and we need to focus. I need to find out if I can scent anything useful.”

I can tell from his tone that saying no pains him almost as much as it does me. That knowledge soothes the sting a little, even if it doesn’t dampen my want. With a sigh, I pull my hand back and take a step away.

I watch as Mika drops to all fours, his body shifting with an unsettling series of pops and cracks. Even though he’s told me a hundred times that it doesn’t hurt, I wince every time I see it. Bones lengthen, muscles bunch and twist, and then—there he is, my wolf. Sleek, powerful, and completely captivating.

Mika lopez over to me and nudges my hand with his nose before giving it a quick lick. “Ready?” The thought echoes in my head through our link.

“Yeah,” I reply, glancing down at the clothes in my hand. “I’ll stash these behind the barn so you can shift back with some privacy when you’re done.”

Mika dips his head in agreement, and I jog around the barn to find a decent spot to put them. A thick patch of brush I’ve been meaning to clear out serves well enough for now. I tuck his clothes in carefully, making a mental note to come back and retrieve them later.

When I return, Mika is waiting, his ears twitching and his nose already working. “Okay,” I say. “Let’s get this done.”

Trailing behind him, I marvel at the grace in his movements. Even in wolf form, Mika is gorgeous—sleek muscles rippling under his black coat, every step exuding confidence and restrained power. My heart stutters as I catch myself thinking of him as sexy, even now. Deviant indeed, I think, shaking my head at myself.

I nearly run into him when he stops suddenly. His ears prick forward, and his head snaps up. He glances back at me briefly before trotting toward the barn entrance. I hesitate, worried about how the dogs might react, but Mika’s presence seems to calm them. Instead of barking or growling, they whimper softly, their confusion at the mix of Mika’s scent and his wolf form evident. Several roll onto their backs in a show of submission, but none seem frightened.

Mika moves with purpose, heading to the exact spot where Todd was found. He spends long minutes there, nose to the ground, his body still except for the occasional twitch of his tail or shift of his weight. Watching him work is mesmerizing, the way he sifts through scents, tracing trails here and there. The intensity radiating from him keeps me riveted.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. "Anything, Mika?" I ask, my voice low but insistent. Patience might be a virtue, but it's not one of mine.

"I'm not sure yet," Mika replies, his mental voice tinged with frustration. "There are several scents, and I need to figure out whose is whose."

I roll my eyes, swallowing a groan of irritation. That's not exactly helpful. "Uh, Mika? What exactly do you mean by that?"

He lifts his head, glancing back at me, his wolfish expression somehow managing to look both amused and exasperated. "It means I can pick up several distinct scents, but I have to figure out which ones belong to people we know—like Todd, Adam, or the first responders—and which ones don't."

"Oh," I say, feeling slightly less grumpy now that he's clarified. "Well, let's hope one of them stands out sooner rather than later."

"Trust me, babe," Mika reassures me, turning back to his task. "If there's anything out of place, I'll find it."

Mika freezes, and I immediately stop moving, every sense on high alert. "Someone's coming, Gabriel," Mika thinks to me, his voice sharp and focused.

I strain my ears, and after a moment, I catch it—a faint hum of an engine. It's distant but steadily growing louder. "I hear it," I whisper. "I'll slip around front. You head to the shrubs at the side of the house, okay?"

The engine slows, and the sound shifts, like the vehicle is coming to a stop. My pulse kicks up a notch.

Edging my way around the house, I dart toward the copse of trees in the front yard.

From there, I peer toward the road, squinting in the darkness. Two things hit me right away. First, there are no headlights, and second, the vehicle has stopped, and the engine has been turned off. Someone is sneaking in, driving with their lights off and pulling off the road before reaching the driveway. That can't mean anything good.

I glance around for Mika but don't see him. "Mika?" I think as clearly as I can, hoping he picks it up.

"To your left, in the brush by the road," Mika responds instantly. "The scent matches one I picked up in the barn. I've separated the smells—EMS workers, the sheriff, his deputy—but this one's familiar in a way I can't place. That's who I'm scenting now. Stay hidden, please, Gabriel."

Yeah, sure. Like I'm going to let Mika handle this guy on his own because he's a wolf. That hadn't stopped him from getting hurt before. "For now, caveman, but there's no way I'm hanging back and risking you getting hurt. Together, remember?"

I think I hear a low growl from the bushes. Mika might be annoyed, but too bad—I'm not budging on this. My breath catches as I hear rustling in the brush near the side of the house. Someone's moving toward us.

It's fully dark now, and with the outdoor lights off to help Mika stay hidden, it's almost impossible to make out any details. A shadowy figure emerges from the brush, their silhouette faint against the night sky. My blood runs cold when the moonlight glints off something metallic in their hand.

"Pipe," Mika confirms, his tone grim. "I'm guessing this guy isn't very creative when it comes to murder weapons. I'm right behind him."

Just as Mika finishes, the man seems to sense something, spinning around with surprising speed. He lets out a high-pitched yelp when he spots Mika, a massive wolf

stalking him, growling low and flattening his ears.

“Spawn of Satan! Black demon!” the man screeches, raising the pipe to strike. Mika leaps back, avoiding the blow with fluid grace.

“No!” I shout, stepping out from behind the tree. I can’t just stand there and let this asshole hurt my mate. As I move, the man swings the pipe in a wide arc, spinning completely around. I duck fast, the air from the swing brushing past the back of my head and I stumble.

Before I can recover, Mika lunges, sinking his teeth into the man’s calf. The guy howls in pain, trying to shake Mika off. His grip on the pipe wavers, but he raises it again, this time aiming for Mika.

I don’t think—I just act. Throwing myself forward, I tackle the man to the ground, wrapping my arms around him and pulling him down hard, slamming him into the ground with enough force to rattle my teeth. The pipe clatters away, and I’m on him, straddling his chest and pinning his arms with my knees.

The man thrashes wildly beneath me, yelling incoherently about demons and hellfire. His fists pound against my arms, but I hold on, digging my knees into his back to keep him pinned. Mika circles us, growling low, his hackles raised.

“Fuck! You sick, twisted bastard!” My voice comes out rough, anger fueling me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mika shift back to human form. His body moves like a blur as he lunges forward, grabbing the pipe and tossing it far out of reach. It’s only then that I hear him, barefoot and naked, rushing to my side.

“Mika, don’t let him up!” I think frantically, struggling to keep the man down. He bucks hard, nearly throwing me off, but Mika is already there, grabbing hold, a

warning growl rumbling deep in his chest.

The guy freezes for a moment, his wild eyes darting between me and Mika. His body shakes beneath me, and I press him harder into the dirt, grabbing his wrists and forcing his arms behind his back.

“I’ve got him,” I tell Mika through the link, my voice shaking with adrenaline. “We need to tie him up before he tries anything else.”

“Rope by the barn,” Mika responds. “Hurry. I’ll keep him down.”

Nodding, I grip harder for a second longer, then dash toward the barn, my heart hammering as Mika keeps the guy subdued.

“Gabe,” Mika shouts, his voice steady but sharp with urgency.

I run back with the rope, and glance down at the man beneath Mika, taking in his face for the first time. It hits me like a punch to the gut. It’s Todd’s father. I have so many bad memories of this man from growing up with Todd, and even though I haven’t seen him in years I recognize him immediately. He has a crazed glint in his eyes as he thrashes, trying to throw Mika off. Motherfucker! I rear back and slam my fist into his jaw with everything I’ve got. Pain explodes through my knuckles, and I bite back a hiss.

The guy goes limp, his head lolling to the side, and I shake out my stinging hand.

“Impressive, babe,” Mika says, his lips quirking into a grin. “Might’ve broken his jaw. Wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“Hurt like a bitch,” I mutter, flexing my fingers. “Probably broke my damn hand instead.”

Mik a kneels next to me, taking my hand and inspecting it carefully. His touch is warm, steady, and just what I need. The knuckles are scraped raw, and I'm pretty sure there's swelling starting.

"Let me grab my sweats and call this in. Someone's got to come arrest this psycho. After that, we're getting you to the hospital, and we'll fill Adam in while we're there."

Mika leans in and kisses me, his lips soft against mine, a grounding moment in the chaos. Then he's gone, jogging toward the barn to grab his clothes.

While he's gone, I perch on the man's back, keeping him pinned. My heart's still racing, adrenaline pounding through my veins. I glance down at him, anger bubbling again. What kind of sick bastard does this?

I don't have much time to dwell on it. Sirens wail in the distance, growing louder with each second. The sharp glare of flashing lights cuts through the dark as a patrol car barrels down the road, skidding to a stop in the driveway.

Great. Kaufman. Just who I didn't want to see.

The sheriff climbs out, one hand resting on the butt of his gun. He's got that puffed-up stance, all chest and bravado, as he stomps toward us.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he barks, his eyes darting between me and the unconscious man beneath me.

"What the fuck does it look like?" I snap back, my voice sharper than I intended. I don't care. My patience for Kaufman is about as thin as a strand of hair right now.

Mika steps up before Kaufman can fire off some snide remark, his tone calm but



edged with steel. “We caught the guy who beat Todd. He came back tonight with the same weapon he used before.”

Kaufman’s eyes narrow, but he doesn’t move. “You sure about that?”

“Positive,” Mika replies, crossing his arms over his chest. “The pipe’s right over there if you want to dust it for prints. And this,” he gestures to the man on the ground, “is Todd’s father. You going to do your job now, or do I need to call someone who will?”

I watch Kaufman closely, every fiber of me strung tight as a bowstring. Something’s off. I can see it in the way his jaw works, how his hands flex and clench by his sides. He’s hiding something, I’m sure of it.

“What are you doing here, Kaufman?” Mika’s voice cuts through the tension like a blade. “I hadn’t even placed the nine-one-one call when you came screeching down the road.”

The sheriff’s expression shifts, his sneer deepening. There’s no mistaking the challenge in his eyes.

“What, you didn’t know?” Kaufman drawls, his tone oily with mockery.

I see Mika tense beside me, his shoulders rising slightly as his wolf fights for dominance. The warning growl that rumbles from him is low, menacing, and enough to make Kaufman falter for a split second.

“Todd woke up a couple hours ago,” Kaufman says, recovering quickly. His lips curl into a smug grin. “Said his dad went nuts because his son likes to lick nu—”

Mika moves fast, stepping into Kaufman’s space before he can finish the slur. His

teeth flash as he bares them, and there's a feral edge to his voice. "I'd suggest you watch your mouth, Kaufman. I've already explained how easy it would be for you to lose your position."

Mika throws a hand out behind him carefully passing the phone to Gabe, hoping the sheriff thinks they're just clasping hands. Judging by the sneer on his face, the man thought just that. "Gabe, set it to record."

I slip the phone from his pocket, flipping it to the recording app with a practiced motion. My thumb taps the button, and the red icon flashes. I hold it steady, angling it just enough to catch the sheriff's sneering face.

"A tad homophobic, Kaufman?"

Kaufman doesn't seem to notice, or maybe he doesn't care. His lip curls in disdain as he mutters, "Whatever, that's just... Y'all are... It's no wonder Todd's father lost it. What father wouldn't?"

The words make my blood boil. I want to step in, say something, but Mika doesn't give me the chance.

"Any father who gives a shit about his son," Mika says, his voice even but razor-sharp. "That's what kind of father wouldn't. Not that I'd expect you to understand that, as it would involve something called unconditional love. Ever heard of it?"

Kaufman puffs up like a rooster, his chest pushing forward as his fists clench at his sides. "Listen here, you fucking queer," he spits, his voice low and venomous. "I will haul this guy off and give him tips on how to do the job right next time before I turn him loose. You do not want to fuck with me."

I see Mika's jaw stiffens, his fingers curling into fists.

“Gabe?” he says without turning, his voice calm but loaded.

I lift the phone, the recording still running. “Got it,” I say, loud enough for Kaufman to hear.

As if on cue, another patrol car comes tearing down the road, sirens blaring. Its lights flash, illuminating the sheriff’s pale face. His glare could peel paint, but Mika stands firm, a smug smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“What the fuck are you waving around in the air, you freak?” Kaufman’s voice is a low growl as his deputy steps out of the car and starts toward us.

I grin, holding the phone higher. “Did you know, Sheriff,” I drawl, keeping my tone casual, “that a lot of cell phones have a record option now? It’s friggin’ amazing what these things can do. Isn’t that right, Deputy Stanish?”

The deputy pauses, his gaze flicking between me and Kaufman. “Yeah,” he says slowly, his tone carefully neutral. “Those things are amazing. That one have video and sound?”

I nod, not breaking eye contact with Kaufman. “Sure does. Top of the line.”

Kaufman’s face goes beet red, his jaw clenching so hard I half expect his teeth to crack.

Mika steps closer to him, his voice dropping low as he whispers, “And we’ve got some fucking great audio of the past several minutes. How...politically incorrect of us not to warn you. And raising a ruckus won’t get you that phone—it’ll just make Stanish suspicious.” Mika straightens, his smirk back in place. “So shut the fuck up and do your job, Kaufman.”

The sheriff stares at him, his eyes full of fury, but he doesn't say another word.

Mika steps back, turning to me with a satisfied gleam in his eye. "Damn, that felt good. Let's see if the fool is going to play nice now." I can't help but grin.

Kaufman looks ready to explode, but with Stanish standing by, he can't risk it. For the first time all night, it feels like we've got the upper hand.

"So, Todd told you his father assaulted him, and you came here...why?" I ask, my voice sharp with suspicion.

Kaufman hesitates for a second, his jaw working like he's chewing on the words. For a moment, I think he's going to ignore me altogether. Instead, he turns to Deputy Stanish. "Cuff the prisoner and gather up whatever evidence you can," he barks, like that's going to cover his ass.

Finally, he looks back at Mika. "I came because I went to search for Mr. Barton, but he wasn't home. Mrs. Barton was afraid he'd come here, looking to take out... well, he blames Gabe for Todd being gay." Kaufman's lip curls slightly as he says it, but he continues. "So I hauled it on over."

I don't miss the emphasis he puts on hauled. Like we're supposed to thank him for gracing us with his presence.

Mika, though, has other ideas. He thumps Kaufman on the back, good ol' boy style, and I have to fight not to laugh because I know it's going to piss him off.

"Well, it's a good thing you got here when you did," Mika says, with an edge sharp enough to cut glass. "Even if it was pretty much all over." He tilts his head, arching a brow as Kaufman's face flushes. "I'm sure you'll do your damndest to make sure Todd gets justice, seeing as how you would never—" Mika lets the words hang in the

air just long enough to make Kaufman sweat. “— ever tolerate a hate crime. Right, Sheriff Kaufman?”

The sheriff’s glower could probably set fire to a tree, but he stomps over to Mr. Barton without a word. His boots hit the ground in jerky, angry stomps, and I have to bite down a laugh.

“Mika,” I say, holding my sore hand against my chest, “you are something else, you know that?” My grin feels lopsided, but it doesn’t matter. “You made my heart—and another thing or three—go pitter-patter.”

Mika’s eyes gleam with mischief as he pulls me close, his arms firm but careful of my hand. “Well, mate,” he purrs, his voice warm in my ear, “after we get your hand checked out, maybe you can show me just what thing or three you’re talking about, hmm?”

I don’t care that Kaufman or Stanish can see us. Let them. Mika and I are a done deal, and anyone who doesn’t like it can shove it.

“How much longer y’all gonna be?” Mika asks, looking at Stanish.

The deputy shrugs, glancing at his watch. “We’re about done here. Waiting on a tow truck for Barton’s vehicle, then we’ll need your statements.”

Mika frowns, glancing down at my swollen hand. “Any chance you could swing by the hospital and get our statements there? I think Gabriel might have broken his hand when he knocked the fuck out of Barton.”

Stanish tries to hold back a smile but fails miserably. “Yeah, well, if it’s any consolation, it looks like Barton has a broken jaw. Bet you anything they wire his mouth shut, which’d be a blessing. That guy...whew.” Stanish shakes his head. “One

holier-than-thou son of a bitch, let me tell you.”

I laugh despite the ache in my hand. “Oh, yeah. He was a friend of my parents. They were all pretty damn zealous.”

“Yup,” Stanish says, nodding. “Go on, I’ll come up to the hospital for the statements—after I make sure Kaufman doesn’t ‘accidentally’ screw up this investigation.” He winks, then strolls back toward the sheriff, leaving me and Mika staring at each other.

“Huh,” Mika says after a moment, looking genuinely baffled. “Who knew?”

I shake my head. “Not me, caveman. Not me.”

Mika places his hand at the small of my back, steering me toward the truck. His touch is warm and steady, grounding me when my thoughts are all over the place.

“Well,” he says, his voice softer now, “it makes me feel a bit better. Let’s get up to the hospital.”

I nod, leaning into his touch as we head to the truck. I want to see Todd, make sure he’s okay. But more than anything, I want this whole mess behind us so I can go home with my mate. Because Mika’s right—I owe him a demonstration of just how hard he makes my heart—and other things —go pitter-patter.

Three hours later, my hand is immobilized in a splint that runs halfway up my forearm. It aches like hell, but the pain meds they gave me are starting to kick in, softening the edges. Mika keeps a steadying hand on my elbow, probably worried about how loopy I’ll get once the pills really hit.

“Here we go, babe,” he murmurs, pushing open the door to Todd’s hospital room.

The moment we step inside, Adam leaps away from Todd's bed, yanking his hand out from beneath the covers.

"Oh, wow." I can't help but snicker. "You guys turn the prettiest shade of red."

Mika shoots me a look, his lips twitching like he's trying not to laugh, but Adam's glare could curdle milk. "Next time, knock," Adam snaps.

Mika's gaze narrows, the air around him going cold and sharp. "Watch your tone, Adam," he says, his voice low and steady, but carrying enough weight to make the vet's ears turn even redder. "Gabe's hopped up on pain pills, courtesy of his fractured hand." He glances at Todd, who's suddenly looking sheepish. "That fractured hand, I might add, he got while breaking your father's jaw after the man tried to bash my head in with a goddamn pipe."

Todd's smile vanishes like smoke in the wind. "Oh. Oh shit, I'm sorry, guys. He's fucking crazy—" His words come out thick and garbled, and I have to work to understand him even without Mika's wolf-enhanced hearing.

"It's not your fault your dad's...uh, like that," Adam sighs, his tone softening as he reaches for Todd's hand. "Sorry I snapped. It's just a little embarrassing to get caught with my hand in the cookie jar, so to speak."

I can't help but laugh. "Hey, man, it's okay. Right, Mika?" I glance at him, grinning. "I mean, I plan on having my good hand in Mika's cookie ja—"

Mika slaps his hand over my mouth before I can finish, his face heating up. Adam and Todd laugh, and I bite down on Mika's fingers, not hard, but enough to surprise a yelp out of him. He jerks his hand away, glaring at me.

"You'll pay for that later, mate."

“I’m counting on it, sexy,” I shoot back, leering at him.

Adam and Todd look between us, clearly confused, and Mika shakes his head, trying to play it off. “Okay, you can put your good hand—and any other part you want—in my cookie jar when we get home,” he says, his voice light, though his cheeks are still pink.

My cock stirs at the promise in his voice, and I grin at him. “Deal.”

“Well, uh, on that note,” Adam interjects, clearly trying to steer the conversation back to safer ground, “Deputy Stanish came by and filled us in on what happened. He even mentioned you might have blackmailed the sheriff into good behavior?” He raises a brow in question.

I burst out laughing, the pain meds making everything ten times funnier. Mika sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, Stanish caught on, but it worked. Those record options on cell phones are something else, huh?”

Todd’s eyes go wide, his jaw dropping. Adam chuckles, shaking his head. “You two are something else,” he says, his voice warm, and for the first time since we walked in, he actually looks relaxed.

Todd reaches for Adam’s hand, their fingers lacing together, and I feel a pang of something that’s not quite jealousy. More like hope—for them, for us, for all of it.

Adam leans down, murmuring something in Todd’s ear that makes his face light up. It’s a good look on him, the kind of glow that only comes from feeling truly seen, truly loved.

I glance at Mika, who’s watching me with an expression that makes my chest ache in the best way.



I purse my lips, fixing Mika with a look I know will make him squirm. “Ya know, caveman,” I say, and hear Adam and Todd burst out laughing at my pet name for him, “I bet we could have a lot of fun with that particular cell phone option.”

Mika’s eyes widen, a flicker of something between embarrassment and arousal flashing across his face. Turned on wins out—his cock jumps, and I catch him shifting to hide it. He grabs me, muttering a quick, “Later,” to the two grinning men before dragging me out of Todd’s room.

As we leave, I hear Todd chuckle behind us. “Cookie jar, huh?”

Adam groans, and I laugh all the way down the hall.

Gabe

The ride home is chaos. I'm high as a kite from the pain meds, and Mika is deliciously tense in the driver's seat, trying to keep his composure. I'm sure I've grown extra hands and another tongue because I'm all over him, teasing, touching, licking the edge of his jaw. He growls and swats me away, but the way his eyes darken every time I press against him tells me he's just barely holding on.

By the time we pull into the driveway, Mika's knuckles are white on the steering wheel. He slams the truck into park, yanks out the key, and lunges for me, but I'm faster. Slipping out the passenger door, I throw him a wicked grin.

"Oh, you wanna play chase, huh, mate?" he growls, stepping out slowly like a predator sizing up his prey.

I laugh, stumbling as I make a run for the porch. My whole body is buzzing with excitement. I know Mika's going to catch me, and when he does...

The porch is in sight, and I pause, glancing over my shoulder. That's my mistake. Mika lunges, wrapping strong arms around my waist and tossing me over his shoulder like the proverbial bag of potatoes.

"Caught you," he rumbles.

I'm giggling—I actually giggle, for shit's sake—as I grab his ass, pinching hard through the denim. Mika growls, smacking my own ass in retaliation. "You're going to get stuffed up against the front door if you don't cut it out," he warns.

He fumbles with the keys, hands shaking. By the time he manages to unlock the deadbolt, I've shoved my good hand down the back of his jeans, kneading his firm, muscular ass. Mika groans, kicking the door open with so much force it bounces off the wall and back into his foot.

I laugh, pushing the door closed behind us before shoving my hand even deeper, massaging the curve of his cheek. He retaliates by cupping my ass, fingers digging into the seam of my jeans, stroking and pressing until I'm panting, desperate for more.

"More, caveman," I gasp, my breath hitching. "Need you to fuck me."

Mika growls low in his throat, the sound sending a jolt straight to my cock. He carries me to the bedroom, tossing me onto the bed like I'm nothing but a toy for him to use. I love it.

He makes quick work of my shoes and socks, then grabs the lube with one hand while stripping off his shirt with the other. "Strip, Gabriel," he commands, voice deep and rough. "Now. So, I can fuck you like we both need."

I move to obey, but then I stop, holding up my splinted hand. "Uh, Mika?"

His eyes narrow, flicking to the bandaged hand like it's an inconvenience he's planning to work around.

"Don't care," he growls, his gaze locking onto mine, molten heat blazing in his eyes. "You've got another hand, don't you?"

I laugh, struggling to wriggle out of my shirt one-handed. Mika steps in, yanking the fabric over my head before working my jeans down with impatient fingers. The man is single-minded, and I love it.

“You’re going to have to do all the work,” I tease, kicking off my pants and spreading my legs in invitation.

Mika grins, feral and full of intent. “Oh, babe,” he purrs, crawling up the bed, his body covering mine. “You’re not going to lift a finger.”

His lips crash against mine, swallowing my laughter, and I don’t mind giving up control. Mika takes it from me, which is so fucking hot, and I’m more than happy to let him.

Mika’s hands are everywhere—hot, demanding, relentless—and I can’t think straight. His growl sends shivers racing down my spine, and I press my head back against the pillow as he looms over me, pinning my arms to the bed. The strength in his grip, the weight of him above me—it’s almost too much, and exactly what I want.

He nips at my lower lip, and when I gasp, his tongue thrusts into my mouth, taking control. Our hips grind together in sync with the rhythm of our tongues, and the rough scrape of my jeans against his cock sends him groaning into my mouth. I feel the desperation in every movement, and I know I’m not far from losing it myself.

Mika pulls back, his breath hot against my cheek. He slides my hands up over my head and presses them against the headboard. “Keep them right there, mate,” he orders, his voice rough and deep. “Hold on to the bottom of that headboard like your life depends on it.”

I nod frantically, gripping the wood hard, my body arching as I try to get closer to him.

“ You’re so fucking sexy,” Mika growls, his lips trailing down to my neck. His tongue flicks out, soothing the bite mark he left there earlier, and I moan, the sensation electrifying. When he starts sucking on that spot, my hips jerk

involuntarily, my entire body burning with need.

Suddenly, there's a sharp rip, and my shirt buttons go flying. "Oh shit! Fuck yeah, caveman!" I shout, bucking beneath him. My body is vibrating with anticipation, my cock aching as Mika's tongue licks a wet stripe over my chest.

He bites down on one of my nipples, and his fingers pinch the other, sending sharp jolts of pleasure-pain shooting through me. My scream echoes in the room, but it's not enough. It's never enough.

"God, Mika, please, please, pleasepleaseplease!" My voice breaks as I beg, tears slipping from the corners of my eyes.

"Gonna, babe, I promise." His voice is soft and steady, and he leans up to kiss away the tears on my face.

He shifts down, straddling my thighs, and I groan when his fingers make quick work of my jeans. The moment my cock springs free, Mika's gaze locks onto it, his eyes dark with hunger. For a second, I think he's going to take his time, but then he's tugging the jeans off the rest of the way and grabbing the lube.

"Let me get you ready, babe." Mika's voice scrapes out, raw, and I can see the strain in his body. He's as desperate as I am.

The cool slickness of the lube makes me shiver as he rubs it over me, his fingers moving with precision and care. Then, the first two fingers press into me, and my head falls back, a shout ripping from my throat when he brushes long fingers against my prostate.

"Damn, you're wrapped so tight around me, Gabriel. Like you were made for me," he mutters, his voice full of awe and lust.

“More,” I gasp, my hips jerking to meet his hand.

Mika doesn’t make me wait. He’s scissoring his fingers, stretching me with deliberate strokes, and then he adds a third. The stretch burns, but it’s so fucking good I don’t care. When his fingers massage my prostate again, I shriek, the sound ripping out of me so loudly that my throat feels raw.

I’m trembling beneath him, my body completely at his mercy. “Mika,” I whimper, barely able to form the word. “Please.”

His lips brush against my thigh, and I feel the promise in his touch. He’s not going to make me wait much longer, and thank God for that, because I’m not sure I can.

“I can’t wait anymore, babe. I have to…” Mika’s words are a deep, needy growl, and my body responds before I can even process them.

His fingers slip out of me, and I groan at the loss, but then he’s there, his cock pressing against my entrance. My legs are over his shoulders, and before I can beg, he thrusts in deep, burying himself fully inside me. The burn, the stretch, the overwhelming fullness—it’s all perfect. My muscles clamp down on him, and I feel his entire body shudder above me.

Mika pauses, trying to hold still, but I can’t. I use the leverage of my legs to thrust against him, and the noise he makes is feral, sending heat spiraling through me.

He collapses over me, folding me almost in half as he pounds into me. Each stroke is deep, relentless, driving me wild. My good hand braces against the headboard as I push myself down to meet him, needing him as deep as he can go.

“Fuck, babe,” he groans, his voice hoarse and raw with passion.

It's too much, too intense. My whole body clenches, and a guttural scream rips from my throat as I come hard. My cock pulses, spilling hot streams of cum between us, slicking our bellies and filling the air with the sharp, salty scent of my release.

That's all it takes to push Mika over the edge. He lets out a yell, slamming into me as his cock jerks inside, emptying thick, hot jets into my clenching depths. His hips grind against me, trying to get even deeper, like he wants to lose himself completely in me. The thought sends a wave of satisfaction coursing through me.

I can feel him shuddering above me, his muscles tensing so hard I know they must ache. Then, slowly, he collapses, boneless, onto me.

Mika pulls out, and I groan at the emptiness, but there's no mistaking the tenderness in his gaze as he looks down at me.

"Damn, Gabriel, I love you more than you can imagine," he says softly, his voice filled with awe.

I grumble something unintelligible in reply, my body too spent to form words, and watch him as he staggers to the bathroom.

When he comes back, he's holding a warm, damp cloth. He sits at the edge of the bed, and I can't help but let out a small sigh of approval as he gently wipes me clean. His touch is so careful, so reverent, and it makes my chest ache with how much I love this man.

After Mika cleans himself up, he crawls into bed, and pulls me in tight, careful of my injured hand, snuggling us as close together as possible. This—this—is everything right and good. Us, together, a part of each other. This is where I belong.

We've both been outcasts, but now we have our own little pack, our friends, and our

dogs. I have no doubt it's only going to get better, sweeter, and hotter.

A grin tugs at my lips as I drift off to sleep, knowing it's going to be all of those things—and more—with just a hint of deviant thrown in.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:03 pm*

### Epilogue

Mika and Gabe's truck disappears down the dirt road, their scents fading into the cool night air. I watch until the taillights vanish, leaving me alone at the edge of my packlands.

The silence settles over me, thick and heavy. For the first time in years, I wonder if I still belong here.

I turn toward the heart of the pack's territory. My boots crunch against the dirt, but the usual hum of activity—low conversation, the rustling of movement through the trees—is subdued.

Something is off.

I scan the darkened tree line. A few shifters move between the houses, their gazes flicking toward me before darting away. Others don't even look at me at all. No greetings, no nods of respect.

I roll my shoulders, a slow tension building in my gut.

This isn't how it used to be.

The Gila Pack has always had its issues, but respect for the alpha has never been one of them. Even if some still questioned my leadership, they wouldn't openly ignore me.

Now, they do.

It's subtle—the way they move, the way their bodies tense when they catch my scent—but it's there. A shift. One I don't like.

A breeze rolls through, carrying the familiar scent of my pack, but underneath it, something new lingers. The acrid scent of unease.

I push forward, past the houses, past the meeting hall, until I reach my home. The place has never really felt like mine. It belonged to the alpha before me, and the one before him. I inherited it, but I never claimed it as my own.

Now, standing in front of it, I get the distinct feeling I might not be welcome here much longer.

Azrael's words from earlier replay in my head. Kent, Rance, Jared...they're not waiting for a fair fight, .

I exhale sharply. If they want to challenge me, they'll do it in front of the pack. That's how it's supposed to be. But if I've learned anything from Mika's return, it's that not everyone follows the old rules.

I step inside, shutting the door behind me. The air is still, undisturbed. No scent of intruders, no sign that anything's been tampered with. But the weight in my chest doesn't ease.

I flick on the light, casting long shadows against the wooden walls. The house is too quiet. It has been for months. Maybe longer. I run a hand over my face, my pulse still too high.

Tom orrow, I leave for the Alpha gathering.

The Dux Ducis—Aidan Criswell—is calling all alphas in the territory together. The rumors say he's a hard-ass. Worse than that, they say he's the kind of leader who doesn't tolerate weakness. If I show up unprepared, he'll see right through me.

I walk to the kitchen and pour myself a drink, ignoring the tremor in my hands as I lift the glass. The whiskey burns on the way down, but it does nothing to dull the gnawing unease in my gut.

My pack is already slipping through my fingers. If I don't handle this right, I won't just be walking into a meeting—I'll be walking into my own downfall.

A distant howl rises in the night. It's not a call to hunt. Not a call of celebration.

It's a warning.

And I know, deep in my bones, that something is coming.

Something I might not be ready for.

I move to the window, staring out at the shadowed packlands. I should feel at ease here. This is my home. My territory. But instead, I feel like an intruder.

A movement catches my eye near the tree line. A figure standing just at the edge of the darkness, watching.

I narrow my eyes. The shadow lingers, just enough to let me know they want to be seen. My wolf rumbles, my muscles tensing. Whoever they are, they're testing me.

I don't hesitate. I move.

The door swings open before I fully register the decision, and I'm sprinting across the yard, shifting mid-stride. My wolf's senses sharpen as I close the distance, but the

second I reach the tree line, the figure is gone.

A fresh scent lingers—one I recognize. Kent.

A growl rips from my throat. Coward. If he wanted a fight, he should have stayed. Instead, he ran.

My pulse pounds, my breathing sharp as I scan the darkness, but I already know he won't show himself again. Not tonight.

Frustration burns beneath my skin, hot and volatile. I shift back, standing at the edge of the trees, fists clenched.

They're waiting for something.

For me to leave. For me to be weak. For the right moment to strike.

I grit my teeth and turn back toward my house. My blood is still humming with adrenaline as I step inside, locking the door behind me. But it doesn't matter. They've already made their move.

Not a full challenge. Not yet. But a message.

I pour another drink, swallowing it down in one go. My fingers grip the glass, and I force myself to breathe.

Tomorrow, I'll leave for the Alpha gathering. I'll stand before the Dux Ducis and try to prove I still have control over my pack. But right now?

Right now, I know the truth.

I'm running out of time.