



Secret Guardian (Fated Mates Collection #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: After losing her parents as a teenager, Darian Smith grew up with the instinct to expect the worst. As an adult, that hasn't changed. Whether she's working as a nurse in the ICU at her local hospital, keeping her free spirited aunt in line, or feeding the stray cats that meander around her apartment complex, there's never a moment in her life where she's not on guard.

Then one night changes everything, catapulting Darian headfirst into a world she never knew existed... and she finds out someone has been watching over her this whole time.

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ONE

“She came in through the emergency room last night. She was a goner. I honestly don’t know how they got her back.”

The words from the doctor break my heart. Dr. King is the best of the best, but she tells it like it is. I continue administering the patient’s morning medications as the doctor finishes her evaluation, making voice notes in a tiny recorder. She nods to me.

“I’ll be back to speak to the family after rounds. Please page me immediately if there are any...changes.” She looks over at the hospital bed with sympathy before stepping out into the hall of the ICU.

“I’m just going to flush your IV before giving you your medications, Mrs. Miller,” I explain cheerfully as I rip open a new syringe.

I always talk to my patients as if they’re listening, even if they’re asleep or medicated.

I believe they can hear me and treating them as such can only have a positive impact.

I’ve always had the urge to take care of others, and the aunt who raised me often joked that it was in my blood. My mom was a nurse as well, so Aunt Renee might have had a point.

I finish up the IV meds and gather my trash before tossing it into the can next to the monitor. I squeeze my patient’s hand for a moment. “I’m going to step outside and sit

at my desk to finish up some charting, but if you need me, I'll be right in."

She continues sleeping, the monitors beeping normally around her, and I step outside, my heart aching. Because while I love taking care of people, it's devastating that not everyone can be saved.

By the end of my twelve-hour shift, my feet are practically numb.

It's all I can do to make my way to the elevator and down to the lobby.

As I step out into the evening air, the sun halfway setting over the horizon, I appreciate the beauty of the Appalachian Mountains all around us.

Something about the ridges displayed against the sky always pulls at my heart.

There's a thumping in my veins. Home. Home. Home .

Before my parents passed away when I was thirteen, we spent every weekend hiking trails and searching for waterfalls. It's just not the same without them, though. And Aunt Renee's still a city girl at heart.

"Darian!" a voice calls out, interrupting my reverie, and I open my eyes, turning to see my favorite coffee cart set up to my left. My spirits are instantly lifted, both by the sight of the coffee cart and of my aunt.

"I didn't know you'd be set up today." I flash Renee a smile as she whips out her prepped iced coffee to prepare my favorite drink.

"I wasn't supposed to be, but the chief of staff seemed to think everyone could use a pick-me-up. Worked out for me. I'd rather be doing this than anything else." She tops my drink with whipped cream.

Her remark tugs at my heart. The woman uprooted her whole life in New York to come back to Northeast Tennessee and take care of me, rather than make me move across the country at thirteen.

And she won't take a dime of money from me.

She's not poor by any means, but my parents didn't leave us with anything, so she's always had to work hard to support us.

I knew from the beginning that I had to do well in school and get a scholarship, so I did. Now I do pretty well on my own, but she won't accept any help from me. Either way, it's really cool to see her living her dream of being a badass business owner.

"Oh my god, this is heaven." I close my eyes at the first sip of sweet, rich coffee touching my tongue. "Absolutely perfect."

"How was your day?" She rips off a paper towel to dry her hands with before leaning on the counter, giving me her full attention.

"It wasn't bad. Just so busy." The image of my patient, still unconscious, flashes in my mind, but I push it away. "Yours?"

"I did some laundry. That's about as exciting as it gets for me and Tiger."

The mention of her kitten makes me smile. "So, he's adjusting okay?"

"Pretty much. Although, now that he's around, there are more strays everywhere. I'm not sure what's happened."

"They probably smell him." I slurp down the last of my drink before tossing the cup into the trash can. "We always had a few strays that would come and go. You know,

the one I call Old Man has been hanging out on my porch.”

“You were always his favorite.” Her lips turn down in a frown. “Oh, shit. I forgot to fill up Tiger’s food. Would you mind going by there to do that? I’m still not accustomed to having a roommate again.” She chuckles.

“Yeah, no problem. Even though it’s so far away,” I tease. “See you tonight. Love you.”

“Love you too. Be careful.”

“I will.” I wave over my shoulder at her as I head to my car.

It’s an ongoing joke that we live so far away from each other because we live in the same apartment complex.

I moved out halfway through nursing school, but it was more for her than me.

She would never have asked me to leave, but I thought she deserved her space, and honestly, we had both been in the dating pool awhile.

I didn’t want to see my aunt doing the walk of shame, and I’m sure she felt the same.

I drive home in a fog, my mind still reeling from the day’s work, second-guessing every choice I made.

What if I could have done something differently to help my patient?

Thankfully, it’s only a fifteen-minute drive, and as I pull into a parking spot, I turn my mind off.

I imagine there's a little switch and flick it off, ready to give my mind and body a much-needed rest.

I fumble for my keys at Renee's door, cursing her for not leaving her porch light on. When I'm finally inside, Tiger greets me with a feisty hiss until I switch on the light. Then he's a blur of orange, racing around my feet.

"Hey, little guy." I reach down to scratch his ears. "I know. Can you believe she left you to starve? C'mon, I'll take care of it."

He follows me to the kitchen as if he understands everything I'm saying. Who knows, maybe he does. The clinking of the food as it fills his automatic feeder sends Tiger into a tizzy, and he gobbles it up like he hasn't eaten in days. "So dramatic, aren't you?"

His water is still full, so I leave that alone.

"She'll be home in a little while, okay, buddy?"

"I give him one last scratch. I turn on my heel, the moonlight shining into the room from Renee's patio door.

"Of course she left her curtain open again," I mutter.

I've always gotten onto her because she's oblivious about her safety.

It's something I'm always cautious about, but she didn't live through what I did.

I stare out into the night, anxiety building inside me.

The clouds float over to cover the moon and everything is dark, but for some reason I

ache to keep staring into the nothingness.

As the clouds move again, I sigh, reaching up to pull the curtain closed, but then there's a loud thump.

I drop my arm, frozen in fear as a man slides down the door before crumpling onto the patio.

My instincts to save him kick in, and I throw the door open, the metallic scent of blood immediately filling my nostrils. After stepping over the man, I drop to my knees at his side to survey the situation. My hands hover over him, hesitating for only a moment before diving in.

When my skin touches his wrist, an electric shock jolts my fingertips and snakes throughout my body.

Must be the adrenaline. But relief floods my system at the reassuring thump.

He has a pulse, thundering under my fingertip like a drum.

His torso is sweaty, his shirt sticking to him, but that's not where the blood is.

My hands continue their investigation, and there it is.

The rip in his pants is right below his hip bones.

The blood coating his jeans has turned them dark.

It's not pouring from the wound, though, which is a good sign.

I curse Renee again for not leaving her porch lights on, because if the motion detector

had kicked in, I'd be able to see better.

As it is, I'm afraid to move him...and after feeling his taut muscles and stout body, I'm not sure I could.

I'm pretty strong, but this man is enormous.

"Wait right here." I squeeze his arm. "I'm going to grab supplies and turn on the light. I'll be right back."

The man groans in response—a good sign. At least he's awake.

I step over him and run through Renee's apartment to my old bathroom.

Thankfully, she's left everything the way we had it, and I grab the first aid kit from the medicine cabinet and a few of the old cleaning rags from underneath the sink.

After flicking on the patio light, I'm back by his side, my supplies open beside me as my fingers twitch over the zipper of his pants.

"I'm going to unzip your pants so I can clean your wound, okay?"

He groans again, which I take to mean he understands.

After a moment of struggling, I have the button and zipper open.

I grab each side tightly and wrestle the pants down just enough to uncover the wound.

It's nasty, but it's no longer bleeding.

Working quickly, I clean the jagged cut.

It had to be a knife, a serrated blade of some sort.

Of course, if this man makes a habit of dropping in on people's patios in the middle of the night, maybe that's how he got stabbed.

Oh my god, what if I'm saving a creep? Or a criminal? The thought flashes across my mind, but I push the fear aside because it doesn't matter. I have to save everyone.

When the wound is clean, I spray it with disinfectant.

As he reacts to the sting, his clothing twists, and to my utter shock, I catch a glimpse of his dick, hard and throbbing and protruding from the front of his underwear.

My thighs clench instinctively, heat pooling in my core like I've never felt, and I make myself look away.

What the fuck?

Gathering my wits, I clear my throat and finish the bandaging, ignoring the way my skin sizzles as if flames are erupting from beneath the surface.

Once my work is done, I scoot back on all fours, as far from him as I can get without falling off the edge, and sit crisscross on the wood.

My insides tingle, something crawling through my veins, as if searching for something and finding it all at once.

I close my eyes, the sensation overwhelming.

My throat burns with a raw thirst that has nothing to do with water.

I breathe in and out slowly, calming myself, and as the fire subsides, my eyes open slowly.

But he's gone.

How did the man go from being unconscious to disappearing in the minute I took to compose myself?

Leaving nothing behind except my heavy breathing and a wet spot on the porch where his sweaty head had rested.

A low growl from the door interrupts my thoughts as Tiger steps onto the patio, sniffing where my patient was.

He grumbles in kitten nonsense as he scouts out the area before climbing into my lap.

"Weirdest night ever, Tiger." I scratch behind his ears, shaking my head. "I didn't even hear him move. I hope he'll be okay."

Tiger purrs reassuringly, bumping my paused hand for more pets.

I oblige, staring up at the night sky. Normally, I'd never be outside alone this late.

The memories are too much. The flashes of my mom's frightened face; my dad's swinging arm that did no good to dissuade the intruders.

We weren't rich. We didn't have anything of value for anyone to take. We were just unlucky.

But they didn't hurt me.

“I gotta head home, buddy. Let’s get you inside.

” He hops off my lap and pads through the doorway, stepping over my supplies.

I collect everything, putting away the spray inside the first aid kit and crumpling the bandage wrappers in my fist before taking one last look around the yard.

But there’s no sign of the mysterious man.

I lock up Renee’s house and bid Tiger goodnight before heading to my own home. The porch light is bright and welcoming as always, and as I walk up the stairs, I’m greeted by the low meow of the stray that likes to hang around my porch.

“Hey, Old Man.” He pushes up on his front legs, shaking his tail.

The way he moves, as if his joints are stiff, and his fuzzy face make me think of an unruly beard.

He moved to my porch when I moved out of Renee’s.

He won’t let me touch him, though. I tried the first few times he appeared, and he always ran away.

Now I respect his request and we just talk.

“Have a good night,” I tell him before locking myself in my house.

It’s been an odd night, and the adrenaline from the events at my aunt’s has tapered, turning into pure exhaustion.

I should shower, but I don’t know how I’ll muster the energy.

I don't have a choice, though, so I trudge through the motions of getting clean, the hot water soothing my aching muscles.

By the time I crawl into bed, my eyes are halfway closed.

After squinting at my phone to make sure my alarm is set, I burrow under the covers, the cool sheets welcoming me with open arms. But as I drift off into dreamland, my mind is consumed by the image of the injured man sprawled out before me.

Only now, he's awake. His eyes are dark and dangerous, roving down my body, and that same feeling floods through me as before, as if my veins themselves are on fire.

The sheets twist around my ankles as I toss and turn, the burning within me nearly unbearable as I'm trapped somewhere between sleep and waking.

My hand snakes between my legs, searching for relief. Every time I send myself over the edge, I imagine it's at his hands instead of mine. I pretend his full lips are devouring mine as I moan into my pillow, but no matter how many times I orgasm, the ache never ceases.

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TWO

As my coffee drips reassuringly the next morning, the scent wafting around my kitchen, I'm thankful to be off for the day.

After my restless night, there's no way I could provide care for anyone.

Apparently, I can't even take care of myself.

My body is blowing my mind, and not in the way I want it to.

When the machine sputters to a stop, I fill my favorite mug before reaching for my white chocolate macadamia syrup.

Of course the bottle is empty. I toss it into the trash and search through the cabinets, but with no luck.

It's just not my day. I slam the doors shut before making my way over to the refrigerator and yanking it open with an exaggerated groan.

To my utter dismay, the door rips off its hinges.

I stand there in shock as all of my condiments in the door slide onto the floor.

The handle slips from my fingertips and lands on the ground with a bang.

A low feral growl cuts through the silence, and after glancing around the room, it hits

me.

The sound is originating from my own throat.

The shriek tears from me, my mouth opening wide as my frustrated roar echoes around the room.

When the sound ceases, my throat is raw and sore, but somehow I'm feeling better, and the heat within my veins has cooled a tad.

What in the fuck is going on with me? The door hinges must have been loose or something. Nevertheless, now my food is going to spoil if this situation isn't fixed soon. So much for a leisurely day off.

I pocket my phone and keys before heading out into the morning sun. Old Man isn't outside, but he normally isn't during the day. He tends to visit at night, probably because he's accustomed to me coming home from work then.

As I trek across the parking lot to the maintenance office, the lady I cared for in the ICU yesterday comes to mind. You never know if your patient will be there when you come back the next day, much less after a day off.

The bell rings as I step into the air-conditioning, a relief from the sweltering heat. Still, I can't find any relief from the flames roaring within me, and the outside temperature seems to match my own struggle. I'm too young for menopause, right?

The secretary glances up at me over her glasses, her hair pulled into a no-nonsense bun on top of her head. She's never rude, but she's not super friendly. She starts typing as I speak.

"How can I help you today?"

“Yes, I’m Darian. I live in 12C. Umm...” I search for the right way to explain my situation. “My refrigerator door is broken.”

Her fingers pause over the keyboard, and my eyes flick over the nameplate on her desk. Janice. Why can I never remember her name?

“Broken?” She furrows her eyebrows as if she doesn’t understand how this could have happened, and I’d like to tell her that makes two of us.

“Um, yes, the door has fallen off the hinges.”

Evidently, this was the wrong way to explain my situation. Her eyebrows scrunch even closer together, and her lips are now pinched so thinly that the top one disappears.

“I’ll send someone over.”

“Hopefully soon. My food will spoil without the door, you know, and I just bought the value pack of sandwich meat.” And it’s not cheap, Janice.

She just nods, typing away again. Assuming that’s my dismissal, I head back home.

When I let myself in the front door, a soft rustling from the kitchen greets me, and I’m immediately on edge. Surely the maintenance man didn’t beat me here, and if he had, they don’t enter our apartments until we let them in, unless otherwise noted.

I press myself flat against the wall, sliding down the panel to the open doorway and peeking around to find the source of the noise.

An orange ball of fur comes flying at me, and Tiger climbs up my legs, his claws sinking in with each step as he makes his way to my chest.

I wrap my arms around him. “What are you doing here?” He stares at me, eyes wide, and I shake my head, laughing. “How’d you even get inside?”

He meows in response, as if he’s telling me exactly what I want to know, and I scratch him behind the ears. “Did you see the mess I made?” He relaxes against me, his purr vibrating against my neck. “I better text Renee and tell her you’re here. She’ll be worried sick.”

I pull out my phone and type out a quick one-handed message to my aunt, holding Tiger in my other arm. After pressing send, I tuck my phone back into my pocket and survey the junk all over the floor. “This is a disaster. We better get it picked up before maintenance comes.”

I lean over to set Tiger down, but he refuses to let go of my shirt. “Tiger, what are you—”

He grumbles low in his throat, the purring now gone, and even with me trying to pull his claws out of my clothes, he somehow gets the others attached to me before I can disentangle all of him. With a sigh, I give up and stoop over, grabbing things one at a time to set on the counter.

“You are a needy little thing, aren’t you?”

Halfway through collecting bottles and jars—and throwing away a few expired ones that are embarrassingly out-of-date—there’s a knock on the door, followed by the low growl of someone calling, “Maintenance.”

“I suppose you’re coming with me to get that.

” I hoist Tiger up and he settles his butt into the crook of my arm, his front paws resting on my shoulder.

He's not super heavy, but after holding him and working, my shoulder is cramped.

As I make my way to the front door, I pull out my phone to glance at my messages, but there's still not a response from Renee.

Knowing her, she left her back door open before she went out to set up the coffee cart.

I open the door carefully, not willing to risk another accident today, and when my eyes meet the maintenance man, I stop in my tracks. They look exactly like they did in my dreams, when I furtively fingered myself and pretended it was him.

The injured man from last night.

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THREE

“H-hi,” I squeak out, gripping Tiger so tightly that he sinks a warning claw into my shoulder.

“Hey, I’m Aarick. I heard you’re having an issue keeping it cool in here,” he jokes.

God, he has no idea. Because with his reappearance, the unbearable need hits me full force again, and my fingers ache to trail across his chest, the hair peeking over the top of his T-shirt begging for me to twirl my fingers in it.

If he recognizes me, he hides it well. I find myself leaning in closer, inhaling the musky male scent that inexplicably pulls me in.

As I exhale...is it my imagination or does he shudder?

Suddenly, Tiger nips my shoulder with his teeth. “You little shit.”

Aarick smirks at my reaction, and I pull myself out of whatever is wrong with me. Clearing my throat, I step aside to let him in. “I’m Darian. The kitchen is—well, I guess you know. All the apartments are the same.”

He nods, brushing by me to fit himself through the doorway.

It’s as if he’s grown since last night. His shoulders seem broader, his arms thicker.

He walks in front of me to the kitchen, and my eyes move down his body.

I'm no better than a man, staring him down like a piece of meat, but the jeans form to his figure like a glove, and all I can think about is what else he's hiding in those pants.

"Holy shit." He halts at the open doorway, dropping his bag of tools as he surveys the chaotic state of the room. "What happened?"

"I have no idea, honestly." I lean against the wall, scratching Tiger absentmindedly as I imagine the kitchen through Aarick's eyes.

And I'm still not sure how I feel about him being here.

It's too much of a coincidence. But for now, my refrigerator needs repairing, so I'm just keeping an eye on him.

Tiger jumps out of my arms and lands with a soft thud on the tile, then pads into the other room as if he lives here.

Aarick crosses the space in no time, dropping to a squat to peer at the hinges. "The screws are just stripped. It should be an easy fix." He glances over his shoulder, his eyes locking on mine. "Would you hand me my bag?"

I freeze like a deer in headlights, my heart rate increasing rapidly at the way his gaze darkens. Then I whimper.

I. Fucking. Whimper. The heat blooms in my belly, reignited by his attention, and he moves like liquid, turning over on all fours, and he crawls to me.

The man crawls to me on hands and knees, his eyes boring into my soul.

I'm no stranger to sexual tension, but the charge pouring off his body is on a whole

other level.

When he stops before me, settling on his knees, he stares up at me almost defiantly.

Then his hands wrap around my calves, the electric touch of our skin meeting a jolt to my system.

My brain registers what's going on, but my body does nothing to stop it as Aarick buries his face between my thighs.

A shudder racks his body as he inhales before releasing a low moan.

It's muffled against the fabric of my shorts but still audible, and it takes every bit of my self-control to keep myself upright.

"What the hell?" I manage, clenching my hands into fists at my sides. "I don't even know you."

Aarick teases his nose along my belly, a soft smile playing across his face. "You may not know me yet, but your body does. It's calling to me. Aching for me."

His hands move up my legs to grip my hips. He pulls me to the floor effortlessly, and I let him, the craving within me too powerful to resist the common sense that I don't know this man from Adam.

"Darian, I've been searching for you for years." He squeezes my waist, his eyes flashing over my face as if he's searching for something.

"Why have you been searching for me?" I'm turned on by his closeness, but his words are a little more than I'm prepared for.

“You’re my mate,” he says simply, arching an eyebrow at me as if I should know this. As if it’s common sense.

“Okay, I’m...I’m not anyone’s mate .” I press myself into the wall, clenching my thighs together to alleviate the need for friction. I’m on fire, horny as hell, and this man seems to know all the right places to touch me, but I’m suddenly very aware of the situation.

He studies me quizzically. “Don’t you know? You’re...”

“I’m what?” I lash out, shifting my ass on the floor in an attempt to alleviate the throbbing between my legs.

“You’re my mate,” he repeats, and I can’t help but roll my eyes.

“So you’ve said.” I’m beginning to get irritated. If he doesn’t get a move on with taking me to pound town, I may have to just take care of myself again. Maybe it’ll work out better this time.

“You’re in heat, baby. I’m here to get you through it. To take care of you.”

A bark of laughter slips from my lips before I can stop it. “In heat? What are we, animals?” I tease him, my mind still reeling from the term of endearment he used.

Aarick watches me with concern, but I don’t know why; he’s the one who’s acting insane.

“We are animals, Darian.”

I’m still laughing, my shoulders now shaking. “Sure we are. Sure.”

He leans back on his haunches, his lips pinched in a displeased smile.

I attempt to gain control of myself, straightening up and stifling my giggles.

After all, I do still want him to touch me, if he's willing.

Forget all of my being-on-guard, safety bullshit.

It's down the drain now anyway. And if Aarick was going to hurt me, he would have done so by now.

I open my mouth to invite him to touch me, to do whatever he wants to me, as long as this burning stops.

But right before my eyes, Aarick's body begins shaking, twisting, and turning, until with a low growl, he shifts into a large black panther, his dark eyes still boring into mine.

My scream echoes around the kitchen as I scramble to my feet, sliding away from the panther. I keep my eyes on Aarick. Is it really Aarick? Have I finally lost my mind? Is this from lack of sleep? Maybe this heat has been a fever and now I'm hallucinating.

You're not hallucinating. The voice echoes in my mind, like a thought, and I freeze in place, keeping my eyes on the large cat.

"What in the fuck?"

See, I told you. You're my mate. He stretches out, crossing one paw over the other and making himself comfortable. At this rate, I'll be throwing everything in the refrigerator away.

I'll buy you a new refrigerator and fill it with groceries. Quit worrying.

Before I can say anything else, the creak of my front door distracts me. Renee appears in the doorway of the kitchen, her face going pale at the sight of the large black cat chilling on the floor. He swishes his tale back and forth the way Tiger does when he's displeased.

"Renee, you won't believe what's going on."

She rushes over to me, otherwise unbothered by Aarick, and grabs my arm. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." I squeeze her arm reassuringly. "I promise. Just...he keeps saying these weird things."

She searches my face before turning to dart her eyes around the room. "What do you mean?"

"He says I'm his...mate." The word sends shivers down my body and tastes delicious on my tongue.

She pulls me closer until our foreheads almost touch, her eyes now dancing with excitement. "You've gone into heat."

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FOUR

“What do you mean, I’ve gone into heat, Renee?” I stare my aunt down, shocked at her use of the word. When Aarick said it, I chalked it up to him being insane, but now she’s making the same claim.

“Darian, I...I couldn’t tell you.” Her tone matches her face—pinched lips and sad eyes. But that doesn’t make this easier for me.

“You couldn’t tell me,” I repeat. “That’s...”

“I know it doesn’t change the betrayal you feel, but everything we did was to keep you safe.”

“So you know this...man?” I motion toward Aarick’s animal form. “Or...”

“Shifter,” she says calmly. “We’re shifters.”

“So you’re one too?”

“I am.”

“Does that mean my parents...?”

“Your parents were, yes. But there’s so much more to the story. Right now, we have to focus on you. On getting you through your heat.”

“What in the hell does that mean?” I yell, balling my fists in frustration as the never-ending fire roars throughout my veins.

“It means...” She looks at Aarick.

He immediately stretches, his limbs and figure contorting until he’s a man again, standing before me. Buck-ass naked.

Renee quickly turns away, but I can’t. Because my body hums at the sight of him, at the way his curves and crevices glisten like he’s on a romance novel cover. I move toward him without thinking, and he welcomes me with open arms.

“It means that I have to take care of my girl,” he whispers hoarsely as he wraps me in his embrace, my body vibrating happily at his touch. The fire is there but it’s cozy now, and everything aligns in my mind to make sense.

He will put out the fire.

Everything else around us disappears as Aarick lowers his mouth to my neck and I stretch out to receive the touch.

He pebbles kisses along my skin, over my jawline, each one like a block of ice soothing my fever.

My body shakes from the contact, and the distant sound of my front door closing barely registers, but I glance out of the corner of my eye and Renee is gone.

Knowing we’re alone only heightens my anticipation, and as Aarick’s mouth moves down my body, I despise the layers between his lips and my skin.

As I tear out of my clothes, the zipper on my shorts rips.

They hit the floor with my underwear, but there's no time to be shy.

He grabs my shirt, pulling it up, and we both fumble to get it over my head.

His soft laughter as his eyes meet mine touches something inside me that isn't completely sexual.

We freeze for a moment, our eyes locked on the other, and my heart swells, my chest hurting at the fullness.

I break the spell between us, averting my eyes, because the emotional impact of that connection is too much, and my physical needs are my focus right now.

After reaching to unclasp my bra, it falls to my feet like a white flag.

I'm surrendering. In one swift moment, he sweeps me up like a bride into his arms and carries me through the kitchen.

His eyes never leave my face, yet he doesn't run into any walls or corners.

He presses his lips to my cheek, my forehead, behind my ear, but never my lips, and I can't help but wonder why.

When he reaches the doorway to my bedroom, he pauses. "Is this okay?"

"Yes." I nod fervently before burying my face in his chest. The warmth of his skin and the scent in the soft hairs there soothe me more than anything I've ever felt before.

He steps over the threshold to my room and something solidifies between us, a trust that I can't help but give him.

He inhales deeply, and a rumble vibrates through his chest. “You smell so fucking good.”

“I don’t see how. I—oh!”

I stare around the room, inhaling as well, and realize the whole room smells of me. Of my attempts at relief last night.

He lays me carefully on my ruffled covers, and I settle against the pillows, planting my feet on the mattress and bending my legs at the knee. “I didn’t even make my bed this morning.”

The scent becomes stronger as we stir up the covers.

“We’d just mess it up again anyway,” he teases as he climbs onto the bed.

I catch a glimpse of his hard, weeping dick. The moan that follows is feral, wanting, and his eyes flash with a matching want.

“Darian, I’m not going to fuck you today.” He sits back on his haunches between my legs.

If I closed them, I could pretend my knees are squishing his head, which I’d love to do because his words anger the beast inside me. The comforting hum of home now dissipates into frustration, and I hiss in disappointment. “What happened to taking care of your girl?”

He chuckles, tracing his hands over my breasts. “I will take care of you because you need me to and it’s my responsibility as your alpha.”

“So you don’t really want me?”

“Oh, I want you. I’ve wanted you for longer than you can imagine. But I won’t fuck you. I won’t kiss you. I won’t make love to you until you want me to rather than just need me to.”

I have no answer to that, because he’s right. I don’t necessarily want him. I don’t even know him. I just need his touch in a way I’ve never needed anything.

His thumbs flick over my nipples, teasing them until they stand erect, and then he leans his body over mine to take one peak into his mouth, sucking and twirling his tongue around it until I’m wriggling my ass, attempting to press against him, but he holds his body above mine, unflinching.

His hand trails down my stomach, pausing to press a palm against my lower abdomen. He releases my nipple with a pop. “Not this time, but one day I will fill this belly with my seed. I can’t wait to see you carrying my children.”

His words register in my brain, but I don’t have the mental capacity for that conversation right now. Hopefully I’ll remember later.

His fingers move lower and now he’s the one groaning. “You’re so fucking wet. Is this all for me, baby?”

I whimper in response, unable to form words as he parts me and finds my clit like he’s done it a million times before. His tongue darts out to flick my nipple, and he finds his rhythm on my clit in strong circular motions. I wince and he lessens the pressure.

“Perfect,” I whisper.

He grins up at me wickedly, giving my breast a break. “You are absolutely perfect. These magnificent tits, this ass.” He cups a cheek with his other hand, never wavering

with his fingers. “You are a fucking goddess, Darian.”

As he’s staring up at me, worshipping me, my lips ache for more. I crave the connection of kissing, of our tongues intertwining. But he says he won’t kiss me or fuck me until I want it.

And I know this is still just my need. My heat, as they call it. The beast roars pleasantly inside me, as if I’ve accepted her presence.

With that acceptance and the way Aarick works my body, I’m suddenly flushed, my breathing ragged as the heat builds within me, my whole body once again on fire.

I pray to whatever’s out there, to Aarick, that this will satiate my need.

He moves faster and faster, twirling his fingers around my clit like he’s been making me come for years.

Sex has never been bad, and I’ve always had orgasms, but this is different.

This is like he knows exactly the amount of pressure, how much to move, and when he ducks his head to lick my breasts again, I explode, the orgasm racking my body.

My arms and legs shake as pleasure rips through me, my hands tangled in Aarick’s hair, pulling him against me.

It’s as if the heat disappeared, my body finally at ease after almost twenty-four hours of torture.

I’m like jelly, sprawled out on the bed, holding his head against my chest. I twirl my fingers in his hair, and he’s still not moving, but I can feel him breathing.

“Are you okay?” He finally breaks the silence, glancing up at me.

“Am I okay?” I giggle. “I’m more than okay. That was...the best orgasm anyone’s ever given me.”

He breathes out forcefully. “No, I know that was good.” He flashes me a grin. “I mean, mentally. When you’re in heat... I just want to make sure you’re mentally okay.”

I’m quiet for a moment, unsure of how I am, really. “This is a lot, I won’t lie. I think now that the heat is over, I can really process what’s going on.”

Aarick’s eyes flash to mine, a sly grin spreading across his face. “Oh, baby.”

“What? What does that mean?” I narrow my eyes at him.

But as he moves, his erection brushes my thigh, and the warmth begins spreading throughout my body again. He moves down the bed, his face hovering at the apex of my thighs. “We’re just getting started.”

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FIVE

When I peel my eyelids open four days later, I'm instantly on guard, waiting for the infernal heat to rise within me again.

But it doesn't. My skin is clammy but cool, my breathing and heart rate are normal, and the spot beside me on my bed...

is empty. My hand rests on the bare mattress, the fitted sheet ripped off at some point in my feral need, and I wonder how long it's been since Aarick left.

It couldn't have been long; the place is still warm to my touch.

I sit up with a groan, every muscle in my body screaming as I plant my feet on the floor. I need a shower, and I have to call work. Who knows if I still have a job.

I grab my phone from my nightstand while flashes of the past few days play over in my mind like a movie.

Of Aarick taking me over the edge time and time again—with his fingers, tongue, lips, my vibrator.

On my stomach, my back, standing. In the shower, with me pressed against the wall as he knelt before me.

Thankfully, none of the unbearable desire comes back to these memories. My first heat is over. I have so many questions, and it seems as if the only answer right now is

Aarick. But he's gone. His words from the first day repeat in my mind. I won't fuck you until you want me to.

But he's right. Now, I don't want him to.

The common sense of everything takes over, the reality that I allowed a total stranger inside my home, inside my bed, inside my body.

Well, kind of inside my body. Does it add to my body count if we didn't have intercourse?

My head pounds from all of the thinking, the puzzling of what's what, and I roll my shoulders to ease the tension before swiping my phone open.

I touch the app for my work schedule. Someone had put in for vacation time for the two shifts I missed and sent in a doctor's note.

The invasion of my phone kind of pisses me off.

I was in no mindset to take care of business, and the relief that my job is safe is overwhelming, but it still leaves me with a vulnerability I'm not happy about.

When, or if, I see Aarick again, we will have a confrontation about the invasion of my privacy.

After checking the schedule and seeing that I work graveyard tonight, I drag myself out of bed and into my bathroom.

Oh my god, the whole apartment smells like sex.

Before, I loved it, relished it, but now bile rises in my throat.

This whole place needs to be deep cleaned.

It takes me over an hour, but by the time the steaming spray of the shower hits my skin, my covers are in the dryer, and the whole place has been dusted, swept, and mopped.

My refrigerator door was evidently repaired at some point, and the floor swept clean.

The water has long run cold before I'm satisfied with how clean I am, and when I dry off and step out of the shower, my reflection catches my eye in the mirror over the sink.

My gasp breaks the otherwise silent room.

My curves are more prominent than ever, my breasts full and perky.

My lips are swollen. I can't imagine why, because I know for a fact Aarick never kissed me.

It's as if I've been given a makeover; my body is practically glowing.

I finally drag my eyes away and finish getting ready for work, determined to push all thoughts of the past four days—and Aarick—out of my mind.

"Are you feeling better, Darian?" A fellow nurse, Tiffany, greets me as I clock in on the computer in the staff break room.

"I am, thank you." I return her smile, tapping the keys a little harder than necessary as I clock in. "How are you? How's this week been?"

"Tough, honestly. You know your patient from the other day?"

“Yes, I remember her.”

“Well, she’s... It’s not looking good for her. She’s not waking up.”

“That’s so sad.” My heart aches for the woman, and for her family, if she has any. “Is anyone here with her?”

“Yes, her husband and daughter. The husband isn’t dealing well at all, but he’s doing his best. You’re with her tonight.”

I nod solemnly, determined to put my own emotions about the past four days aside.

I haven’t even thought about the shifter aspect of my life.

Now that I’ve considered it, why haven’t I shifted?

Aarick did it at will. Will I change at the full moon?

I have to worry about that later. This woman and her family need me, and that’s all that matters for the night.

I scrub my hands thoroughly before slowly pulling the curtain back and entering her room.

There’s a man standing at the head of the bed, pushing the woman’s sweaty curls off her forehead.

He wasn’t here the first day. The daughter was for a while, but now she’s gone. They must take visiting her in turns.

He looks up at me with empty, haunted eyes.

His face is scruffy, as if he hasn't shaved in days.

He's mostly bald on top but has some hair around his ears.

But there's something about him, about the way he turns, that seems familiar to me.

Maybe I did pass him in the hall the other day and didn't realize.

"Hi, Mr. Miller. I'm Darian. I'll be taking care of your wife tonight."

"Darian," he repeats with a nod. He gives me a soft, paternal smile. "You're probably about the same age as my daughter."

"I think so. She was here for a bit the other morning.

"She went home tonight to be with her kids, but she'll be here in the morning. We... They're doing a scan tomorrow of her brain." He clears his throat, covering up the emotion in his voice. "I can't believe this has happened."

"Me neither, sir. I'm so sorry. I promise I'll take the best care of her possible."

He nods again, swiping at his eyes quickly. I grab him a tissue and pass it discreetly before getting started on Mrs. Miller's medications for the evening.

When I push myself up the steps of my front porch early the next morning, it's all I can do not to lean over on the rail in exhaustion.

Mrs. Miller was heading down for her CT scan when I left, and the daughter had arrived to keep her dad company.

It was heart-wrenching, their pain, them not understanding why it happened to them.

I always wonder, why do some people go through these things and others come out just fine, or deal with no pain at all?

Even as an employee in the medical field, where I witness miracles of science every day, sometimes there's nothing you can do for someone. And it's the absolute worst.

A small meow greets me as I step onto the porch. I know it's not Old Man, because his meow is husky and deep. The calico before me rubs around my legs, and I reach down to scratch her ears. "So, who are you going to turn into?"

She chirps in response, and who knows what all she's talking about as I unlock the door and step inside my house.

She attempts to follow, but I block her.

"I don't think so, ma'am." I rush inside, quickly shutting and locking the door before peeking out of the peephole.

I may have let my guard down with Aarick, but that won't be the case with anyone else, especially animals.

And I was right. Before my eyes, the calico transforms into a stunning blonde beauty with a dangerous smirk, her eyes glinting at me. "I know you're watching me, runty bitch."

The air leaves my lungs, my chest aching as I struggle for breath while she moves closer to the door. She bangs on it with her fist. "You better stay the fuck away from him. A deal was made long ago, and he has to abide by it."

She transforms again into the calico and hikes her leg, spraying urine all over my patio chair before bounding off into the night.

Good god. I never asked for any of this. She can have Aarick if she wants. I don't want to stand in the way.

But even as I think it, I know that's a lie. My blood drums in my veins at the thought of his name.

Mine. Mine. Mate.

The drumming gets faster and faster, my body filled to the brim with anger, possessiveness, and something else I can't quite put a name to.

My hand stretches out, opening the door, and the hissing of the calico as she turns around, crouched close to the ground, is as clear as if she were right next to me.

My body suddenly releases the tension it was holding in all of my muscles as I move down the first step, and as my hand hits the rail, my limbs feel like mush.

My vision clouds, everything around me blurring, and my body contorts, the stretch of my muscles rearranging me onto all fours the strangest sensation.

Quickly, I acquaint myself with my new form.

I can swish my tail, twitch my ears. It's freeing to be able to stretch, to arch my back and release a low growl at the calico.

But she's no longer as brave, apparently, because she's backing away from me, eyes wide. Her head twists back and forth as she looks around, as if searching for someone to rescue her.

Not sure how this will work, I open my mouth, trying the way I would normally clear my throat, but it just releases a small growl.

Inhale deeply, with your whole chest. Aarick's voice is in my mind again, and it's like another invasion, but I look past it and obey his orders, then release a ferocious roar. The calico jumps a foot into the air and takes off at a sprint, her bushy tail the last thing to disappear over the hill.

Well done, Mate .

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SIX

The sensation of the grass under my paws, wet with the morning dew, is a shock to my system as I prowl around the front yard.

The sun has barely risen, so I'm determined to appreciate this moment of freedom before scattering back inside.

If my neighbors came out and saw me in the yard, I'm sure there would be some panicking.

You are stunning.

Shut up , I tell him.

Are you angry with me?

Yes. You used my phone.

Ah, no, that was your aunt. He tilts his head at me, ears alert.

My eyes go wide. She was there while we...?

No, you were asleep. It was in between the floor and the shower, actually.

Oh my god. If I had hands, I'd cover my face. Circling a spot that seems perfect, I plop down on my haunches and give him the evil eye.

He throws his head back as if he's laughing, which perturbs me even more.

This isn't funny, Aarick. My whole life is a lie. And why did I just now change? If I'm a shifter, shouldn't I have done it before? And who's that bitch that showed up at my door, calling me a runt?

We should discuss this, for sure, but not like this. He shifts instantly, bare before me, but while he's attractive as hell, there's no drive for me to pounce him like before.

Right now, I'm worried about shifting back. What if I mess up, or get stuck like this? I close my eyes.

"Just focus on your muscles, your joints. Think about them changing back to how you feel when you're human."

I do as he says, imagining a light illuminating beneath my skin at the places he instructed. It happens slowly at first, my skin pulling and muscles stretching, but then I'm standing before him, human, and naked as well. "Do our clothes just disappear?"

"No, see." He nods toward my porch, where my clothes are torn to pieces. "If you can undress before shifting, it's ideal, and cheaper for your wardrobe."

"Shit. So what if you're shifting and going somewhere else?"

"You can get a pack to wear around your waist or something like that. It will usually hold up. Or tie something to your leg. But that's not normally a worry. We don't travel out of pack territory."

The sun is completely visible now, the birds chirping loudly. "We better get inside. If anyone sees us standing out here like this, we'll both be in the back of a cop car." I rush inside and he follows behind me, shutting the door and locking it.

“Scared of the calico?” I tease him, but there’s some truth to my words.

“No, I think you took care of Addison.” He chuckles. “She wasn’t expecting you to shift.” He sobers then, reminding me of my question earlier.

“Why did I just now shift?” I cross my arms, watching him expectantly.

“Well, that’s a long story, really.”

“I have all day. I don’t work until seven tonight.”

“How about we make some coffee?” he suggests, refusing to meet my eye.

“I don’t have any syrup or creamer, but you’re welcome to coffee. I’m getting dressed first, though.” I head to my bedroom without waiting for an answer, but his footsteps thunder behind me.

“You haven’t looked in your cabinets, have you?”

“My cabinets? No, I woke up yesterday and got ready for work.” The top drawer of my dresser squeaks as it slides open, and I pick out my most comfortable pair of pajamas.

I slide them on without looking up. I don’t feel his gaze on me while I dress, but I don’t want to see him without clothes again.

That’s a lie, though. Because I’ll go in heat again at some point.

“Here.” I grab my robe from the back of the door and hand it to him.

We finally look at each other, and he has a teasing smile. “Oh, can’t resist looking at

me?”

“In your dreams.” I scoff. “Now what’s this about my cabinets?”

“Renee did some shopping for you. She picked up all your favorites.”

“Renee doesn’t shop.”

“No, but I asked her to.”

Doubting his claims, I open the top cabinet carefully, and sure enough, there’s my macadamia nut syrup. My stomach swoops at the sight, at the thoughtfulness. My aunt despises grocery shopping, but she went anyway, and he thought to ask her to.

“Okay. Let’s get this coffee going, then you have some answers to give me.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sit down. I’ll make the coffee.” He motions to the small table I got on sale when I moved into this apartment.

“You know, I normally despise listening to men, yet that’s all I seem to do around you.” The seat is cold against my skin, and I wonder if I’ll always run hot now. He moves around the kitchen as if he lives here, and a nagging thought surfaces. “Do you live in these apartments?”

“I do.” He grabs a gallon of filtered water and adds it to the machine, then measures out coffee grounds.

“So what, is this just like, the center for shifters or something?” I joke. But the look he gives me stifles my laughter. “Oh, god. Everyone here?”

“No, but most. Or friends. All of the employees.”

“Even Janice?”

He chuckles. “Yes, even Janice.”

We sit in companionable silence as the coffee brews and he doctors mine up. I’m glad it’s not awkward. Of course, my mind is running a hundred miles a minute at the revelation that I’m surrounded by shifters. “Are all these strays shifters?”

“Usually.” He sets my cup down in front of me before taking the other seat, blowing lightly on his own drink. “So, what do you want to know?” He takes a slow sip, watching me over the rim of his cup.

“I want to know everything.”

My coffee is cold and untouched by the time I’ve learned everything there is to know about his shifter pack.

He’s the rising alpha, as his dad is retiring.

Addison is from a rival pack that wanted to form an alliance.

There was a treaty of some sort, but when someone has a mate, the treaty becomes obsolete, so her people are pissed.

The apartment complex is a safety net for their pack.

Her crossing the line was a breach of territorial agreements.

“There’s so much more to this than I realized.” I shake my head, finally sipping my drink. It still tastes good, even cold.

“It’s just a lot at once. If we’d known you’d go into heat, I could have met you before now. As it was, I didn’t have the chance.”

“Addison called me a runt. Is that why I went into heat later? Or why I didn’t shift?”

“No, the reason is because there was a protection ritual on you.”

“Like a spell?” I wrinkle my nose, not sure how much I buy into that. Then again, I just turned into an animal, so...

“Yes, a spell. My father is the alpha, and he and his wife performed this ritual to cast a shield of sorts over you. You wouldn’t smell of a shifter or change or go into heat until it was time for me to take over as alpha.”

“But you didn’t know it was time?”

“We didn’t. My father’s mate...she was injured, and that changed everything.”

“Your mom?”

“No, my mother wasn’t his mate. She couldn’t have children. But she’s always been very good to me.”

“So what about the night I saved you. She was injured then?”

“Yes, we were attacked by Addison’s pack. They’ve been making attempts for ages to weed you out, to get you ‘out of the way’” He raises his hands to make quotes in the air.

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry, Aarick.”

“It’s okay. It’ll... We’re hoping she gets better soon.”

We stare at each other across the table, the air thick between us as I process the information I’ve been given.

“So what do we do now?” I break the silence after a moment.

“We take over our pack. If you’ll accept me as your mate.”

He clasps his hands together and rests them on the table, watching my face. But I don’t know what to say, what answer to give.

“Aarick, we haven’t even been on a date.”

“Fine, Darian.” He mimics my tone when he says my name. He takes my hand and presses his lips to my skin. “Would you do me the honor of spending the day with me?”

Whatever I thought would happen, this wasn’t it. But he’s so handsome and kind, and I know he can make me come. It can’t hurt to try one date, right?

“Yes. I would love that.”

“Alright.” He glances down at his attire. “Let me run home and get dressed. I’ll be here to pick you up in thirty minutes.”

“But what do I wear?”

“Whatever you want will be perfect.”

“That doesn’t help if I don’t know what your plans are.” I poke him in the chest

playfully, and for the first time since my heat ended, a flash of desire runs through me.

But I'm not in heat. So this is just normal wanting.

His eyes flash at me as if he knows, his nostrils flaring, and then I realize he can smell me when I'm aroused. And he knows the smell well.

"That's not on the agenda today." I shake my finger at him warningly. "Sorry about that."

"Never apologize for being aroused. It's my new favorite scent." He leans over and kisses my cheek softly. "I'll be back soon."

And he's up and out the door before I realize that he never did verify what I should wear.

I finally settle on a black skirt and a loose flowery top. It's cute but not super fancy. I slip my feet into black flats and check myself out in the mirror. It's still amazing how full my figure is now. How shiny my skin is. A knock on the door startles me, and I straighten my hair one last time.

"This will be fine," I reassure myself out loud. "You're just going on your first date with your fated mate. No big deal."

The clicking of the lock as I turn it is like the sound of a brand-new start, a promise of what's to come.

Aarick stands on the porch with a bouquet of flowers in one hand.

He's not overly dressed up either, which is a relief.

He's in jeans and a nice polo. He hands me the flowers and I take them, inhaling deeply.

"These are beautiful. Thank you. Let me get them into some water."

He follows me into the kitchen, his gaze burning into my skin as I search under the sink for the vase that was here when I moved in. "I've never had anyone bring me flowers before a date."

Aarick starts at this, his head jerking toward me. "Really? That's...ridiculous."

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“Well, the dating pool isn’t the greatest out there.” I grab the glass dish and hold it under the faucet. Once it’s ready, I arrange the bouquet carefully and set it in the center of my table.

“Ready?” He offers me his hand, and I hesitate at first. This seems like more than just taking his hand. This is giving us a real chance. But it feels like the right thing to do.

“Ready.”

When Aaric pulls up to the brightly colored building, I’m suspicious that he’s joking. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Positive.” He jumps out of the car without another word and rushes around the front to my side before opening the door. I step out, still curious, but I let him take my hand and lead me inside.

“Welcome to Lunar Arcade,” a cheerful voice greets us as we step inside.

“Thank you.” I nod in greeting, but I’m soon distracted by the flashing lights and sounds. Spinning in a slow circle, I take in everything around me. Tons of arcade games. Skee-Ball, Pac-Man—the classics. But there’s also a bunch of new ones I’ve never heard of.

“This is so cool,” I murmur, squeezing Aarick’s hand in excitement.

“They have laser tag too, so I made reservations for us to play a round after we check out all of this.” He motions to the games around us. “What should we do first?”

After rounds of air hockey, basketball, Skee-Ball, and every other game we come across, we suit up for laser tag. He hooks my vest for me, his finger brushing the exposed skin between my shirt and leggings, and my quick intake of breath catches my attention.

“Looks like you two are the only ones in this round.” The pimply faced attendant eyes us suspiciously, as if two people playing is abnormal. “You’ll have to be on opposite teams, then.”

“Not a problem.” I flash a grin at Aarick. “I can handle a little competition.”

He hooks on his own vest, releases the gun from its holster, and narrows his eyes at me. “But can you handle being chased?”

He’s so close to me that I could count his eyelashes.

My quick intake of breath and the flood of arousal to my belly must be obvious to him, because he closes his eyes as if he’s in pain, and while he’s an alpha, it’s a mark that I truly hold the power here.

That makes me even wetter. The door buzzes, shocking us apart, and we step inside the arena.

The attendant says, “Go to your home bases. The buzzer will sound, then you’ll have fifteen minutes.”

I rush over to my side—the blue on the tower matching my blue vest—without looking back to see which way Aarick goes.

I need a breather after that heated moment.

The buzzer sounds and the hard rock music thunders throughout the room, making it impossible to hear anything else—for a normal person.

But if I focus really hard, I can make out the slight sound of footsteps across the room, through the other towers and barrels blocking the way.

As I slink around the obstacles, it's obvious that I'm stealthier now.

I move more quietly, and my limbs seem easier to control.

The idea that Aarick could sneak up on me because he's a bit stronger than I am is exhilarating and nerve-racking at the same time.

I duck down below a wooden bar, then slowly peer over it to catch a glimpse of him.

He's closer now, so close his scent is invading my senses, and I know he can smell me.

A wicked thought crosses my mind. I toe off my shoes as quietly as possible, then pull my underwear down, leaving my skirt on.

I hurry back into my clothes and slip my shoes on before hanging my panties from the edge of the wooden plank.

Then I sneak back to my hiding place behind the tower and wait.

I don't know Aarick that well yet, but I would bet money that he's not searching for me by sound.

A few minutes later, I'm proven correct.

He darts around the corner, his laser gun aimed and ready, but he lowers it and his jaw when he sees my panties hanging there.

I peek out from my spot, take aim, and push the trigger, my laser deactivating his vest immediately.

He slowly turns toward me, his eyes dark and dangerous, and the thrill that runs through my body has nothing to do with fear.

He stalks toward me, unhooking his vest and dropping it to the ground as he speeds into a run.

I don't have time to lose mine and just take off, squealing with delight as he chases me around the room. I dodge barrels and dunk under planks.

"I can smell how wet you are for me, love," he growls. It's almost a whisper but somehow so loud that he could be right behind me. "I thought you weren't afraid of a little competition."

I spot a cubby under another stack of wooden planks and squeeze myself into it.

His voice carries over. "When I find you, do you know what I'm going to do to you?"

My body shakes so hard from excitement that I fear I'll jar the planks and knock something over. Between my thighs is soaked, and now there's no hiding from him. Just waiting for him to find me.

Suddenly a hand wraps around my ankle, pulling me out of my safe haven, and I'm face-to-face with my predator. His eyes trail hungrily down my body, and he unhooks the vest, pulling it over my head as if it personally offended him.

He yanks me to my feet and bends me over the planks behind us. “Open your legs for me. Now.”

I don’t even consider disobeying, and when he drops to his knees behind me, a shudder runs through me all the way to my feet.

“You were such a dirty girl, teasing me with your panties.” He trails his nose over my ass, his hands kneading my legs. “Did you think you’d be able to escape me?”

“No.” I gasp as he spreads my cheeks open.

“So you wanted me to catch you? To see this pussy you got wet just for me?”

I don’t say anything, and he smacks my ass softly. “I asked you a question, love.”

“Y-yes.” I didn’t realize it until now, but I wanted him to catch me more than I’ve ever wanted anything in the world.

Then he buries his face in me, licking and sucking my swollen pussy until I practically weep. When my orgasm finally takes over, I sink to the floor, unable to stand any longer.

And I don’t know what I’m going to do with Aarick, or without him.

When we get back to my house, I put on another pot of coffee. I’m going to need it because I’ve got to work in six hours, and I don’t see sleep in my near future.

Aarick seems to be preparing to leave when my front door bursts open. I can’t believe I forgot to lock it. I turn to see a man at the entrance to my kitchen.

I gasp at the sight of him. “What are you doing here?”

Mr. Miller drops to his knees, tears streaming down his face, and Aarick pushes his chair back and rushes to his side. “Dad, what happened?” He pulls his father into his arms, helping him over to the chair.

“She’s...she’s not going to make it, son.” He buries his head in his hands, elbows resting on my table.

I stare at him, this new development sending me reeling. I’ve been taking care of Aarick’s family. Did he know this? Obviously, or else his father wouldn’t be in my house.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Miller.” I reach my hand over to grasp his arm, hoping I can convey my sympathy through a simple squeeze.

He emerges from behind his hands, his eyes bloodshot and puffy.

“I’m Sam. Call me Sam, please.” He turns his head toward me, blinking slowly, and I’m struck with that familiarity again that I had the first time I saw him.

“And thank you for taking such good care of my wife. You really went above and beyond.”

“It was my pleasure, really.”

“So what’s the plan, Dad?” Aarick leans on the kitchen counter. “There’s nothing else we can do?”

Sam sighs, shaking his head wearily. “They said her...brain lost oxygen for too long, and she has too much damage. She’ll never wake up. She always said she wouldn’t want to live like that.”

“We literally have magic, Dad.” Aarick’s voice breaks and his eyes burn into my skin. “There has to be something we can do.”

Sam shakes his head, his exhaustion taking over. His whole body seems to slump, no energy left. “I had to come by, for the ritual. But since you’re here, I wanted to take you back with me, if that’s alright. Your sister is there.”

“Wait. What ritual?” I interject, glancing between them.

Aarick and Sam turn toward me simultaneously, and Sam smiles wistfully before standing.

“I hate for you to find out like this. I just...there hasn’t been enough time for any of this.”

And then he shifts, limbs contorting, until my little Old Man is staring up at me from the kitchen floor.

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SEVEN

It's been thirty minutes since Aarick and his father went to the hospital, and I've done nothing.

I sit in silence. No noise, no phone, just me at the kitchen table with the past few days a roller coaster in my mind.

Aarick's injury, the unbearable heat, our four-day-long sexfest, being attacked by his jealous stalker.

I mean, it's been one thing after another.

I know I have to make a choice—to stand by his side or to reject our bond.

That's the term he used. What happens if I reject the bond, though?

I never feel whole? He'll take a mate of some sort—he'd have to as alpha—but it wouldn't be destiny.

She wouldn't fill all of his crevices the way I supposedly will.

What kind of bullshit is that? That one person can complete you?

I know in my bones that it's true, and my life with him would be perfect.

But I also despise the secrecy, the hiding and spying.

Realizing I've been being watched my whole life, whether for my own safety or not, is a lot.

My phone buzzes and I grab it from its facedown position, then swipe open the notification. Renee wants me to come over.

With a sigh, I reply that I'll be right there, then slip on my sandals and head out.

Should I be afraid of someone from Addison's pack coming after me?

Probably but I don't even give a fuck anymore.

I traipse across the apartment complex rather than driving, deciding the fresh air will be good for me.

And I don't see anyone messing with me right now; it's midday and plenty of people are out walking their dogs or letting their kids run around.

Why did I never make friends with any of these people?

That would have been the right thing to do, rather than always being shy and hiding away.

Then I might have caught on about the shifter thing sooner, before my heat started.

Renee's door is wide open, of course. What will I ever do with that woman? I step inside, glancing around carefully. My skin prickles uneasily as I step through the house, but then a pain shoots through the bottom of my sandal.

"Oh shit." I wince, reaching down to grab the glass from my foot. But then something hard lands a blow on the back of my head, and everything goes woozy, my vision

blurring before me as I try to make out shapes and shadows.

Then a soft familiar voice in my ear hisses, “Nighty night, runty bitch.”

When I come to, my eyes are still bleary, and my head feels like a rock thrown into a pond.

I can’t hold it up, but I keep trying to.

I move to rub my eyes but can’t. My wrists are chained together behind me, and no matter how much I struggle, they won’t come free.

Finally, my vision clears and the room comes into view.

The musty scent of the room makes me think of the earth.

My chains are attached to a giant metal hook in the floor, and my gaze follows the metal to a second set of chains.

Renee is still unconscious, lying on her side on the dank floor.

My head is pounding. I know they’ve drugged me with something. Renee too, no doubt. They must have trapped me by texting me from her phone.

That’s not important right now, though. Right now, I have to get out of here. I don’t even know where here is, or how long I was asleep.

“Renee,” I hiss, trying to wake her without alerting our captors. Her head stirs but she doesn’t open her eyes.

Struggling with the chains, I pull and yank but to no avail. I’m locked in.

“God, why are my wrists not smaller?” I drop my head onto my hands, the cold of the floor soaking through my shorts.

And then it hits me. If I shift, I’d slide right out of these chains.

But is that too easy? Are they wanting me to shift?

After a moment’s hesitation, my decision is made and I close my eyes, focusing on my muscles like Aarick taught me.

The stretching of muscles, the light under my skin hitting each joint, and that feeling of turning to jelly hits.

The clanking of the metal as the chains fall off my paws echoes around the room, and I open my eyes, freshly shifted.

My paws move soundlessly across the floor to Renee, passing a cracked mirror propped against the wall.

I stop, staring at my reflection. My glorious panther, black as coal and almost as large as Aarick. A perfect match for him.

Renee’s breathing is even. If I can wake her, she can shift too. Then we can get the hell out of here and they’ll never know.

Nuzzling my face against hers does no good; she just turns away from me. I press my paws into her shoulder, barely extending my claws, and hiss in her ear. She finally stirs, her eyes opening slowly, then widening in understanding as she takes in her situation.

I growl a low warning to be quiet. She shifts immediately into a cute striped tabby,

slipping out of her own chains, and we both begin searching for a way out of the room.

The place is sealed tight and full of random junk, as if someone routinely chucks things they don't need down here.

The scent around the door is familiar, and my hair stands on end when I hear the voice of a woman.

"They're not going to come for them, Dad. I told you, it's over." Addison's tired tone surprises me. She seemed so feisty when we met before.

"We're not giving up on a decades-old deal, Addy," the gruff male voice answers. "Our two packs will become one, and you'll be the first omega of the unified group. Our line will live on as royalty forever."

"He doesn't want me, and I don't want him." A crashing sound follows—glass shattering on tile—and a small feminine whimper.

"Get out of my sight," he growls, and the footsteps come pounding toward the door.

I rush out of the way as it creaks open and Addison slips inside. Tears are streaming down her cheeks, and she wrings her hands together, her shoulders shaking. When she turns to survey the room, she stops suddenly at the sight of our empty chains.

Oh no. Oh no. No, no..." she whispers hoarsely. Her nose wrinkles as she inhales deeply, and I do the same. So that was the familiar scent. She darts around the room on light feet, as if hoping to find us in a corner.

Then Renee shifts into her human form out of nowhere, grabbing Addison from behind and covering her mouth. She's holding a jagged piece of wood to the girl's

throat. “You better not scream,” Renee hisses. “I won’t hesitate.”

I pad over to the two women, dreading transforming in front of them and being naked. I’m definitely going to start tying something to my leg even if I have no plans to shift.

There’s a wooden door propped against the wall nearby, so I squeeze behind it before shifting, then peek my head out at Renee and Addison.

“Quit fighting,” I growl, and they both freeze. “Let us go. We won’t hurt you.”

Addison’s muffled sob tears at my heartstrings.

“Uncover her mouth, Renee.”

“No, Darian! She’d slit your throat without hesitation.”

Addison shakes her head.

“Just do it, Renee.”

She shoots me a dirty look before warning her captive, “If you make one wrong move, I won’t hesitate. Understood?”

The scared woman nods in agreement, and Renee slowly drops her hand.

“I can’t. My dad will... He’ll hurt me.”

I want to reassure her that surely he wouldn’t, but his actions a moment ago lead me to believe her.

“I didn’t even know he going to kidnap you guys, I swear. I came home and he and his cronies did it. I’m...I’ve given up on Aarick. I don’t want someone who doesn’t want me. I realized after I saw you the other night, it’s over. There was never anything to be over.”

Something in her tone makes me believe her, even though I know it seems stupid. I nod at Renee.

She shakes her head at me. “You and your strays.”

“Come back with us,” I tell Addison. “We can sneak out while he’s distracted, and I’ll protect you.”

“How can you protect me?”

“Well, from what your dad said, I’ll be the omega of Aarick’s pack, correct?”

She snorts. “If you accept the bond, yes. What if you don’t? Where does that leave me?”

“It has to be better than here.”

She glances over to the door, where the sounds of the loud TV and cans being crushed float from.

“Okay. Let’s do it. Let’s get out of here,” she decides. “We have to shift first.”

In one swift movement, we’re each on all fours, and although Renee practically rolls her eyes at me, we follow Addison to a small hole we would have probably found soon had we kept looking.

We bound out into the night, and I realize I'm late for work.

Shit. Of all the things to think of right now, it seems silly, but I also worry about Aarick and his dad. I wonder if Sam's wife has passed yet.

My mind still trails off to a way to heal her.

They have literal magic. Shouldn't there be a way?

As we run through the night, following Addison and hoping she knows the way home, I retrace every step and the medication that Mrs. Miller took under my care.

Her brain activity... That would have to be a magical fix, right?

When the apartment complex comes into view, I've never been happier to be home. I've got to hurry to the hospital and try to save my job. I wish I could save my patient as well.

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EIGHT

After a quick shower, I throw on my clothes and race to my car.

I'm leaving Addison and Renee in an awkward position, but I don't have time to second-guess it.

The timing of my drive from home to the hospital sets a new record, and I'm thankful I didn't get pulled over on the way.

I rush through the double doors to the elevator and repeatedly press the button for the fifth floor.

When I swipe my badge and burst into the ICU, I blow past the charge nurse, ignoring the calls of "Darian, where have you been?" and rush around the corner to Mrs. Miller's room.

Jane. Her first name is Jane. It flashes across my vision from reading her chart.

Everyone looks up at my sudden arrival. Sam's hand is on Jane's head. Aarick is sitting by his sister, her head buried in his shoulder.

"The monitors are unhooked. The machines are all gone. The only thing Jane has now is regular oxygen, to keep her comfortable," Aarick explains, clearing his throat to hide the emotion.

I make my way around the bed, wanting to comfort Sam—Old Man. He's spent years

watching over me. Time spent away from his mate, from his family, all to keep me safe for his son.

His eyes crinkle at me fondly. “Thank you for coming, Darian. It really means the world to me.”

“I can’t believe...all this time...”

“You should know that it wasn’t just me watching over you.

The whole pack did, of course. But Jane...

” He nods toward his wife, his voice cracking.

“We take the same form. And she loved you so much. She loved your protective heart, how you watched out for your aunt. I just thought you should know before she... Before she passes.”

“Thank you, Sam.” I squeeze his hand before moving over to look down at Jane, her curls framing her face. I’ve cared for her for a few days this week, and it turns out she’s been guarding me for who knows how long. The world really is completely different than I thought.

“I’ll leave you guys alone. I just wanted to stop in and pay my respects.” I bend closer to Jane. “Thank you for taking care of me,” I whisper before leaning over to press my lips to her forehead.

When I step out of the room, I take a deep breath and then exhale, controlling my emotions. For the first time, I fear I might shift accidentally, and my workplace would not be the best location to do so.

Aarick steps out of the room behind me, and we reach for the other's hand immediately. "I don't know how long I'll be here, but I'll come by to see you...after."

"I'd love that, really," I say. "We don't even know each other."

"We don't. But if it's any comfort, my dad knows both of us and says we have a good chance."

"Well, what does Jane say?" I tilt my head toward the room, and he laughs softly.

"She always said you're too good for me."

I can't help but chuckle at that as well, but then stop. It seems wrong to laugh when someone is dying because of me. "I'll see you when I see you, Aarick."

"See you when I see you," he repeats.

I turn away and head back down to my car. I'm in no mood to talk to anyone about my job tonight. Does it even matter if I still have one?

Instead, I get into my car and drive home. There's no sign of Renee or Addison in my apartment. All I can do is hope they haven't killed each other. I crawl into bed, too exhausted to even change into pajamas, and drift off to sleep.

Sometime in the night, a warm body slides into my bed, wrapping its large limbs around me.

Aarick's scent envelops me, and it's sad.

He smells like salty tears, and his heart is pounding against my back.

I turn in his embrace, cupping his face in my hands.

He brushes his nose against mine, and in reply, I scoot closer, pressing my lips to his.

He moves quickly, devouring my mouth as if he's a man dying of starvation and I'm his food source.

Our kiss is a delicious mess of tongues and teeth, and when we part for air, we're both gasping for breath.

"Are you sure?" He searches my face for confirmation, and I nod.

"I've never been more sure of anything. I don't need to kiss you. I want to."

He lowers his head to take my mouth with his again, and my heart soars as our kiss deepens.

Because he's professed that I'm his destiny, he can make me come with barely a stroke of his finger, but this kiss, this is a promise.

It's a sign of respect, because I didn't just need it. I wanted it. And I want him forever.

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One Year Later

It's been one year since Jane passed away, but her sacrifice, her love for her pack, is still fresh in everyone's minds.

And on today's anniversary, I'm visiting her grave to give her some news.

They say Jane loved babies more than anything, and it broke her heart that she could never have one.

So, as I sit crisscross by her grave, like I have so many times before, it's a sweet relief to say the words.

"Aarick and I are going to have a baby," I whisper, as I brush some wayward grass off her headstone. It's a double headstone. Sam will be buried beside her when his time comes. "I just thought you should know because they all say you would have been the best grandmother."

I pull out the ultrasound photo from my back pocket. "We're having a girl. I told Aarick we should name her after you, so we've decided on Janie. I...I hope you'll be okay with that."

A breeze swirls around me suddenly, sending the grass clippings flying, and I smile up at the sky. "They said you already had your name picked out for when you became a grandmother. So when we talk about you, we'll use it. I promise, GramGram."

"Are you ready?" Aarick calls from behind me, and I turn to see him making his way

up the hill, already shirtless.

“Ugh, do we have to today?”

He offers me a hand, and I hold my growing abdomen as I stand.

“You know exercise is good for you. And little Jay.”

“Fine.” I roll my eyes. “Did you bring clothes for me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he reassures me, showing me the pack tied to his leg. “Now let’s go.”

I obey—not because I have to, but because I want to—and we shift instantly, taking off at a run.

I still glance around me. I still lock the doors and stuff like that.

But I’m not as paranoid as I once was, because even if she’s no longer on this earth, I still feel as if I have a secret guardian somewhere, watching over me.

The End