



Secret Wolf Baby (Gold Wolves Black Ops #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I effectively got sold to my secret baby's daddy.

I gave him my heart and my virginity, but he didn't want me.

For years I lived like an outcast, used and abused.

And now I'm forced to marry the black ops wolf who rejected and impregnated me.

I used to be a determined, strong girl. But where has that girl gone?

She disappeared when the taunting and shaming became too overwhelming.

Now I'm being sold as a bride to my ex.

And if I don't walk down the aisle nicely, I'll be punished.

I flat out refuse to be used as some goods, but I don't have a choice.

I hate him for what he did, but I can't fight what he does to my body.

He strokes the old bruises on my wrists and arms until I cave.

He soothes my hurting wolf until I submit to him completely.

But when my cruel mate finds out I had his secret baby girl, will he claim me for real?

Or will he reject me again?

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Moonlight streaked across the street as I walked down the sidewalk. My heart pounded, growing louder with every step as I got closer to my destination. My entire body felt electrified with anticipation, even as my stomach twisted with uncertainty. This could either be the best decision of my life or the worst. But I had never been one to back down from a challenge. And there was something thrilling about taking the risk, especially when the reward was worth it.

And the reward, if this gamble paid off the way I thought it might, would be more than worth it.

The wind brushed against my face, bringing enticing scents from the forest toward me. On any other night, that smell alone would have been enough to draw me to the edge of the woods, where I would shift and let my wolf run and hunt for the evening. Tonight, however, my wolf and I had no desire to hunt. She was as set on our path as I was. I could feel her tail swish in eager anticipation inside me as we neared our destination.

I came to a stop in front of the house I had been in dozens of times over the last couple of years. Mira's home. And her brother Jackson's. I stared up at it for a long moment. Light streamed out from behind a curtain on the second floor, and that was it. Only one person in the house, just as I had hoped.

I took a deep breath. It was now or never. I strolled forward, shoulders back and head high as I moved up the path. I paused, a hint of nervousness swirling in my stomach for the first time as I stared at the door in front of me. This was it. One last time to back out. But if I backed out, I would regret it for the rest of my life. At this point, it was now or never.

I knocked and waited.

A light flicked on in the house. Footsteps sounded on the other side of the door, and a familiar, comforting scent grew nearer as I saw a large form in the frosted glass beyond. I waited, heart racing with excitement and more fear than I would have cared to admit. My wolf paced inside me with pent-up energy as the short wait for the door to open stretched on like an eternity.

Eventually, however, the door opened.

A tall man with light brown hair stood in the doorway. He towered over me, and I realized with a new jolt that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Each of his perfectly defined muscles rippled with each tiny movement, and my heart began thundering as my body began to heat all over.

Jackson blinked as he stared down at me. His head tilted in polite confusion as his brow furrowed.

“Audrey?” He glanced around. “Mira’s not here.”

“I know.” I knew that perfectly well. I had planned out this entire thing with that in mind. “I wanted to talk to you. Can I come in?”

The creases in his forehead deepened as he studied me. I waited, matching his gaze. Just being this near him sent my wolf into a frenzy. She had always been a bit on the wild side.

I stayed where I was, excitement and nervousness coursing through me, electrifying my entire body. The thought of him saying no or closing the door in my face terrified me more than I could say. I stayed where I was, though, unwilling to back down. I was going to see this through, regardless of the outcome.

After a moment, he nodded, taking a step back. “All right,” he said.

“Thanks.” I brushed past him. Another whiff of his scent, oak and vanilla, hit me as I strolled into the room, enough to send my wolf pacing inside me, her tail swishing in anticipation. She had waited for so long to do this that every minute it stretched on seemed only to annoy her further.

“Happy birthday, by the way,” he said after he closed the door. He raised his eyebrows. “Eighteen. Pretty big one.”

“Yeah,” I said, turning to face him. “It’s weird to think about.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t spending time with friends ton—”

His words cut off as he stared at me, his jaw-dropping as his eyes raked me up and down as he finally registered what I was wearing. He blinked in surprise as he studied me, lingering on my breasts, not bothering to conceal his interest. I wore a short skirt, a lacy top with a plunging neckline, and no bra. The heels on my feet accentuated my legs, and my auburn hair was curled and fell around my shoulders. His eyes flashed with an undisguised hunger and lust that made my stomach lurch with delight and my toes curl.

“There were other ways I wanted to celebrate my birthday than spend time with friends,” I admitted.

“Is that so?” he asked.

“Mhm.”

He dragged his attention away from my body to focus on my face. “What was it you wanted to talk to me about?” he asked. I didn’t miss the raw edge to his voice, as if he

was trying to hold back some primal urge.

I took in a deep breath. For the first time since I had made up my mind to do this, a flutter of nerves churned in my stomach. It wasn't like me to get nervous or self-conscious, but it wasn't like this was an ordinary situation.

"I've been debating whether to talk to you about this for a while," I admitted. I took a step closer to him, his oak and vanilla scent growing stronger, sending a lurch of desire through me. "I almost didn't." I gave a playful, flirtatious smile. "But since it's my birthday and I figured I deserved something nice, I decided I would just bite the bullet."

He raised his eyebrows, folding his arms as he leaned against the wall, his head tilting in question. The pause lingered. God, I had thought this might be difficult or uncomfortable. I just hadn't realized it would be this nerve-wracking. I didn't get nervous. And yet, here I was, standing in front of Jackson, feeling like a blushing, babbling kid. I could feel my cheeks flush as he watched me with that alluring intensity that always seemed to heat up my insides.

This was my last chance to back out. The last time I could brush past him and walk away, maybe go out and find Mira and have a drink to celebrate instead of doing what I really wanted. For a wild moment, I almost considered doing just that. Except I was here instead. I'd made my decision, and I was going to stick with it.

The edge of Jackson's lip quirked upward in a smirk. "This doesn't really feel like biting the bullet," he teased.

I shot him an annoyed look even as I couldn't hide my own smirk. That casual teasing was one of the things that had drawn me to him in the first place. Now was the time.

“I think I’m in love with you,” I admitted.

And there it was, finally out in the open. Just admitting it to someone was a weight off my shoulders. I had wondered about it ever since I had first moved to town and met Mira. I left my old pack years ago because I couldn’t take living with my parents any longer. The alpha who had taken over the pack was too brutish for my taste, and my father had cozied up to him. I left with no plan whatsoever and eventually found myself in this pack.

Mira had become nearly a sister, and the moment I had met Jackson, I had felt this rush of electricity and energy, a sort of undeniable need that I had never imagined possible. I had wanted him from the moment I laid eyes on him.

On top of that, Jackson had been good to me this entire time. Kind and considerate. He had helped me get settled in, had taken the time to check in on me and make sure I was doing well. Hell, he’d even helped me find a job. At first, I had written it off as just a guy helping his sister’s brother. But at some point, I started wondering if there was something more to his attentiveness. That was also when I finally realized that all I thought about was him.

At first, I tried to ignore the feelings. Not ignore, deny. I sensed how badly I wanted him, how much my wolf wanted him, too. I told myself the feelings weren’t real, or that I needed to ignore them. It was easier that way, especially considering Mira. How the hell was I supposed to tell her I was in love with her brother? That I suspected he might be my mate? So I pushed them down, trying to forget all about them.

But the more time I spent with him, the harder they were to ignore. At some point, I realized there was no helping it. The feelings, that need to be around him always, would never abate despite how much easier my life would be if they did. I was his. And now that I was eighteen, I could finally tell him.

Which was why I found myself standing in front of him now, finally admitting the truth I'd tried to kid myself wasn't real.

Jackson stared at me, his face unreadable. I thought I caught a glimpse of something in his eyes, something that might have been surprise or excitement, but I couldn't tell. The longer he stared at me in silence, the more anxious I became, not something that typically happened. But there was something about being this open, bearing my heart to him, that made my pulse thunder in my ears and my stomach clench in a way that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"I've thought it for a long time," I admitted. "Only, I didn't say anything because Mira's my best friend, and I was only seventeen to begin with. I wanted to wait until I was positive before doing anything like that."

He remained silent, his eyes locked on my face. He straightened, every inch of his body alert, all his attention trained on me.

"And I think I sense a mating bond, too," I said. Those nerves dug themselves deeper inside me as I tried to read his face. I bit my lip, heat rushing to my face. It took a lot for me to feel self-conscious, but a rush of uncertainty washed over me. "But since I've never felt one before, I can't be certain. But it definitely feels like one, or the way I imagined it to."

More silence. My heart rate had doubled at this point.

"I understand if you don't feel the same," I said. "But I wasn't going to be able to forgive myself if I didn't tell you. And I couldn't wait any longer. So, here I am."

He continued to stare. I searched his face, the slightest hint of unease bordering on dread seeping into my bones as I tried to gauge his reaction.

Nothing.

“Do me a favor and say something,” I urged.

He blinked as if coming back to earth, his attention focusing on my eyes. “Is this really what you want?” he growled.

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t,” I retorted.

“There’s no going back once we cross this bridge. You know that, right?”

“I know,” I said. “I knew that when I walked over. I’m still here.”

He looked at me with undisguised longing. I could see him working through his own thoughts. I waited, heart pounding, in silence.

“All right, then,” he said.

He stalked forward, that hunger burning in his gaze as he came to stand in front of me. Before I could move or react, he pulled me toward him, pressing my body against his as he bent down to kiss me.

Fire burned through my entire body, and my wolf howled in triumph as his mouth claimed mine, his hand tangling in my hair to hold me in place. My mind went deliciously blank as my hand slipped under his shirt, my fingers tracing the hard muscles of his stomach. Ecstasy and lust blended together as he lifted me up, his mouth not leaving mine. My legs locked around his waist, and he carried me up the stairs into his bedroom.

After, we lounged in bed, his arm wrapped around me as he held me against his body. I nuzzled against him, resting my head against his chest. I smiled, relishing the feel of

his fingers stroking my hair as I let my imagination wander. I pictured the future, what it would be like for the two of us in five, ten, twenty years. All I could see in those images was pure bliss. All my life, I had wanted to find a place where I could belong. I had finally found it.

“You all right?” he asked, breaking the silence and pulling me out of my reverie.

“Mhm. More than all right.” I angled my head so I could look at him. “So, what now?” I asked.

His muscles tensed beneath me. That should have been my first warning that everything was going to go to shit.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I don’t know how we’re going to tell Mira,” I confessed. “Do you think she’ll understand?”

He didn’t say anything. An unreadable expression had come over his face.

“I didn’t think you would be that stumped for ideas,” I teased. “I know I’m smart, but I can’t be the only smart one in the relationship.”

He swallowed hard. “Audrey, you are incredible.”

I gave a lazy smile. “Please, continue singing my praises. I like hearing it.”

He didn’t smirk back. My smile vanished, and a small pebble of uncertainty and dread settled in my stomach. Something was wrong. I pushed myself away from him, staring at him with a creeping dread.

“Jackson?” I asked.

He sighed, pushing himself up so his back leaned against the headstand. I watched uneasily as he chewed his lip. Eventually, he rubbed his face.

“Fuck,” he muttered. Before I could properly register the word, he was already talking again. “You’re incredible,” he repeated, but this time, the words sounded more like an ominous warning than any sort of compliment. “But I don’t think this is going to work out. I don’t think it’s a good idea, especially right now.”

My world crashed around me as the words rang in my ears.

“You don’t...” I stammered.

“This was great,” he said. “But I don’t think a relationship is a good idea.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, my mind racing. Something constricted around my chest, and I couldn’t breathe. All I could do was stare at him in disbelief.

“So you’re saying you don’t feel anything?” I asked when I finally regained my voice.

He licked his lips as he ran his fingers through his hair. “No, I’m not saying that. I do feel something. And I don’t think you’re wrong about the mating bond, either. I’ve felt some sort of connection basically since you arrived in town.”

“Then why are you rejecting it? Rejecting me?” I demanded.

“That’s not fair. I’m not rejecting—”

“You just told me you didn’t want anything else. That’s the definition of rejection.

The least you could do was admit it.”

He didn't answer.

“Oh my God,” I said. “I'm such a fucking idiot.”

I scrambled out of the bed, head still swimming as I found my clothes and shoved them on hurriedly, my hands trembling as I tried to process what had just happened, because it didn't seem possible. How had what had seemed like a perfect moment turned into this?

“You're not an idiot.” Jackson got out of bed and walked over to me. He took my shoulder and gently tried to move me to look at him. “You're amazing. I just—”

I jerked my arm away from him and stepped back, glaring at him. “Don't touch me,” I spat.

“Audrey—”

“So, what? I open my heart to you, and you decide you'll just take advantage of that and then run? You got what you wanted, and that's it?”

“It's not like that,” he said, a hint of a growl entering his voice. His features softened again. “I like you, Audrey. You're smart, gorgeous, feisty—”

“Touch me again, and you'll see how feisty I actually am,” I snarled, though internally, my heart was breaking, tears threatening to spill out as I desperately tried to keep myself composed. I wasn't going to show him how much I was hurting.

His hand fell to his side. “It's nothing to do with you,” he insisted. “It's me. I promise. I want to go into the military, to go into special ops. I don't want to have

someone waiting and worrying about me while I'm out doing dangerous things, and I don't want to have to worry about putting someone I care about at risk. You have to understand."

"I don't," I snarled. "I don't have to do anything. You yourself said you thought you felt something. So that was a lie?"

"No! Of course not. I'm being honest. I just don't want to put you in a position where you could get hurt."

"Well, you failed on that bit," I growled.

"Audrey, please—" He reached out toward me.

"I told you not to touch me," I snapped, jerking my arm away from him. It took all my strength not to give in to the urge to tear him to ribbons. I willed the tears to stay back long enough for me to get out of his sight. "I never want to see you again."

I walked out the door, slamming it shut behind me as I hurried down the path, walking as fast as I could without breaking into a run. A lump had filled my throat to the point it was hard to breathe. I forced myself to keep moving, to not look back, to put as much distance between myself and the man I thought I had loved as quickly as possible.

The instant I thought it was safe and I was out of view, I doubled over. Tears dropped from my nose and cheeks to splatter on the ground as I sucked in a deep breath, willing myself to get a grip, but all I could do was replay his words over and over again in my head.

God, how could I have been such an idiot? I should have known something like this would happen. I had been an outcast and a reject my whole life. Why would the guy I

had thought was my mate be any different?

There were so many dreams I'd had but never admitted: Jackson and I getting married, having kids, my best friend being my sister-in-law as he and I settled down and built a life for ourselves. I had pictured our dream house, the way our wedding would look, how we would grow old together. I had imagined so clearly what the rest of my life would be like with my mate, a perfect life where I would finally be happy.

All of that just flew out the window. It evaporated in my head in an instant. All that was left was me, alone, hunched over on the sidewalk, crying over a guy I would never get to have.

I wasn't sure how long I stood like that. Eventually, though, I pulled myself upright and dried my damp cheeks with the heel of my palm. I could be sad later. Right now, I needed a plan.

I had meant it when I said I never wanted to see Jackson again. There was only one way to guarantee it, and that was to pack up and leave. It wouldn't be too difficult. I had run away once before; I could do it again.

I'm sorry, Mira, I thought. Leaving her was the only pang of guilt I felt once the idea got into my head. I was going to miss her, and I knew she didn't have many friends here. But I also didn't think I could look her in the face and admit that not only had I had sex with her brother, but that he had rejected me after.

And if I stayed friends with Mira, I would inevitably have to see that asshole again. I couldn't.

The best thing was a clean cut. To leave tonight, to put Jackson and this stupid town and everything else behind me so I would never have to deal with him again.

So that was what I did. An hour later, I threw my suitcase in my ancient car and drove away, putting the town and Jackson in my rearview mirror for good.

I would never have to deal with him again.

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It's never a good thing when your boss pokes his head out of his office and says, "I need to speak with you." Especially when said boss has a grim, mildly annoyed expression on his face.

Without waiting for me to respond, Declan jerked his head, motioning for me to come inside.

I looked over at Rose, his assistant. She shrugged.

"Don't look at me," she said. "He hasn't told me anything."

"That somehow makes it worse," I muttered, glancing at Declan's open office door. Whatever was going on, I got the sneaking suspicion that I wasn't going to like it. "Wish me luck."

"Look at it this way," Nolan said, clapping me on the shoulder as he gave a broad smirk. "Even if it's something bad, there's no way Mira will let him kill you. Perks of being the alpha's brother-in-law, eh?"

"Not really comforting, you know," I fired back.

Nolan just responded with one of his trademark self-amused grins.

Shaking my head, I brushed past him and headed into Declan's office.

"Close the door," he said.

“You know this is getting more and more ominous as it goes on, right?” I said jokingly as I shut the door behind me.

“I just don’t want this to get out unless it’s necessary,” Declan replied. “You know how quickly gossip spreads in this town if you don’t keep it contained.”

“It doesn’t help that all of us Gold Wolves are notorious gossips when we’re bored,” I pointed out.

“Might not be bored for much longer,” Declan said. He leaned forward, propping his forearms on the desk.

I groaned. “I know that look. It’s the ‘I have a mission for you’ look.”

“That’s pretty much it in a nutshell. I just got a call from the Wolf’s Council. They want us to look into something for them,” he explained.

The Wolf’s Council was the group that oversaw all the packs in North America, the shifters who ensured peaceful interpack relations and ran the military. So, effectively, they were our old boss from when the Gold Wolves were spec ops.

Emphasis on “old” and “were.” Or at least, so I thought.

“Do they not understand how retirement works?” I grouched.

“Apparently not. Their excuse is that it should be a minor thing, and we’re already in the general area. I think they’re just trying to pull us back into the job any way they can.”

“Jameson did warn us that the spec-ops life always found a way of coming back,” I mused, thinking back to the alpha of the Silver Wolves, another semi-retired black-

ops group we had worked with before. “I just thought he was bullshitting us.”

“Apparently, he was right.”

“Seems like it. And I’m guessing that we don’t really have an option in any of this.”

At Declan’s “no shit” expression, I took a deep breath. “Right. Well, it was worth a shot. What’s the job?”

“It’s nothing major. Should only take a couple of us, to be honest. But they want us to look into a pack nearby. Apparently, their alpha, Reacher, has been throwing his weight around a little too much. The council’s been hearing whispers that he’s been using extreme tactics to keep his guys in line.”

I nodded, folding my arms as I shifted on my feet. It wasn’t the first time an alpha over-asserted his authority, and I knew it wouldn’t be the last, either. Sometimes they just needed some strong encouragement to knock it off, and that was the end of it. Others could be a lot more problematic. But it wasn’t anything I hadn’t seen before.

“What’s the pack name?” I asked.

“Blood Moon. They live in Rowen. It’s not too far from here.”

My brow furrowed. Something about the pack and town name sounded familiar, triggering some old distant memory that I couldn’t place. I could have sworn I’d heard the name before, but for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out when or where.

“Have we ever dealt with them before?” I asked.

“Not to my knowledge. Why?”

I shook my head. “No reason. Keep going.”

“Anyway, I was hoping that you wouldn’t mind overseeing this,” Declan continued. “It should be pretty cut and dry. Check out the town for a day or so, see if there’s anything amiss, try to get the locals to talk to you, that sort of thing. I’m too swamped here to get away.”

“Are you sure you’re swamped, or you just don’t want to go?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Declan’s lip tilted upward. “I’m going to ignore that one,” he said. “Anyway, are you good to go?”

I let out a long breath, chewing the inside of my lip as I considered. To be entirely honest, I didn’t want to go. I was enjoying not having to deal with black-ops jobs after years of constant fighting and moving from town to town, from mission to mission. There was a reason I’d retired.

“I don’t know, Declan,” I said. “Are you sure the council can’t get one of their non-retired units to look into this?”

Declan cracked a grin. “I asked them that almost verbatim,” he said. “Apparently, all of them are busy at the moment, and they want this checked out sooner rather than later. Just in case it is something to worry about.”

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. The truth was, I didn’t want to go. It was inherently selfish, I knew, but I was perfectly happy staying in town and helping out with running things on this side.

Declan seemed to read my mind. “Look, it’s not fun, and it isn’t what any of us had in mind when we quit. But at the same time, we still swore an oath to protect others.

That oath doesn't die with retirement.”

Sure, but I had assumed the days of being shuffled around from place to place, often finding nothing, were long behind me.

“Let me think about it,” I said.

Declan gave a curt nod. “That’s all I wanted to hear,” he said. “I know it’s not convenient, and honestly will probably be an incredibly boring job, but it is a necessity.”

“Yeah,” I said, strolling toward the door. “I’m coming over to visit Mira tonight. I’ll let you know what I’ve decided then.”

Walking out of the office, I gave a short nod to Rose, then tilted my head. “How many of them were listening in?” I asked, raising my eyebrow.

“Three of them,” she said with a knowing quirk on her lips. “Will was the only one who didn’t.”

I sighed. “Sounds about right.”

“They ran off that way.” She pointed down the hall in the direction of an open door. “Dipped into the break room.”

Snorting, I strolled in that direction. When I rounded the corner to enter the break room, the remaining ex-members of the Gold Wolves looked up at me.

“What’s going on?” Trent asked with wide-eyed innocence.

“Funny,” I said, giving him a look.

“We’re serious,” Chris grunted, though he couldn’t help but smirk. “We didn’t overhear a word.”

I groan. “How the hell did you guys succeed in spec ops all those years? You’re all terrible liars. Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

“In that case, does Declan know what the word ‘retirement’ means?” Nolan complained. “I can give him a dictionary for Christmas.”

“This is coming from higher up,” I told him.

Chris’s eyebrows shot up, his head tilting. “Really? That part we missed. The council’s dragging us into this?”

When I nodded, there was a collective groan from the others, save for Will, who kept lounging on the couch, watching us with silent interest.

“Honestly, we could probably tell The Council no if we really want,” Trent commented. “It isn’t as though they can do much about it if we do.”

“Feels wrong, though,” Will countered. He turned toward me. “Are you going to take it?”

Letting out a puff of air, I ran my fingers through my hair. “Hell if I know. I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

“Well, if you do, feel free to volunteer me to come along,” Will said. “Or if you don’t, I can lead the mission.”

I nodded, not surprised that Will was the one who volunteered to take over. He had always been the one most duty-sworn.

“I’ll let you know when I’ve decided,” I said, already planning on throwing out the suggestion to Declan. It sure as hell would make my life easier. I happened to enjoy retirement.

By the end of the day, I was fully prepared to tell Will to have at it. He and the others were more than capable of handling the situation without me looking over their shoulder. Hell, the only reason Declan had told me about it first was because I was his second-in-command. No one would judge me for sticking behind.

Except that every time I told myself I had decided not to do it, something stopped me. I couldn’t shake the feeling that the Blood Moon pack was familiar. Not just familiar—important. As if it meant something to me. Only, I couldn’t for the life of me remember what.

It was for that nagging reason that I didn’t give Declan an answer before I left, and the reason I couldn’t stop thinking about it after I arrived at my sister’s house.

I was still trying to uncover what was nagging at my memory while I sat on the couch, playing with my nephew while Dani, Declan’s kid and Mira’s stepdaughter, played on the floor.

I bounced Alex up and down on my leg as he giggled.

“You all right?” Mira asked, studying me. “You seem off.”

I blinked, pulling myself back to the present. “Yeah, I’m fine... we just have to go on a mission soon.”

Her brow furrowed. “Aren’t you guys retired?”

My lip quirked upward as I smirked at her. “Apparently not,” I quipped. “But that’s not what’s bothering me. Does the name Blood Moon pack ring a bell? Or the town Rowen?”

I had expected her to shake her head. To my surprise, she nodded. “Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Do you remember my friend Audrey? She was in our pack for a couple of years before she randomly left without a word?”

A jolt of remembrance and guilt pierced through me. Of course I remembered Audrey. How could I not? The last memory I have of her was her running out the door, anger radiating off her. Because of me.

“Yeah, I think I remember her,” I managed to say.

“I always wondered what happened to her,” Mira mused. “She just vanished. Didn’t tell me why. Sent me a text she was leaving, and that was it.”

As far as I knew, Mira knew nothing about that night. If she did, she’d never told me as much. But there was no sign of accusation on her face, just genuine loss and confusion.

Guilt continued to gnaw at me as I focused all my attention on Alex. “Sorry, but what does this have to do with Mira?” I asked, trying to keep my expression neutral.

She blinked, shaking her head to clear it. “Sorry. Anyway, Blood Moon was her original pack. The one she ran away from when she joined ours.”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I stared down at Alex, who was burbling happily as he

bounced up and down on my knee. Audrey. A woman I still thought about daily. I'd had a chance with her, and I'd blown it.

"You never found out what happened to her?" I asked, trying to keep my voice casual.

She shook her head. "Tried reaching out to her over the years, but I never found her."

I hadn't tried. Not because I didn't care, but because I assumed she wouldn't bother speaking to me. Not after the way things had ended between us. That hadn't stopped me from wondering about her, though.

I'd always wondered what her old pack had been like. She hadn't spoken about it much beyond vague terms. It had to have been rough for her to leave her parents.

It was probably even harder for her to leave your pack, a voice chided me.

I tried to ignore the stab of guilt. If I did want to know what her home pack had been like, this was my chance. Why not take it?

The door opened. "I'm home," Declan called through the house.

Dani straightened, her eyes sparkling as she scurried toward the door. "Daddy!" she cried.

Declan strolled into the house, holding Dani in one arm, eyes crinkling as he laughed at something Dani had said. Smiling, Mira picked up Alex and walked over. Declan bent down and gave her a tender kiss on the cheek.

Seeing the four of them, a whole family, sent a spasm of longing through me that I hadn't anticipated. I had always wanted to settle down with someone eventually.

Seeing Declan with his family like this now only intensified that desire.

That, plus the overwhelming urge to see what Audrey's old pack was like, was probably what made me change my mind.

"I'll lead the mission," I announced, standing.

Declan blinked, raising his eyebrows. "Really?"

I nodded, ignoring the obvious question that lingered in the single word.

"I can take Will and Trent," I continued.

He studied me, clearly trying to figure out what had made me decide. When he realized I wasn't going to give any explanation (partially because I could barely explain the rationale myself), he nodded.

"Let them know. You can leave the day after tomorrow," he said. "The sooner you get there, the sooner we can put this behind us."

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I shuffled along the street, keeping my head down as I weaved back and forth through the crowd. My hands were filled with packages, and I was slightly off-balanced as I attempted to navigate the throng.

Finally, I managed to make it to town hall. I juggled the boxes, shifting them to my hip as I struggled to pull the door open. I squeezed inside and nearly lost the top two boxes before I managed to balance them again.

The woman behind the welcome desk glanced up, not bothering to move or help me as I staggered forward. Not that I had expected her to.

“You get everything?” she asked in a clipped, indifferent tone.

“Yes.” I dropped them on the desk. “Can you help me get these to the right offices?”

“I’m busy,” she said, examining her nails as she leaned back in her seat.

“Right,” I muttered. I hefted the boxes in my arms and moved down the hall.

I shuffled from office to office, the load in my arms getting steadily lighter with each stop. No one thanked me or so much as looked up when I dropped off their mail. It wasn’t a surprise, and I’d given up on expecting anything other than casual indifference from most of the pack.

Finally, there were only a couple of letters remaining, along with a small parcel, all for Reacher. I took a deep breath as I looked down at the name, then down the hall where his office was. Apprehension and unease prickled along my skin. I tried to

avoid our alpha as much as possible. Unfortunately, thanks to being an aide at town hall, that wasn't as easy as I would have preferred. And since my dad refused to let me quit my job, I was forced to come across Reacher at least a few times a week.

You would think that I would have gotten used to it by now. That I would be desensitized. Unfortunately, it had been ten years now, and seeing him still sent that same bone-deep dread running through me.

As I approached the closed door, I heard voices emanate from the other side. I couldn't make out the words, but I recognized Reacher's voice along with my father's, his second-in-command.

My mouth went dry as a spasm of unease rippled through me. I'd gotten in trouble before for knocking while they were in a meeting. Reacher had called it "interrupting." But he had also chewed me out for an entire hour, calling me useless and a good-for-nothing idiot, among other things, when I hadn't delivered the mail and other packages in what he deemed a timely manner. So I could either get in trouble for bothering him, or get in trouble for "not doing my job."

I paused, debating whether or not it was worth knocking and potentially getting berated for interrupting, or if I was better off waiting and getting berated for dawdling later. Bothering him typically resulted in less of an explosion. Taking a deep breath and bracing myself for the inevitable backlash, I raised my hand to knock.

"How many weapons do we have right now?" Reacher's voice rang out, now crystal clear.

My knuckles paused centimeters from the door, the words registering just before my fist made contact. Weapons? Had I misheard him? If he was interested in weapons shipments...

Please let me have misheard him , I willed.

“A good amount. But only about half of what we need,” Dad answered.

“That’s a problem,” Reacher said angrily. “I want to get moving on this before anyone who shouldn’t gets wind of what we’re doing.”

“There are more on the way. Promise.”

A light, rhythmic tapping sound followed the statement, as if Reacher was drumming his fingers on his desk. “What about men?”

“I’ve roped in everyone we can trust,” Dad said. “And the guys in the other packs are ready to move when you give the word.”

“What about the ones we can coerce?”

“Working on it.”

My breath caught in my throat as a creeping dread ran up my spine, feeling like hundreds of spiders scuttling along my back. I stayed rooted to the spot, hand still held up like a statue.

I knew I should go. Should turn around and leave. If they found out I was eavesdropping, I would get in serious trouble. But a morbid curiosity took hold of me at the same time, along with a gnawing unease. Things had been off lately. I had sensed it in the way Dad would sometimes act cagey, and in the dirty looks I would get when I wandered into an area they didn’t want me in.

I took a step back, preparing to turn and leave.

“I think—” A long pause followed as Reacher cut himself off. A low growl emanated from inside the room, and my stomach clenched with dread. “Wait.”

I heard the footsteps coming to the door a second too late. I stumbled backward, but not fast enough. I hadn't taken two steps away when the door swung open.

A hulking shifter with salt-and-pepper hair emerged, glancing around until his gaze landed on me. Reacher looked down at me with disgust and rage, fury burning in his eyes as his lips curled into a sneer.

“Get in here, you little brat,” he hissed. His hand clamped around my wrist and jerked me into the room. I stumbled forward, nearly tripping over my feet with how fast he was dragging me. The instant I cleared the doorway, he slammed the door shut behind me.

“Want to explain what you were doing lurking outside my office?” he snarled.

My jaw opened and closed, my mouth refusing to cooperate with my brain as panic gripped me. My wrist began to throb as his grip tightened.

“Are you mute now?” he sneered.

“N-no,” I stammered. “I wasn't lurking. I had only just gotten there. I was about to knock. I have your mail.”

I raised the bundle of mail in my hand. I knew he could hear my heart thundering. His eyes caught it, and his lips curled into a sneer. He snatched the mail from my hand with such force that one letter fluttered to the ground.

“Don't knock when I'm in a meeting, you know that,” he growled. “This shit can wait until after.”

You say that every time, and every time I listen to you, you berate me for not giving it to you sooner, I thought. But there was no way in hell I was going to say it. Instead, I just gave a timid nod of my head.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I would promise that it wouldn’t happen again, but it was part of the inevitable cycle that seemed impossible to break. No matter what I did, it was wrong, and I would get in trouble for it. The only thing that came close to saving me was apologizing and shuffling away as quickly as possible.

Reacher looked down at me coolly, his face expressionless as his eyes stared into me with contempt and disdain. I stood frozen in fear like caught prey, trapped by that gaze, waiting for the retribution.

“I’ve got to go,” Reacher said, not taking his eyes off me. “I’ll leave you to take care of this and our other problem, Saul.”

“Of course,” Dad responded immediately.

Reacher brushed past me without another word.

“Come on,” Dad snarled, leading me down the hall and opening the door to his own office. The instant it was ajar, he grabbed my arm and jerked me into the room.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dad hissed. I gasped as his nails dug into my flesh, his grip tight enough that I knew it was going to leave bruises. “I knew you were a tramp and a runaway, but I didn’t think you were dumb enough to be a spy.”

“I’m not,” I protested, my throat dry. I tried to pull my arm away, but he only gripped me tighter. “I swear, I wasn’t—”

“What did you hear?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” I said, my voice strained.

He looked me up and down, eyes squinting at me in suspicion. I realized with a horrible, sickening dread that he knew I was lying.

“You little liar.” His grip on me tightened, and I gave a sharp intake of breath as he jostled me. Anger filled his eyes, but something that might have been a twinge of fright lurked behind it. “How much do you know?”

Truthfully? More than they thought I did. Over the last year, ever since I had noticed the atmosphere at town hall had shifted, I had picked up snippets here and there of whispered plans. Plans I was definitely not supposed to know. It’s easy enough to be a fly on the wall when most people pretend you’re not there in the first place. I had heard enough to know that what they were planning was bad, and a lot of people would get hurt because of it.

But there was no way in hell I was going to tell my father that because I also understood enough about their plans to know that there was nothing I could do to stop them. All I could do was get myself and the only person I cared about in trouble. The best course of action for me was to play as dumb as possible.

“Nothing,” I said.

He sneered. “I’m not an idiot. Stop lying.” He raised his eyebrow. “You wouldn’t want me to get Claire involved in this, do you?”

This time, I couldn’t help it. I winced. His sneer turned triumphant as he realized he’d won. As usual.

“Anything I may or may not know, I have no way of proving,” I said. “And even if I did, I wouldn’t tell anyone. So for all intents and purposes, I know nothing.”

I could tell that was the answer he had wanted. Still, he leaned forward, his eyes flashing wolf as he got close. I wanted to stand still, to show him he didn't scare me by not shying away. But when his face was inches from mine, I couldn't help it. I flinched, my head shrinking away.

"You sure about that?" His hot, rotten-smelling breath brushed against my face. It took all my effort not to grimace or try and take a step backward. My insides squirmed with unease, and I looked away.

"I'm positive," I said.

"Good." He released my arm. I took a step back, forcing myself not to rub the area he'd been gripping. "Be sure to keep it that way. Do you understand?"

I understood perfectly. I gave a short jerk of the head.

"Good." He turned and walked away, leaving me alone and with a dozen new, unsettling questions that I would never risk asking.

Later, I sat at the kitchen table, drumming my fingers as I contemplated the cramped space, still trying to calm my nerves from the brief encounter with Dad and Reacher. For what had to be the thousandth time, I imagined leaving the pack, running away again like I used to. But I knew that was an idle fantasy, one that would never come true for one specific reason. And that reason was likely getting home from school right about now.

Like clockwork, the door opened. A moment later, Claire hurried into the kitchen, slinging off her backpack.

“Hi, Mom!” she chirped.

“Hi, sweetie,” I said, smiling. “How was your day?”

She tilted her head back and forth, her light brown hair bouncing with the motion. “It was okay,” she said. Based on the way she said it, though, I doubted she was being entirely honest.

I glanced down at her jeans and tried to bite back a sigh of frustration. They cut off an inch above the ankle. She was in the middle of yet another growth spurt, and unless Dad helped, I didn’t have the money to get her new clothes. If it were anyone but my father, I wouldn’t have hesitated to bring it up. But knowing Dad, he would just say no out of spite. Not because of Claire but because of me. Any way he could find to make my life a little more difficult, he would take it, even at the expense of his own granddaughter. I sometimes suspected that he didn’t see her as much more than a pawn.

“Why don’t you go get started on homework?” I prodded. “I’ll start fixing dinner once your grandfather gets home.”

Claire nodded, then dipped out of the room and headed upstairs.

I let out a sigh as I slumped back in my chair, glancing up at the ceiling as if I could see my daughter through it. Out of everything that had happened in my life, Claire had always been the shining beacon, the main reason I kept trying to move forward, no matter how difficult. After running away from Jackson’s house that night, I was broken, ashamed, humiliated. I knew I couldn’t stay in his pack. It was too painful to even consider it. So I shoved all my possessions into a suitcase and left in the middle of the night, not three hours after Jackson and I had sex.

For the next couple of weeks, I was aimless. I didn’t know what to do or where to go.

All I wanted was to forget about the whole thing and start over.

About three weeks after I left, however, I realized that would be impossible. I started to get sick nearly every morning. My confusion slowly turned to horror as I did the math and realized my period was late. I could still remember being in the stall of the public restroom, staring at the pregnancy test clutched in my hand as the lump in my throat swelled, threatening to choke me. I remembered the bizarre mix of happiness and dread as the plus sign began to form on the stick in front of me. Happiness because I had always wanted to be a mother, to have a kid I could treat better than my parents had treated me. Dread because I was in no condition to take care of a child properly. I was a runaway without a pack, without a solid job or place to live. Hell, I had been living out of my car as I traveled around, trying to figure out what I was going to do next.

I tried frantically to get a job, to do anything I could that would put a roof over my head before my cub came. I did everything in my power to try and make ends meet. But the economy sucked, and I realized that doing this on my own was going to be impossible. I needed help.

I thought about going back to Mira's pack. I knew that she would help me. But I just couldn't go back there, especially not when I knew Jackson was the father. He would figure it out instantly, and I didn't know how he would react. For all I knew, he would reject his kid altogether, leaving me in an even worse position. Regardless, I couldn't face him. I couldn't stand admitting to him what had happened.

Which meant I did the one thing I had sworn I would never do.

I went home.

I remembered with perfect clarity walking back into the Blood Moon pack and knocking on my parents' door. My father was the one to open the door. His nostrils

flared, and his gaze lowered to my belly. He sneered, said something demeaning (I'd forgotten what; at some point, all the insults blended together that I wasn't able to separate them), then took me to Reacher.

At first, they had been reluctant to let me back in. It wasn't until my mother stepped in that they changed their tune. For what it was worth, I was fairly certain Mom only interceded because she was worried about appearances. She was more accepting than Dad and Reacher, but that was like saying a copperhead was safer than a water moccasin. Her main reasoning was, now that I had shown up again clearly pregnant, people would talk if they sent me away.

Eventually, they allowed me to stay, with two caveats: The first was that I had to live with my parents. I wasn't allowed to live on my own since I was now deemed a flight risk. The second was that I couldn't leave the pack again. Reacher threatened Claire's life, saying he would kill her if I so much as thought about running away. Even if I took her with me, he would track me until he had hunted us down. So I was stuck in a pack with no real support system, where the alpha and my father hated me, and there was no way for me to run.

Mom had at least been somewhat helpful. She helped me raise Claire for the first couple of years until she died suddenly. The instant she died, Dad's passive-aggressive cruelty turned more aggressive.

I had dreamed of getting away ever since I had rejoined the pack, more so once Mom had died. But I was afraid of what would happen to Claire if I tried. Even if I brought her with me, I knew that Dad and Reacher would hunt us down, and they'd punish Claire for my decision. I couldn't risk it, so I never tried. Besides, where would I go?

My mind flickered unbidden to Jackson, the way it sometimes did when I wasn't paying attention. I wondered what he was doing, if he had actually joined the military, and whether he was happy. I also wondered what would have happened if I

had decided to go back after all. If it would have been as bad as eighteen-year-old me thought it would be.

I shoved that thought away the instant it cropped up. Jackson had rejected me. He'd made his intentions perfectly clear. Even if I had tried, he would have rejected his kid the same way he did me. I had done the one thing I had to in order to protect my daughter and make sure she would at least get her basic necessities taken care of. It had cost me my own freedom and forced me to live in a place I hated, but I couldn't regret it.

Still, there was no getting out of the agreement I had made with Dad and Reacher. Unless a miracle happened, I was stuck here for good.

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Something felt off about the town the instant we got out of the car. It was just something in the air, a sort of tension that loomed over the entire area. Based on the dubious expressions on Will's and Trent's faces, I guessed they got the same sense.

"Maybe there's something to the rumors after all," Trent remarked. "You don't typically get this kind of vibe in a happy, carefree pack."

"No, you don't," I agreed. "But we don't know anything at the moment. Let's see what we can find. Might be we're just imagining it."

As we wandered the town, though, it became clear that we weren't imagining it. Something about the place just felt wrong. People hurried from place to place, glancing at us with suspicious looks before darting down the street. Despite it being a perfectly clear day, the entire place felt gloomy and overcast.

"Think we're getting weird stares?" Trent muttered as his eyes swept the area. I noted the tension in his shoulders. Everything about him screamed that he was alert and ready for danger.

"It probably doesn't help that you look like you're ready to pick a fight with the first person to bother you," I hissed. "Relax. We're here looking for a new pack to join, not hunting a potentially dangerous shifter."

"Give him a break," Will retorted. "He never was much good at the espionage part."

"I resent that," Trent said, shooting Will a look. His cheeks went red as he saw the playful smirk on Will's face that said he had been baiting the other shifter. "Jerk," he

muttered.

“Will you two knock it off?” I snapped. “The whole point of our cover story is to make sure that no one knows what we’re really up to here. You guys aren’t really helping at the moment.”

“Sorry,” Trent said. “A bit out of practice with it all.”

The longer we walked, the more my thoughts kept wandering toward Audrey. She had never mentioned her pack or her family in much detail, only that they didn’t get along and she didn’t like the alpha, which was why she had run away. Now that I was here and saw the atmosphere for myself, I couldn’t blame her for wanting to leave.

And you ran her out of the safe pack she did find , a voice in the back of my head reminded me.

I pushed the thought from my head. I didn’t know that for certain. I didn’t know if that was the reason she had left. For all I knew, she had been planning on leaving afterward, anyway. She had always been a free spirit.

But the conversation after we’d had sex hadn’t exactly given off that impression. In fact, it had seemed rather the opposite.

The more I thought about her, the more the pang of guilt intensified. I wondered where she had ended up. Wherever it was, I hoped it was better than this place. Thinking back to the spirited, fiery woman I had known, it seemed almost impossible that she had grown up in this pack. It felt like the type of place that would snuff out that flame as quickly as possible.

At least she had gotten away from here.

“You all right?” Will asked, raising an eyebrow. “You look lost in your own thoughts.”

I blinked, dragging my attention back to reality as I turned to look at him. “Yeah, I’m all right,” I said.

“Good,” Trent mumbled as he nodded in front of him. “Because it looks like we’re about to get some company.”

I turned in the direction he had indicated. A tall, burly, middle-aged shifter with graying hair approached us, his hands stuffed in his pockets. He gave a smile as he regarded the three of us, but it didn’t reach his eyes. My skin prickled as alarm bells began to ring in my head.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“Depends,” I replied, raising an eyebrow, trying to inject an air of brashness into my tone. “Are you gonna be as skittish as the rest of the people here? We’re looking for someone in charge.”

“You’ve found one,” he said as he studied us. “As for people being skittish, that’s just our custom. Don’t take this the wrong way, but we’re not typically used to strangers. You can understand why we would want to be cautious. You never know what their intentions are.”

“We know how some packs can be about strangers,” Trent said.

That was putting it mildly. It wasn’t uncommon for packs to be suspicious of outsiders. During our spec-ops days, we’d been run out of town on more than one occasion. Others, like the Falcon pack where we had settled, were more open to strangers. Based on everything we had seen on our short stint around town, the fact

that this pack was one of the former didn't surprise me in the least.

"Then you'll understand if I want to ask you a few questions."

"I'm all right with it as long as you tell me your name first," I said.

The shifter let out a genuine chortle at that. "Fair enough. I'm Saul."

"I'm Jackson," I said. "This is Trent and Will."

"Great. Now that we got that out of the way, why don't you tell me what you're doing here?"

"We're just looking for a new pack," I said, jerking my head behind me at Will and Trent. "Turns out the three of us had some disagreements with our old alpha about how things should be run."

Saul raised an eyebrow. "That so?"

I shrugged. "The guy was an old-timer. Too soft. But he didn't like us making waves, so we decided to leave. We're looking for a place that agrees with us a bit more."

Based on everything I had read about Reacher and the way he allegedly handled his pack, I was hoping that he and his inner circle might respond well to a rougher, more violent-oriented type of person, the type of shifter who equated cruelty with strength. Based on the look Saul was currently giving us, one that mixed interest with curiosity, I guessed I was right.

"Huh." Saul looked us up and down, one eyebrow raised as he assessed the three of us. His eyes lingered on my face, scrutinizing it for longer than I cared for. "There's something familiar about you," he commented.

I blinked, not bothering to hide my surprise. Had I run across him before? During one of our missions? If so, this operation was dead in the water. “Can’t imagine why,” I said, trying to bluff my way out of the situation. “Guess I just have one of those faces.”

“It happens all the time,” Will drawled, sounding bored.

“Yeah, there was that one time a guy punched him in the face because he thought it was the same guy who stepped out with his girl,” Trent added.

“I sorted them out,” I said, playing along. “So as long as you don’t plan on hitting me, I don’t care who you think I look like.”

“Maybe,” Saul muttered, continuing to squint at me. After a moment, he gave a short shrug. “Probably my imagination. Old age will do that to ya.”

“Regardless, mind showing us around a bit?” I asked. “See if we’d be a good fit?”

He studied us, his head tilted in interest. I waited, wondering if he would tell us to get the hell out of here or if he would take the bait. After a minute of contemplation, he broke into a charming grin.

“I think I can help you fine gentlemen out with that,” he said.

As he led us around the town, something about him also struck me as familiar. Just small things, like the way he gestured at a building or rubbed his nose, and something about the shape of his eyes. I had been certain I hadn’t seen him before, but now... I wasn’t sure.

I pushed the thought from my mind. I was here on a mission, not to wonder why a guy struck me as familiar. And if I had met him before, that was even worse. The less

any of us dwelled on it, the better.

“All in all, the people here are pretty good,” Saul said as he showed us down another street. “Strong community, once people know you. I always like to say we’re all one big happy family.”

Whenever someone said that about a pack, especially someone who helped run things, I’d often found that the “one big happy family” was typically about as far from the truth as possible. The only “family” there was the kind that was enforced by cruelty.

“That’s what I like to hear,” I said. “Kind of place we’re looking for.”

“What about your alpha?” Will asked. “What’s he like? He’s not one of those who likes to roll over for anyone who comes by, is he? Our last alpha was such a pushover that he let everyone walk all over him. It was an embarrassment. He—”

“Hey,” I snapped on cue. “Watch it.”

Will shut up. The instant Saul turned his attention away from Will and back onto me, Will winked. It seemed he hadn’t lost that acting touch that had made him so good at infiltrating.

Chuckling, that laugh oddly familiar, Saul asked, “I’m guessing you three didn’t get along well with the last alpha?” he asked.

“He was a good guy,” I said, pretending to shoot Will an irritated glance. “We just had some disagreements with him about how to handle certain things.”

“Don’t mince words,” Will drawled, folding his arms. “He was a wimp. Let anyone do whatever they wanted and didn’t do anything to assert his dominance. Honestly, it

was embarrassing.”

“Let’s just say that we’re looking for a pack whose alpha knows what they’re doing,” I said.

Saul nodded. “I completely understand. A lot of alphas nowadays are too soft, if you ask me. They don’t know what it takes to keep things under control.”

“Exactly,” Trent said, nodding. “We’re the type of people who respect strength in our alpha. Feels like too few people care about that anymore.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve definitely come to the right place,” Saul promised. “I have a funny feeling you guys are going to like Reacher. He’s the kind of guy that everyone respects. And he’s certainly got strength in spades.” He suddenly glanced over to the side and instantly straightened. “Ah, and here’s just the man to tell you all about it. Reacher!”

A large shifter with graying hair and messy stubble turned his head at the name. He gave a brief nod of acknowledgment and strolled toward us.

“Glad you’re here,” Saul said when Reacher came to a halt next to him. “Looks like we might have some new recruits for the pack.”

Reacher raised his eyebrow. A long pause followed the statement as the alpha looked at each of us. His eyes lingered on me before he finally said, “That so? Where are you guys from?”

“Redstone pack, a few hours from here,” I lied.

“Long way to go for a new pack,” he mused.

I shrugged, trying to keep my expression indifferent. “Nothing tying us down there. Why not try a new area?”

He nodded, looking us up and down. For a moment, I worried we’d been made, that our cover was blown and we were about to get kicked out of town. It would mean the mission was over. On one hand, going home would be nice, but I wasn’t the kind of person who would back out of a mission before it was complete.

I waited to see what Reacher’s next move would be, already calculating next steps in case things went sideways. It turned out to be unnecessary, though, because a moment later, that suspicious look turned into a smile.

“In that case, why don’t you three come into my office?” Reacher suggested. “I’m sure we can have a nice long chat about whether you three would be comfortable here. Saul, why don’t you come as well?”

The five of us walked back the way Reacher had come. As we did, I couldn’t help but notice people shuffling out of the way, everyone clearing the path for Reacher as he strutted forward. I studied their faces. There seemed to be a mix of admiration and fright, the sort of look I’d expect for a guy who demanded respect through brute strength and fear as opposed to earning it through hard work and helping the community.

With every passing minute, I grew more and more certain that all the rumors about Reacher were true. This guy was bad news. The only question now was what we could do about it.

He led us into a large, gray stone building and up the stairs, humming to himself, hands in his pockets as he sauntered through the halls. He gave friendly waves to passersby, who all returned them.

“This is my office here,” he said, opening a door and ushering us in.

The instant the door was closed, his entire demeanor shifted. His genial smile turned to a frown as he made his way from the door to his chair.

“So,” I began. “What can you tell us about the town—”

“You can save the pleasantries,” Reacher said tersely. He leaned forward and propped his elbows on the desk, studying the three of us. “I know who you are.”

A shock rippled through me. Not just at his declaration that he knew who we were but at how rapidly his personality had changed. It was as if he had flicked a switch.

Guess my instincts weren't that far off the mark after all, I thought. My eyes darted around as my mind scrambled to figure out a plausible cover story.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Will said, keeping his voice even. But I could see his alarm in the way he repositioned himself, in the subtle way his muscles tensed as he glanced around.

“I think you do,” Reacher said. “I would be a pretty piss-poor alpha if I didn't know what the Gold Wolves looked like.”

Off to the side, I noticed Saul shifting, clearly preparing for a fight.

Reacher caught the motion as well. “It's all good, Saul,” he said. “They did a good job. No reason for you to get ashamed they pulled the wool over your eyes.”

An uncomfortable tension crackled in the air as everyone noted the shift. Reacher grinned, fully aware that he had put us off balance. He held most of the cards, and there was nothing we had that compared. Our only play at the moment was to feign

indifference and keep moving. The less we showed that he had taken us by surprise, the more power we could regain.

“I’m impressed that you put in the effort to research a retired group,” I said, sounding bored.

“You never can be too careful,” Reacher said, his eyes glinting with triumph. “And it seems as though I was right to do so. Now, what is it you boys really want?”

I scrambled, trying to come up with a convincing excuse that would mean our mission hadn’t been an entire waste. I wasn’t going to give up that easily. He might have figured out who we were, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t turn this around.

“I think you’re mistaken,” I said, shrugging. “Yes, we’re part of the Gold Wolves. Or we were. The three of us decided that we’d had enough of our alpha and the goody-two-shoes life, so we left. We’re looking to start over, away from the Gold Wolves.”

I’d hoped that maybe by pretending we no longer had any allegiance to the Gold Wolves, he might accept the story and let us stay, or at least let us look around a bit more. We just needed to convince him we weren’t investigating him, that we didn’t care how he acted.

Unfortunately, he didn’t seem entirely convinced.

“Now, why would the infamous Gold Wolves do that?” he asked.

“Bored,” Will grunted, catching on to what I was trying to do. “And our alpha was too much of a softy. He never did have the stomach to do the hard stuff that was necessary.”

“Is that so?” Reacher asked thoughtfully. He glanced over at Saul, then back to me.

“Now, see, based on the stories, I have a hard time believing any of that.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” I countered.

He chuckled. “In that case, why on earth should I believe you?”

I couldn’t come up with a good answer for that. “If you don’t want us here, then just kick us out. You could have done that from the start.”

“I could have,” he conceded. “But that wouldn’t have done me much good in the long run. You three would have just kept snooping around.”

“Who says we’re snooping?” Will asked.

“Spare me,” Reacher snapped. “Please don’t insult my intelligence. I know what you’re doing, and you denying it is just going to make us keep talking in circles. I don’t have the time or the patience for that, so let’s skip over that bit, shall we?”

“Fine. If you have nothing to hide, then why do you think we’re here investigating you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Why else would you be here? I can also guess what you’re looking into. I rule with an iron fist. Some people don’t like that. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone complained to the council.”

“You’re not helping your case here, you know,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

Reacher held up his hand and gave a warm politician’s smile. “I want to assure you three that you have nothing to worry about here. I run a tight ship, certainly. But that doesn’t mean we’re doing anything unlawful.”

I didn't believe a word spewing from this guy's mouth, and the longer I stood here talking to him, the harder it was for me not to take a swipe at him.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Reacher," I said, stuffing my hands in my pocket, "but your assurances don't exactly mean much. We're here to look into things, not take your word for it."

He chortled. "Naturally, and fine operatives such as yourselves would naturally want to do some in-depth searching to make sure everything is aboveboard. But we also know that doing that is a bunch of wasted effort. So, let me propose a solution that will make both of us happy."

He pushed himself to his feet, walking around to stand in front of me. "As a show of... let's say goodwill... I want to give you something. Anything you want. That way, you can see I have nothing to hide, and we can all go back to what we really want to be doing. Me running this town, and you three enjoying your retirement. So, what do you say? That sound of any interest to you fine fellas?"

It sounded like a load of bullshit. My wolf thrashed, irritated with the alpha, his instincts screaming at me that there was more going on in this town than met the eye. There was a reason Reacher wanted us gone. If he had nothing to hide, then he wouldn't be trying this hard to get us out of here as quickly as possible. And he actually thought he could get us to leave on a bribe? I couldn't think of a single thing he could offer that would stop me from investigating this guy, especially when he was trying this hard to get rid of us.

I opened my mouth to say just that, to tell him there was no way in hell I was going to take a bribe. But before I could say a word, there was a knock on the door, and it swung open. A scent of jasmine and honey wafted up my nose. It was vaguely familiar, like I had smelled it a long time ago.

Reacher's eyes flashed as he looked behind me, his face contorting in anger. "Just because you knock first doesn't mean you can enter without permission," he barked.

I barely heard him, too preoccupied with the new (was it new? Why did it seem so familiar, then?) scent. My wolf stirred, intrigued by the scent, pulled to it in a way I hadn't experienced before.

No, that wasn't true. I had experienced this pull once before. Years ago. With...

"I'm sorry," a voice said, one I hadn't heard for years but one I would recognize in a heartbeat.

My head whipped around in disbelief.

A small woman stood just inside the room, her hand still on the doorknob, clutching it so hard, her knuckles had turned white. Her blue eyes were wide with something akin to fright as she stared at Reacher in stricken panic.

"In case you're too dim-witted to notice, we're in the middle of a meeting," Reacher snarled. I imagined him gesturing with a hand at the room at large, his face contorted in a dismissive sneer, but I didn't turn to look. All my attention was focused on Audrey.

Reacher's words pierced through my consciousness. Dim-witted? Audrey? He had to be stupid to even consider calling her that to her face. I expected her eyes to blaze with anger and for her to fire back a retort the way she always did. Instead, to my surprise, she lowered her head, breaking eye contact with Reacher.

"I'm sorry," she muttered to the floor.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you," he barked.

She raised her head, but her gaze darted all over the place.

I stared at her, unable to tear my gaze away. It was Audrey. Same pointed chin, same auburn hair and blue eyes, same petite frame. She looked as gorgeous as she had all those years ago.

Except, there was something off. She was still beautiful; I doubted anything could ever change that. But there was something haunted about her. She looked more gaunt, as if she didn't eat enough, and her shoulders hunched slightly, as if she was perpetually nervous. And there was a hollowness in her face and eyes that hadn't been there before.

She didn't act like Audrey, either. There was a wild, caught-prey look in her eyes, something I never would have expected to see on the spirited woman I used to know. And the Audrey I knew wouldn't be taking any of Reacher's bullshit lying down.

"Now, what the hell was so important that you couldn't wait?" Reacher sneered.

"I—" Her eyes found mine, and she stopped speaking abruptly, as if the words had lodged in her throat. She gasped as she stared at me, her mouth working silently.

An overwhelming need to protect her, to have her near me again, washed over me. I wanted her again the instant I saw her. But seeing her like this, meek and frightened of her own shadow, made that need to save her even stronger. I couldn't let her stay here, not with how beaten-down she looked.

I knew what I was about to do. I knew I was risking the mission for selfish reasons. But I had lost her once before, and I wasn't going to let her get away again.

I turned back to Reacher. "I changed my mind," I said, jerking my head back toward Audrey. "I want her."

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“I want her.”

The words rang in my ears, not fully registering in the shock of seeing Jackson again.

Jackson. Here. After all these years.

I had never expected to see him again. Had never wanted to see him again. Now that he was here, standing in front of me, it felt almost surreal. Like I was in a dream. Or a nightmare.

The last eleven years had only enhanced his features. His light brown hair had always been a little on the wild side. Now, it had a natural, windswept look to it that accentuated his strong square jaw and high cheekbones. Muscles rippled with every movement. He had always been tall, but now he towered over me, his broad shoulders making him seem even bigger.

Over the last few years, I had sometimes imagined what it would be like if I ever ran into him again. Not that I had ever expected it to happen, not with my being confined to the pack. I had imagined how I would feel, what I might say. I had expected it to be along the lines of “fuck you” or “you have some nerve showing your face.” But that wasn’t who I was anymore. And now that he stood in front of me, I couldn’t find the words.

Anger coursed through my veins. He had ruined my life, and now he was here, staring at me as if none of that had ever happened. I wanted to yell at him, to hit him. I wanted to scream at him to get the hell out of my town, spin on my heels, and march out of the room. But I couldn’t seem to move.

My traitorous wolf, on the other hand, didn't seem to feel any of the anger and bitterness radiating through me. All she wanted to do was get close to him, to nuzzle against him, to wrap herself in his scent. She was positively thrilled to see him.

I stifled her urges, not wanting to even humor them. I didn't know what he was doing here, and I didn't particularly care. I just wanted him to leave and never come back.

And what the hell did he mean by saying, "I want her?"

I took in the tableau, trying to discern more about what was going on. Two unfamiliar shifters beside Jackson looked as confused as I felt. One of them gaped at Jackson as though he had gone insane. The other observed the situation with narrow, shrewd eyes.

Jackson was staring at Reacher, his chin jutted out. Reacher continued to glance between me and Jackson as though trying to come to terms with something. What, I had no idea. Meanwhile, Dad had a similar expression to Reacher, his brow furrowed, his lips turned downward in disapproval as if he had just heard something that didn't add up.

"Really?" Reacher looked at me with disbelief, then back at Jackson. "Her?"

"Her," Jackson repeated.

All five shifters now stared at me. My face grew hot, and I knew it was turning a brilliant crimson. I looked down at the floor.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," I said, trying not to sound like I was babbling. "I'll leave now. Sorry."

"You'll stay where you are," Reacher commanded.

I froze, even more confused than I had been a minute ago.

Then, like I wasn't even there, Reacher turned back to look at Jackson. "You're sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," Jackson said.

Sure of what? I wanted to scream, but no words would come out.

"We have an agreement, then," Reacher said. When Jackson gave a short, curt nod, the alpha broke into a wide, triumphant grin. "Excellent. See, I knew we could find some sort of arrangement that would benefit both of us."

I finally found my voice. "What's going on?" I asked.

Reacher chortled, getting to his feet and walking around the desk until he stood next to Jackson. He looked as though he had just won the lottery.

"This is Jackson," Reacher said to me, clapping the other shifter on the shoulder. "You're going to go with him."

My mouth went dry as the words swirled in my head, refusing to make sense. Go with him? Go with him where? And why?

I looked between Reacher and Jackson and my father, waiting for one of them to burst into laughter and reveal this was some sort of terrible, cruel prank for their own enjoyment. Except none of them were laughing. None of them were acting remotely like this was a joke.

"What?" I croaked, my throat dry. It was the only thing I could think to say.

Reacher rolled his eyes, his content smirk turning into a scowl. “This is Jackson,” he repeated slowly, enunciating every syllable.

A brief shock of annoyance flared inside me. I opened my mouth to explain that I knew exactly who this jerk was. But he seemed to sense what I was about to do and gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. The motion made me stop. I didn’t know why he wanted to pretend we didn’t know each other, but I was more than happy to go along with that part of his plan.

Reacher was still talking. “He and I just came to an agreement. A trade of sorts. As part of it, this fine gentleman has agreed to let you go with him back to his pack.”

What Reacher was implying sounded so absurd, so ridiculous, that I initially thought he was joking. I even gave a soft laugh. There was no way he had just sold me in a trade with Jackson. But then I saw the bewildered expressions on the two unfamiliar shifters’ faces and the grim look of acceptance on Dad’s face.

Oh, God. They were serious.

“I don’t follow,” I said. I had to be missing something. That was the only explanation.

“He’s going to be your mate,” Reacher said in that same slow, mocking tone he used with me sometimes. “It’s all been decided. You’re lucky.”

Jackson’s mate? No. I wouldn’t. Not after the way he broke my heart.

“I don’t want—” I began.

“I think in order to make everything official, we should have a ceremony,” Reacher said, speaking to Jackson as if I hadn’t said anything.

Ceremony ? The word sounded so foreign that I couldn't properly process the meaning.

"Is she all right with that?" Jackson asked.

"Of course she is," Reacher answered for me before I could say anything. "And I'm going to insist on one, I'm afraid. I think it will be best for both sides."

Jackson nodded.

"Fantastic!" Reacher beamed. "I think tomorrow will do fine. No use dawdling, and that way, you can get back to your pack as soon as possible."

Tomorrow? That word seemed to break the mute spell that gripped me, and I finally managed to find my voice.

"N-no," I said, eyes wide as I shook my head. "No, I'm not—"

"You'll do what your alpha says," Dad growled.

My mind reeled as I thought desperately. There had to be a way for me to get out of this. I couldn't go with Jackson. Not after everything he had put me through.

"You don't want me," I said to Jackson, finding an edge of steel I had forgotten I had. "Seriously."

Reacher's eyes flashed with warning as he shot me a withering look. "I believe that he just said he does," he retorted in a voice that said I wasn't to argue. I didn't know exactly what was going on, but I knew that I was jeopardizing some larger plan of Reacher's.

Normally, I would shrink away and obey Reacher. But not about this. Not when he was planning on selling me like livestock. I wasn't going to let him do that without some sort of fight. At the same time, I knew that fighting back directly would get me in serious trouble. The best way to get out of this was to make Jackson change his mind.

So, I said the one thing I could think of that might scare him off.

"I'm not going anywhere without my daughter," I blurted out.

It made sense to me to mention Claire. Jackson had abandoned me for a hell of a lot less eleven years ago. If he was anything like how he used to be, he wouldn't want that extra burden. Hell, he hadn't even wanted me alone.

A resounding silence fell over the group after I made that statement. Dad looked annoyed. Reacher looked like he might want to murder me. Jackson stared, his mouth open. I waited, heart pounding, for him to turn around and tell Reacher the deal was off. Surely he would do that. It was the only chance I had to get out of this.

"Daughter?" Jackson asked, still gaping at me. "You have a daughter?"

"Yes."

For a wild, panicked moment, I worried that he might ask if Claire was his, or that he might guess it out of sheer luck. I hadn't been with anyone but him. I hadn't ever wanted anyone else. Even if I had, none of the males here would touch me with a ten-foot pole, considering Reacher and Dad had made me a social pariah. Claire could only be his. But there was no way he could know that.

I hoped that if Jackson knew I had a daughter, he would change his mind. Who wanted a kid to go along with their forced bride? I waited for him to turn to Reacher

and tell him the deal was off, that he had changed his mind. He had rejected me on my own. There was no way he wouldn't do the same if I had a kid.

Instead, he asked, "What's her name?"

I frowned. "Claire," I said.

He nodded, looking over at Reacher. "Naturally, Claire will come with her mother," he stated.

Reacher nodded. "If that's what you want, then of course."

This was horrible. Not horrible—surreal. I wasn't going to go with this man.

"No," I said. "I've already said it once. I'm not going anywhere."

All five shifters again turned their attention to me. My skin prickled as my wolf snarled, wanting to claw each of these shifters for even considering treating me like a commodity. Even if she wanted to go with Jackson, to be with the wolf who used to drive her wild with need, she wasn't going to take this transaction lying down.

Reacher glowered at me. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, signaling the danger I was wading into. I knew that warning look in his eye. It was the one he gave me when he wanted me to shut my mouth and mind my business. Part of me wanted to shrink back from it as I always did, to cower and go along with whatever he wanted. Except I couldn't. Not this time.

"Would you excuse us for just a moment, gentlemen?" Reacher asked, his eyes locked on me. "I think Audrey and I need to have a quick conversation to go over logistics."

Without waiting for permission, Reacher stalked forward, his eyes shooting daggers at me. He took me by the arm, guiding me with surprising gentleness out of the room.

The instant we were out of sight of the other shifters, his grip tightened. I sucked in a breath as he squeezed my bicep painfully and jerked me down the hall. He walked at such a fast clip that I stumbled to keep up as he dragged me along. He didn't so much as glance at me as he marched me down the hall, but I could sense the anger radiating off him in sickening waves as he steered me toward an empty meeting room. He shoved me inside before following me in, closing the door behind him.

I backed up until I hit the wall. He stalked toward me, only stopping when he was inches away, effectively pinning me in place.

"Do you have a death wish, you little brat?" he snarled. "Or are you just that stupid?"

"I'm not going with him, and you can't make me," I bit out.

"The hell I can't. I don't know where this back-talking is coming from, but you better knock it off right now."

"Please don't do this," I said, pleading now.

"Why not?" Reacher sneered. "You should be thrilled. You're getting a mate out of this. A powerful one. It isn't like anyone else is going to want you. I don't know what he does, but I don't particularly care. You should be thanking me."

"Let me go." I reached out and pushed him back.

The instant I did, I knew I had made a dire mistake. His eyes darkened, and before I could apologize or run or do anything, his hand lashed out and grabbed my forearm, squeezing tight enough for me to wince.

“Now you listen here,” he hissed, his face so close to mine that I could see his every pore. “You’re going to go with this man whether you like it or not. Take your bastard daughter with you if you want. I don’t give a fuck. But you’re going with him whether you like it or not.”

“You’re basically selling me,” I said. I meant to sound angry, to have some kind of bite to the words. Instead, they came out feeble and timid, a slight tremor in my voice that I hated.

“Damn right, I’m selling you. And your father’s already backing me up, so you don’t have a choice in this. Do you understand?”

“I’m not going with him,” I repeated, though the words sounded feeble even to myself. I could feel myself shrinking inward. “You can’t do this.”

“I can. I just did. Get used to the idea and stop whining. Be grateful some shifter wants anything to do with you.”

I stayed silent, jaw set as I looked up at him in silence. There were plenty of ways I could get around this. I could run away. I could attack Jackson. I could—

As if he could read my thoughts, Reacher snarled, “This deal needs to go through. If you do anything, anything to jeopardize this, I will take that daughter of yours and make sure you never see her again. Do you understand?”

At the threat, all the fight I had been able to muster died in an instant. My shoulders sagged, and I glanced away, looking down at the floor.

“All right,” I muttered.

“Good.” He gave my arm another squeeze, this one tight enough to make me wince.

“And just to make perfectly clear that we are on the same page, if you breathe a word of anything you think you might have heard from me or your father about what we may or may not be planning, then I will make sure both you and your daughter regret it. Do you understand?”

And there it was. Why I was being sold. I didn't know all the details, but I was basically a bribe. Something to stop Jackson and the other shifters from looking into the Blood Moon pack and discovering what Reacher was planning.

“Do you understand?” he repeated when I remained mute.

“I understand,” I said.

A knock sounded on the door. Reacher's head whipped around, eyes narrowing. He released me and marched to the door. My hand went to the place on my arm where I could still feel phantom fingers gripping tight. I didn't need to look to know that there were red marks there that would ultimately turn into long, thin bruises.

Reacher shot me a look that very clearly communicated I should keep my mouth shut. Then he turned back to the door and opened it.

Jackson stood in the hall, his hands in his pockets. The slight frown on his lips and the small furrow in his brow gave him gravitas that sent shivers down my spine. I wanted to fall into his arms despite myself, despite the great anger I still had toward him.

“Everything all right?” he asked, his tone making it clear that he already knew the answer was no.

“Of course,” Reacher said. “Audrey's just so excited that she isn't able to properly articulate it. I was just trying to help calm her down a bit so she could properly

express her enthusiasm.”

Jackson gave me a look that told me he didn't believe Reacher for a second. “Are you all right?”

“I just told you, she's fine,” Reacher said impatiently.

“I asked her, not you,” Jackson snapped, a hint of wolf flashing in his gaze. He turned back to look at me, and an old softness returned. He was looking at me the way he did all those years ago. “Are you all right?” he asked.

I couldn't help myself. I glanced over at Reacher. I didn't need the withering glare my alpha shot me when he was certain Jackson wasn't looking to know how I was supposed to answer. Part of me wanted to be honest, to tell him that no, in no way was I all right. But the thought of what Reacher might do to me or Claire if I told the truth made the words lodge in my throat.

“I'm fine,” I said.

“See?” Reacher said. “She's fine. Just excitable. You know how women can be. I'm sure that once she gets used to everything, she'll settle down a bit. Right, Audrey?”

“Right,” I said, unable to look at either of them. All I wanted in that moment was to get out of there as quickly as possible. “I have to go pack,” I muttered.

“I can help,” Jackson said.

“I can manage on my own,” I said.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes. And besides, I want to talk to Claire about this alone.”

Jackson looked as though he was about to argue. Reacher didn't look particularly pleased about me going off on my own, either. Probably figured I was a flight risk and would have someone tailing me the instant I left. But there was no need. I wasn't going to try and run, not when Claire could get caught in the crossfire.

Before either of them could say anything else, I dipped around them and hurried off down the hall, not looking back.

While I waited for Claire to get home, I started packing, throwing all the things I cared about into a suitcase. It didn't take long for me to realize how little I actually owned and how small a percentage of it I actually cared about. Even after I finished packing Claire's things, I still had ample time before she would come home.

To pass the time, I baked her favorite cookies: peanut butter and chocolate chip. At the very least, she would have something to enjoy as I told her our entire lives were about to change.

Jackson. I was going to be married to Jackson. I was being sold off to the man who rejected me all those years ago. The irony was so strong that I would have laughed had I not been so overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I was getting out of here for good. I wouldn't have to live in fear of Reacher or my father ever again. I was getting what I thought I had always wanted: a way out of this pack for me and my daughter. I should have been ecstatic. I wasn't going to be under Reacher and Dad's thumb anymore. On the other hand, I was about to be tethered to the man who had broken my heart. I was going to be trapped in another way by being tethered to another person I hated, and one I could never trust again.

These emotions and thoughts swirled in my head, the tempest refusing to settle as I made the dough, lasting as I rolled it into balls and put them in the oven, lodging themselves in my brain as I pulled them out and waited for them to cool.

By the time the front door opened and I heard Claire's tiny footsteps hurry into the kitchen, I was no closer to sorting out any of my emotions.

"You made cookies!" Claire exclaimed as she raced into the kitchen. "I could smell them from the yard." Her face lit up as she caught sight of the cookies cooling on the rack. The smile ebbed as she looked at my face.

"Mom?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Sit down," I said. "Have a cookie."

She obeyed, sitting at the table as she ate the still-warm cookie, fresh enough that it fell apart in her hand as she nibbled on it. She stared at me anxiously, waiting for the bad news.

"Something happened," I said, my leg jittering up and down. How the hell was I supposed to explain to her that I had basically just been sold and we had to move? Let alone that the guy I had just been sold to was her father?

The last part, at least, I could omit. I had no intention of telling Jackson who Claire really was. And Claire had gone this long without knowing her father. I wasn't going to spring that bit of information on her at the same time as everything else I had to explain.

"We're... going to be moving," I finally said.

She perked up. "To a new house? We won't have to live with Grandpa anymore?"

“We won’t... but we’re moving to a different pack. In Colorado.”

Confusion filled her gaze. “Colorado? Why?”

Because your grandfather and our alpha sold me to prevent people from looking too hard into what they were doing, I thought, but how the hell did you explain that to a ten-year-old?

“I... met another shifter,” I said. “He’s going to be my mate, and we’re going to move with him and live with his pack.”

Claire just stared at me as if unable to process what I was saying. I couldn’t blame her. I could barely understand what I was saying.

“But... my friends...” Claire said.

I winced. I knew she didn’t have many friends, not with how most of the town treated us. But the friends she did have, she cared about. I didn’t want her to have to leave everything she knew. But the alternative was keeping her here with Dad and Reacher, and that was out of the question.

“I know, sweetie.” I reached out and grabbed her hand. “Trust me. I know this is sudden, and if there was any other way, we wouldn’t be having this conversation at all.”

She went silent for another moment.

“Do you love him?” she finally asked.

I hesitated. How the hell was I supposed to answer that? Once upon a time, a long time ago, I thought I did. I was convinced he was the one. Then he broke my heart,

and the resulting chain of events led me straight back into the life I had tried so hard to leave.

Despite this, it was hard not to feel a flutter of affection when I thought back on the man I remembered. Until that final night, he had been kind, sweet, fun to be around. He'd seemed like a caring guy, someone I had imagined starting a life with.

I pushed those thoughts away. That had been years ago. The man who was dragging me away from here, whether I wanted to go or not, wasn't the person I had fallen for when we were younger. He was a stranger. A stranger my alpha had just sold me to.

Claire was still waiting for an answer, looking up at me expectantly, her head tilted like a wolf.

"It's complicated," I said. "The bottom line is that we don't have a choice this time. I'll explain when you're older. I promise."

She gave me a defiant look, one that I knew I used to give on any number of occasions, though I wasn't sure of the last time I had done so. After a moment, though, as if she read my features and could read how torn and reluctant I was about the situation, the fire in her eyes flickered and went out.

"Okay," Claire said. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow," I said. "After... after the mating ceremony."

She didn't say anything as she stared at her shoes. I could see her working through a myriad of emotions. I couldn't blame her. I'd had hours to process it, and I was nowhere near close to fully grasping the sudden change. I didn't blame her for being upset. After all, I was.

“All right,” Claire said after a moment. “I’m going to go up to my room for a bit.”

“You do that,” I said gently.

She shuffled away, leaving the rest of the cookies untouched. My heart broke a little as I listened to the stairs creak under her weight. I had dreamed of moving out since coming back here—if Dad would ever allow it. But I had never imagined it would be like this. I didn’t want to uproot my daughter’s entire life and drag her away from everything she knew. But it was either that or leave her alone with Dad and Reacher, and there was no way in hell that was ever going to happen. Not as long as I had anything to say about it.

I could only hope that where we were going would be better than here.

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The wedding was going to be a small ceremony in a room in the town hall, the only guests were some of the employees plus Will and Trent. In a way, it seemed sadder than just doing it in Reacher's office with witnesses. But Reacher insisted, so the least I could do was try to make the room look nice. Which was how I now found myself fixing a couple rows of chairs to line up around a makeshift aisle and trying to arrange flowers.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Trent asked me.

"What do you mean?" I replied.

He gestured all around us. "This. You agreeing to stop investigating for some woman. Do you realize how absurd that is? Declan's going to be furious. You know there's something going on here—"

"Keep your voice down," I snarled. Glancing around to make sure no one was listening, I leaned forward. "Yes, I know there's something fishy going on. But you saw what she looked like, how she acted. I couldn't just let her stay here."

"She's a random girl, though," Trent argued. "That's what I don't get."

I looked around again. "She's Mira's friend. I'm just trying to help her out for my sister's sake."

"You're putting a lot of stuff on the line for your sister's old friend, especially considering neither of you have seen her for ten years," Trent commented. "On top of that, agreeing to marry her? That's a pretty drastic step."

I knew what I was doing had wide-reaching consequences. I was tearing Audrey and her daughter out of the life they had known here, and I had made a deal that scuttled the entire mission. I knew what I had done was incredibly selfish on multiple levels. But I couldn't help myself. The instant I had seen her, all common sense and rationality had gone out the window. All I cared about was Audrey, protecting her and making sure she was all right. Completing a mission seemed pretty trivial compared to that.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if this decision was selfish, purely for my own gain, when I should have put the mission first. Honestly? Most likely. But that still didn't seem to matter, so long as Audrey was safe.

"It was the right thing to do," I said, trying to remain evasive.

"I'll believe it if you can convince Declan," Trent retorted. He glanced around. "Where's Will? If you're going to make me help with all these ridiculous decorations, the least you could do is make him do the same."

My eyes darted from side to side, making sure the coast was clear before leaning over and whispering. "He's setting up cameras so we can keep tabs on them after we leave."

Trent raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure that's going to work? What if they find them?"

Shooting him an exasperated look, I said, "It's Will. You know how perfectly he does things. There's no way in hell anyone will find them if Will doesn't want them to."

"Fair point," Trent mumbled.

The rest of the decorations didn't take long. It wasn't as though there was going to be

a massive ceremony, and Reacher had insisted on a fast turnaround. I hadn't even seen Audrey since she left town hall the day before. I had tried to, but Reacher had blocked me, saying it was bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony. So I'd spent as much time as I could decorating the small room the ceremony would be in. I'd bought all the flowers I could get my hands on and other vaguely wedding-related items. It only looked marginally better than it had before, but at least I had done something.

Reacher emerged into the room, strutting forward. He beamed as he approached, clapping me on the back.

"Are you excited?" he asked. "You should be. Audrey's a great woman. I'm not surprised she caught your eye."

"She seems like a nice woman. I hope she likes her new pack," I said. I had decided to conceal that I knew her from all those years ago. I felt the less Reacher and his pack knew, the less leverage they would have. Keeping our past in the dark was beneficial for everyone.

"I'm just glad that we were able to come to a mutually beneficial arrangement," Reacher declared. He gave me a pointed look.

"Don't worry. I haven't forgotten our deal," I said. "We'll be out of your hair in no time."

"That's what I like to hear," he said, giving a brief nod. Something dark flashed in his eyes. "And let me be clear: if I get a whiff of you reneging, you and I are going to have a serious problem."

I gave him a steady look. "Are you implying I'm a liar?"

“Just making sure we understand one another,” Reacher said, giving that same oily smile that made me want to take a shower.

“We do,” I said.

The truth was, I planned on keeping up my end of the bargain. I wasn't about to give Reacher an excuse to retaliate against Audrey or anyone else. However, I knew I could find some loopholes. Reacher had been a bit hasty to agree to the arrangement, to the point I had some flexibility in terms of its interpretation. I had seen enough of this town to know that he was bad news and needed to be stopped. I planned on still doing that, but protecting Audrey took precedence. At the moment, that was all I cared about. I'd worry about the consequences later.

The alpha nodded, clapping me on the back again. My wolf snarled, wanting to tear into him. Before I could do anything reckless, Will and Trent came in, followed by a handful of bored-looking guests.

“In that case, why don't we get started?” Reacher said.

I nodded, going to stand near the makeshift altar, Will and Trent coming to stand next to me.

Music began to play. A young girl, maybe ten or so, walked down the aisle with a basket of flowers. She threw them in the air sporadically. Even as she did, she kept her eyes on me, as if she was studying me. She had light brown hair that went to her shoulders, and the same blue eyes and face shape as Audrey. It didn't take a genius to realize this had to be Claire.

As she continued to walk and toss the petals, she tilted her head at me, unsmiling as she regarded me. I got the sneaking suspicion she was assessing as much as possible about me in her short stint down the aisle. She didn't look particularly happy to be

here, but she didn't seem angry, either. More curious than anything else, as if waiting to see how everything would unfold.

I admired that. It wasn't patience, exactly. More like trying to assess all the facts that had been thrown at her before passing her final judgment. It was a skill I didn't think too many kids had. Something about the way she studied me felt eerily familiar, though I couldn't explain why. Most likely it was Audrey's influence. She probably had given me similar looks countless times since I had known her. That had to be it.

Claire finished her promenade and scurried over to a chair, hopping on it so her feet dangled, not touching the ground. Either she hadn't hit her growth spurt yet, or she had inherited Audrey's petite height.

I wonder what she inherited from her father , I mused. I wonder who her father is .

Just the thought of Audrey being with someone else, anyone else, made me wolf snarl with rage, his claws flexing. The jealousy that slammed into me right then took me by surprise, and I had to force myself to keep my composure. Clearly, this guy wasn't in the picture anymore. Otherwise, Audrey would have said something, wouldn't she? Some male would have stepped forward by now and protested Claire leaving without the pack consulting him first.

Before I could think any more about it, the door opened again, and this time Audrey appeared, her father next to her.

She wore an elegant white dress, lacy and strapless with a small train. The way the fabric clung to her body emphasized both her petite frame and her curves. It looked worn around the edges, as if it was used, maybe by her mother. But that didn't change the fact that she looked absolutely stunning, as if the dress had been custom-made just for her.

Saul had her arm locked around his. If I didn't know any better, it looked like he was pulling her up the aisle. Audrey kept her eyes on the floor. She kept her gaze there as they moved toward us. It wasn't until Saul positioned her in front of me and moved back that she finally raised her head to look at me.

I was so used to a fire blazing in her eyes that seeing the almost blank, hollow look there took me by surprise. If I didn't remember her so well, if her scent wasn't already ingrained in my brain, I might have thought this was an entirely different woman from the one I had known all those years ago.

"Are you okay?" I whispered, keeping my voice low enough so it wouldn't carry.

She hesitated, and I didn't miss the brief glance she shot toward Reacher, hovering nearby. "I'm fine," she muttered.

"She's just shy and a little overwhelmed," Reacher said, giving his politician's smile. "I promise she'll warm up once all of the excitement dies down. Won't you, Audrey?"

I saw her jaw set, but she just gave a brief jerk of her head in affirmation. Her eyes darted first to Reacher, then to me, then back to the floor.

"Yes," she said.

Reacher nodded in satisfaction. He began speaking, talking so rapidly that I could tell he was trying to rush everything, as if worried I would change my mind. I kept my eyes on Audrey, who kept staring at the floor. Something about the way she hunched made my stomach writhe with anger. She used to be so lively and vivacious. What happened to her?

"You may kiss the bride," Reacher announced, startling me and pulling me out of my

thoughts.

I pulled Audrey toward me, bending down to kiss her. I meant for it to be tender and gentle. But the moment our lips met, some primal urge flared inside me, craving more of her. My grip on her tightened, the kiss deepening as a craving for her and her alone washed over me.

She stepped away, breaking whatever spell had taken hold of me. Her expression remained unreadable. Before I could say anything, Reacher stepped forward.

“You got what you wanted,” he hissed in my ear. “Now get the hell out of here.”

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As bizarre as the last two days had been, somehow Jackson pulling the car to a stop in front of a sprawling three-story house seemed the most outlandish thing by far.

“This is yours?” I asked, unable to help myself.

He nodded, cutting the engine. “One of the benefits of being spec ops is the hazard pay. Come on, I’ll show you around.”

Claire and I clambered out of the car. I craned my neck up to look at the home. It was Tudor-style, the kind of house I had always dreamed of. Tucked away in the woods the way it was, it looked like something out of a fairy tale.

I hated how much I loved it at first sight. I didn’t want any of this—not this way, at least. But the house was undeniably gorgeous, and the garden enclosed by the woods was just as stunning. Everything about it looked straight out of a storybook.

I shoved those thoughts from my head as I walked around to the back of the car and opened the hatch to pull out our suitcases.

“I’ve got it,” Jackson said, standing beside me.

“It’s fine,” I muttered, not looking at him. Being this close to him still felt so strange. It was hard not to believe this was all an elaborate dream.

“I insist.” His hand brushed against mine as he pulled the case out of my grasp. I retracted my arm, trying to ignore the jolt of electricity radiating through my body just by touching him.

He guided us into the house. To my annoyance, it was as perfect as the exterior. It opened to a spacious foyer with a long hall that led to a two-story living room with towering ceilings, complete with a cozy fireplace on one wall and large windows that looked out on the forest.

“Wow,” Claire said, her eyes widening as she took in the massive living room. “This place is huge.”

“I hope you like it,” Jackson said. He nodded toward a door that opened onto a set of stairs leading downward. “There’s a whole basement area that I don’t know what to do with. Maybe we can set it up as your playroom or something. I’m not sure what kind of games or things you like to do, but maybe at some point you can help me figure out what to do with all that space that you can enjoy.”

Claire hesitated, looking first at me, then at Jackson, then at the door to the basement. She bit the inside of her cheek, a thing she always did when she was thinking hard about something and feeling conflicted about it. I could guess what was going through her head. She still didn’t know what to make of the situation. She didn’t know Jackson, she’d just been dragged into an unfamiliar town, and she missed her friends. But part of her was excited at the same time. Her bedroom at home—our old home—had been barely big enough to fit a bed and a dresser, and she’d certainly never had a playroom or anything like that. She could see the possibilities in this new pack, but she still wasn’t convinced or entirely thrilled about the situation. I didn’t blame her.

“There are three bedrooms upstairs that you can pick from,” Jackson added. “Whichever one you want.”

“Thanks,” Claire muttered. She gave him a suspicious look as she grabbed her suitcase and walked up the steps.

Jackson watched her go. When her footsteps had faded, he turned to me. “Is she always this shy? Or does she just not like me very much?”

“She doesn’t know what to make of any of this yet,” I said.

“And I’m guessing you don’t, either,” Jackson commented.

I shot him an uneasy look, then looked away. “It’s been a long time since we knew one another.”

His hand went to my shoulder. The small, intimate touch sent shivers radiating through my body in a way I hadn’t felt since... well, since the last time he had touched me. The conflicted desire of wanting to be close to him and still hating him drove me insane. I wanted to step away from his touch, but something kept me rooted to the spot. Despite myself, despite all my hurt and rage, part of me wanted to be close to him. My wolf wanted to nuzzle against him like she had that night all those years ago. To my chagrin, part of my human side wanted to as well.

“Hopefully, we can get to know each other again,” he said.

The words brought me crashing back down to reality. I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t let myself get close to him, not after everything he had put me through, all the hurt. I was stuck here. I knew that much. But that didn’t mean I had to grow close to him. I still hated him for what he had done, for what his actions had put me through, even if he didn’t understand the full scale of it. The worst part was, I couldn’t even tell him everything he had done to me, not without him learning about Claire. And I refused to let him discover the truth about her.

I bent down, pretending to adjust my dress as an excuse to move from his touch. The space where he’d touched my shoulder felt cold and empty, as if it was missing something.

“My bedroom is over there,” he said, nodding down a hallway. “But if you want your own bedroom, especially while we’re getting used to each other, then I would understand.”

I opened my mouth, then hesitated. Part of me, my wolf in particular, wanted desperately to curl up next to Jackson every night. Despite my own feelings, she had missed him. She wanted to spend as much time as possible with him, to be by him always.

But the other, more rational side of me hated the idea of being anywhere near the man who broke my heart. I didn’t hate him. I didn’t have the anger to hate him, not the way I used to. But I didn’t trust him, and I couldn’t sleep next to a man I didn’t trust.

“I think separate bedrooms would be a good idea,” I said.

He nodded. I could see disappointment in his eyes but also acceptance. “In that case, you might want one of the rooms upstairs.”

“I’ll wait for Claire to pick first.”

Giving a short chortle, he inquired, “Is she the type of person who will take the biggest room?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

She’d never had the chance to make that decision before, so even if she did take the biggest room, I wasn’t going to stop her. She deserved to have some perks after getting dragged away from the life she knew.

“So, you have a daughter,” he said after a long pause.

I closed my eyes, doing my best not to wince. I'd been anticipating and dreading this conversation since this whole mess had started. Of course he was going to ask about Claire. I just hadn't entirely decided how I was going to handle the unpleasant inquiry.

I had flip-flopped back and forth about whether to tell Jackson the truth about Claire back when I had first found out we were going with him. After all, there were enough physical similarities between them that if he noticed, he would figure it out on his own. In the end, though, I decided to keep it to myself. All I could think about was how much he had hurt me when he rejected me. What would happen if he learned about Claire and did the same thing to her? I didn't think I could bear it.

Claire didn't know who her father was, either. I had told her only the bare essentials whenever she asked about him. I had decided I would tell her the whole story when she turned eighteen. Though, now I wasn't sure I would be able to do that. But that was still years away, and based on how Jackson had used me and dumped me, I doubted he would stay interested in us for that long.

"Yeah," I finally said.

"She seems sweet."

"Yeah," I repeated.

"I know she's probably shaken up about moving here, but she's taking it in stride," he said.

"She's good at adapting," I said.

"I'm sure her father isn't too happy about her leaving town, though," Jackson said.

I finally turned to look at him and was surprised at the intensity in his gaze. “You’re fishing,” I accused.

His lips quirked upward in that absurdly attractive way that had always made my stomach lurch, ever since we were kids. “And you’re as perceptive and blunt as always,” he shot back.

If it had been anyone else, anyone but him, the flirting would have been cute. But I kept my guard up. I wasn’t going to fall for him. Not again. I’d made that mistake once before.

“If you want information, you should just ask,” I said.

“All right.” He moved to stand in front of me, making it impossible for me to avoid looking at him. “Do I need to worry about her father showing up?” he asked.

“Don’t you think you should have asked about that before forcing me to marry you?” I asked dryly.

“To be honest, I was so surprised at seeing you again that when you brought up the whole daughter thing, the idea of who her father might be didn’t cross my mind.” He tilted his head, folding his arms. “And considering you didn’t mention you were mated when this whole thing started makes me pretty confident you two aren’t together anymore.”

He was perceptive. He always had been.

I let out an exhausted sigh. “To answer your question, no. You don’t need to worry about him. Her father isn’t in the picture.” On the contrary, he was staring right at me. Part of me wanted to tell him, if only so I didn’t have to keep up the charade any longer. But the more rational part of me held off.

He nodded, something like relief flickering through his eyes. “Why don’t you find your room and get settled?” he suggested. “We can order pizza for dinner or something like that.”

“Sounds good.” My words sounded almost mechanical as I gave him a brief nod, grabbed my suitcase, and walked up the stairs.

In the end, I don’t think it mattered which room Claire picked. All of them were massive. I picked one with an attached bathroom and a view of the woods behind the house.

I collapsed on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, trying to parse out all my emotions now that I was here. I hated Jackson. I was still furious at him for using me, then tossing me aside the way he had. I wanted to be angry at him, to shout and scream and call him out for what he had done to me. I wanted him to understand how angry I was, how hurt I was by everything he had put me through.

Except the fight that I used to have, that will to confront him, died a long time ago. That didn’t stop the anger, though.

At the same time, part of me was relieved, bordering on ecstatic. I was out of the Blood Moon pack. I was free of Reacher and my father, something I had never, ever dreamed would be possible. If the circumstances were different, I would be singing and dancing in celebration. But part of me felt like I was still trapped, just in a different way. I hated feeling like a commodity, even if it had ultimately gotten me what I had been dreaming of for years.

On top of that, even if I didn’t live there anymore, just the thought of Reacher and my old pack sent shivers down my spine and made my throat tighten. I could still feel his tendrils, even this far away. I had no doubt that if Reacher or my father somehow found out I had told Jackson anything, or if I tried to leave him or jeopardize

whatever bargain they'd made in any way, they would come after me. And they wouldn't stop until they had me in their grasp again.

And who knew what they would do as punishment for disobeying their orders? I didn't exactly want to find out.

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I could feel the fury and disbelief radiating off Declan from the other side of his desk. I kept my head high, meeting his gaze. Behind me, Will and Trent stood several steps back as if trying to keep their distance from us. I couldn't blame them. None of this was their fault, anyway.

“Are you out of your mind?” Declan growled at me. He glanced behind me to look at Will and Trent. “Please tell me this is some sort of elaborate prank.”

“Nope,” Will answered.

“We were as surprised as you are,” Trent said. “It kinda came out of nowhere.”

Declan turned back toward me, his eyes burning with rage.

“I did what I did,” I said, folding my arms, refusing to break eye contact.

“You abandoned the mission,” he snarled. “And agreed to back off. For a kid you haven't seen in over ten years.”

“She's not a kid. She's a woman,” I retorted. “And a woman who desperately needed to get out of there.”

“You don't know that,” he barked. He marched around his desk to stand in front of me. Since we were kids, I had only seen him truly pissed off a handful of times, and the last time was when an asshole had kidnapped his mate. I knew I was treading in hot water. Still, I held my ground.

“Yes, I do,” I argued back. “It was bad. She was...” I trailed off, trying to find the words to describe how she had seemed like a shell of herself. Everything about her had screamed she needed rescuing. I didn’t regret it, but trying to explain that logic was harder than I thought.

“For all you know, she was perfectly happy, and you just dragged her out of her life because of a selfish whim,” he growled. “If she had wanted to leave, she could have done so any number of times without your help.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, based on her meek, servile manner around Reacher and her father. I got the feeling she didn’t have much say in her daily life. Before I could say any of this, however, Declan had launched back into his tirade.

“And that’s not including the fact that you negotiated with a guy who is under investigation by the Council,” Declan continued. “Do you realize how that looks? If the council gets wind of this, you’re going to be in a world of hurt.”

“I had to do it,” I shot back, folding my arms.

“Why? Because she was Mira’s friend?” He shook his head. “I remember this Audrey girl from when she lived in the pack. She knew how to handle herself. She didn’t need rescuing, now or then.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, based on the way she had looked and how she had acted around Reacher and her father, but I kept my mouth shut as I tried to figure out the best way to go about this. I knew I was walking on the thinnest of ice.

I had never told Declan what had happened with Audrey when we were kids. I hadn’t known how, especially after she vanished right after. He didn’t know the entire story, and I didn’t feel particularly inclined to tell him all of it, either. Partially because it was private and not just my story to tell but also because of the lingering shame of

how things had ended.

“You didn’t see her, Declan,” I argued, trying to avoid bringing up the past. “She was in a bad way. Just...” I trailed off, not sure how to explain the hollow look in her eyes, how she looked like she hadn’t eaten a good meal in months. How she seemed to flinch the second anyone so much as glanced at her. She was a shell of the woman I used to know. If it hadn’t been for the fact that my wolf had recognized her scent after all these years, and that I saw her face in my head whenever I thought about her, I didn’t think I would have recognized her.

But I didn’t know how to articulate any of that without revealing the entire story, and I wasn’t about to do that.

“In Jackson’s defense, it did seem like she needed to get out of here,” Will said from where he leaned against the back wall. “She seemed pretty skittish and afraid of both her father and Reacher. I got the impression they weren’t exactly the kindest to her.” He gave Declan a pointed look that conveyed precisely what he meant by that.

Declan’s shoulders eased. His gaze flicked between myself and Will. Will had always been the one of us most inclined to stick to the rules of the mission. The fact that he was on my side seemed to mollify Declan a bit.

“You still fucked up,” he said to me. “What you did was incredibly selfish and short-minded.”

“Heard you say that before,” I said, trying to make light of the situation. At Declan’s glower, I raised my hands. “Sorry. Bad timing.”

“Very,” he agreed. “And we still have a huge problem on our hands. Because based on everything I’ve heard in the last fifteen minutes, Reacher is bad news, and we need to do something about him before he gets even worse. But because of the way

things went down, we have very little evidence and don't have an easy way of getting it from here on out. Not without risking Audrey's life. And that's the least of our problems when it comes to this mission now."

"It shouldn't be too hard to find what we need," I argued.

"The point still stands that you made an agreement with Reacher," Declan said. "And he won't take kindly to you breaking that deal. It could set off a bigger conflict. But we still need to investigate him. Only now, instead of going through the easy channels that would have made all our lives easier, we have to do this more covertly, and in a way that won't make it seem like you're breaking the bargain. The instant Reacher smells something's off, he'll come for Audrey and her daughter and cause all sorts of chaos that I don't want to deal with."

"I could sit this one out," I suggested, though the idea disgusted me to my core. I wanted to be the one to nail Reacher after everything he had done to Audrey. Still, if that was the best way to get him behind bars, then that's what I would do.

As soon as I said the words, Declan's eyes blazed. "Oh, no. This is your mess, Jackson. You got us into it. I don't care how noble your intentions were, but the point stands that we wouldn't be standing here having this conversation if it weren't for your actions. So you're going to be the one to fix it. You have to find a way to complete the mission to my satisfaction without breaking your agreement with Reacher. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Good news is we aren't entirely in the dark," Will chimed in. "I managed to put up some cameras while we were there."

"Are they hidden well?" Declan asked.

Will gave him a look that said, Are you serious?

Declan raised his hands. "You're right. Sorry for doubting."

"I think there are some loopholes I can use," I said. "Mostly, Reacher just wanted me out of his town. The implication was I would stop investigating them, but all I said was that I would leave. We can investigate from here and figure out what he's planning without going back."

Declan's jaw worked as he contemplated this. "It might be okay. But he's going to retaliate even if you follow the letter of the law and not the spirit. Still, that's at least some leeway. I'd still recommend keeping a low profile while you look into it."

"Was already planning on it," I said.

Nodding, Declan said, "Good. Keep it that way. Now get out of here before I change my mind about killing you for that moronic stunt."

We walked out of the office. Glancing over, I noticed Rose very pointedly not looking at us as she focused on something particularly fascinating on her computer. Trent strolled over to engage her in conversation. While he did that, I cracked my neck, relishing the sound of it popping, then headed down the hall, Will following after me.

"Honestly went a bit better than I expected," I told him.

"I agree." He cracked a rare grin. "I was expecting him to tear you a new one by the end of it."

"So did I," I muttered.

“No use dwelling on it now,” he pointed out, strolling down the hall. “We’ve got bigger problems than Declan’s temper on our hands at the moment.”

I appreciated that he didn’t mention that a large portion of that problem was my fault.

“Thanks, by the way,” I said. “For sticking up for me.”

“Yeah, well, when you work with someone for a decade, you’ll do stupid things sometimes,” Will said, folding his arms. “I stuck up for you because I saw what she looked like and could see the way those two treated her from a mile off. But what I don’t get is what makes her so special.”

I blinked, my brow furrowing. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that any number of women could have walked into that room, looking the way Audrey did, and you wouldn’t have backed down. You wouldn’t have deviated from the mission. But you did for her. I want to know why.”

“You know why,” I said. “It’s because I knew her when we were kids.”

But Will was already shaking his head. “I didn’t believe that bullshit for a second, even when you were trying to sell it before the ceremony. It’s more than that, and we both know it. There’s something about her that makes her special. After sticking up for you back there, I deserve some sort of explanation. So tell me.”

I took a deep breath. Will was right. He deserved the truth, or at least part of it. I wasn’t going to tell him everything, but after everything, I could at least explain part of it. Besides, if I didn’t, he would keep hounding me until I gave him some sort of answer.

“I have to right an old wrong,” I finally said. “And that was the first step.”

He studied me for a long time, his face expressionless as he contemplated the words. “I just hope you know what you’re doing, Jackson,” he said. “Because if you don’t, we’re all going to be in a world of trouble.”

“Yeah,” I said, meeting his gaze. “I know.”

Delicious smells wafted toward me the second I opened the door to my house. It was such an unfamiliar experience that my entire body went on alert for a brief moment, preparing to confront an intruder dumb enough to cook in my house. Then my body relaxed as my wolf noticed Audrey’s scent mixed in with the mouthwatering aromas. My stomach growled.

I kicked off my shoes, about to drape my jacket over the stair banister like I always did. Then I noticed the usual spot for my jacket had a small kid’s coat occupying it instead. My gaze flickered to the nearby wall, and I saw that new shoes had appeared along it.

Multiple feminine pairs of shoes lined neatly next to the front door felt strange. I’d been a bachelor for so long that the little reminders that I no longer lived alone kept surprising me over and over again. Seeing them made me smile, though. The house was great, but it had always seemed too big, like I was a lone pea rattling around in a can. Having others live here made it feel right. Homey, even.

I followed the smells to the kitchen. Audrey had her back to me, and I noticed her phone was blaring music from its speaker. She hadn’t noticed me yet. Her hips swayed back and forth to the music, and I couldn’t help myself from admiring her figure.

“We have a sound system through the house that you can connect to Bluetooth if

you'd rather not blow out the speakers on your phone," I said over the din of sizzling oil and what sounded like jazz.

Audrey gasped, jumping backward and rounding on me. Her eyes were wide and frightened.

"Sorry, sorry," I said, putting my hands up. "It's just me. I didn't mean to startle you."

She shot me a glare that was half-annoyed, half-chagrined. "I didn't think you'd be home yet, that's all," she muttered. "I'm still in the middle of cooking. I'm sorry it wasn't ready when you got here."

I frowned. "Why would you be sorry? Just knowing that I'm about to have a hot meal I didn't cook myself is fantastic. It's a nice surprise."

Her brow furrowed. "Surprise? I figured you would..." She trailed off before she finished the sentence, but I got the gist without her finishing the statement.

"Do you think I expect you to cook for me now that you're here?" I asked.

She raised her head and met my gaze. "Honestly, Jackson, I don't know what you expect," she said. "I don't know why you brought me here in the first place."

Running my fingers through my hair, still trying to sort out my thoughts, I scrambled to figure out what to say. "I saw you needed to get out of there, so I did what I thought was best," I finally said.

Her jaw set, and she folded her arms. "You could have just asked me if I wanted to get out of there, you know," she pointed out.

I let out a short exhale. “Maybe you’re right,” I allowed. “But I didn’t exactly have a private moment to chat with you, and if Reacher had known that I knew who you were, he would have made getting you out of there a hell of a lot more difficult. He’s the kind of guy who likes leverage. So I had to act quickly and in a way that didn’t give away that I knew who you were.”

Her lips pursed, and I could sense that she wanted to say more. Then she seemed to lose her nerve, and her arms flopped back by her sides. “It doesn’t matter,” she murmured. “I’m here now.”

“You are, and you’re safe. Though I’m not going to lie, being in the same house as someone who is clearly afraid of me is a little unsettling,” I joked.

Her eyes widened, and she took several steps back until her back was against the counter. “I’m not afraid of you,” she stammered in what was clearly a lie. “You just startled me. That’s all.”

“You’ve never been a very good liar,” I teased, then sobered when her expression remained unchanged. “If you tell me why you’re so afraid, I can help. I want you to be happy here, not petrified.”

“I’m not—I mean, I am happy,” she said, her eyes darting all over the place as if looking for an excuse to end the conversation.

“If you aren’t, then tell me. I want you to enjoy your time here. How can I help?”

The music halted, replaced by a vibrating and ringing. Audrey looked at her phone and instantly paled, going even whiter than she had been moments earlier.

“I have to take this,” she muttered. “Um, could you look after the sauce?” Then, before I could even ask her who was calling or why she was picking up when the

caller clearly terrified her, she snatched her phone and scurried away, heading in the direction of her room.

Standing beside the gently bubbling pot of tomato sauce, I stared after her, wondering what the hell was really going on here.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:42 am

I ran into my room and closed the door before taking a deep breath and pressing the answer button.

“Hi,” I said.

“That took a while,” an unpleasantly familiar voice sneered. “You weren’t considering letting me go to voicemail, were you?”

“No, of course not,” I said quickly.

“Good. Just because you don’t live with me anymore doesn’t give you the right to disrespect me.”

You’re making that very clear, Dad, I thought. That was what this whole phone call was about. A power game. He was just trying to show he could still throw his weight around. Could still keep a hold over me despite how far away he was.

“Why are you calling?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level.

“I’m not allowed to check in on my daughter?” he asked. I didn’t miss the mocking tone in his voice.

Any other father, maybe. You? Not without an ulterior motive, I thought. My fingers tightened around the phone. Out of anger or fear, I wasn’t entirely sure. Just hearing his voice was enough to make my heart thunder and my mind race with terror.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Claire is, too.”

“That’s good. And have you forgotten our deal?”

“No, sir,” I said, fully aware that this was the entire reason he was calling. It wasn’t to check on me. I might have been angry had I not been so unsurprised. If anything, I just felt tired and resigned.

“So you haven’t told him or anyone else anything?” he pressed.

“No, sir,” I said. “Not a word.”

“Good. Keep it that way.”

I bit my lip, running my fingers through my hair as I paced back and forth. I didn’t have anything else to say to him, but I knew if I hung up before he was finished, I’d be in a heap of trouble, even if I didn’t live with him anymore. He would still find a way to make things miserable.

“And just remember,” he continued, “any word of any of it to that boy or any of the other Gold Wolves, or anyone else in that nothing town, and both you and Claire will regret it.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I could understand him threatening me; I was used to it. But I couldn’t understand a man who would threaten his own granddaughter. It just seemed despicable.

I wanted to tell him as much. The words pressed against my lips, yearning to spill out. But they lodged in my throat, just like they always did.

Instead of saying any of the myriad of things I wanted to say, the only two words that came out of my mouth when I opened it again were, “Yes, sir.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” Dad said. “Now, be a good girl and remember to give that Gold Wolf whatever he wants to keep him happy. And I mean anything.”

Before I could respond, he hung up. My fingers tightened around the phone as anger threatened to overwhelm me. After a moment, I let out a frustrated, inarticulate cry and threw the phone across the room. It thumped into a pillow before landing on the comforter, entirely unharmed.

I closed my eyes as I leaned against the wall, trying to sort out my emotions. The whole point of that damn call hadn’t been to check on me or to see how I was doing or even Claire. It had been to remind me that he could still reach me, that I was still under the Blood Moon pack’s thumb no matter how far I ran. If I did anything to disobey them, they would find a way to make me pay for it. Or worse, Claire. Which meant I had to comply.

I had hoped that maybe being this far away, I might finally be out of Reacher’s grasp. That maybe I could finally live my life. But it was clear that I was still his pawn, only here as a bargaining chip and to keep an eye on things so that the Gold Wolves didn’t interfere with his plans. The thought that I was still trapped, still in a prison of sorts, made it hard to breathe. I closed my eyes, willing for the sensation to go away.

A knock on the door made me jump. Taking a deep breath, I cracked it open to find Jackson on the other side. I swung it all the way open.

“Everything all right?” Jackson asked.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to force a smile on my face.

Based on the skeptical look he gave me, it must not have come off as particularly convincing. “Who was that?” he asked.

“Oh, just my dad.” I tried to adopt an airy tone, as if it wasn’t that big of a deal. “He just wanted to check in on me and make sure I got settled in okay.”

I knew before he said anything that he didn’t believe a word. I hesitated, trying to come up with some way of deflecting or stopping him before he got too suspicious.

“I’m fine,” I insisted. “Really.”

He took a step closer to me. I sucked in a breath, fully aware of how close he was, the way heat radiated off him, and how all it would take was a half-step for me to fall into his arms.

I blocked out the image. I wasn’t going to let myself go down that path ever again. Just considering it was too much. I wasn’t going to let him hurt me again. I couldn’t.

“You know if there’s something wrong, if something happened between you and your dad, you can tell me,” he said. “I’m always here for you, whatever you need.”

Looking into his eyes, I could see the sincerity there. I desperately wanted to believe him, to confide in him. I wanted to tell him everything that had happened since I left all those years ago, including about Claire. I was tired of lying, and I didn’t want to burden myself anymore.

But I couldn’t tell him. I didn’t trust him. And even if I did, telling him would only put myself and Claire in even more danger.

“Everything is fine,” I lied.

He studied me for a long moment. Feeling like an ant under a microscope, I waited for him to decide whether or not he believed me or whether he would push. Part of me wished he would, because it wouldn’t take much pushing on his part to make me

cave. Then I would finally be able to stop lying and could have at least one weight off my chest.

“Okay,” he finally said. “But you know you can tell me anything if something does happen, right?”

I wanted to laugh in his face. Tell Jackson anything? The man who had abandoned me and left me to fend for myself? The man who had betrayed my trust? It would take a miracle for me to ever tell him anything.

But saying any of that would be entirely useless. I forced a smile and gave a short nod.

He took a step forward, his hand twitching toward me as if he wanted to touch me. But he stopped himself, letting his hand fall back.

“Let me know if you need anything, okay?” he said.

I nodded. He turned and left, leaving me alone.

I paced around the house, feeling restless. So far, I hadn't really gotten out of the house to explore Falcon's Reach beyond going to the grocery store. I had nowhere else to go, and I was beginning to feel cooped up. At the same time, I don't really want to go out and explore. It felt too much like accepting the situation.

Despite my reluctance, I couldn't help but admit, if only to myself, that I liked the house. There was a coziness to it in spite of its size. I liked the high ceilings and open spaces. I liked being able to enter a room where I could go and be on my own without having to worry about someone coming to bother me. It felt safe.

As these thoughts ran through my head, the doorbell rang. Dragging myself from my musings, I headed over, assuming it was Claire and she had forgotten her key to the house.

I opened the door and froze. It wasn't Claire.

My mouth dropped open as I stared at the pretty, curvy woman with blond hair as she beamed at me, her eyes the same shape as Jackson's. I recognized her immediately, but shock, disbelief, and excitement rendered me mute as my brain tried to catch up with my eyes and assure me that, yes, I was seeing who I thought I was seeing.

Finally, I managed to get out a single word. "Mira?"

"Audrey!" Mira flung her arms around my neck and pulled me toward her. She held me tight, practically cutting off my air as she hugged me. "Oh my God, I can't believe it. Jackson told me, but I thought he was bullshitting me or something. But now..." She squealed in my ear, shattering my eardrum. But I grinned, ignoring the dull ringing in my ear as I returned her hug.

"Oh my God, this is incredible!" Mira gushed. "I'm so happy to see you again!"

We hugged for what could have been an hour. Eventually, we pulled away from one another, both still giving broad grins.

Jackson had told me Mira lived in town and that she was Declan's mate now. That didn't change how bizarre it was to run into her again after all these years. When I last saw Mira over eleven years ago, she had been timid and insecure, pining over Declan. I couldn't remember all the times she had whispered to me about her secret crush on him. She hadn't been bubbly or effusive; she'd been too shy for that.

Now, however, it seemed she had come out of her shell. She practically glowed with

a confidence I had never seen in her before.

“Come in, come in,” I urged her. “This is so great.”

“I know, right? We have eleven years of catching up to do!” As she entered, her eyes landed on a pair of Claire’s shoes by the door, kicked off absent-mindedly, one still on its side. “And you really have a kid?” Mira asked, her eyes turning wide as saucers as she turned to look at me again. “Again, I thought Jackson was bullshitting. I thought the whole thing was a giant practical joke.”

“No joke.” I pulled out my phone and held up a picture. “This is Claire.”

Mira practically snatched the phone from my hand as she looked at the photo. Her eyes went wide as saucers. For a wild, panicked moment, I wondered if she would notice the similarities between her brother and my daughter.

“She’s so cute!” Mira exclaimed, handing over the phone again. She broke into a wide grin. “Almost as cute as mine.”

My mouth dropped open. “A kid? You have a kid?”

“Kids , technically,” she said. When I looked even more dumbfounded, Mira laughed. “One is technically my stepdaughter, the other is a baby. I can’t wait for you to meet them. Oh!” She clapped her hands together in excitement as her eyes lit up. “You should bring Claire over. I’m sure she and Dani would get along. Dani can be a handful, but she loves kids her age. I mean, I’m assuming Claire is around her age.” She shot me a questioning look. “How old is she?”

“Ten,” I said, trying to keep a straight face as I prayed that Mira wouldn’t do the math and make the connection.

“Hmm,” Mia mused. “Well, Dani’s a little younger than that, but I think it’ll be okay. But enough about the kids! I want to hear about everything you’ve done in the past ten years.”

“It’s pretty boring,” I said, laughing as we walked to the couch. “You go first.”

The next couple of hours flew by. For the first time since this entire fiasco began, I found myself smiling and laughing. It only took a few minutes of being around Mira for me to remember why she had so quickly become my best friend back in the day.

“Why did you leave without telling me?” she asked.

I stiffened, though I knew the question was coming. “It’s complicated,” I said, struggling to come up with a lie as I realized Jackson hadn’t told her what had happened. “I had to leave because of an emergency. And when I found out I was pregnant, I went home.”

“You could have just come back to our pack,” Mira said. “I would have helped.”

“I wasn’t thinking straight,” I lied.

I didn’t know if Mira believed me, but she nodded. “It doesn’t matter. I’m just glad to see you again.”

“I’m glad to see you, too. Even if the circumstances are... weird.”

Mira nodded in understanding. “Are you settling in?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I must not have sounded particularly convincing because Mira gave me a skeptical

look. “I know all of this has to be a huge shock,” she said. “But this is a great town. And Jackson’s a good guy. I don’t know everything that’s going on, but I know he’s trying to help.”

My mouth went dry. I wanted to tell her the truth about everything, including from back when we were kids. But I didn’t know where to begin, and I was terrified of how she would react when she learned I had slept with her brother. And Mira was the only thing keeping me mildly sane through this bizarre situation, the only person besides my daughter who I wanted to spend any time with. I couldn’t risk her friendship. Not right now.

“It’s not all bad,” I said, nudging her. “After all, I got my best friend back.”

She grinned and gave me a side hug. “And you aren’t getting rid of me that easily this time.”

We’ll see about that , I thought through a forced smile.

“Hey, Audrey?”

Audrey glanced up from where she was reading her book. “What’s up?”

“I was about to go on a hunt,” I said. “I was wondering if you wanted to come along.”

“You want to hunt together?” she asked, not bothering to hide her skepticism.

“Of course,” I said. Back in our old pack, we had gone on hunts together. Those private moments together were when I started realizing how I felt about her. I was hoping that doing something that we used to do together might ease some of her stress and anxiety. I knew she didn’t fully trust me, but I hoped that this might be a small way to re-earn that trust.

She chewed the inside of her cheek as she shifted in her seat. Her eyes glanced out the window, where warm sunshine beamed down invitingly on lush green trees. I knew that longing expression on her face, and the way her fingers twitched as if she was imagining them as paws running along the ground.

After a moment, she turned back to look at me and gave a short nod. “That sounds nice,” she said, almost whispering.

A few minutes later, I waited outside. I had shifted, and my wolf itched to run through the woods, to dig his claws into the earth and charge after prey. But the instant the smaller auburn-furred wolf emerged from around the house, all thoughts of hunting were temporarily driven from my wolf’s mind. I had forgotten how beautiful she looked as a wolf, her fur sleek and her eyes bright copper.

She dipped her head to me, waiting for me to take the lead.

We ran through the woods, darting between trees. My wolf loved getting the chance to get out and run again. It had been too long for him. But he was more interested in the fact that Audrey was here. Her presence kept distracting him. He was more interested in being close to Audrey and her wolf than in catching any prey.

Audrey, for her part, seemed determined to focus only on the hunt. Her nose twitched as she followed the scent of prey, her ears pricked for any sound of rustling in the bramble. She almost refused to look at me.

At least, at first. After some time, she seemed to relax and get into the hunt. She would glance my way to see if I scented prey or if I had noticed any danger. Her tail swished excitedly as we tracked a deer through the forest, moving slowly. When we caught up to it, we both stilled.

Audrey looked at me, her head tilted. With a jerk of my head, I told her to go ahead, that I would come behind her. She bobbed her head as if nodding and turned back to the deer, every inch of her alert. She dipped into a half-crouch, waiting for the perfect moment. I watched her form, admiring it. She had always been a skilled hunter. It was nice to see she still had that knack.

At the perfect moment, the exact time I would have moved, she struck, jumping into the air toward the deer. Before it could get two steps in, Audrey landed on its back, bringing it down to the ground as I arrived. Together, we landed the killing blow.

We shifted back. Audrey's eyes shone bright with exhilaration as she beamed, looking more like herself than I had seen her since meeting her again.

“Good job,” I said.

“Thanks.” She pushed her hair from her face. “It’s been a while since I’ve hunted. I forgot how much I missed it.”

“I wouldn’t have known it from that performance,” I remarked. “You’re a natural.”

Her smile faded a little at the words, and she hesitated. “Thanks,” she muttered.

I frowned. I had said something wrong, but I couldn’t figure out what it might be.

Before I could ask, though, she said, “Are you good to take this back to the house? I want to hunt on my own a bit.”

Blinking, I nodded, trying to hide my surprise. “Yeah, I’ll meet you back at the house. Is everything all right?”

“It’s fine,” she said, though it wasn’t convincing. “I just want to keep going.”

Before I could press her any further, she shifted again and ran into the woods, leaving me alone with the deer.

Audrey was back home by the time I got out of the shower. I was planning on asking her what had happened in the woods, why she had run off, but the instant I saw her, I knew it was a bad idea. She had a serious, contemplative expression on her face that put me on edge.

Something was wrong. I didn’t know what, but I wanted to see if I could help. I reached out and touched her shoulder. I felt her muscles tighten beneath my fingers as she slowly turned to face me.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

“You keep asking me that,” she said with a sigh. “Why?”

I raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t exactly an answer. But I had a funny feeling that pointing that out wasn’t going to get me any further than I already was.

“You’ve been acting odd ever since we ran into each other again,” I said. “You’re not...” I trailed off. What I wanted to say was that she wasn’t her anymore. I could still picture the fiery woman she used to be when she came to my house all those years ago. That playful smirk and the glint in her eye she always used to get when she bantered with me. Now, she jumped at shadows, and her shoulders were always hunched over.

“Everything’s fine.” She tried to shrug her shoulder from my grip, continuing not to look at me. “Really.”

I didn’t let go. Instead, I gently nudged her back around to face me. I took her chin in my free hand and tilted it up so she had to look at me.

“Is it something to do with Reacher?” I asked. “Or your father?”

Alarm flashed in her eyes, and she shook her head so hard that she yanked her chin from my grasp.

“Of course not,” she said, giving a tittering laugh that sounded about as genuine as a snake-oil salesman’s pitch. “Everything is fine with them. Why wouldn’t it be? And besides, even if there were issues with them, what would that matter? It’s not like I live there anymore.”

I let go of her chin and give her a long, searching look. “Audrey, you can tell me

anything.”

She didn't respond. Instead, she ran her hand through her hair as she stared out the window, eyes far away as she lost herself in contemplation. As she did, her baggy sleeve drooped down, slipping to the elbow. The setting sun caught her arm, lighting it up, making the long, thin bruises on the skin more visible.

Long, thin bruises that looked an awful lot like fingers.

Rage began to simmer, growing hotter every second I looked at them. My wolf snarled, howling in fury. I didn't know who the hell had done that to her, but they were going to pay for putting their hands on her.

“What's that?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even as anger threatened to creep in.

Despite my best efforts, she must have noticed an edge to my voice because she froze. Her eyes grew wide with surprise and then panic, similar to how she'd looked in the woods.

“What's what?” she asked.

Gently, trying not to spook her, I reached out and took her hand, extending her arm so I could get a better look. The dark splotches on her arms stuck out starkly against her pale skin. They were unmistakably finger marks.

“Who did this?” I growled.

“No one.” She tugged her hand away, but I didn't let go. She glared up at me, a hint of her former fire returning to her face. After days of seeing her look like a shell of the woman I remembered, seeing the spark in her expression was almost a relief. “Let go of my hand,” she demanded.

I obeyed, letting go of her. “Was it Reacher or your dad?” I demanded.

“I fell a couple days ago,” she answered. “That’s all.”

I didn’t respond right away. Those bruises were deep but had already begun healing. There was no way she had gotten them since moving here, and there was no way in hell she had gotten them just by falling.

I moved my hands to her shoulders, thumbs brushing against her bare skin. “If something happened to you, you know you can tell me,” I said, trying to sound gentle despite the rage rushing through me. “You’re safe here. I promise.”

The dubious expression in her expression told me she didn’t believe me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she muttered, her eyes averted to her feet. “There wasn’t anything wrong there. There’s nothing to tell. I swear.” She glanced up, finally meeting my gaze. Based on the way she paled and her uneasy expression, I was fairly certain she knew I didn’t believe a word of it.

As much as I wanted to push the matter for my own purposes, I knew that forcing her to tell me wasn’t going to do any good.

Instead, I said, “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

She gave a small smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “I know,” she said unconvincingly. She hesitated. “I’ve got to go take a shower.”

Before I could say anything else, she turned and hurried out of the room.

I stayed where I was, listening as her footsteps hurried up the stairs, then faded into nothing. I tried to hold back my growl of frustration. Inside, my wolf snarled, his tail swishing in fury. He wanted to tear whoever did this to her to ribbons. It was the least

they deserved.

But Audrey wasn't going to tell me anything. Not right now. Not after everything I had done to her.

I had to figure out a way to make her trust me again. The only question was how.

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Falcon's Reach was larger than my old town. Rowen had been simpler to navigate, though that might have had more to do with living there my entire life. Falcon's Reach seemed windier, though it maintained that small-town feel. It took me a while to find my way around. Even though everything somehow managed to find its way back to the center square and the town hall that stood at one end, the roads wound and intersected in ways I wouldn't have expected.

Despite the unfamiliarity, I was surprised to find that I liked the town. There was something about it that just felt homey and welcoming in the way other towns never had. I couldn't put my finger on why, only that it was easy to relax and let my guard down, to not think about my dad or Reacher or any of the problems plaguing me.

Except that wasn't all of it.

It took a while of wandering around, moving from shop to shop as I grabbed groceries and bought new clothes for Claire until I figured it out, or at least part of it. It was that people here seemed happy. People were smiling and laughing as they strolled around in small clusters. People waved to one another across the street as they went about their business. In the Blood Moon pack, a looming tension had gripped the entire town. Everyone had known about it, but no one would mention it. None of that plagued Falcon's Reach.

It was one of those things you didn't realize was a problem or abnormal until you went somewhere else. As I explored Falcon's Reach, I had to wonder how I'd never noticed it in Rowen.

Today, I was wandering through a small grocery store, the type that sold niche

goodies and treats that you wouldn't find at a typical supermarket. I slowed along the candy aisle, looking for a treat for Claire. She was adjusting well to the new environment, but I could tell she was still struggling and missing her friends back in Rowen, so I was going out of my way to spoil her until she got used to the new setting.

As I studied some of the options, a shadow loomed over me. I ignored it, assuming it was another patron doing their own shopping. I crouched down to the shelf I was looking at, trying to make myself smaller so the other shifters could grab what they wanted.

"Hey there," a gruff voice said.

I craned my neck upward to see a broad-shouldered shifter with unkempt stubble looking down at me.

"Sorry," I said, standing and shuffling back. "I didn't mean to get in your way."

"No, no, you're not in my way," he said as his eyes looked me up and down. He gave a slow, sleazy smile that I assumed he considered charming. "And I doubt anyone would complain if you were."

I gave a thin-lipped smile and a sound that might have been a half-laugh. I reached out and grabbed a thing of peanut clusters—one of Claire's favorites—and began walking down the aisle away from the man.

"Good choice," I heard him say from right behind me, looming at my right shoulder. "Those are some of my favorites."

"They're good," I said tersely.

“So, are you new around here?” he asked. “Don’t think I’ve seen you before, and I’m pretty sure I’d remember a face as pretty as yours.”

“I’m new,” I said, trying to engage with him only as much as was strictly necessary, hoping he would get the hint. I could sense him looking at me, eyeing me up and down. It made me feel like I needed to take a shower.

“Cool.” He moved until he was right next to me. The aisle was small enough that it would be easy to brush against him if I wasn’t careful. “I’m Hank.”

“Nice to meet you,” I muttered. I wanted to tell him to beat it, but I couldn’t get the words out. All I could do was hope he would finally register that I wasn’t interested.

Apparently, hope wasn’t enough.

“Aren’t you going to tell me your name?” he prodded.

Fuck off , I thought. Instead, the word that came out was, “Audrey.”

“Cute name,” he said. He paused, clearly waiting for me to thank him for a thing I had nothing to do with. When I didn’t give him the response he craved, he pressed on. “Need someone to show you around?” he asked. “There are some pretty cool places around here you probably don’t know about. Bars and things like that. Some of them are pretty exclusive, but I’ve got connections.”

“Good for you,” I said. I had been trying to remain polite, but anger was starting to seep into me. How the hell was he not getting the hint yet?

He moved to stand in front of me so rapidly that I nearly ran into him, only stopping myself inches from him.

“Is that a yes?” he asked.

“I’m good, thank you,” I said. I tried to move around him, but he moved, blocking my path yet again.

“What? You don’t enjoy having fun?” he asked, openly leering at me.

“Apparently not,” I retorted, then weaved around him before he could cut me off again.

At this point, I’d had my fill of town. All I wanted at the moment was to get out of here and go home. I walked up to the register and handed over the groceries.

“Aw, come on.” He materialized next to me, leaning against the counter as I handed my card to the cashier. “Let me show you a good time.”

“No thanks,” I said. “Please just leave me alone.”

His eyes narrowed, and a jolt of anxiety lanced through me as I saw a glint of anger flicker in his gaze.

“I—” he started.

“Hank, she said to leave her alone,” the woman at the register snapped. “Listen to her before I get George to kick you out.”

Hank glowered, first at me, then at her, before slinking outside, muttering something about “stubborn women.”

“Thanks,” I said to the cashier.

“Hank’s a bit of a creep,” she said, rolling her eyes. “One of only a few in town. Sometimes he just needs someone else to step in before he gets the hint.”

“I appreciate it,” I said.

“Us girls have to stick together,” she said with a wink and a smile. It almost took me by surprise after years of being more or less invisible in the Blood Moon pack. I smiled back.

As I gathered my bag, I considered how just a few years ago, I may not have needed someone to interject for me. My past self could tell creeps to knock it off without hesitation. Hell, I was the one who used to step in and help out other women. Now, I barely seemed capable of getting them to take me seriously.

I walked out of the store and made my way back to the car. Or at least, that had been my intention. It sort of got derailed when a familiar voice hollered after me.

“Hey, Audrey!”

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Hank trotting up toward me. I kept moving, speeding up, hoping that he would finally leave me alone without me having to confront him.

I heard footsteps trot up next to me. I kept my head straight, only increasing my pace.

“Hey, c’mon, wait up,” Hank complained. “Don’t be like that.”

I ignored him, but apparently, without breaking into an all-out sprint, I wasn’t fast enough. He came up next to me, matching my pace.

“What part of ‘leave me alone’ don’t you understand?” I snapped. The anger boiling

inside me continued to rise.

“I get it. You like playing hard to get,” he said with a slimy grin. “That’s okay. I like a challenge. You’re cute enough for it to be worth it.”

“And you’re nowhere near worth playing hard to get for,” I shot back. I sped up, creating a gap between the two of us, hoping that I might be able to get away and he would lose interest. But his footsteps pounded after me as he continued to hound me.

Panic began seeping through me. This guy was moving beyond creepy and into disturbing. At that moment, all I cared about was getting away from him.

Ignoring his continued chatter behind me, I turned down a road, only to find myself facing a dead end and a completely deserted alley. I spun back around to find the exit blocked by Hank’s hulking figure.

“Leave. Me. Alone.” I said, but my voice wavered.

“C’mon,” he sneered. “We all know that you women don’t actually mean it when you say that.”

“I do,” I said as firmly as I could, glaring at him.

He gave a dismissive snort and kept strutting toward me. I kept backing up, trying to get away. But there was nowhere for me to go.

I gritted my teeth. There was no way in hell I was going to let myself get cornered. I had no idea what he was planning, but I had no intention of finding out.

I looked around, trying to figure out the best way of getting around him. My only hope was dipping around him.

Taking a deep breath, I darted forward, hoping that I could thread the gap between him and the wall. I skirted around him, and for a wild moment, I hoped that I had gotten away. Instead, fingers wrapped around my wrist, clenching it in a vice-like grip.

I snarled, baring my teeth as they lengthened to fangs. Equal parts panic and rage raced through me as I tried to jerk my hand away from him.

“Let me go,” I hissed.

“I’m just trying to talk to you,” he said with a creepy grin. “What? Just because you’re new, you think you’re too good for the rest of us here?”

I didn’t answer, instead trying to wrench my hand from his grip. He held on tight, continuing to crush my wrist as I tried to free myself. My wolf growled in anger, her fur bristling. She wanted to come out, to tear this asshole to shreds.

His eyes blazed as I remained silent, still trying to pull myself free. Terror flooded through me as I looked into his face, suddenly reminded of my father and Reacher. For a moment, I was transported back to my old pack, to being pulled into Reacher’s office and bullied relentlessly over and over again for ten years. My breath shallowed, growing ragged as fear rendered me paralyzed.

“Well?” he snarled. “Are you too good to answer me, too?”

“Let go of her, or you’ll lose your hand,” a familiar voice called out. It was full of icy calm.

Both our heads whipped around. My stomach lurched and my pulse quickened when I saw Jackson strolling toward us. His eyes blazed with fury as he kept his attention on Hank.

The pressure on my hand vanished, and the other shifter took several steps back. His face paled as he watched Jackson get closer and closer.

“Hey, man, we were just talking,” Hank said light-heartedly. “That’s all.”

“You sure?” Jackson growled. “Because it didn’t look much like talking.” Not taking his eyes off the other shifter, Jackson pushed his way between the two of us to stand in front of me. He turned to glance back at me. “This guy bothering you?” he asked. When I nodded, he added, “You want him to leave?”

“Yeah,” I said.

Jackson gave a short nod, then turned all his attention back to Hank, who looked small in comparison to Jackson’s looming presence, as if he had shrunk down several inches in the span of a few seconds.

“You heard my mate,” Jackson snarled. “She told you to back off. So, back off.”

The man’s brow furrowed as he looked behind Jackson to look at me, then looked back at Jackson. “Your mate?” he repeated.

“Yes,” Jackson snarled.

He scowled. “She didn’t say anything about having a mate.”

“She shouldn’t have had to,” Jackson growled. “Because when someone tells you to leave them alone, you should listen.”

“Would have made things a lot simpler,” the shifter grumbled. “Women don’t know what they want.”

Jackson growled. Before I could blink, his hand lashed out, grabbing the other shifter by the collar and slamming him against the brick wall of the alley. He pinned him there, stepping close until he was inches from the other man's face. His eyes flashed wolf, his teeth lengthening to fangs.

"Apologize to her. Now," he demanded.

"Sorry," the shifter stammered. I could see the rage and embarrassment in his eyes, but his fear seemed to override any of those emotions.

Jackson gave a curt nod of satisfaction and released his grip. The shifter's feet thumped to the ground, his collar rumpled.

"Get out of here," Jackson ordered. "Before I change my mind."

The man's face contorted in disgust and hatred, but he scurried away. I should have felt relief, but something about the glower the man shot in my direction as he darted toward the mouth of the alley made me feel like this wasn't quite over. My stomach churned.

The instant the man had rounded the corner, Jackson turned to look at me again. "Are you all right?" he asked, his voice gentle. His eyes looked me up and down, taking in everything about my appearance as if trying to catalog any new injuries or anything off about me.

"I'm fine," I muttered, staring after the guy. "He's just a creep." The emotions running through me were a mix of adrenaline wearing off from the encounter, unease, appreciation that Jackson had helped me, and annoyance that he had stepped in.

Jackson's shoulders sagged in relief as he assured himself there was nothing wrong with me, but I could still see the anger brimming in his features. "Doesn't make it any

better,” Jackson said. He glanced back at the mouth of the alley, still scowling. “I’m sure you had to deal with that pretty regularly at your old pack, though.”

Honestly? No. Most people tended to ignore me. But I didn’t think that was necessary to mention. Instead, I asked, “What are you doing? I thought you were at work.”

“I was, but there’s this novel idea called lunch. I was just heading back to the office, and I smelled your scent. So I followed it.”

Despite myself, I blushed. He’d noticed my scent and come to find me. It was sweet.

I pushed the thought away. I wasn’t going down that road. I wouldn’t let myself fall into that trap a second time.

“Well, thanks,” I murmured. “I should probably get going.”

I took several steps away, heading back to the main street. I had only gone a few feet when a hand rested on my shoulder, holding me in place. I turned to look back up at Jackson, raising one eyebrow in question.

“What are you up to?”

I shrugged. “Just running some errands.”

“Have you eaten yet?”

“Not yet, but I’m not hungry.”

As if on cue to prove how much of a liar I was, my stomach growled. Jackson’s lips quirked upward.

“Why don’t you come back with me to town hall? It’s high time you meet some of my friends, anyway. We can grab you some food on the way.”

“Oh, um...” I hesitated, even though I knew I had no excuse to say no. Besides, it might actually be nice to meet some new people. What was there to lose? “Sure,” I finally said.

He led me through the streets, pulling me into this tiny deli off the main road that he insisted had the best subs in town. After taking a bite of one, I had to admit he might have a point. I scarfed the rest of it down as we walked through the town toward the large stone building that made up town hall.

We reached the top floor, where a woman with perfect posture sat at a desk as she typed away at a computer. She glanced up when Jackson entered.

“Good lunch?” she asked him. “While you were out, Declan told me he wanted to talk to you about...” She trailed off when she caught sight of me trailing behind Jackson. She raised a perfect eyebrow, shooting Jackson a knowing look.

Getting the hint, Jackson stepped to the side and nudged me forward, one hand going to the small of my back and sending shivers up my spine. I tried not to think about how badly I wanted to lean into his touch.

“Rose, this is Audrey,” Jackson said. “Audrey, this is Rose. She’s the only reason things run as smoothly as they do around here. Pretty sure I and the rest of the Gold Wolves would crumble without her help.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Rose quipped, her lips quirking upward. She turned her full attention to me. “It’s so nice to meet you. You’ve caused quite a fuss, you know. Well, not you exactly, Jackson is the one who caused all the chaos.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said.

Rose flapped her hand dismissively. “None of it is your fault. If I had to blame anyone, I would blame Jackson. And based on everything I know about the situation, I can’t really blame him for anything he did.”

“Isn’t all of that supposed to be classified?” Jackson asked her, raising an eyebrow.

Rose gave him a pointed look. “I’m Declan’s assistant. I practically run this office. There isn’t anything that goes on around here that I don’t know about.”

He nodded, his lip quirking upward in a knowing smirk.

Satisfied, Rose turned to me. “Let me know if there’s anything you need, or if you want someone to take you around to all the fun places. No sense in being cooped up at home all day, now is there?”

“Rose is also friends with Mira, by the way,” Jackson said.

Rose’s eyes lit up. “You know Mira?” she asked me.

“She and I were best friends back when I lived in his pack,” I said.

Rose all but squealed, clapping her hands in delight as she beamed. “We should all get together, then! Any friend of Mira’s is a friend of mine.”

Her enthusiasm must have been infectious because I couldn’t stop my own smile. “That sounds wonderful,” I said, and was surprised by how much I meant it.

“The guys are probably finishing up their own lunch in the breakroom,” Jackson said. “Come meet them while you’re here.”

The instant I stepped into the expansive breakroom, five shifters, three of whom I recognized, all stopped their conversation to look at me with interest.

“Guys, this is Audrey,” Jackson said. To me, he added, “Don’t worry. They look tougher than they actually are.”

“We can hear you,” the red-headed one shot back.

“You already met Will and Trent,” Jackson said, nodding to the two other shifters who had come with Jackson to talk to Reacher. They both gave friendly waves. “The redhead is Nolan. The guy brooding in the corner is Chris.”

“Not brooding, napping,” Chris corrected, sitting up. “Or at least, I was.” He gave me a cordial nod. “Nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” I said.

“So you’re the reason Jackson got chewed out for a good hour after he reported back,” Nolan told me with a broad grin.

“Closer to two hours,” Trent corrected.

“I didn’t mean to cause all the commotion,” I said.

Nolan gave a roguish grin. “Not your fault. Jackson’s always liked doing things his way. He probably deserved to have his head bitten off at this point.” At Jackson’s glower, he held up his hands, still smirking. “I’m just saying. Remember that mission in the Catskills?”

“That was one time,” Jackson grumbled.

“Then there was the time in Newfoundland—”

“I get it,” Jackson growled.

“Oh, don’t forget the one in France,” Chris drawled.

“Oh, yeah.” Nolan grinned, then whispered conspiratorially to me, “One of the few times we actually get to go international, and we wind up in the Seine because Jackson—”

“She gets it,” Jackson growled. At the same time, Nolan and Chris began roaring with laughter.

“And I’m sure you remember Declan,” Jackson continued, clearly trying to change the subject.

“Hard guy to forget,” I remarked.

Declan gave a brief nod. “Good to see you again, Audrey. I hope you’re settling in all right.”

“It’s nice to see you, too,” I said. “I’m glad you and Mira are doing well.”

He barked out a laugh and gave a genuine grin. “Took me long enough to get the common sense to do anything about it. But yeah, we’re doing great.” He turned to the others. “Oh, by the way, you guys forgot about the time in California when Jackson thought he could ride a Cerberus and got bucked off so hard, he flew into the woods and landed in a swamp. Reeked for days.”

“Hilarious,” Jackson grumbled without any real ill humor as everyone else collapsed into peals of laughter. “You guys are all a bunch of comedians,” he added tartly.

I couldn't help it. I smiled, too.

I sat in the living room, reading and trying to take my mind off the bizarre day—hell, the bizarre week. I couldn't stop thinking about it. In particular, my mind kept wandering back to meeting the Gold Wolves at town hall. They had all seemed so friendly. I had worked at the Blood Moon pack's town hall for years. None of them had been nearly as friendly as the guys I'd met today. They had made me feel included. I had never felt that way before, except for maybe a little bit when I had been in Jackson and Mira's old pack.

For the first time, I wondered if I could actually find a life here. At the very least, I liked it here. And it wasn't as though I could leave, not since I was tied to Jackson. But that was different than feeling like I could fit in after a lifetime of feeling like an outcast and being rejected.

I kept trying to read, but with every attempt, I only got through a couple of sentences before realizing I hadn't retained a single word.

The door opened and closed, giving me a much-needed excuse to put down the book.

“Hi, Mom!” Claire called from the hall.

“Hey, sweetie!” I called back as she hurried into the living room.

“There are peanut clusters for you in the kitchen,” I said. At Claire's suspicious look, I laughed. “No strings attached this time. I promise.”

Claire broke into a grin and hurried into the kitchen. I could hear the rustling of a plastic container. A minute later, Claire came back inside, her mouth already full, the

container clutched in one hand as she stuffed another cluster in her mouth. Based on the shrinking level in the container, it had to be at least her third cluster already.

“How was your day?” I asked.

Her eyes lit up. “It was great! Ms. Lupine is really sweet, and really smart.” She beamed. “ And I got my test back, the one she gave me to see where I was at based on everyone else since I came in halfway through the year. I got a perfect score! She said she’s really impressed, especially after what I told her about my old school.”

I grinned, unable to hide my relief. Claire’s last teacher hadn’t been particularly kind to her, especially considering that she knew who Claire’s mother was. She hadn’t been cruel, but she hadn’t been particularly nurturing and had been fairly dismissive of Claire’s intelligence. Knowing Claire was in a more supportive environment was a relief.

“That’s great, Claire!” I said. “Not that I’m surprised.”

She grinned through a mouthful of chocolate and peanut butter. After she swallowed, she said, “I was wondering if I could go home with Jenna after school tomorrow.”

“Jenna?”

Claire nodded. “She’s in my class, and she has a huge movie collection. She wanted to show me some of her favorites, and we were going to make popcorn. She had a ton of movies I’ve never seen because Grandpa wouldn’t let me.”

I didn’t think I had ever seen Claire this excited about watching movies before. Dad had been pretty controlling and restrictive with her, so I wasn’t surprised. But seeing her now felt like seeing an entirely new daughter. It made me smile.

“Of course you can go,” I said. “I’m happy you’re making friends.”

Claire nodded enthusiastically, her eyes sparkling. “I actually really like it here. My teacher is great, and all the girls in class are really nice.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Seeing her happy—happier than I had ever seen her in the Blood Moon pack—meant that everything wasn’t an entire waste. I wanted her to be able to enjoy herself and make friends and get in trouble. To do all the things kids who came from a loving household should do.

What happens if this all ends? I wondered, a chill creeping over me. If Jackson uncovered the truth about Claire, would he decide he didn’t want to bother with us anymore? Would he kick us to the curb and leave us to fend for ourselves, the way he did to me all those years ago? Or, worse, would he send us back to Reacher? I didn’t think I could bear putting Claire back in that world, not when she was so much happier here.

My mouth had turned dry, and I swallowed hard. All I cared about was protecting Claire. Right now, that meant keeping the truth about her as far away from Jackson as possible. As long as he never found out, I would never have to worry about him rejecting her.

The doorbell rang, dragging me out of those thoughts. Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself from my spot on the sofa and went down the hall.

I had just gripped the doorknob, preparing to turn it, when I froze. A familiar scent had wafted up my nose, one I had known since I was born. And another equally familiar scent. Neither of them welcome.

I gasped, my body stiffening with terror. Panic raced through me, paralyzing me. What were they doing here? They weren’t supposed to be here. I was supposed to be

safe from them.

Part of me wanted to walk the other way, to pretend I wasn't home and ignore the entire thing. But that wouldn't accomplish anything. They would hound me until I relented, dragging anyone they could into it if they thought it would get me to do whatever it was they wanted. The best thing I could do was minimize the damage and talk to them now.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the door open. Reacher and Dad stood in front of me.

My stomach clenched and plummeted at the same time. I had hoped that I was wrong, that I had imagined it when I recognized their scents. Since moving here, I had hoped that, at the very least, the most I would ever have to deal with Dad and Reacher again would be their vaguely threatening phone calls. I had hoped that after a while, they might lose interest in the whole situation and stop bothering me altogether. I had hoped that I might actually break free from them.

Staring at them now, I realized how absolutely stupid I had been. There was no way they were ever going to let me go or relinquish their hold on me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my mouth dry. They could be here for any number of reasons. They could be here to threaten me, to figure out what I had learned, to just remind me what they expected of me, or—just the thought of it petrified me—they had changed their mind and were here to take me back. Or, worse, take Claire back.

Dad tutted. “Is that really how you want to talk to your alpha and father?”

“He's not my alpha anymore, though. You made sure of that when you two married me off.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could think better of them. They surprised me as much as they did Dad and Reacher.

A low growl emanated from Dad's throat. His eyes narrowed, and he took a step forward. Reacher raised his hand, stopping Dad from moving further. His cold eyes leveled their gaze at me.

"Seems the time away hasn't improved your manners at all," Reacher commented.

All those thoughts about feeling at home, about being free and maybe finally letting go of the past, flew out the window. Instead, I was the same timid girl I had been for the last few years, scared of my own shadow. Just seeing them again forced the weight of years of trauma back onto my shoulders.

"What do you want?" I repeated.

"What do you think?" Reacher said. "I want to know what you've found out so far."

"I don't have to tell you anything," I said. I started to close the door, but Reacher stuck his hand out, pushing the door fully open and causing me to stumble back.

"I think you're going to want to, though," Reacher said, a sinister smile playing on his lips. "Tell me... have you told Jackson he's Claire's father yet?"

The air rushed out of my lungs. I froze in place, my mouth opening and closing in shock as I tried to get my racing thoughts back under control. They knew. How did they know? I had never told anyone. My parents had demanded I tell them on countless occasions in the past, but I had always refused.

I remained immobile as Reacher stared smugly at me. He raised his eyebrow. "Why don't you come outside and have a chat with us? I'd ask you to invite us in, but I

think your mate would start asking too many questions if he noticed other shifters' scents in his house, don't you think?"

My jaw worked, and my mind raced with panic as I scrambled to think of something I could say that would get them to leave.

"Just go," I said. Then, trying to keep my voice even, "Please."

Reacher's expression darkened. "If you don't talk with us now, then I'll tell your mate exactly who Claire is and what a liar you are," he threatened.

A dull, pulsating sound echoed in my ears as my mind continued to swirl and spiral, teetering on the edge of total panic. How did he find out? I never told anyone, even when Dad threatened me all those years ago. It was supposed to be a secret.

I searched Reacher's expression, trying to gauge whether he truly knew or if this was all just a grand bluff. My stomach sank as I saw the truth in his expression. He knew. Somehow, he knew. And the worst part was, I knew he wasn't lying. He would tell Jackson who Claire really was in a heartbeat if he didn't get his way.

I couldn't have that. Things were already complicated enough. I didn't want Claire to get hurt if Jackson rejected her the way he rejected me, and I didn't want Jackson kicking us out if he found out that I had been lying to him this whole time about who she really was. Things were complicated enough as is. The only thing I could do at the moment was exactly what Reacher wanted.

I glanced down, breaking eye contact. "All right," I muttered.

The alpha gave a sleazy smirk, his eyes dancing with triumphant glee. "Good girl," he said. "Now, let's have a chat."

“Just give me a minute,” I said.

“Keep the door open,” Reacher ordered. “I don’t trust you to not run off.”

I didn’t answer. I just obeyed and walked upstairs to Claire’s room.

“Claire, I have to step out for a few minutes,” I said, peering around the open door. She sat cross-legged on her bed, schoolbooks splayed out in front of her, the tub of peanut clusters open beside her. “I won’t be too far away. Don’t leave the house, and don’t open the door for anyone.”

My daughter tilted her head, giving me a quizzical look so reminiscent of her father that I nearly reeled backward in surprise.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, forcing a smile on my face. Why did she have to be so perceptive?

“Why do I smell Grandpa?” she asked, knitting her brow.

I tried not to wince, keeping my expression neutral. “Probably just something in the air. I’ll be back in a few, all right?”

She hesitated for a moment. “Okay.”

I walked back to the front door, head still swimming. This whole thing felt like a horrible dream. I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t seem to even open my mouth.

“Come on,” I said to the men, pushing past them.

They followed me into the woods, where the only sounds were birdsong and our footsteps as we crunched across dry leaves and twigs. When I was satisfied we were far enough away, I turned back to look at them.

“How did you know?” I asked. I didn’t bother elaborating. They knew exactly what I was referring to.

“I didn’t become alpha for nothing,” Reacher said. “That Gold Wolf wouldn’t have backed down from his mission for just anyone. And I noticed the way you looked at him. It was clear you knew one another. The only time you would have met him would have been when you ran away and came back knocked up.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” I said, keeping my voice low.

He gave another sinister smile. “No, it doesn’t,” he agreed. “But I was over at Saul’s house and saw a photo of Claire. When you look closely, she has more than a passing resemblance to your new mate. Honestly, I’m surprised he hasn’t figured it out yet.”

“I guess the Gold Wolves don’t look for intelligence when they pick their recruits,” Dad jeered. “He does strike me as the all-brawn-and-no-brains type.”

“How do you know he doesn’t know already?” I asked, trying to sound more confident and sure of myself than I actually was. “Maybe I told him already.”

It was obvious that attempting to lie and tell them they were way off the mark wasn’t going to work. This was the only bluff I had. I didn’t know what they wanted. All I knew was that I couldn’t let them have any leverage over me.

But Reacher laughed, and my stomach sank as I realized that my one line of defense wasn’t going to cut it. “If that was the case, then you wouldn’t have come out and talked to us.”

I winced. He was right. He had me over a barrel, and all I could do was go along with it.

“What do you want?” I asked, my voice hoarse, barely above a whisper.

“I want your help,” Reacher said. “You’re going to keep me informed about the Gold Wolves and what they’re up to. You’re going to let me know if they decide to move against me. In short, you’re going to be my eyes and ears here to make sure they don’t interfere with any of my plans.”

I knew more about Reacher’s plans than he thought. I knew the general gist of what he planned, and what would happen if he achieved those plans. I hadn’t told Jackson any of it out of fear, but that was different than actively helping Reacher with his plot.

I couldn’t do it.

“And if I say no?” I asked. “If I refuse to help?”

Reacher took a step forward. He was close enough now that the pungent stench of tobacco and oak filled my nostrils, blocking out every other scent.

“Then I’ll tell Jackson exactly who Claire is,” he said, his voice low. “And I’ll make sure he knows you’re helping me, anyway. How long do you think he’ll keep you and your daughter in that fancy house once he realizes you’re a liar and a traitor?”

I didn’t say anything. My jaw clenched as I stared at them, willing my hands to remain steady even as they threatened to tremble.

When I stayed silent, Reacher added, “If that isn’t enough, then how about your daughter? You don’t want anything to happen to her, do you?”

I closed my eyes as I took a deep breath, but already I could feel any lingering resolve crumbling to sand. I couldn't let anything happen to Claire. Not as long as I had the power to save her.

Ever since I started living here these last couple of weeks, I had started building myself up back to who I used to be. Just being away from my father and Reacher had done wonders. But all it had taken to bring me straight back down to that meek, timid place was a few minutes back in his and Reacher's presence. And their triumphant smirks told me they knew it, too.

"All right," I said. "Fine."

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My jaw clenched in annoyance as I did my best not to hurl the screen across the room. No matter where I looked, I couldn't find shit. I was nowhere near as good as Trent or Will when it came to research, but I wasn't awful at it, either. I should have been able to find something incriminating about Reacher by this point. But I'd found shit.

The knock on my office door dragged my attention away from the computer. "It's open," I called.

Declan strolled in, walking closer toward me before leaning against the wall. "How're things going?" he asked.

"Badly," I grumbled. "I've been trying to look into Reacher's time as alpha, to try and get some idea of what might be going on. But the information on him is surprisingly scant. It's hard to find anything beyond bare bones."

Tilting his head, he asked, "Have you thought about asking Audrey? Her dad is Reacher's second, isn't he? I wouldn't be surprised if she knew something."

Sighing, I leaned back, running my fingers through my hair. "I thought about it," I admitted. "In fact, I tried to bring it up a couple of times, trying to feel out if she would be willing to talk about it."

Declan raised his eyebrows. "And?"

"And every time I tried to bring it up, she would go pale and start stammering. She basically would say everything was fine and that there was nothing wrong before

trying to change the subject.”

“And you’re guessing she was lying?”

“I think she’s scared,” I said. “Even if she’s no longer there, I think she’s still frightened.”

“Doesn’t seem like the Audrey I remember,” he mused. “Granted, I didn’t know her as well as you or Mira.”

I shook my head, drumming my fingers on the desk. “No, it’s not like her at all. There are times when she basically seems like an entirely different person. I never would have imagined her as timid or scared, but she jumps at practically everything.” I furrowed my brow before glancing up at him. “I’m worried about her. I’ve tried talking to her about it, and she won’t go into that, either. But jumping at everything that moves and not speaking up for herself can’t be healthy, can it?”

“People change,” Declan said. At my dubious expression, he relented. “Okay, if there is something wrong, just give her time to adjust. Let her come to you when she’s ready.”

I let out a low growl. He had a point, I knew that. But the idea of waiting was counterintuitive to me. I wanted to know what was going on now.

Declan seemed to read my mind because he said, “I know patience and letting other people take the lead isn’t your strong suit, Jackson. But it’s probably the best course of action here. Audrey needs time to get used to everything. So be patient.” He tapped the screen and gave me a meaningful look. “And in the meantime, you can put your mind to work elsewhere. Like taking a closer look into a certain alpha?”

“Right, right,” I said with a sigh. I drummed my fingers. Something he’d said had

given me an idea. “Stick around for a sec, will you?”

He slouched down in the chair, pulling out his phone as he waited. Meanwhile, I pulled up a couple of databases and began following up on my hunch.

For a moment, I found nothing and worried I was way off the mark yet again. Then a small nugget of information I almost missed caught my eye. I straightened, my interest piqued.

“I found something,” I announced.

Declan’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“Come look.”

He pushed himself up and moved around the desk to read over my shoulder.

“He was the alpha of a different pack,” I said. “Before the Blood Moon.” I drummed my fingers on the desk as I considered. “You know, I’ll bet there are some people there who would be willing to talk about him.”

“Interesting. It’s not exactly common for alphas to leave their packs.” Declan raised an eyebrow. “Makes me wonder if something happened.”

“Less ‘if’ and more ‘what,’ if you ask me,” I muttered. Turning to look at him, I asked, “Mind if I go have a chat with their alpha? Might be able to get something out of him.”

“Worth a shot. I doubt they would have the same loyalty as some of the people in his current pack,” Declan noted. “Bring a couple people with you when you go.”

“I’ll set something up,” I agreed.

Nodding, he straightened and headed to the door. He was just about to step out when he paused and looked back over his shoulder. “And Jackson?”

“Yeah?”

“This time, don’t bring home any women.”

He left and closed the door behind him.

“This is delicious,” I told Audrey as she, myself, and Claire sat at the dinner table. I forked another mound of spaghetti into my mouth.

“Thanks,” she said, her cheeks turning the faintest hint of pink as her lips turned upward.

“Yeah, it’s really good,” Claire said—or, rather, garbled.

Audrey shot her daughter a look. “Don’t talk with your mouth full,” she chided.

Giving her mother an almost identical glance of annoyance, Claire obeyed. A moment later, however, she put a single strand of spaghetti in her mouth and slurped it up, staring at her mom in defiance the entire time.

“Now you’re just being obstinate,” Audrey said, clearly fighting some mix of amusement and annoyance. “You—”

Her words were drowned out by another loud sucking sound, though not from Claire.

She turned, and her eyes shot daggers at me as she watched me suck in a noodle.

“What?” I asked innocently.

“You know what,” she said.

“Nope,” I said, shrugging. Raising my eyebrows, I met Claire’s eyes and gave an elaborate slurp as I sucked another noodle into my mouth.

Claire giggled, and I grinned. Glancing over, I saw Audrey give a faint smile as well.

“Don’t you encourage her,” she said. “You’re going to be a bad influence.”

“Me? Never. Spec-ops guys have perfect manners. We’re fantastic influences.”

“Right,” Audrey said, rolling her eyes but smiling more freely. It was nice seeing her smile.

“Were any of your missions dangerous?” Claire asked me.

“Some,” I said. “But I had a great team with me, so I never worried.”

“Which was your favorite?” she asked with genuine curiosity.

I rubbed my chin. “Hard to say. I really liked the one where I had to fight a lion and a gorilla in an amusement park.”

Her eyes went wide. “You’re joking.”

“You’re right.” I gave a wide grin. “I am.”

Claire stuck out her tongue as Audrey laughed.

The rest of the dinner went by in a similar fashion. The whole experience felt almost familiar, as if we had done this hundreds of times. There was something about it, though, that also felt right, like it was always supposed to be this way. The three of us as a unit.

After dinner, Claire started walking toward the living room when Audrey stopped her. “Go finish your homework,” she ordered. “You can watch TV after.”

Claire grimaced and glanced over at me, her eyes wide and begging.

“Listen to your mother,” I said.

Pouting, Claire nodded and went upstairs.

“Thanks,” Audrey said.

“No kid likes to do homework,” I said. “I get it.”

She began gathering the plates.

“Here, let me help,” I offered.

“It’s fine,” she muttered, stacking the dishes. “I do this all the time.”

“You did back at your old pack,” I said. “But here, I can help.”

She hesitated, the pile of plates already in her hand. She glanced back at the table.

“You can get the glasses if you really want to help.”

Nodding, I gathered them.

“Did you know Reacher was the alpha of a different pack before the Blood Moon?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

I wasn't sure what sort of reaction I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't her dropping the entire stack of dishes. The resounding crash rang in my ears as ceramic and dollops of food spilled across the floor.

“I'm so sorry,” she babbled, looking from me to the broken dishes at her feet and back to me, her eyes wide with fright. “Just butterfingers. They slipped right out of my hands. I didn't mean—”

“It's all right,” I said, cutting her off. “These things happen.”

She ran her fingers through her hair, muttering swear words under her breath. “I'm so sorry,” she repeated.

“Relax. They're dishes,” I said. “They're easily replaceable. I'm more worried about you hurting yourself. Be careful where you step.”

As if she hadn't heard me, Audrey bent and began gathering the larger shards, putting them on the least broken plate. Her hands trembled a little as she kept her gaze on the floor.

I crouched beside her and began to help pick up the pieces.

“I'm fine, I've got it,” she insisted. “You just...”

I stopped what I was doing to look at her, taking in her wide eyes, hunched shoulders, and frantic movements. After a moment, I reached out and took her wrist. I felt her

stiffen beneath my grip, but I didn't let go.

“Audrey,” I said gently, as though speaking to a frightened animal. Slowly, she looked up at me, her large, blue eyes staring into mine with uncertainty. “What happened to you?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her eyes widening.

“Eleven years ago, you were this strong, fiery woman,” I said. “You weren't afraid of anyone or anything. It was one of the things I admired about you. A few years ago, you would have laughed about the plates and told me it was my fault for distracting you. But now...” I gestured around us.

Her jaw clenched for a moment. “People change. I'm sorry if—”

“I'm not trying to attack or insult you,” I cut in. “I care about you. I just want to know what's going on. I'm worried about you. I want to help. But I can't unless I know what's really going on with you. Please. Just let me help.”

“You really want to know what happened?” she asked. Something like her old spark flickered in her eyes, but only for a moment.

“Of course I do,” I said. “I want to help you.”

She swallowed, glancing around before her gaze finally returned to my face. She took a deep breath.

“That night, when I came to your house...” She trailed off.

“I remember,” I said.

I didn't think I could ever forget it. I'd regretted what I said to her the second she walked out the door, but I also knew I couldn't walk it back. I knew what I wanted in that moment. But over the years that followed, I sometimes wondered if I had made the right call.

"I dreamt about a life with you," she said. "Imagined all the things we would do together. Our kids. I had this perfect life planned out. And then..." She trailed off again. "The way it ended... it hurt... a lot. I don't know how to articulate it better than that. But that night changed everything. I'd never been hurt like that before, and I never want to feel that kind of pain again. It's the reason I left, and the whole reason I went back to a place I hated—because I had nowhere else to go, and no one I could turn to. On top of that, I basically haven't been able to trust anyone since. I keep waiting for anyone I get close to to betray me one way or another. It's easier to just keep to myself."

I stared at her, dumbfounded. I didn't know what to say. How was I supposed to begin to respond to that?

Absently, she started picking up the plate shards. She hissed in pain, dropping a shard, which broke again into smaller pieces. She clutched her wrist as blood began to well on the heel of her palm. "Shit," she mumbled as she stood, hurrying to the sink to wash the cut.

I jumped to my feet and dashed to the nearby bathroom to grab bandages. I returned to stand beside her at the sink.

"Here." I took her hand gently and placed the bandage across the cut.

"Thanks," she said, talking to the Band-Aid instead of me. Seeing her like that stirred old emotions and regrets, ones I had denied I felt for years. Seeing her now, though, I could finally see how stupid my choices were.

Gently, I reached out with my free hand and lifted her chin so she was looking at me. “Audrey,” I said. “I am so sorry. For all of it. I can’t express how sorry I am.”

She took a deep breath. “You can say sorry all you want. That doesn’t mean much in the grand scheme of things.”

“I know. But it’s the truth. And if I could take it all back, I would in a heartbeat.”

“You can’t take it back,” she said.

“I know,” I said. My hand went to her cheek. She leaned into it. I didn’t think she even realized she was doing it. “But I want to make it up to you. Starting now.”

I had made so many mistakes when it came to Audrey. There was something about her that just made me throw all common sense out the window. I wanted to do right by her, to make up for all the wrongs I had done her. I wanted to tell her just how much she meant to me, and how I would do anything to make her smile.

I didn’t know how to articulate any of that, though, or whether this was even the time. Instead, I did the one thing I could think to do in that moment.

I leaned down and kissed her.

An electricity ran through me the instant our lips touched, a yearning that I hadn’t felt since that night she came to my house. My wolf howled in longing and triumph. I sensed her own longing, too, in the way she instinctively pressed against me, the way one hand knotted into a fist, gripping the fabric of my shirt as it was pinned between us. Her other hand wrapped around my neck as my own snaked around her, pressing into the small of her back. My other hand gripped her head, fingers tangling in her hair as I held her in place.

For a long moment, all that mattered was the two of us.

Her hand went to my chest, and she stepped back, breaking the kiss. Her chest heaved, and I could see the longing and need in her eyes.

“We can’t,” she said. Her fingers remained clenched around the fabric of my shirt as if part of her didn’t want to let go. “I’m sorry, but I can’t go down that road again.”

I wanted to protest. Part of me, that primal part that belonged to my wolf, wanted to ignore her wishes and take her right then and there, to plunge my tongue into her mouth and claim her. The more rational side of me managed to hold those desires at bay, no matter how badly I wanted to pull her against me again.

I forced myself to nod, and her hand fell away.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated before turning on her heels and leaving the room.

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I spent the next day wandering around the house, trying to keep busy with chores, reading, TV, anything to get my mind off what had happened the night before. The way his lips had felt against mine, and how badly I wanted to do it again.

Except no matter what I did or how I tried to distract myself, all I could think about was that kiss. It had reignited everything I'd been trying to suppress since Jackson walked back into my life. No matter how hard I tried to deny it or pretend otherwise, I was still attracted to Jackson. I still wanted him. It had taken all of my strength to break that kiss, except I knew I had to. I couldn't let myself fall for the same tricks. Not again.

I had run out of the room because I knew if I stayed a second longer, I would have given in to those primal urges. I couldn't let myself do that.

I pushed those thoughts from my head. Or, I tried to. Every time I closed my eyes, I could feel his lips on mine, and my heart pounded with longing.

I needed to get out of there. Which was how, ten minutes later, I found myself running through the woods, chasing after prey as I tried to let the smells of the forest clear my head. I stayed out for well over two hours, just letting myself enjoy the fresh spring air and being out on my own. My wolf relished the chance to run and be outside. She'd felt cooped up lately, and I was happy to let her run free for a while. As I tracked a hare, I let my mind go blank as my wolf's instincts took over.

By the time I finished, I felt more like myself, and more relaxed about the entire situation. At first, I thought maybe we could put the kiss behind us, and it would all be forgotten. We could simply move on.

I realized how stupid that hope was almost the instant I walked in the door and heard laughter echo from the living room. Wandering that way, I felt my stomach lurch as I saw Claire and Jackson sitting cross-legged on the floor. Claire's brow was furrowed in concentration as she stared at two cards in her hand. Jackson had an intense look on his face before he solemnly put down one of his own cards with a hand far larger than Claire's. The way they were acting, you would think that whatever they were doing was a life-or-death situation.

"Let's see if this trips you up," he said.

Claire's face lit up. "Annd Uno!" Claire declared as she plopped down her second-to-last card.

"Hmm..." Jackson drummed his fingers against his cheek as he studied his cards and then his opponent. His eyes narrowed in scrutiny. The look was so startlingly similar to one I had seen Claire give me on a number of occasions that I nearly took a step back.

"You're a worthy foe," Jackson said in a sinister, melodramatic voice that made Claire giggle. "But can you defeat... this?!" he slammed down one of his cards.

Claire's triumphant smile told me everything I needed to know. "I win!" She put down her final card.

"Ah, dang it!" Jackson threw up his hands theatrically as his eyes crinkled. The cards that had been in his hand flew up, then fluttered to the ground. "I've been defeated."

"Told you!" Claire cried gleefully. "I'm the best at this game."

He gave a deferential bow. "I shall never question your expertise again. At least when it comes to Uno."

Their smiles at that moment were identical in every way, right down to the single dimple on their right side. No wonder Reacher had figured it out. It was a miracle Jackson hadn't guessed yet.

"Want to play again?" Claire asked hopefully.

Jackson glanced over at me, raising an eyebrow. "Let me see if your mother needs help with anything first."

I waved a hand. "I'm good."

"You want to join us, then?" he asked.

"Mom's terrible at games," Claire grumbled.

"Hey, now," Jackson said. "Just because she's terrible doesn't mean she can't play. Besides, if she needs help, I can give her a few pointers."

I shot him an annoyed look. He winked back with a roguish grin that almost made me laugh. God, when had it become so hard to resist his charm again? I had put up so many walls, but I hadn't realized how many of them he had chipped away at.

"I'm going to get dinner ready, anyway," I said. "You guys have fun."

As I fixed dinner, I listened to the two of them as they moved from game to game. Jackson won a few, but Claire won more. I wasn't sure if he let her win or if the wins were legitimate, but it didn't seem to matter. Every time I glanced over while I stood at the stove, they both had wide, genuine grins that were infectious.

I had never pictured Jackson as good with kids. Watching him play with Claire told me I had been dead wrong. It should have made me happy. Claire was getting along

with Jackson, who was likely going to be in our lives for the foreseeable future. Instead, it made me uneasy.

What was problematic was that seeing him play with Claire this way, seeing him accept her as if she was his own daughter, made me even more attracted to him. Not just physically but emotionally as well. Despite myself, I could feel that I was falling for him again. I wanted to be near him, to lean against him, to taste his lips on mine once more.

Those thoughts that I had hoped the hunt had eradicated had come back in full force. They plagued me all through dinner, and after. I kept finding myself looking at him without being conscious of it, my thoughts drifting toward what it would feel like to melt into his arms like that one fateful night. No matter how hard I tried, they kept resurfacing. How good he was with Claire. How he'd treated me with kindness and compassion since coming here, letting me heal on my own, but offering to be there when I needed it.

It was getting harder to hate him. But the memories of what he had once done are still there, and they still hurt.

Later, after Claire had gone up to bed, Jackson came over to where I was finished cleaning.

“Doing okay?” he asked. “Thanks for getting that rabbit for dinner. It was great.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I said.

He took the rag from my hand, his fingers brushing against mine. “Here, let me.”

I did, barely breathing, part of me yearning to inhale his scent. I hesitated, debating whether to bring up the next topic. Eventually, I bit the bullet. “It seems like you and

Claire are getting along,” I said.

He gave a wide grin, one that yet again looked almost identical to Claire’s. “She’s a great kid. Really. You’ve done a great job raising her.”

“I did my best,” I said with a shrug.

“Honestly, I’m surprised.” Jackson scratched his head. “When you said you had a kid, I wasn’t sure what to expect. But I like spending time with her.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “I mean, I think it helps that we have a bunch in common, which was a nice surprise. But I’m not sure I expected to get along with her as well as I am.”

I stayed silent, unsure what to say, and worried that anything I said would reveal the truth.

“You all right?” he asked.

I turned, and my stomach lurched as I realized how close he was. It would only take a few half-steps for us to be touching. His scent of oak and vanilla washed over me as my heart worked overtime.

“I’m fine,” I said, my voice coming out smaller than I intended. But all I could think about was how easy it would be to close the gap between us, and how badly I wanted to. But I couldn’t tell him any of that. This was a mistake... wasn’t it? But then why did I want to give in to the temptation so badly?

His hand went to my shoulder, resting there and sending warm shivers through my body. I could feel myself going over the edge, succumbing to the feelings I’d been

trying to ignore. I willed myself to hold on, not to give in.

He apparently didn't realize where my mind was, instead thinking I was preoccupied with something else because he said, "You did a great job raising her, Audrey. Despite everything. And I'm excited to help now and see the kind of woman she grows into."

I couldn't stand it anymore. I couldn't take the closeness. I was tired of holding myself back. I had wanted him since the moment I saw him again. My wolf had known it. I had known it. I was tired of pretending otherwise.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him toward me. He let me without hesitation, taking the two short steps to clear the distance between us. His hand wrapped around my waist, and he held me against him as our lips met. A fire ignited, a fire I hadn't experienced since that night eleven years ago. And suddenly everything that had happened—with Reacher, between us, all of the tension and anxiety that had been looming over us the past, however long it had been—none of it seemed to matter anymore. Once our mouths locked together, all that mattered was me and him, together. Nothing else. If only for this short moment.

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Her lips were soft against mine, even as I could taste the passion behind them. I waited for her to push me away the way she had the other night. Instead, she leaned into the kiss, any reservations about our one either forgotten or dismissed. I didn't care which. My wolf howled in longing as the kiss deepened, all thoughts of stopping wiped from my head. My hand went to her head, holding her against me as I pushed her against the wall, pinning her there as our bodies pressed against one another.

I slid one hand down her side, feeling the curves of her body as she melted against me. My thumb traced the line of her hip. She moaned into my mouth, the thrum sending new jolts of need through my body. I could feel my cock twitching, wanting to be inside her already.

My mouth moved to her collarbone, nipping gently. She gave small gasps of pleasure, her body pushing into mine as her back arched. It wasn't until I began to fumble with her jeans that she stopped me.

“Not here,” she whispered. She gave me a coy smirk as she tilted her head. “I don't want anyone seeing.”

I knew she meant Claire. Even as I wanted to throw caution to the wind and fuck her right there on the couch, I nodded and pulled her into my bedroom, closing the door shut behind us. When I turned back around, I saw with savage pleasure that she had already discarded her shirt, and she wasn't wearing a bra. Snarling, I peeled off my own shirt. She sucked in a breath, her eyes raking up and down my body, drinking it in. The lust and hunger in her eyes only fueled my own. My eyes lingered on her tits, round and the perfect size, her nipples already hard with arousal.

“These are even better than I remember,” I growled, stepping forward and grabbing one in each hand.

She moaned at the touch. I bent down, my lips caressing her collarbone and neck. She shivered beneath me as my hands continued exploring her body, relishing the feel of her after years of remembering her smooth skin and gentle curves. Soon, I wasn't satisfied with going slowly. I needed her. Needed all of her. My touches grew more insistent, holding her still as my mouth moved back to claim hers. I pushed her against the wall, keeping her helpless before me. Even that wasn't enough. My wolf was greedy. He wanted more. I wanted more.

Unable to wait any longer, my hand slipped beneath her jeans. She gasped, her back arching as my finger found her clit. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her breath went ragged, driving my wolf wild. My own cock twitched again in response.

Snarling, I pulled down her pants and underwear, leaving her completely bare before me. I stood back, drinking in her nude body, savoring every moment. She stood before me, self-conscious at first, then more at ease. She looked absolutely perfect.

Without saying anything, I stripped off the rest of my clothes, my cock springing out. I pulled her against me, tangling my fingers in her hair and pulling her lips to mine, holding her in place even as my fingers resumed toying with her clit. She moaned into my mouth, her body grinding against mine in response. Her hands gripped my back, nails digging in.

I pushed her back against the wall, the pictures hung there rattling with the force of it. I watched her face as her expression contorted to one of pure bliss the more I played with her. I could smell her arousal, and it was driving me wild.

I crouched before her, hands holding her in place as they gripped her waist. Her scent grew more potent as I lowered myself, only intensifying my cravings.

My tongue ran along her slit, savoring the taste and relishing the way she writhed as her hands gripped my hair. I could hear her soft groans, growing higher and higher-pitched with every flick of my tongue. Her hips tried to buck but stayed still beneath my grip. I took my time, moving slowly, teasing her as I enjoyed her squirming and gentle mewling.

When I could tell she was close, I stopped, the taste of her still on my tongue. She shot me an irritated glare that only made me laugh as I raised myself. Before she could argue or say anything, I lifted her off her feet, raising her high before thrusting my cock inside her.

She groaned as I began pumping, her legs locking around me. I thrust inside her and let out a groan of my own. She felt incredible. I'd been with other women in the past, of course, but none of them had felt half as amazing as she did. Her hands knotted into fists on my shoulders as her back began to arch.

I kept pumping in and out of her, her own hips gliding up and down in time with mine. She threw her head back, exposing her neck. My wolf snarled as I grabbed her hair and forced her mouth on mine, keeping it there as I continued ramming into her. I knew she was close from the way she squealed, the way her moans grew higher-pitched, becoming more and more irregular. Each sound only intensified my own pleasure and need. All I cared about in that moment was her.

Her fingers dug into my skin, and I could tell she was close. With two more thrusts, she screamed into my mouth as she came, her muscles clenching around my cock. I kept pumping as her hips bucked. Her coming and her hips grinding against mine were enough to send me over the edge. I let out my own cry as I came inside her, filling her. My thrusts slowed to a halt as I finished.

We stared at each other, panting, neither of us saying anything as our bodies stayed pressed together. The surprise on her face was mixed with something I hoped was

contentment.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, I slid out of her and lowered her to the floor. “Are you all right?” I asked, still trying to wrap my head around what had just happened.

“I’m okay,” she muttered.

I tilted my head, studying her and trying to gauge her reaction. I could sense something was off.

“Are you sure? How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Tired,” she said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I teased. “But I meant more about the sex. You seem...” I trailed off, not sure how to finish that sentence.

She bit her lip. Something about the sight drove my wolf wild, and I could feel my cock twitch as I looked at her. Part of me wanted to pull her toward me and go for another round. But then her next words were like a bucket of ice water dumped on my head.

“It was fun,” she admitted, not looking at me. “Really, I had a great time.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ here,” I said.

She nodded. “But I think it should be a one-time thing. Things are complicated enough right now without adding this to the mix.”

My wolf growled in disappointment, and I had to agree with him. Being with Audrey again had made me happy in a way I could never have imagined. Something about it

had just felt right. I had been with other women before, but it had never felt like it just had with Audrey.

I tried to mask my disappointment and keep a straight face. Even if it wasn't what I wanted necessarily, I cared about Audrey, and I wanted to respect her wishes.

"I mean, if you think that's best, I'm not going to argue," I said. "I trust that you know what's best for you."

"Right," Audrey said absently. Something unreadable flickered in her gaze before she looked away.

I stood and walked over to her. I gently took her chin in my hand and raised it so her eyes, blue and sparkling like sapphires, met mine.

"That said," I said, my voice low as my thumb stroked the line of her jaw, "I thoroughly enjoyed myself. And if you ever change your mind, you know where I am."

Her cheeks flushed an adorable pink. The sight of that alone was enough to drive my wolf wild and make my cock twitch again. All I wanted at that precise moment was to pull her against me again, to kiss her before carrying her over to my bed for a second round.

I gritted my teeth, trying to squash those urges. Audrey wanted this to be a one-time thing, and I was going to respect that. But that didn't stop me from wanting her again. It had been so long since we had last slept together that I had forgotten how incredible it was. Doing it again had brought back memories and fueled desires I hadn't realized I still had.

God, I wanted her. I desperately wanted her. The fact that I couldn't have her made

the whole thing worse. And the longer I stayed here in front of her, inhaling her scent and being this close to her, the harder it was to resist those selfish impulses that made me want to kiss her again.

“I’ve got to go,” I said, taking a step back, and Audrey blinked in surprise and confusion. Something flickered again in her gaze, but I couldn’t figure out what.

“Okay,” she said.

“You seemed really eager to go on this mission right this minute,” Will said to me, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I noticed that, too,” Chris said. “Any particular reason?”

“Just want to get this sorted out before too much time goes by,” I said. “Besides, the sooner it’s taken care of, the sooner Audrey can start relaxing more.”

Silence broken only by the rumbling of the car followed the response. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I could see Chris shooting a skeptical look in Will’s direction. Beside me, Will had an amused, knowing look on his face.

“Knock it off,” I growled.

“I will when you tell us what’s really going on with Audrey,” Will said.

“Yeah, because we all know you aren’t just paying a favor back for Mira’s sake,” Chris added.

“And what makes you say that?” I demanded.

“Declan,” the two of them responded in unison.

“He says he remembers you making eyes at Audrey when she used to live in your old pack,” Chris said. I could hear the smirk in his voice. “And then she just vanished one day. You never talked about her after that.”

“I didn’t make eyes at Audrey when she lived in our old pack,” I said defensively. “I just wanted to get moving on this before anything bad happened. Doing my job and doing it promptly doesn’t mean there’s something else going on or some ulterior motive on my part.”

“If you say so,” Chris drawled, giving me a lazy, knowing grin.

“If you guys keep pestering me on this, there’s going to be hell to pay,” I warned, though that only earned chuckles from the other two in the car. But mercifully, they stopped pestering me after that, and I could just listen to the radio without having to field any more awkward questions about myself and Audrey.

The truth was, the reason I had pressed myself to get moving on this did have to do with Audrey, just not necessarily in the way I was implying. I couldn’t get the other night out of my head. Every time I closed my eyes, all I could think about was the way she had felt when I held her, and the way she had looked without any clothes on. It made focusing on anything else virtually impossible. Even if I had told her I wasn’t bothered or that I would respect her wishes, that didn’t stop me from wanting her.

So, with all that on my mind, I did the one thing that usually helped when nothing else did: throw myself into the job headfirst and hope it would distract me, at least for a little while.

Which was why Will, Chris, and I were currently driving through the streets of an unfamiliar town. I watched the shifters wandering along the streets, most of them

smiling and laughing as they walked together in small clusters. The difference between this pack and Blood Moon was like night and day. No one here looked strained or nervous, and when we got out of the car and headed toward their town hall, none of the passersby shot us suspicious looks. There was none of the ominous atmosphere that had plagued Blood Moon. There was a brightness and vibrancy here that the other pack entirely lacked.

“Notice any differences?” Will asked dryly. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who noticed the stark contrast.

“Yeah, no kidding,” I muttered in response, glancing around. “Hard to believe Reacher and this pack had any association with one another whatsoever.”

“The other place that bad?” Chris asked.

“It looked fine on the surface,” Will admitted. “But it just felt like everyone was on edge. Like they were afraid to screw up or step out of line. There wasn’t this air of relaxation like here.”

Chris nodded but didn’t say anything. We all remained quiet as we climbed the steps to the town hall and entered the main building.

We had only stepped inside when a man lounging at the front desk, engaged in a conversation with the receptionist, saw us. He muttered a final thing to the woman before pushing himself away from the desk and strolling over to us with a lazy, confident grin on his face.

“Hi, there,” he greeted, sticking out his hand. “Pete. Pleasure to meet you.”

I shook his hand. “Jackson. This is Chris and Will. We were hoping we could talk to your alpha.”

“You’re looking at him. What can I do for you fine gentlemen? Looking for a place to settle?”

He was certainly more hospitable than Reacher had ever been.

“No, actually,” I replied. “We’re doing some investigation on behalf of the Wolf’s Council. We were hoping we could ask you a few questions about the previous alpha. Reacher?”

Pete’s smile faltered, replaced by a grimace. Behind him, I noticed the secretary was staring at me, her eyes wide and posture tense.

“I see,” Pete said.

“You don’t seem particularly surprised,” Will commented.

“That the Wolf’s Council is looking into him?” Pete asked. “I can’t say I am.”

“He was bad news?” I asked.

Pete snorted, folding his arms. “That’s one way of putting it. A bit of an understatement, to be honest.”

“Why don’t you tell us what happened?” I prodded.

Pete didn’t respond at first. He looked the three of us up and down, as if trying to size us up, determining whether or not he could trust us. “Any particular reason you want to know? It’s pack business.”

“We’re part of the Gold Wolves,” Chris answered, cutting to the chase like he normally did.

Pete looked us up and down, one eyebrow raised. “Thought you guys retired.”

“So did we,” Chris retorted.

“Anyway, we’re looking into Reacher at the Wolf Council’s request,” I explained. “We found out he used to be the alpha here before he left suddenly. We were hoping to know the story about that.”

Pete didn’t say anything at first as he scrutinized us again, mulling over our words. For a moment, I thought he might refuse. After another moment, though, he gave a short nod.

“All right, but not here, if you don’t mind,” he said. “Why don’t you three come up to my office?”

He jerked his head toward the stairs, and we followed him in silence.

“Right,” Pete said once we entered the office. He closed the door. “So you want to know what happened?”

“Yes,” I said.

“It’s important,” Will added.

Pete nodded, chewing the inside of his cheek. I waited, not wanting to break his train of thought as he tried to figure out how to begin.

“It was a while ago, at least fifteen years, maybe even closer to twenty, so only us old-timers remember him. But he certainly sticks with you once you’ve met him.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” I muttered. Pete cracked a grin and nodded his agreement.

“You’ve met him, then,” Pete said. “Reacher was a strong alpha. He kept people in line. The problem was, the way he did that was basically by bullying everyone into listening to him. He was ruthless. And since no one wanted to get on the wrong side of him, everyone fell in line. People were afraid to cross him, so no one tried to fight against him or his cruelty.”

I raised an eyebrow, tilting my head. “But people clearly did fight against him. Otherwise, he would still be in charge of the pack.”

Pete gave a half-grin. “Yeah, well, he went too far, and a few of us decided to take matters into our own hands.”

“What did he do?” Chris asked.

“He tried to take over the nearest pack.”

The silence following Pete’s words was absolute. I didn’t need to look at Will and Trent’s faces to know that we all had identical expressions of shock. Being ruthless to the point of cruel was bad enough. Trying to take over another pack violated council laws.

“Yeah, that was about how I felt,” Pete remarked.

“He actually tried to take over?” I asked.

“He was planning a whole coup. Had people stationed in the other pack, ready to put things in motion the second Reacher said go. The only reason it didn’t happen was because a buddy of mine and I overheard a couple of his inner circle talking about it.”

“And I’m guessing your group wasn’t going to let him get away with that,” Will said.

“Hell, no,” Pete said, scowling at the memory. “So we rounded up a few guys willing to go after Reacher and his guys. There was a pretty nasty fight, but we managed to run them out of town. We warned the other pack what might happen, I became the new alpha here, and that was the end of it.”

“You haven’t seen him since?” I asked. “Or any of his group?”

The alpha gave a feral grin. “We made it known that if he ever showed his face here again, he wouldn’t make it back out alive. So, no, we haven’t seen him since. That was several years ago.” He gave us all a speculative look. “I’m guessing that, based on the fact that you’re asking around, he’s shown up somewhere else and is making trouble?”

“You can safely assume something along those lines,” I confirmed.

Pete frowned, something flickering in his gaze. I could tell that what I’d said bothered him, as if he understood the implications there.

“He was bad news on a lot of levels,” Pete said. “Ambitious, cruel, shrewd. Once, he threatened to kick out all the elders because he considered them useless. He didn’t, but his plans were usually along that level of cruelty. If he’s trying to start back up what he was doing...” He trailed off, looking at us questioningly.

“We’re still trying to get all the facts,” Will said.

“Fair enough. Regardless, I pity whatever pack he has his claws in now,” Pete said. “They’re in for a world of pain if he manages to get what he’s after.”

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“No, I’m serious,” Mira said, laughing. “Audrey actually told the dude that she would bite off his nose if he kept trying to stick it in our business. It was hilarious. You should have seen the look on his face.”

Rose cackled, throwing her head back. “You were a wild child, weren’t you?” she said to me, taking a sip of her drink. All around us, the bar hummed with life and conversation.

I gave a sardonic grin. “Something like that,” I admitted.

Mira had suggested the three of us go out on the town for a girls’ night. As fun as it was, my mind kept sliding away from the present to focus on other things. I couldn’t stop thinking about Jackson. The way it had felt when we’d been together. How incredible having sex with him had felt. Just thinking about it sent shivers down my spine and made my toes curl. It had taken all my strength to tell him that it shouldn’t happen again.

I wanted it to happen again. My wolf did, too. She loved being close to him, to his wolf. After all these years, she was still positive that he was her mate despite all evidence to the contrary. But having sex with him again was a mistake. I couldn’t shake the thought of what happened all those years ago, the fallout from it, the pain it had caused. I wasn’t going to let myself get hurt like that again.

Telling Jackson it couldn’t happen again had been more painful than I thought it would. What surprised me even more, though, was the fact that when he had agreed, I felt a deep pang of disappointment.

I couldn't blame anyone but myself for that one, though. I was the one who said we shouldn't, after all. It wasn't like I had been playing mind games or reverse psychology. The hurt and disappointment didn't make sense, but it was very much there. I couldn't be upset with him for respecting my wishes.

It wasn't just that, though. The casual way he had walked away from me afterward, almost the instant I told him it couldn't happen again. It was like he had gotten what he wanted and was ready to be off to the next thing. It had stung, and reminded me all too well of how he had rejected me all those years ago.

There was another aspect that I hadn't brought up to Jackson, mostly because I didn't want to even consider it. And that was Mira. It had been years since we had spoken, but that didn't change the fact that she was the closest friend I'd ever had, and Jackson was her brother. What on earth would she say if she found out we had slept together—once as teenagers, and now again as adults? There was a reason I never told her how I felt about Jackson back when we were younger. I didn't want her to feel like I'd betrayed her. How the hell could I tell her any of this without her being furious with me?

“Oh my God, do you remember that time Jackson and Declan ran through poison ivy?” Mira asked, her eyes bright with glee.

“Oh my God, yes !” I laughed, my mind returning to the bar. “They were covered everywhere. I don't think they shifted for a month—the one time they stripped to shift and go on a hunt, everyone started laughing because both of them had giant rashes.”

“Everywhere?” Rose asked, raising an eyebrow slyly to indicate precisely what she meant by that.

“Absolutely everywhere,” Mira confirmed. “I made fun of Jackson for a week. At

least until he threatened to hug me while he was still contagious.”

Rose snorted. “God, I can’t believe this is the first time I’m hearing of it. I could have lorded this over them for weeks.”

“Well, now you know, so lord away,” Mira said with a grin.

I had forgotten what it was like to have a friend like Mira. When I had been stuck in my old pack, I had gaslit myself and convinced myself that it hadn’t been that good a friendship. But being here again, it was impossible to think I had ever told myself that.

I had been so isolated in my old pack that I hadn’t realized just how much I had craved companionship of any kind. I’d kidded myself into thinking friends weren’t that important, that I didn’t need them.

I’d been wrong.

The rest of the evening flew by, and as the hours wore on, thoughts of Jackson came less and less frequently. I was able to relax and push those thoughts from my mind. With Mira, it felt like there had never been a ten-year gap in our friendship, and Rose fit right into the mix. How had I ever handled being isolated all those years? Why on earth had I settled for that? The questions swirled in the back of my mind, and I realized I didn’t have any good answers.

Hours later, after a couple more drinks, it was time to leave. I waved goodbye to Mira and Rose and headed down the road. I considered shifting to get home faster, but something about the evening made me want to walk as a human instead. The cool air brushed against my skin, carrying the fresh scent of the woods along with it. The moon and stars overhead gave some light, along with the dim, yellow glow of the streetlamps as I continued walking.

I hadn't gotten far when the hair on the back of my neck began to prickle. I slowed, glancing around as my wolf began to snarl, pacing internally and flexing her claws as she started sensing danger. My entire body went on alert, every muscle in my body tensing, coiled and ready to spring.

Something was wrong. Someone was nearby.

Slowly, I turned.

A man stood just a handful of steps behind me. How he had gotten there without making a sound, I didn't know, nor did I care. I was more preoccupied with the glazed, drunken look in his eyes as he studied me. He swayed slightly.

Something about him struck me as familiar. But it wasn't until he spoke that I finally recognized him.

"Still too good for me?" he slurred.

Hank. The man who had harassed me at the grocery store, who had only left when Jackson had intervened. Last time, it had been broad daylight, and I'd been only a street away from a bustling population. The man had crept me out, but there had been some level of safety during that encounter.

Now, we were on a deserted street, and it was nighttime with no one to witness anything.

I froze in place as panic gripped me. My chest tightened. My mind began to spin as my wolf snarled, bristling, ready to fight. But picking a fight with an angry drunk shifter seemed like the worst possible idea.

He took a step forward. Before he could get any closer, I turned and ran, shifting as I

did. Behind me, I could hear Hank shift as well and start giving chase.

I kept racing through the streets, but I was still unfamiliar with them, and it was easy for me to lose my bearings and make wrong turns. But it wasn't until I ran into an alley with a large brick wall at the end that I realized how much trouble I was in. I turned back around to see a wolf looming in the entrance of the alley, stalking toward me until my back pressed against the rough brick.

He had me cornered. I wasn't a fighter; I was almost the exact opposite. Despite this, I wasn't going to let him get anywhere near me without defending myself.

I snarled, swiping my paw out at him. I felt a savage satisfaction as my claws raked across his snout. He yowled in rage as he stumbled backward, blood pouring from the wound.

He snarled at me, eyes burning with rage, and stalked forward again. He lunged, preparing to strike.

A ferocious howl echoed from my left. Before I could even turn to see what was going on, a gray blur barreled into the wolf's side.

Jackson's wolf snarled, leaning over the other wolf, his paw pressing against his chest. He bent forward, his sharp teeth dangerously close to the prone wolf's throat.

I let out a soft growl, causing both wolves to look at me. I shook my head at Jackson. The asshole wasn't worth killing. Jackson's wolf looked at me reluctantly, his tail swishing in anger. I could tell he would love to tear out the guy's throat.

Eventually, he let out a reluctant grumble. He snapped at the air right above the wolf's jugular in a clear warning. Then he stepped back.

Hank's wolf scrambled to his feet and charged out of the alley, his tail between his legs.

Jackson stared after him long after he vanished, his fur bristling. He kept himself between me and where the attacker had run off.

I stared at Jackson, his gray fur glinting silver in the moonlight. He had come to protect me. He hadn't abandoned me. My chest tightened, and I wondered, truly for the first time, if he had changed more than I thought.

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I waited until I knew the creep wasn't going to come back. Once I was satisfied, I shifted back to human. When I turned, I saw Audrey had done the same. She was naked, her clothes torn to shreds when she'd shifted, but she looked all right. Still, I couldn't help the panic rippling through me as I worried whether she was hurt.

"Are you okay?" I asked. I scanned her up and down, taking note of every scratch and bruise I could find. She seemed okay, though. Perhaps a little shell-shocked.

"I'm fine," she said. "Are you?"

"Yes."

I couldn't stand it. Seeing her wasn't enough. I needed to touch her, to feel that she wasn't hurt. My hands went to her shoulders, fingers moving down her arms as I searched for injuries. She shivered at my touch, leaning into me instinctively.

Eventually, I was satisfied she wasn't hurt. I sighed, relieved that she was okay. Just the thought of her being injured was too much. I wanted to keep her safe always, to protect her from everything.

Unable to express any of that, no matter how hard I tried, I pulled her into a hug, holding her tight, breathing in her scent. She stiffened in surprise, but only for a moment before she leaned into me, nuzzling her head against my chest.

"I'm all right," she said, as if sensing my emotions. "He's gone. Nothing bad happened."

“It could have. I should go after him and tear him to shreds,” I snarled. I wished I had.

She rested her hand on my shoulder, dragging my attention back to her. “Don’t,” she said. “Please.”

Her pleading took me by surprise. Silently, I pulled her against me, resting my chin on her head. She leaned against me as I stroked her back.

After a moment, she stepped back. “I’m okay, Jackson,” she repeated.

I frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It isn’t like he did anything. All’s well that ends well.”

I glanced around, still making sure that the guy was gone for good. “That doesn’t mean it can’t disturb you, or that he can’t hurt you.”

“Really,” she said dismissively. “He was just a creep. That’s nowhere near the worst thing that’s happened to me.”

My head snapped around to her. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

She stiffened, her eyes widening as if she had said something she hadn’t meant to. “Oh, nothing,” she said, but without any conviction.

I let out a low snarl. “What are you keeping from me?”

Her jaw tightened. “It’s nothing you need to worry about,” she reassured me. Or, at least, she tried to. I didn’t buy it for a minute.

She must have picked up on that because she took a deep breath. “Can we not talk about this in the cold while we’re naked? I’d rather get home and change into some clothes I didn’t tear to shreds by shifting.”

“Oh,” I said. “Right.”

We shifted again and headed back. Once we did, Audrey dipped upstairs to her room, returning a few minutes later in sweatpants and a loose shirt. She somehow managed to make the baggy clothing look incredibly sexy. I pushed the thought from my head. I needed to focus on the more pressing matters.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

She nodded. “How did you know where I was, anyway?”

“It was late enough that I was starting to get worried about you. I came to find you and walk you home. I smelled your scent and the scent of that asshole and followed it,” I said. Then I gave her a knowing look. “You’re changing the subject, and you know it.”

Sighing, she closed her eyes and nodded. “I am,” she admitted.

“Out with it,” I growled.

She took a deep breath, tucking her hands in between her thighs as she looked down at the floor.

“Look, Reacher... wasn’t the nicest person,” she began.

I snorted. “Yeah, I kind of figured that out.”

She shook her head. “Look, please, just let me finish. Otherwise, I don’t think I’ll be able to say any of it.”

I stayed silent.

“And I’m not talking about what he just did to me,” she continued. “Which was bad enough. Plenty of verbal and mental abuse from both him and Dad. He was rough, too. The kind of guy that didn’t mind if he left bruises when he grabbed you. So you could guess he was an abusive asshole, but he would also challenge anyone who questioned him or his leadership to a fight to the death.” She swallowed hard. “He rigged the fights so he would always win. And if he got so much as a whiff of discontentment, he would arrange accidents for anyone he thought a threat to his rule.” She gave a half-smirk. “I don’t think he knows I know all that. I would overhear him talking to Dad. But he’s much, much worse than just being an abusive asshole.”

I stared, my mouth dropping open in shock as the words sank in. “He did all that?” I asked, my voice strained as I tried to hold back all my rage.

“Yeah,” she admitted. She opened her mouth as if she wanted to add something else, then hesitated. She closed her mouth. “Maybe it’s best if you just leave it be,” she advised. “Leave Reacher alone and move on.”

After everything she had just told me? There was no way in hell I was going to leave him alone.

She must have read the look in my eyes because she shook her head emphatically. “Don’t, Jackson,” she said. “Listen to me on this one and just leave him be. It’ll be safer for you and all of us.”

I frowned as I studied her. Something told me that she still wasn’t telling me the

whole truth, that she was keeping something from me. Except I knew that after everything she had just revealed, she was done telling me secrets for the evening. As much as I wanted to push, I didn't. Declan had been right when he said I needed to let her take the initiative.

I reached out and took her hands gently, holding them in mine and rubbing my thumbs against the back of her hand. Her eyes lingered on our hands before lifting to meet mine. A mix of emotions swam behind them, and I couldn't even begin to parse them out.

"I'm going to protect you and Claire," I promised her. "No matter what. I'm not going to let Reacher or your father come anywhere near you ever again."

She choked out a laugh as if we'd just shared a private joke. "You don't know you can do that," she said grimly.

"I swear," I said, squeezing her hands. "You're safe."

The Gold Wolves listened, their ears pricked, their attention locked on me as I relayed the information I had gleaned from Audrey the previous night. The more I spoke, the deeper their expressions of rage grew, their shoulders tensing more with each word.

"Anyway, that's everything she told me," I finished.

"So we're dealing with a massive asshole," Nolan said.

"I feel like that's a vast understatement," Trent mused.

“Not surprising, though. Seems like he learned how to handle discontents after getting kicked out of his first pack,” Chris commented.

“Yeah, I kinda wanna tear him a new one after hearing all that,” Will said, his arms folded. “Especially after meeting Audrey. No wonder she’s so timid all the time. Can’t blame her after ten years of that.”

My jaw worked, but I stayed quiet, trying not to think about the fact that I was partially responsible for her returning to that awful situation in the first place. All the more reason to go after Reacher. I needed to do right by her after all the wrongs I’d done.

“Unfortunately, that’s not going to be good enough for us to go in there,” Declan said. “Not only would Reacher just ignore her testimony and say she’s biased, the word of a former pack member isn’t going to cut it.”

“What about all the others?” I asked. “The ones who reported him and got us looking into it in the first place?”

“We need actual evidence,” Declan said.

Chris frowned, stroking his chin as he considered. “I’ve been keeping an eye on the Blood Moon pack,” he said. “Thanks to the video surveillance Will managed to put up when you guys were there.”

Will gave a bored, two-fingered salute. “Always happy to do anything tech-related,” he said.

“Anyway, I’ve been keeping an eye on the pack, and I’ve noticed some weird shipments coming in at odd hours.”

“Weird how?” I asked.

“Large, heavy, military-style boxes. The kind civilians aren’t supposed to get.” Chris pulled out a tablet, giving it a few brief taps as he walked over to Declan and held it out.

Leaning over, I watched the video feed he’d pulled up. Sure enough, a handful of shifters crossed the screen, carrying what appeared to be heavy boxes.

“I think they’re weapons,” Chris said.

“Any proof of that, or is it just a hunch?” Declan asked.

“Hunch, but a solid one. I used to do these kinds of false-shipment missions for the army before I joined the Gold Wolves. We would use crates like those.”

“Hmm.” Declan scrutinized the image, his head tilted. “Do we have any other feeds that show us a better view? Maybe one that can show us what’s inside.”

“If there were, I’d be showing that instead,” Chris said. “This is as good as we’ve got.”

Declan nodded grimly, resigned but clearly unsatisfied. “We need to find out more somehow. Whatever he’s planning, it doesn’t look good.”

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I couldn't remember the last time I had a lazy Saturday. When I lived in Rowen, I'd always have to run errands or do chores for Dad. Having the chance to kick my feet up and relax on the couch felt almost indulgent as I flipped through the channels on the TV.

"What are you watching?" Jackson asked. I craned my neck upward to see him hovering behind the couch, looking down at me.

"Not sure yet," I admitted. "Need something?"

Part of me expected him to tell me to go shopping or do laundry or something, the way Dad normally would. Well, the relaxation was nice while it lasted. I pushed myself to a seated position, not expecting what he said next.

"I was thinking it might be fun to go on a hunt," he suggested. "The three of us together."

Something about that made my stomach lurch, and my heart started pounding. It shouldn't have. It was just a hunt, after all. But the idea of the three of us—Jackson, me, and Claire—going on a hunt together felt right.

The other, more reasonable part of me argued otherwise. I was warming up to him too much. I was dropping my guard, and that was dangerous around Jackson. It gave him more chances to hurt me. The more activities we did like this, the more I was going to fall for him and forget what he was capable of.

And that wasn't the only reason going on a hunt could end in disaster. The more time

he spent with Claire, the more likely he was to find out the truth about her. That thought still terrified me to my core.

Or did it? As the thought crossed my mind, the dread and fear that typically accompanied it felt muted, muffled. It didn't instill panic the way it used to. Would it be that bad if he found out? Didn't he deserve to know? He had been good to us so far, and telling him would be better than him finding out on his own. Besides, Jackson wasn't stupid. He would discover the truth when given enough time.

I pushed the thought from my head. That was a problem to deal with on a different day. Not right now. I realized with a jolt that Jackson was staring at me, waiting for a response. How long had I been staring blankly at him like an idiot?

"I'm not sure," I hedged. "I don't know how much fun you would have. I haven't taught Claire much about hunting yet. We just haven't had the time. I'm worried that will slow you down, or she might scare away the prey."

I wasn't sure how he would respond, or what I was really expecting. But I didn't anticipate him perking up, something like excitement glinting in his eyes as he gave a warm grin that made him obnoxiously attractive. I had to keep myself from grabbing him by the shirt and pulling him to me.

"Well, she's got to learn sometime," he said, jerking me away from that train of thought. "I'd be happy to show her a thing or two."

"Really?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

He nodded. "Of course! Whenever we were on a mission for spec ops, I was the one who went on hunts for food since half the others couldn't catch a rabbit to save their lives. I'd love to teach someone else. It'd be a shame for all this massive talent to go to waste." He gave a roguish wink that made me smile despite myself. "Is that a yes?"

he asked.

“Yeah, all right. Let me make sure Claire is feeling up for it.”

It turned out she was more than feeling up for it. The instant I suggested it, she jumped to her feet, a giant grin on her face.

“He really offered to teach me?” she asked.

I nodded, unable to bite back the smile creeping up my face. Claire’s growing adoration of Jackson hadn’t escaped my notice. She looked up to him. Based on the way I’d seen him interact with her, it was hard to blame her. I might not be able to fully trust Jackson, but Claire did wholeheartedly. So I wasn’t surprised when she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet, asking a dozen questions about where we would go, what sort of things we would hunt (she wanted to go after a bear; I gave her an emphatic no), what skills Jackson might teach her. It was hard not to smile at it all.

A couple hours later, I padded alongside a small, gray-furred wolf cub. Claire glanced around, panting, her tail swishing in excitement. I couldn’t blame her. The appeal of going on a hunt had only grown for her since Jackson had suggested it. My wolf dug her claws into the soil, relishing the chance to run through the woods and be free for a while.

Jackson stood waiting for us at the edge of the forest. When I saw him and Claire next to each other, a jolt of panic raced through me. They looked practically identical, the shade of their fur almost an exact match. There was no way he wouldn’t be able to figure it out.

His wolf kept his eyes on me, something intense in his gaze. Not accusatory. Something closer to lust or want lingering there instead.

I waited for some sign of recognition about Claire, for him to shift to human right that second and demand an explanation. But all he did was jerk his head toward the woods and trot in that direction. Claire scurried forward, trying to walk next to him. I could tell how excited she was about her hunting lesson from how she held her head, the way it tilted toward any sound that could potentially be prey, and how all her muscles seemed coiled, ready to spring.

We came to a clearing. Jackson paused, glancing behind him at us. He gestured with his head, indicating that we would stop here. Claire came to a halt and sat on her haunches, all her attention locked on Jackson as she waited for her first lesson.

Jackson crouched, keeping low to the ground as he moved without making a single sound. He sat up and motioned to Claire with his tail.

Slowly, Claire tried to imitate him. I was surprised at how well she did. Her belly brushed the ground too much, causing a soft rustling as she moved across the grass, but she had the basic movement and paw positioning almost exactly correct.

My wolf swelled with pride as I watched her. I had never gotten the chance to hunt with her before. Dad had never let me, claiming that it wasn't a woman's place to hunt, even if I enjoyed doing it. He also said I was terrible at it, scaring all the prey from a mile away.

Watching my daughter, I wished I had ignored him. She was panting, giving a wide wolf grin as her tail moved back and forth, her eyes bright with the thrill. She loved it. On top of that, as I continued watching her, another thing became just as apparent: she was a natural.

Just like her father, I thought with another painful jolt, this one tinged with guilt. It wasn't just Jackson I was betraying by doing this; it was Claire, too. She'd never had a true father figure, one she could look up to. I'd wanted to protect her, to make sure

Jackson couldn't hurt her the way he had me. However, seeing him teach her these hunting techniques, gently adjusting her posture with his snout or a nudge of the paw, it seemed absurd that I had even thought that a possibility.

Does he know he's falling into that father-figure role right now? I wondered. Or is he just doing it naturally?

I didn't have a good answer, and before I could think any more of it, a rustling sounded at the edge of the clearing.

All three of us halted. Claire's head whipped around, her nose twitching as she caught the scent of the rabbit that had just wandered nearby. She glanced up at Jackson, who nodded, then jerked with his head, telling her to go for it.

Trying to imitate Jackson, she got low to the ground, moving silently. A loud crack sounded in the clearing when she stepped on a twig. She froze, her annoyance at herself clear in her posture. The rabbit paused, raising its head, its ears pricked, sensing danger.

Claire jumped. The rabbit tried to hop away, but it was too late. Claire grabbed the prey by the neck and bit down. The rabbit stilled.

Jackson let out a growl of approval, then shifted to human as Claire and I did the same. Claire looked in disbelief at her kill, then glanced back up at Jackson as he approached.

"I did it!" Claire shouted, throwing back her shoulders with pride, her eyes wide with surprise and delight.

Jackson laughed, his gray eyes sparkling in a way that made them look almost silver. The proud grin spreading across his face crinkled the edges of his eyes. He beamed

down at Claire, the fatherly pride there so apparent that I nearly rocked back on my feet.

“Great job!” he praised, holding out his hand to high-five her. “That was almost perfect. And on your first try, too! That’s amazing. It took me ages to catch my first rabbit. You’re an absolute natural!”

She made a face. “I broke a twig,” she grumbled.

Chuckling, Jackson ruffled her hair. “You’ll get better as time goes on,” he said. “And I’ll show you a few tricks to keep the sound under control. But for your first time, that was amazing. You should be proud of yourself.”

“I guess...” Claire said, trying and failing to sound modest. The triumphant grin on her face gave away how delighted she truly was. I failed to bite back a smile of my own. When had she grown up so fast?

“You know what you’ve gotta do now, don’t you?” Jackson asked, the grin turning almost mischievous. Claire’s brow furrowed, and she shook her head. Smirking, Jackson leaned forward. “You gotta dress it.”

“Ew!” Claire wrinkled her nose. “That’s disgusting.”

“It’s part of hunting,” Jackson explained, his tone so patient and fatherly that you could have believed he had been looking after Claire her whole life, not just the last two weeks. “It’s not too bad. Here, I’ll show you.”

I watched from the side as Jackson went through the process of dressing the rabbit, explaining the basic steps and why they had to do it. Claire listened with rapt attention, her eyes wide and solemn as she nodded along, following Jackson’s orders and asking questions. From how respectfully she looked at him and listened to him, I

hadn't realized how much Claire looked up to Jackson until now. Sometime in the short span since they had met, he had turned into an idol for her. And all of us spending time together this way, it felt right.

It was almost like...

Like we're a family, a voice in my head finished for me.

The thought struck me like a lightning bolt, slamming into me so hard that I nearly fell back. Because that really was how it felt, as though we were already a family. Like we had been doing this for years, not months.

And he still doesn't know the truth about Claire, a nagging voice in my head reminded me.

I closed my eyes. I couldn't keep it from him, not for much longer. Even if I hadn't noticed the closeness between the two of them, it was only a matter of time before Jackson came to the conclusion on his own—an infinitely worse situation than me telling him. They were too much alike. Claire looked too much like him and Mira, and their mannerisms were too similar. I was fairly certain he hadn't realized it yet only because he wasn't looking for it. But that flimsy barrier wouldn't last for much longer.

On top of that, he deserved to know. After seeing him with Claire, seeing the way he had helped her over the last few months and fallen into that fatherly role with her... he had put so much work into that relationship, even if he hadn't been sure how to handle it at first. He had been trying to do right by her—by us—ever since we moved here. I still didn't trust him, not entirely, not enough to open up to him fully. But despite a part of me telling myself I should continue keeping it a secret, I knew he deserved to know at least this bit.

Even with that certainty, though, a seed of fear planted itself in my stomach and began to bloom. How would he react to the fact that I had kept this from him for so long?

It didn't matter. Not telling him would be infinitely worse in the long run. Jackson wasn't an idiot. He would figure it out eventually. And if I wasn't the one to tell him, things would only go from bad to worse.

No, I needed to tell him. The only question was how, and when.

I waited until later that night, after Claire had gone to bed. I doubted it would take long for her to fall asleep, considering all the fun and excitement of the hunt. Still, I waited a good hour after she had gone upstairs to go over to the couch Jackson was lounging on.

The entire rest of the day after the hunt, I'd agonized over whether or not to do this. It had only gotten worse during the last hour, and I had probably flipped back and forth on the answer over a dozen times in that short period. Right now, I was on the "yes, you should tell him before this goes any further" train. So, steeling my nerves and preparing for the worst, knowing full well that he might kick me out after all this was over, I came to stand in front of him.

He glanced up from the book he was reading and raised an eyebrow. "What's up?" He sat up, putting the book upside down on his thigh to hold his place. "Want to watch a movie or something? I'm at a slow part of the book, so if there's something you're interested in—"

"Jackson," I cut in. Something in the tone of my voice must have set off alarms because he paused, frowning. He studied me for a long moment.

“What is it?” he asked.

Fuck, why were my hands trembling so much? I tucked them into my jacket so he couldn't see them. I tried to look into his face but couldn't, so I stared down at his shoes instead.

“There's something I need to tell you,” I managed to say. But that was as far as I could get.

After a long pause, Jackson asked, “Are you going to tell me what it is?”

I gave out a bizarre, choked laugh. “I'm trying to, trust me,” I said. “It's just...”

I trailed off again. God, this was even harder than I thought it would be. Panic had gripped my emotions and threatened to overwhelm me. I couldn't get the words out no matter how hard I tried.

Jackson's feet appeared in my vision. A moment later, a hand lightly took my chin and tilted my head upward so I was looking into Jackson's eyes. Slowly, tenderly, he brushed a strand of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. Shivers ran through my body from where his fingers had caressed my skin.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” he said. “It's not going to change how I feel about you. I promise.”

I gave another strangled laugh. “You say that now,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Try me.” His thumb stroked my cheek. I leaned into it unconsciously, taking solace in the gesture, steeling myself for what I feared would be the imminent explosion.

“It’s about Claire,” I finally said.

“What about her?” he asked.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, then forced myself to open them and look directly into his.

“She’s yours.”

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“She’s yours.”

At first, the words didn’t register. I frowned, blinking as I tried to figure out what she meant by “yours.” My what?

And then it hit me.

My jaw dropped, and I took a step back, my hand sliding away from Audrey’s face as I stared at her, trying to fully grasp what she had just said.

“Mine,” I repeated numbly. “As in, my kid?”

She gave the tiniest nod, her face strained with unease and panic.

“And I’m guessing you don’t mean in the metaphorical sense or because you and I are mated,” I said, my throat going dry.

She shook her head, her entire body rigid, every muscle tensed and coiled. Her eyes searched my face, trying to gauge my reaction.

My mind went back to that night eleven years ago. Eleven years. Claire was ten. God, how had I missed it? We had the same hair color, similar mannerisms. I had thought the matching hair color was a coincidence, and the mannerisms were there just because we had been spending time together. But no, Claire was my kid.

My kid. I had a kid.

I struggled to process it. It felt like I'd just been whacked on the side of the head with a sledgehammer. My mind seemed unable to fathom the idea.

My wolf was a different story. He growled in approval, his tail swishing. He seemed content. Happy, even. I had to wonder if he had always known, and was just waiting for me to figure it out on my own.

I stared at Audrey, who looked back at me with an anxious expression on her face, her arms wrapped around her stomach. She looked terrified. How long had it taken her to muster the courage to tell me? And how the hell had I not figured it out on my own?

Another memory struck home. Saul, Audrey's father. He had said I looked familiar. It hadn't been because we had run into each other while I was working on a mission or anything like that. It was because of Claire.

I ran my fingers through my hair to give my hands something to do as I continued to process the situation. Claire was my daughter. The bizarre thing was, she was the exact type of kid I would have wanted: smart, a good learner, a good hunter. She enjoyed games and had a bit of a goofy streak to her.

Then I thought about all the time I had lost, and what might have happened if I had known about her from the start. Frustration and annoyance rippled through me. All those precious things I had missed because Audrey had kept Claire a secret instead of coming back to my pack when she found out she was pregnant. Instead of letting me help, letting me meet my daughter and help raise her, she'd decided to return to an abusive home.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" I asked. I couldn't hide the flash of irritation in the words. "That's kind of a big thing, you know. Maybe I would have liked to have known that the first time I met her?"

Audrey winced. “I know, and I’m sorry,” she said. “I must have debated telling you a hundred times. There were so many times when...” She took a deep breath as she ran her fingers through her hair, looking off into the distance as she tried to find the right words. “But I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of how you might have treated her,” she finally said. And some of that old spark, that old fire I had fallen for all those years ago, flickered to life in her voice. “You left me once before.”

“You thought I would leave you because of Claire?” I asked.

“I didn’t care whether or not you left me,” she said. “But I didn’t want to introduce Claire to her father, only for him to turn around and reject her. Trust me, I know from experience what that feels like.”

Those last words slammed home in a way that nothing else did. I turned to look at Audrey. For a moment, we were both kids again. She had just wandered into my pack, looking for a new place to stay. I remembered asking her during one of the first times she came over to hang out with Mira what she was doing here. I’d asked her if her parents would be worried sick about her.

She had laughed and tossed her hair back over her shoulder, a defiant flame in her eyes. “There’s a reason I left, and it wasn’t because I was bored. They didn’t want me, so I don’t want them.”

She had sounded so strong then, so dismissive. But in later conversations, I could see how much the situation actually hurt her. She desperately wanted her parents to care about her. She knew the pain of not feeling wanted. She’d been forced to go back to it when she had Claire.

And look at her now. Over the last few days, I'd seen that old spark I'd fallen for reemerge, but years of rejection had taken their toll. It's no wonder she would want to protect her daughter from a similar fate.

Her father isn't the only one who rejected her, a voice in the back of my head sneered. You did, too. It's no wonder she would worry you hadn't changed. And besides, if you had been there for her all those years ago, if you hadn't decided going into the army was more important, none of this would have happened. You would have had ten years with your daughter.

I closed my eyes as I let those words wash over me, knowing there was a kernel of truth in them. I let that bitter truth quell the anger still building inside me. When the anger finally subsided, I took a deep breath and turned to look at her.

"Audrey, I'm so sorry," I said. "I'm sorry for what I did to you back then. But I was a stupid kid who didn't know how to express what I felt, and I was selfish, too. I didn't want to get tied down yet, and I was afraid that staying with you would do just that. I wish I could take it all back. I know I can't," I added quickly before she could interrupt. "But I wish I could. And I understand why you would wait to tell me about Claire."

She blinked, as if she couldn't believe what I was saying. Her lips parted slightly. "You're not mad?" she asked, sounding hesitant and more than a little surprised.

"That's complicated. Less angry and more hurt, maybe," I admitted. "Frustrated that I could have had ten years with my daughter that I'll never get to have back because of the way I treated you. But I understand. You didn't want to risk her getting hurt in any way."

She swallowed, eyes beginning to water. "I thought it was the right thing to do," she said. "Now I don't know. Maybe I should have told you sooner."

“Does she know?” I asked.

She shook her head. I hesitated, the question I was dying to ask pressing on my lips. Worrying about the answer wasn't going to change anything, though.

“Are you going to tell her?” I finally asked.

Biting her lip, she glanced away. “I've always told her that her dad went and joined the military after she was born, and we lost contact. That was the closest I could get to the truth with her. But I guess there's no hiding it anymore,” she said. “She'll find out sooner or later at this point. So, yes, I just have no idea how to explain that she's been living with her dad for the last couple of months, and I've been hiding it from her.”

She started pacing, running her fingers through her hair. “God, how do I tell her any of this? She's going to hate me and think I'm a terrible mother. I was just trying to protect her.”

I stepped forward again, hands cupping her face. A tear began trailing along the side of her nose, and I swiped it away with my thumb.

“If you think you made a mistake here, I can promise you that mine were ten times worse,” I said. “And I'm going to make it up to you. To both of you. I swear.”

I bent down, kissing first one cheek, and then the other, tasting the salt from her tears. My lips brushed gently across hers, lingering.

What started as a gentle, reassuring kiss turned deeper, more fervent. Her hands knotted into fists in my shirt as she pulled me closer to her. A primal snarl escaped my lips, and my hand went to the back of her head, holding her in place as my mouth claimed hers. She melted against me. The feel of her breasts pressing against my

chest made my cock twitch. I needed her.

Without asking, I lifted her up off her feet, keeping her against me. Her legs locked around my waist and I carried her to the bedroom. My mouth went to her neck, nibbling gently. The soft moan that escaped her and the way she leaned into it drove me and my wolf wild with hunger.

The instant we were inside, I kicked the door shut with my foot. Her fingers were tangled in my hair. I needed her, needed her in a way I had never experienced before. And this time, I wasn't going to let her get away.

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He slid me down his body until my feet touched the floor. His eyes burned with a hunger that heated my entire body, and a longing and need kindled beneath my stomach.

He didn't give me the chance to move or say anything. He pulled my shirt off with enough force that I heard a soft rip as he tore the fabric. I couldn't care less because his hands were already on me again, roaming and caressing every inch of me, every curve and contour, until it felt like it belonged to him.

He unclasped my bra, tossing it to the side. He eyed me with hunger as his hands went to my breasts. I let out a soft gasp, my back arching instinctively as his fingers closed around my nipples, sending pulses of need and lust radiating through me until they settled between my legs.

Without a word, he pushed me onto the bed, hovering over me as he undid my jeans. I could smell his musk, and his scent drove my wolf into a frenzy. I watched with growing longing as his own clothes fell to the floor. His cock sprung out, fully erect and he clambered on top of me, pinning me to the bed.

Smirking, his hand slipped between my thigh, his thumb brushing against my clit. I let out a soft moan, my back arching in response. My eyes fluttered closed for a moment, relishing the sensation as his thumb flicked back and forth, sending new spasms of need and longing jolting through me. When they opened again, Jackson was smirking down at me.

“You like that, babe?” he asked.

Before I could even nod, his mouth went to my neck, nibbling just above my collarbone. I gasped as shivers radiated through my body. I writhed beneath him, relishing the delectable sensation.

His mouth went to my ear, his warm breath caressing my neck. At the same time he nipped at my earlobe, his fingers thrust inside me, causing me to gasp in delight. Then his fingers began pumping rapidly in and out, his thumb pressing on my clit. He grinned as he saw the mindless expression spreading across my face. He took one nipple in his mouth and bit gently, sending radiating waves of longing through my body, adding to the growing lust and need for release for him that was blossoming inside me.

Each thrust of his hand fueled the fire, intensifying that craving. His fingers weren't enough. I needed more.

As if reading my mind, he extracted his fingers, though his thumb continued to rub my clit, the sensation and need becoming even more unbearable. I could feel my breath growing ragged. But it still wasn't enough. There was only one thing that would satisfy the burning need spreading through my body.

"Please," I begged.

"Please what?" he teased, his eyes sparkling with mischievous glee.

"You know what," I snarled.

He laughed. "There's that fire I've been missing," he said, his voice practically a purr. He leaned forward, his lips brushing against my ear. "I want you to say it," he ordered.

I shot him an irritated look that just made him grin wider. He pressed against my clit,

and my hips bucked. I groaned.

“Fuck me, please,” I said.

The instant the words were out, he thrust inside me. I screamed out as pleasure erupted, each thrust fanning the flames and sending me closer and closer to oblivion. I cried with each pump, my breath ragged as I went mindless with need.

The need for release and the blind ecstasy of him gliding in and out of me grew, moving toward a crescendo. I continued to squirm and writhe, so close to coming, the pressure inside me swelling until it was becoming nearly too much to handle.

I could tell I was close, each motion sending me closer to oblivion. I tried to hold on to it, to savor that feeling of being on the precipice for as long as possible.

One final pump from Jackson, and I shattered, screaming as waves of pleasure and release washed over me, drowning me. I rode the sensation for as long as possible, wanting it to last, not wanting to fall back into clarity and rejoin the real world.

Jackson kept pumping, his thrusts growing more rapid and fervent. His breaths grew ragged, and his mouth locked against mine again, sending new spasms of ecstasy rippling through me, my hips thrusting in time with his pumps as I held onto that bliss.

Just as my orgasm had begun to subside, he groaned, and I could feel him finish inside me as his cock throbbed.

His pumps slowed to a halt. He hovered above me, his cock still resting inside me as he brushed a strand of hair from my face. Gently, without a word, he bent down and kissed me, his lips barely brushing mine.

“How was that?” he asked as he slid out of me.

I nodded in answer, giving a small smile. But a spasm of guilt marred the moment. I still hadn't told him everything, and I suddenly felt like holding everything back had been a massive mistake, one I needed to fix. A kernel of dread nestled inside me, trying to protest. If Reacher found out...

I closed my eyes. If I trusted him enough to tell him about Claire, I might as well trust him with everything else.

“I need to tell you about Reacher,” I finally said.

He raised his eyebrows as he propped himself up on his elbows. I expected a quip of some sort, but he had a serious look in his eyes, giving me his full attention.

“You know something?” he asked.

I nodded. “Dad's his second, you know, and I worked for them. He's not a good guy, Jackson.”

“I know,” he started to reply but stopped when I shook my head.

“No, you don't.” I took a deep breath. “He's dangerous. And he's planning something.”

He shifted his position, staring at me long and hard. It felt like he was trying to read my mind. His head tilted. “You know what's going to happen, don't you?” He phrased it as a question, but the tone told me he already knew the answer.

There was no use lying. I had already committed.

I nodded. “Not all of it, but enough. I overheard things I wasn’t supposed to,” I finally said. “More than once. Mostly by accident, but still, a lot of things that they wouldn’t want other people knowing.”

He remained silent, continuing to stare at me with that piercing gaze. I realized he was giving me the option to continue speaking without interruption, as if he knew it would be easier for me to talk that way. The fact that he somehow understood that sent flutters of appreciation and affection through me. I pushed those feelings aside, determined to focus on what I needed to say.

“He’s stockpiling weapons,” I said. “I haven’t seen the shipments, but I’ve heard them talk about it. And he’s been talking to Dad about the Long Tail pack, assessing their weaknesses and how strong their alpha is. That sort of thing.” I took a deep breath as I ran my fingers through my hair. “I know that’s probably not helpful. I wish I had more information, but...” I trailed off, making an inarticulate gesture that didn’t convey anything.

Jackson shook his head. “No, this is important. It confirms a few suspicions we had.” He gave me a sheepish look. “I suppose this is the time to tell you that I’ve been looking into Reacher behind your back.”

I snorted. “By all means. He deserves it. I kind of assumed that’s why you were there in the first place, based on everything.”

“You did throw a wrench into the investigation,” he admitted. “But that was also my fault. We both know I can get a bit selfish and impulsive. Declan chewed me out for an hour for doing it.”

I gave a small smile. “Well, for what it’s worth, I’m glad it happened. I like it here a lot better than I ever did over there. Claire does, too.”

“I’m surprised they let you come here if they were worried you knew that much,” he mused. “You would think that they wouldn’t want to risk you telling anyone anything.”

I winced inwardly. I wanted to tell him about Reacher and Dad and their impromptu visits, except admitting that felt too dangerous. Jackson knew about Claire now, so they couldn’t threaten me with that any longer, but there were plenty of other ways they could punish me. Just telling Jackson this much felt like a massive risk. What would they do if they found out I told him they were still threatening me? Moreover, what would Jackson do if he found out? Would he throw me and Claire out for betraying him? Or would he go after Dad and Reacher even harder? The risk that it would backfire on me, either from Reacher’s end or Jackson’s, made me keep my mouth shut. I could tell him when I knew more.

“I think they wanted me to make sure you stayed in line,” I said, trying not to give too much away. “They figured they’d scared me enough that I wouldn’t talk.”

“Well, I’m glad you decided to after all,” he said.

“You’re not angry?”

He paused, considering. “I am,” he admitted. “What you’re telling me is the type of thing we’ve been looking into for weeks now. If you’d told me, we would’ve had a much bigger head start.” He took a deep breath, running his fingers through his hair as he looked at me. “At the same time, I understand why you didn’t.”

“I was afraid of what they would do,” I muttered. “They’ve...” I trailed off, not wanting to relive those moments.

Jackson seemed to guess what I was thinking before I could utter a word. “Those bruises on your wrists, I’d almost forgotten about them.”

I nodded, rubbing my forearms, feeling the phantom fingers lingering there. “That was usually as bad as they got physically with me,” I said. “Most of it was verbal and mental abuse, that sort of thing. Calling me stupid and worthless, controlling every aspect of my life.” I gave a half-laugh as I stared at the wall, unable to look at him for this next part. “You know, when I first came here, I had so much freedom that I had no idea what to do with myself. So much of my life was regulated that I wasn’t sure what I was allowed to do. It took me a while to get out of that mindset.”

Jackson let out a low rumble of anger. “Those assholes,” he growled. He pushed himself to a seated position, turning to look at me. “I’m going to make those assholes pay, Audrey. If it’s the last thing I do. I promise.”

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At breakfast the next morning, I was still wrapping my head around the fact that I had a kid. It felt surreal, like something out of a dream.

Which was why I felt totally unprepared when Claire wandered into the kitchen, her hair still a rat's nest from sleep. A couple of locks jutting out at weird angles were pretty adorable on a ten-year-old, though.

"Morning," she said around a yawn.

"Hey," I said, trying to keep my voice even. The more I looked at her, the more I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it sooner. We had the same nose, and the same eye shape. "Sleep all right?"

She nodded. Her eyes darted between Audrey and me as she blinked away the grogginess. A moment later, the exhaustion seemed to vanish, replaced by alertness, as if she sensed some sort of change. Her lips turned into the faintest frown.

"What happened?" she asked.

Shrewd kid. I'd be arrogant and say she probably got it from me, but I knew it was probably from Audrey. That, and I was too focused on how oddly nervous I was. It felt like I was meeting her for the first time.

I glanced at Audrey, silently communicating that it was her choice. I wanted Claire to know as quickly as possible, but I also knew that Audrey was the one who had raised her. She would know what was best for Claire.

Audrey looked at me, then at her daughter. That same nervous tension from the night before crackled around her as she bit the inside of her lip.

“Claire, sweetie, there’s something I—we—need to tell you.”

Claire frowned. She leaned against the wall, putting one foot on top of the other the way I used to as a kid. She glanced from her mother to me, her brow knitting the same way Audrey’s did when she was suspicious of something.

“What?” she finally asked.

“You know the little bit I’ve told you about your father?” she asked.

“You told me he went off to the military and was fighting monsters?” she asked. “It’s okay if it’s not true. I always kind of thought you were making it up to make me feel better.”

Honestly, I was surprised Audrey had painted me in that nice a light. I knew it was likely for Claire’s sake, but it was still better than I’d probably deserved.

Audrey bit her lip. “It’s closer to the truth than you think,” she said.

Claire’s brow furrowed as she frowned, her eyes narrowing. Now that I saw it, it was the exact same expression I’d given countless times. She waited in silence for her mother to finish, all her attention locked on Audrey, who took a deep breath.

“Sweetie... Jackson’s your father. Your biological one.”

Claire blinked in surprise. She turned to look at me, a wariness in her expression as she looked me up and down. I could tell she was trying to note the similarities between us, just as I had.

“Really?” she asked.

Audrey nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I just wasn’t sure how.”

She turned to me. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked. I couldn’t miss the hint of hurt in her voice. A pang of guilt jabbed through me.

“He didn’t know,” Audrey said. “He found out last night.”

“Oh.” She stared at me again, her expression unreadable. “So what now?”

“You don’t have to call me Dad or anything like that,” I assured her. “But I do want to get to know you better as your father. You’re a great kid, and fun to be around. I just want to spend time together.”

“Okay,” she said, though her voice was a little flat. It was clear she was still processing it.

“Is that all right?” I finally asked.

Claire didn’t respond at first. “I mean, I guess,” she finally muttered. She glanced at Audrey. “Can I go out for a bit?”

Audrey nodded. Claire gave me one last speculative look. Not distrusting, more curious. But she hurried out of the room. The front door opened and closed.

“That didn’t go as well as I had hoped,” I muttered.

“I think she just needs time to get used to it,” Audrey said. “If she’d been really mad, she would have yelled and screamed.” She gave an amused smirk. “She did inherit that old fire I used to have. This, I think, is more her getting over the initial shock. I

wouldn't worry too much about it."

I nodded, hoping that she was right. "I've got to go do some work in the home office."

I worked for about an hour, trying to go over some memos Rose had sent me but constantly thinking about Claire and hoping Audrey was right about her reaction. I could only wait and see.

Eventually, I heard the door open and close—probably Claire coming back inside. I expected her to go back upstairs and waited for the echo of footsteps climbing upward. Instead, the footsteps grew louder, coming closer to me. When they stopped, I knew they were right in the doorway of the office. Taking a deep breath, I swiveled around to see Claire staring at me.

A long pause followed.

"So, you're really my dad?" she asked.

I nodded. She looked me up and down. "I guess our hair is the same," she said.

"You also have my mom's ears," I said. "You're lucky you didn't get my father's. They stuck out like this." I held up my hands, cupping my ears to make them seem massive and as if they stuck out.

Claire giggled.

"I know it's a shock," I said when she'd stopped giggling. "Nothing has to change between us unless you want it to. Your mother just felt like it was time you knew."

"Nothing's going to change?" Claire asked.

“Not unless you want it to,” I repeated.

She nodded. “I like it here. Since you’re my dad, does that mean we can stay?”

“You can stay here for as long as you like,” I promised.

Claire stared at her feet, biting her lip as she shuffled. After a moment, she glanced back up. “Can you teach me some more hunting techniques?”

I let out a snort, both amused and relieved. If I’d had any remaining doubts about whether she was really my daughter, she’d just thrown all of those out the window.

“Yeah,” I said. “Anytime you want.”

“Now?” she asked hopefully.

Unable to hide my relieved and ecstatic grin, I stood and stretched. “I think I can spare some time,” I said. “Let’s get going.”

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I hummed to myself as I put away the groceries I had just grabbed from the store. I didn't even realize I was doing it until I stopped briefly, and the music halted. It caught me by surprise. I only ever hummed when I was happy, which meant I hadn't hummed in roughly ten years.

For whatever reason, the humming was what hit home more than anything else. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was actually happy. Optimistic, even. I felt like the woman I used to be back before I returned to Rowen.

And in more ways than one. Because I was doing the one thing I had promised myself I wouldn't do. I had fallen for Jackson again.

Despite trying not to, I hadn't been able to help it. The way he looked after Claire, who was now ecstatic that Jackson was her dad after getting over the initial shock. The way he constantly checked on me. The way he laughed when he riled me up. I couldn't stop thinking about him. And as much as I had tried to prevent it, I couldn't stop myself from imagining a life with him once again.

I hadn't told him any of this yet. I didn't know how to. And as much as he seemed like a different man now, I could never shake the memory of that night long ago, when I had run out after he rejected me. The thought of him doing it again... I didn't think I would be able to bear it a second time. I worried it would break me. Until I knew for certain his feelings for me, I would keep my own to myself.

A knock on the door pulled me from these thoughts. I placed the box of cereal in my hand down on the counter and walked through the hall. I opened the door.

Reacher and Dad stood on the other side.

I froze, my chest tightening in fright as I looked at them, the age-old reaction I'd always had around them. That didn't stop the fear from digging itself deep into me. What if they knew that I had told Jackson everything? What if they were going to hurt me?

I pushed those thoughts away. There was no way they could know that.

"You aren't going to say hello?" Dad sneered.

My jaw tightened. "Just cut to the chase. What do you want?"

"Information, of course." Reacher examined his nails before looking back at me, giving a feral grin. "I heard from some old contacts that your mate went and visited my old pack. I want to know what he was doing there."

"How the hell am I supposed to know that?" I asked, a bite to the words. I hated the way he said "mate," the subtle mocking in the word as if he found the whole thing amusing.

"You live with him, don't you?" Reacher asked. "We told you to get information on what he was doing, didn't we?"

"I don't know anything about it," I said.

Reacher snarled. "You really are worthless, aren't you? I didn't think you could be this incompetent. Guess I was wrong. You never cease to amaze me."

Something snapped inside me, and I realized I was done. I was done being afraid of these two, done listening to whatever they said, done living in constant fear of them. I

was my own person. I wasn't worthless like they had told me my entire life. And I was sick of them threatening me, the new life I had built here. I wasn't going to let them keep dictating my life anymore.

"He doesn't talk to me about that kind of thing," I said. "Besides, I didn't even know you had an old pack. What, did they kick you out?"

Rage sparked in Reacher's gaze as he stalked toward me. Expecting him to strike, I braced for the blow, but he refrained from physical violence. For now, at least.

"Watch it," he snarled. "Don't forget who you really work for."

I kept my gaze locked on his eyes. "I don't work for you," I said. "Not anymore."

He laughed. The sound was harsh, grating in my ears like claws on a chalkboard. Part of me, the part that had lived in fear of him for ten years, wanted to recoil and back away from him. I pushed those thoughts down and forced myself to keep his gaze, letting my wolf and her years of hatred and anger toward him fuel my strength.

When he saw I wasn't backing down, the mirthless laugh died, and the smirk on his face was replaced by a sneer. "All right, you've had your fun," he said, his tone patronizing. "You've made your point. You're a big, strong girl. Now tell me what I want to know."

"No," I said. "Now get out of here."

I made to close the door, but he shoved it open, knocking me backward as the door slammed into the wall. I stumbled back, deeper into the house.

"Are you so stupid that you've already forgotten our deal?" he snarled. He crossed the threshold, Dad following him. Reacher came until he stood right in front of me,

leering down at me. He leaned down, his face inches from mine, hot breath slamming into my face, his scent clogging my nostrils. “You help us, or he finds out all about Claire. And I’ll throw in the fact that you’ve been our little mole from the start for good measure.”

“Go ahead,” I taunted, raising an eyebrow. My wolf snarled, thrashing, wanting to break free, to take over and tear Reacher to shreds for all the hell he’d caused me over the years. The only thing keeping me back was my rational side, telling me that hurting him would only endanger Claire. “He already knows everything.”

Reacher’s eyes blazed with rage. He grabbed the front of my shirt and jerked me onto the tips of my toes. Terror washed over me. I knew I was stepping into dangerous territory. But all I wanted right now was for him to leave me and Claire and Jackson alone from now on. This was the best, most direct way to get that.

“He what?” he hissed.

“He knows,” I said, trying to sound braver than I felt. I gave Reacher a wild grin. “Have fun putting your plan into action with the Gold Wolves breathing down your neck. I wonder how long it’s going to take for them to come after you now. What do you think?”

“You bitch,” he hissed. He slammed me into the wall, still holding me by the shirt. “We told you not to tell anyone. You’re going to go against a direct order like that, you little snake?”

My heart pounded in terror and rage. Still, I kept my cool as I leveled my gaze at him.

“I’m done answering to you,” I said.

His lips curled into a snarl, his face inches from mine. “We’ll see about—”

“Mom?”

Ice ran through my veins as Claire’s panicked voice reached me. The air rushed from my lungs. Our heads turned in unison toward the front of the hall. Claire stood just inside the door, frozen in place as she gaped at the tableau in front of her. I could only imagine what it looked like to her: her old alpha pushing her mother against the wall while her grandfather looked on. Her gaze went from Dad, to me, to Reacher. Her eyes narrowed.

“Let my mom go,” she said. Her fingers lengthened to claws, and she showed her fangs.

“Claire, don’t,” I said. “Just run. Go get—”

I didn’t even have time to say ‘your father’ before everything went to hell.

“Get her,” Reacher ordered over my own words.

Dad lunged for Claire. Before she could fully shift or even take two steps toward the door, he had grabbed her and pinned her hands behind her back, holding her in place even as she screamed and fought.

“Don’t you hurt her—” I snarled.

I tried to push Reacher away and move toward Claire to get my father away from her. Reacher shoved me back against the wall. I glared at him, preparing to shift and shove him away. Before I could, as if he knew what I was about to do, he grabbed me by the throat.

“Don’t even think about it,” he growled.

I gagged as his claws dug into my flesh. I tried to pry his fingers away, but couldn't.

"Mom!" Claire screamed off to the side.

"If you kill me or her, you're done for," I managed to choke out.

"Oh, I'm not going to kill either of you." His grip on my neck tightened as he leaned forward. "I still have use for you," he hissed in my ear.

I could barely hear as dark spots poked at the edges of my vision.

"Mom," Claire said, the fear and desperation now evident in her voice. "Let me go!"

I glanced toward her to see her fighting her grandfather to no effect. Even if she had shifted, it would have taken only seconds for Dad to catch her.

"Hold her," Reacher ordered Dad, then turned back to me. "Now, you listen to me, you brat. The only reason I'm keeping you alive right now is because I want you to give the Gold Wolves a message. You tell that mate of yours that if he so much as thinks of coming after me, his daughter is dead. Do you understand?"

"Let her go. Please," I implored. My wolf howled in rage, wanting to fight back, to kill this asshole for so much as thinking about hurting my cub. But I knew that so much as shifting would only put Claire in more danger. I knew my father well enough to know he cared more about power than he did about hurting his own blood. "She doesn't have anything to do with this."

"Think of her as my insurance," Reacher growled, his grip tightening until I could barely breathe. He turned my head, forcing me to watch Dad drag Claire out of the house as she kicked and screamed, and I could do nothing about it, not without risking her getting hurt. "Remember to tell your husband when you wake up."

Then his fist slammed down on my temple, and everything went black.

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On my way home from work, I picked up some flowers and chocolates for Audrey and Claire. I wanted to do something nice for them. Everything seemed to be going well. After relaying Audrey's information to Declan, we had enough to mount a plan against Reacher, and Audrey and I were on the best terms we'd been on since meeting again. After months of stress and tension, it was a relief to feel like things had taken a turn for the better.

That good mood lasted for the span of the car ride home. The instant I got home and registered what I was seeing, it evaporated in an instant.

The front door was open.

I stopped, staring at it for a long moment. Then I ran, the flowers and chocolates I had brought forgotten in the car as I sprinted toward the house.

Stale, unpleasantly familiar scents hit me when I crossed the threshold. Reacher's and Saul's. They'd been here.

A low, angry growl began to resonate in my throat, rage and fear vying for dominance. If they had been here, that meant trouble. My mind raced with all the possibilities as to what they could have done, none of them pleasant.

"Audrey? Claire?" I yelled.

No answer.

That was when I saw the crumpled heap on the ground.

I raced forward, trying to hold in my panic. Audrey didn't move as I approached, my heart pounding. She'd been hurt. I hadn't been here, and she'd been hurt. Please let her be all right.

"Audrey? Audrey!" I bent down next to her, lifting her halfway in my arms. She was breathing. As I lifted her, her eyes fluttered open, and she let out a soft groan.

"Thank God." I finally breathed, some of the tension and panic leaving me.

She stirred, her hand going to her temple, where a large red mark was already darkening into a bruise.

"Jackson?" she muttered. "What...?"

"It's all right," I said, stroking her hair. "You're all right."

She pushed herself up until she leaned against the wall. "My head," she groaned.

I cupped her cheek. "Stay here," I said as I got to my feet. I raced to the kitchen. As I did, I kept an eye out for Claire, but there was no trace of her, or of any conflict outside of the front hall. Maybe she had gone over to a friend's after school or had stayed back for some reason. I could worry about calling her in a moment. Right now, I wanted to make sure Audrey was all right.

I pulled an ice pack from the freezer and hurried back to the hall. Crouching in front of Audrey, I put the pack gently to her head. She sucked in a breath and tried to flinch away.

"I know," I said, trying to sound soothing. "But this will keep the swelling down. Are you okay?"

“I think so,” she said, taking the pack from me. She shifted, pushing more of her back against the wall, and the light caught her neck. Dark lines of red and purple wrapped around her throat as if someone had been choking her.

A new surge of anger slammed into me like a tidal wave. Whoever did this to her was going to pay.

“What the hell happened?” I demanded.

Audrey closed her eyes, as if trying to remember. Then her eyes flew open, wide with terror. She reached for me, grabbing a fistful of my shirt.

“They have her,” she said, her voice quaking. “They took Claire.”

The words rang in my ears, sounding impossible.

“Who?” I snarled.

“Reacher. And Dad,” she said. Tears filled her eyes. “I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“It’s not,” I said, shaking my head.

She shook her head. “No, it is. When I first came here, they made me work for them. They wanted me to keep tabs on you and give them information to ensure you wouldn’t interfere with their plans. Today, they came by, and I told them I wasn’t going to do it anymore. Then Claire came home from school, and they... they...”

She trailed off, seemingly unable to finish, though from rage or fear, I couldn’t quite tell.

“They what?” I prodded her.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. When she looked at me again, the tears and fright were still there, but I could see an ice-cold rage beginning to form in her as well. In her eyes, in the way her shoulders stiffened, in the hard expression on her face.

“They told me to tell you that they would hurt Claire if you or any of the Gold Wolves tried to interfere with their plans,” she said.

Blind rage took over. They had kidnapped Claire and hurt Audrey. It was all I could do to stay rational enough to know that I had to come up with a plan before I stormed into their pack and tore out their throats.

“Don’t worry,” I said, my voice low and hard. “They’re going to pay for this. I swear.”

“What are you planning on doing?” she asked.

“What do you think?” I growled as I helped her to her feet. “I’m going to get our daughter back. There’s no way in hell I’m letting her stay in that pack, especially as a bargaining chip. Those assholes don’t know who they’re messing with if they think I’m going to let them get away with that bullshit.”

She stared at me, her expression unreadable. I half-expected her to tell me no, to tell me it was too risky. I wouldn’t have blamed her, not after everything she had been through. But letting Claire stay with Reacher and Saul and bowing to their will was infinitely worse on so many levels. And you don’t use kids as hostages. I was going to rescue Claire no matter what. Still, I prepared myself to argue my point.

Instead, she asked, “How certain are you that you can get her out safely?”

“Very,” I said. “And if I’m not able to, it’s because I’m dead. She’s coming back.”

Audrey took this in. I could see her shoulders quivering and the tremors in her hands—not out of fear, but pure rage. She glanced up at me, her jaw set.

“I’m coming with you,” she said.

I shook my head. “No, you’re not. It’s too dangerous for you.”

Her eyes flashed, that old spark from when we were kids fully reignited. She straightened her shoulders and met my gaze, seeming to tower over me despite being much shorter.

“I don’t care,” she said. “And I happen to know the town a hell of a lot better than you do. I’ll know the spots he’s most likely to keep Claire.”

“I can figure it out on my own,” I said. “But I’m not going to put you in danger. Stay here.”

“No way in hell.”

I stepped toward her, my hands going to her shoulders as I met her gaze. “I know you’re angry,” I said evenly. “And you have every right to be. But these guys already hurt you once. I’m not going to give them the chance to do it again.”

Her lips pursed, the rage in her eyes burning so bright that I could practically feel the flames.

“Those two kidnapped my daughter,” she said. “And all of this is my fault. I’m not staying back.”

“Audrey—”

“I’m going,” she nearly shouted. “And I swear, the only way you’re going to stop me is by knocking me out again, tying me up, and keeping a guard on me. And I’ll still fight every step of the way.”

I growled. Despite everything, I had to admire her determination. This was the Audrey I used to know. And I knew just by the look in her eyes that she was prepared to move heaven and earth to get Claire back, and I wasn’t going to be able to stop her.

Part of me wanted to try, anyway. I didn’t want her to go and put herself in danger. I cared about her too much. I wanted to find a way to keep her here, even if it meant locking her in her room. It was the same selfish bit of me that had thrown away a mission when she walked into Reacher’s office. That same selfishness that was half the reason we were in this mess in the first place. I wanted to protect her, to keep her safe. But in order to do that, I knew I would have to take away her free will again. And if I did that, she would never forgive me.

She deserved to make her own decisions. I couldn’t blame her for wanting to protect her daughter. I couldn’t take that away from her, no matter how badly I wanted to for my own selfish reasons. I couldn’t be self-centered this time. I had to let her do this.

The only thing I could do was help her and make sure she stayed safe.

“All right,” I conceded. “We’ll do this together.”

She blinked, taking a half-step back as if she hadn’t expected me to go along with it. “You mean it?” she asked.

When I nodded, she flung her arms around my neck, her head burying itself in my chest. I pulled her close, stroking her hair absent-mindedly as I breathed in her scent.

“Thank you,” she murmured. When she stepped back, her eyes burned with that old fire. “Let’s get going.”

She turned toward the door. I reached out and took her bicep. She turned to glare at me.

“If we’re doing this, we’re going to need help,” I pointed out. “If Reacher has half the weapons and men you think he does, we need more manpower than just the two of us.” I smirked as I pulled out my phone. “Thankfully, I happen to know a group of retired yet highly trained spec-ops shifters, and I happen to have their numbers on speed dial.”

It took all of five seconds for Declan to answer. “What’s up?” he said. “You find some more information?”

“Reacher took Claire,” I said.

“He what?” Declan demanded.

“He kidnapped Claire to use as a hostage,” I said, practically growling. “To make sure we stayed on our best behavior.”

I gave him a brief overview, trying to rein in my rage enough to stay coherent. Declan listened in silence, not speaking until I had finished.

“We’ll be there in ten,” Declan stated. I could hear him standing and moving around already. “Don’t worry. We’re going to get her back.”

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“So, let me get this straight,” Nolan said, looking between me and Jackson. “You’re Claire’s father? Seriously?”

“That’s the gist of it, pretty much,” Jackson said.

“In hindsight, probably should have seen it,” Trent muttered.

“I did,” Will said, leaning against the wall.

Everyone stared at him.

“What?” he said. “It was obvious.”

“And you were just going to keep that to yourself?” Jackson asked.

Shrugging, Will said, “Wasn’t my secret to tell.”

“Can we pause the ‘surprise, I’m a father’ conversation until after we’ve gotten Claire back?” Jackson growled. His fingers flexed, and he kept pacing back and forth, filled with pent-up energy from anger and nerves.

“We’re working on it, but we’re kind of at a disadvantage. We don’t even know where they’d be keeping her,” Declan said.

“I’ve got a good guess,” I said. When everyone glanced my way, I said, “Probably my dad’s house. That’s where we used to live. If they wanted her to behave, I doubt they would throw her in an unfamiliar environment. Especially since she’s a kid they

assume they can keep in line.”

“Can they keep her in line?” Declan asked.

My lip twitched upward. “Not as easily as they probably think. She was so well-behaved when we lived here because I made sure she followed the rules. I didn’t want her to get in the same type of trouble I did. But she’s a bit wilder than they think.”

“Can’t imagine where she gets that from,” Chris quipped.

Jackson shrugged.

“Anyway, based on the way they took her, I doubt she’s going to be as mild-mannered as they would like,” I said. Which could potentially be a problem. I didn’t want to think about them trying to knock down Claire’s spirit the same way they had mine.

“Still, Saul’s place makes about as much sense as anywhere else,” Jackson noted. “It’s worth a shot.”

“It’s a good place to start at least,” I said. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll figure out somewhere else.”

“We’re wasting time,” Jackson growled. “Let’s get going.”

We clambered into two cars and sped down the winding roads to leave the mountain. I sat squished in the back middle seat, my foot tapping irritably as I kept counting down the minutes to get to Rowen. Part of me wished we had been able to run there. It was slower than by car, but the sensation of racing through the woods made it feel faster. Instead, I was forced to sit and wait, my rage at what had happened to Claire growing stronger every second.

Jackson's hand went to my thigh. He gave a gentle squeeze.

"We're going to get her back," he promised me.

I didn't answer, just leaned against him, trying to take some of his strength.

After what felt like an eternity, we pulled to a stop a little ways outside of Rowen. Clambering out, the familiar scents of my old pack washed over me. They were just over the ridge.

We moved through the woods, trying to catch a fresh trail of either Claire or Reacher. Knowing Reacher, he wouldn't take her directly into town. Too many people knew her and would wonder what she was doing there. They'd likely snuck her in from somewhere around where we had parked.

It took some time to find Reacher's scent just outside of town. My stomach lurched when I smelled Claire and Dad mixed with it.

The Gold Wolves noticed the scents as well. Each of them stiffened, their nostrils flaring.

"Let's go," Jackson said, pushing to the lead. I followed right behind him.

For a moment, I harbored a hope that we could resolve this quickly, that we would find them all and be able to take them in a flash. That hope was dashed after five minutes, when we came to a halt.

"Reacher's and Claire's scents diverge here," Declan said.

"Shit," Chris grumbled.

“They’re trying to split us up,” Will said.

“Reacher is the priority,” Declan said. “If we get him, we’ll be able to get Claire.”

“Screw that,” I scoffed. “You don’t know them. We need to get Claire out of there as quickly as possible. You can handle Reacher after she’s out of harm’s way.”

“Audrey—” Declan began.

“We’re wasting time,” Jackson interrupted with a growl. “You guys go after Reacher. Audrey and I will go after Claire.”

A rush of gratitude flooded through me at his words, and I let out a slow exhale. Declan looked as though he wanted to argue, but one look at me and Jackson told him how pointless that would be. His jaw set as he gave us a short, curt nod.

“Once you get here, take Claire to the cars. We’ll rendezvous later,” he said. “Good luck.”

I barely heard those last words because I was already racing through the woods toward my daughter and my old home. I heard snapping branches and crunching leaves behind me as Jackson followed.

Tracking Claire’s scent took us the exact route I had expected. It seemed to take no time at all before we stood in front of my old house, the location of so many of my unpleasant memories. Part of me recoiled, wanting to run away. But the other furious part of me wasn’t about to let that happen, and neither was my wolf.

I almost didn’t wait for Jackson as I charged up the front steps, grabbed the spare key from beneath a nearby rock, and flung open the door. I could smell both Dad and Claire, and I heard movement coming from the kitchen. I raced over.

Claire sat at the kitchen table, staring stony-faced ahead of her. Across the room, leaning against the counter, my dad stood, arms folded as he watched her. Both of them turned to look at the door as I appeared. Claire's face broke into a relieved grin. Dad's contorted into an even deeper scowl.

"Mom!" Claire tried to run toward me, but Dad reached her first and grabbed her by the shoulder, holding her back. She rounded on him and snarled, showing teeth. "Let me go," she snapped.

Seeing our cub fight back gave my wolf a savage pride.

"Shut up and listen to your elders," Dad barked at her as she glowered at him.

"Give me my daughter," I hissed.

"She's my blood, too," Dad responded in an almost mocking tone that made me want to tear out his throat. "I'm within my right to make sure she stays safe."

"By locking her in the house?" I growled.

He shrugged, still digging his fingers into Claire's shoulder as she tried to get out of his grip. "She was being obstinate. Like mother, like daughter, I suppose."

"If you don't give me my daughter back, I don't care if you're my father," I said. "I will tear you to shreds."

"No, you won't," he drawled.

My eyes narrowed. "I'm going to give you one last warning, Dad."

"Here's the offer," Dad said. "You can get Claire back if you, your mate, and the rest

of the Gold Wolves leave now and forget everything you know about Reacher and our plans. You make your report back to the council that everything is fine and there's nothing to worry about. Then, everyone's happy."

"Here's our counteroffer," I said. "You give me my daughter and go to jail."

"Not a particularly appealing offer," Dad mused.

My fingers lengthened to claws as I kept my gaze locked on him. He started laughing. "You don't have the guts," he spat.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," I said.

He barked out a laugh, a mocking, derisive one that sent new rage coursing through me. "Is that so?" he jeered. "Prove it."

Jackson tried to step forward, but I growled a warning at him. This was my fight. I wasn't going to let Jackson fight this one. I had to do it myself.

Before my dad could react, I jumped forward, shifting in midair. Claire darted out of the way, running toward Jackson. Dad, however, gaped at me in disbelief, as if unable to believe that I would ever do anything this rash. He shifted just in time to avoid me clawing his face to ribbons. His paws lashed out, knocking me out of the air and slamming me into the table. It toppled onto its side with a loud crash.

Dad came to stand over me, growling, his eyes gloating as if he still assumed he would win, that I would cave and submit like I normally did. I growled back at him. That wasn't who I was anymore.

My claws raked across his belly, and he yowled. Before he could stagger backward or react, I jumped up, my jaws snapping at his throat. He managed to recoil at the last

minute, and my teeth clamped around fur.

Growling, his claws raked across my muzzle, drawing blood. I sensed Jackson taking a step forward when I yowled, but I snarled back at him, and he stayed next to Claire. Dad tried to make another move while I was distracted, but I darted out of the way just in time.

He barreled into me, knocking me off my feet. His jaws clamped around the scruff of my neck, and he bit down. Snarling at the pain, I shook him off, sending him to the side. I panted heavily, feeling my injuries but refusing to back down. He wasn't going to get away with what he had done to Claire.

Thinking about her again sent new energy rushing through me. Howling, I jumped, this time landing on his back. My claws raked between his shoulders as my wolf and her protective instincts took over. She wanted him to feel the pain he had caused her by taking Claire and threatening her. I let her channel that rage, let out the years of pent-up terror and anger.

He dropped to the ground and rolled, shoving me off him. The instant we were back up, he lunged toward me, his claws outstretched.

I dashed to the side, avoiding the swipe. My back claws kicked out, slamming into his side and shoving him across the room. He slammed into the counter and crumpled to the ground. I rounded on him, waiting to see if he would get up and come after me again.

I looked down at his crumpled form with disdain and anger. All my life, I had never expected to stand up to my father this way. Now that I had, I couldn't believe I had let him bully me my entire life. He had constantly put me down, called me weak and worthless. But in the end, he was the one who lay on the ground, whimpering. I should never have listened to a word he said.

I would have felt more triumphant had I not been filled with so much rage for all the pain he had caused me and Claire. Instead, all I felt was a grim determination.

Slowly, my father rose to his feet. His fur matted with blood, his breathing heavy from the injuries, Dad growled at me, baring his fangs. I snapped, lunging forward, and a savage satisfaction washed over me as he recoiled. I swiped at him again. He staggered back again, then raced out of the room.

I listened, waiting to hear if he was truly leaving. The instant I heard the front door slam against the wall as it opened, I finally relaxed, turning to face my daughter. Panting, I hurried over to Claire and licked her cheek, making sure she was all right. She giggled at the sensation. Relieved, I shifted back to human and pulled her close.

“Are you okay?” I asked, stroking her hair, wanting to keep touching her, to prove to myself that this was real, that she really was okay.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Claire said.

I hugged her again. I could have stayed like that forever, but a gentle tap on my shoulder reminded me that we were nowhere near done.

I straightened, taking a deep breath.

“You two need to get going,” Jackson said, ushering us into the living room and motioning toward the open door Dad had escaped through. “I want you to run to the car and drive home as fast as you can. Don’t look back.”

“What about you?” I asked. “If you think I’m letting you stick around for Reacher to find you on your own, you’re wrong.”

“I’m going to find the Gold Wolves,” he said. “When I meet up with them, we’ll be

able to finish the rest of this off once and for all. Claire needs to get out of town, and she can't go alone. And I don't want you staying here in case Reacher finds some way of making you the bait."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," a sickeningly familiar voice said.

My stomach clenched with dread as I spun around to see Reacher leaning against the doorframe, two shifters flanking him. With a smug smirk, he sauntered inside, more of his goons filing in after him, some already massive wolves. Before any of us could do anything, three of them broke rank and headed straight toward me and Claire, cutting us off from Jackson. I gripped Claire's shoulder as the wolves closed around us. My back hit the wall, and I realized too late that we'd been cornered.

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I stared, rage paralyzing me as the wolves blocked Audrey and Claire. I hadn't even had the chance to get to them before I had my own circle of shifters surrounding me.

Reacher strutted behind them, hands stuffed in his pockets as he gave a lazy, triumphant smirk, looking like he had won the lottery.

I snarled, my fingers lengthening to claws and teeth sharpening to fangs. I was going to enjoy tearing each and every one of these people to shreds.

“You do so much as swipe a paw at one of my men, and those two are done for,” Reacher said. There was no threat or bravado in his voice, just pure fact, as if he were discussing the weather. Something about that made everything even worse.

“If you hurt them—” I growl.

“Whether or not they get hurt is up to you,” Reacher said. “Now, are you going to keep this up, or stop and listen?”

My jaw clenched. I wanted to jump over the circle and kill him once and for all, but I knew I couldn't, not without risking Audrey and Claire. I exhaled hard, listening to my wolf snarl and beg to be let out to tear Reacher to shreds for even daring to threaten my mate and daughter. I forced my claws and fangs to change to human fingers and teeth.

Reacher nodded his approval. “Now that we're all cozy, why don't we have a little chat?” Reacher said. He glanced around. “Where's Saul?”

“Ran off,” I answered.

He tutted. “Pity. I always liked him.”

“He’s not dead,” I said.

Reacher flapped his hand dismissively. “He is to me. If he gets his ass handed to him, then he isn’t useful to me anymore. But that’s beside the point.” He folded his arms as he stood in front of me.

“The second trail. I’m guessing that was a trap?” I said.

“Not so much a trap as a decoy,” Reacher said. “Though, I have to admit, I had my doubts that the infamous Golden Wolves would fall for it. I guess I overestimated you. Still, it’s fortunate for me. I wanted to talk to you alone.”

“And why’s that?” I asked.

“I figured that since you and I have struck a bargain once before, why not do it again?” He spread his hands in a magnanimous gesture as his grin grew wide. “And I didn’t want the rest of your team trying to interfere and give you bad advice, so here we are. I knew you would choose to come get your daughter over following my scent. Though, I have to admit, Audrey coming along was an unexpected boon. You really did grow a wild streak since leaving, didn’t you?” He turned to Audrey as he said this last part, his tone almost mocking. “Not to worry, we’ll fix that soon enough.”

“You’re acting like she’s staying with you,” I said. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting that happen.”

“Ah, and we finally come back to the point I was trying to get to this whole time,” Reacher said patronizingly. “I knew we’d get there eventually.”

“Do you ever shut up, or do you like hearing the sound of your own voice that much?”

Reacher chuckled humorlessly. “You should be nicer to me, you know.”

“Or what? You’ll sic one of your goons on me?” I asked, gesturing at the wolves surrounding me.

“Not on you.” He flicked his wrist, and a loud snarl came from one of the wolves trapping Audrey and Claire. They lunged forward, nipping at Audrey’s heel. “Next time, it won’t be a warning,” he said, his eyes cold, his voice flat and emotionless.

My jaw worked as I tried to fight back the rage threatening to burst out. My wolf snarled, flexing his claws, bristling at the mere thought that this shifter was threatening his mate and cub. It took all my effort not to tear into him right then and there. The only thing holding me back was the fact that I couldn’t risk Audrey and Claire getting hurt.

“Now, are you going to listen to my offer, or are you going to keep blustering and threatening me?” Reacher asked.

My hands curled into fists. I glanced over at Audrey. She shook her head. I turned back to Reacher.

“What’s your offer?” I asked.

He grinned, showing a row of fangs. “Good man. I knew you’d see sense. Here it is: you walk away and forget all of this ever happened. And all three of you will live.”

I laughed. “You seriously think I believe you would let all three of us just walk away?”

“No, no. Not them. Just you. You walk away right now and stop interfering in our plans. Your mate and that bastard daughter of yours—”

“Watch it,” Audrey snarled, earning her a growl from one of her guards.

“—stay here as an insurance package,” Reacher continued as if she hadn’t said anything. “So long as you and the rest of the Gold Wolves behave yourselves, they’ll be safe and sound.”

Rage bristled through me, but I forced myself to keep calm as I glared at him. “You’re saying that my options are either to walk away and leave my mate and daughter with you, or all three of us die?”

“That is the gist of it, yes,” Reacher said coolly.

“I’m not letting them stay here,” I growled. “You have to be crazy to think I would even entertain something as ridiculous as that.”

Chortling, Reacher shook his head as if lecturing a child. “It isn’t as though I’m giving you a choice here, Jackson.”

Audrey growled. A second later, she had turned into a wolf and was swiping at her nearest guard. Claire followed suit, shifting into a tiny, snarling cub. She refused to stay behind Audrey and moved to stand right beside her.

The wolves trapping them started to move closer. Just as they were about to lunge, all hell broke loose.

Furious yowls and howling came from outside the still-open door. Reacher rounded, as did all the other wolves. I couldn’t see his face, but I could perfectly imagine his eyes widening as five massive shifters stormed into the house before he could do

anything about it.

The Gold Wolves had arrived.

They fanned out, Will and Nolan heading toward Audrey, the others toward the larger group. At the same time, I jumped, shifting in mid-air as I headed straight toward Reacher. We were outnumbered, but that didn't mean we were going to go down easy.

Reacher turned and saw me jumping toward him. A second before I reached him, he shifted, turning into a massive brown wolf. I slammed onto his back. My claws dragged downward, trying to tear into him. Growling, he shook me off before I could scratch him, forcing me to move awkwardly to avoid collapsing onto my side. My claws raked across half his face, gouging just above his eyes.

He staggered backward, but only for a moment. The moment I took a step toward him, preparing to land a more severe blow, he moved to the side, rounding and swiping at my ribs. The sharp claws scratched across my flank, drawing blood and sending fur flying. I stumbled, nearly letting him charge me a second time before I righted myself and dodged out of the way with only a split second to spare. I pounced, landing on his back once again, or almost. My paws landed on his rump, and he wriggled out from underneath me.

Before I could gain my footing, he was already lunging toward me, his jaws snapping at my snout. His amber eyes were filled with a primal rage as he tried to bite down. I ducked beneath him, trying to swipe his throat but barely missing.

I moved away from him as he lunged again, but only barely. He was faster than he appeared. My chest heaved as I panted. I couldn't back down, though. I darted forward. I managed to dig my teeth into his flank, but he knocked me off. As he did, he barreled into my side, knocking me off my feet.

He slammed me onto the ground. A moment later, his teeth sank into my shoulder. I yowled as searing pain raced through me, so painful that it made it difficult to think for a moment.

As he bit down, his claws dragged across my back. I yelped in pain. Reacher, unlike Saul, lived up to his cruelty and could back it up with fighting skill and power. I needed to find a way to get the upper hand.

As I struggled to come up with a way to beat him, an idea struck. Risky, but one that might work. I let my muscles go limp, acting as if I was too weak to keep going. Reacher's triumphant snarl overhead told me he fell for the ruse. He released me, clearly preparing to go for the killing blow.

Before he could do anything, I spun around so I was on my back. My claws drew down Reacher's belly, raking through the flesh. He yowled in pain, staggering backward. He glowered at me, his chest heaving as he panted in pain. He made to move toward me again, but this time, I was ready. The second he moved, I dashed to the side, biting into his neck. Before he could shake me off, I forced him to the ground on his back. He tried to rake my stomach the way I had him, snarling, his face twisted in rage. He managed to drag his claws across my snout before I managed to pin him down fully.

Reacher struggled, yowling and spitting, but it was too late. My jaws clamped around his throat and crunched down. He twitched once, then stilled.

I stayed that way for a long moment, mouth around his neck as I waited to make sure he wouldn't move again. Finally, satisfied, I let go. His head flopped to the ground with a heavy thud.

Sounds of the fight flooded back to me—yelps of pain and alarm, and the scurry of claws scraping against wooden floors as several of the wolves charged back outside.

With their leader dead, none of Reacher's supposed loyalists seemed particularly keen to fight anymore. Within moments of killing Reacher, the only people in the house were the Gold Wolves, Audrey, and Claire.

Audrey and Claire.

My head whipped around to where I had seen them last, and I relaxed, tail swishing. There they were: a large wolf and a much smaller wolf. The tiny wolf was no longer next to Audrey, though. Instead, she was growling, fur bristling as she glared at the door, clearly expecting them to make a return. It wasn't until the larger wolf gave the cub a reassuring lick across the forehead that she stopped.

Claire looked up at Audrey, then back at the door. She gave a low sound that might have been a growl or a whimper, then shifted back. Audrey followed suit a moment later. She pulled Claire close, holding her tight. Her eyes scanned the destroyed living room, broken furniture scattered everywhere, one window shattered, her old alpha dead in the center of it all. She sucked in a breath as she took it all in. Then her eyes landed on me. Relief flooded her eyes as she saw I was still breathing, but I doubted it was anything compared to my own as I saw her standing strong, a handful of thin, shallow scratches and scuff marks the worst of her injuries.

I shifted back and walked over to her. "Are you all right?" she asked, looking me up and down. Her eyes landed on the teeth marks in my shoulder. "Oh, God," she muttered.

"It looks worse than it actually is," I said.

She shot me a disbelieving look.

"Okay, it's pretty bad," I conceded. "But I'll be fine."

“That’s what I’m here for,” Trent said, giving a mock salute as he approached, a bag fitted to be worn as a wolf in his hand. “Best medic in the squad.”

Neither Audrey nor I said anything while he stitched me up and then looked over Audrey and Claire, both of whom had minimal injuries. The second he was finished, he made himself scarce, moving to another room, clearly assuming we would want some alone time. Claire hurried off with him, probably guessing the same thing.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” Audrey said. “Thank you for helping. I’m sorry you got hurt.”

“There was no way in hell I was going to let him take you from me,” I said. “You or Claire. I made the mistake of letting you go once already.”

She gave me a hesitant look. I took a deep breath and cupped her chin. My thumb stroked her cheek as she leaned into the touch.

“Audrey, I would move heaven and earth to keep you safe,” I said. “I love you. I always have. Since before you came to my house that night when we were kids, since the moment I met you. And I am so, so sorry for everything that I put you through.”

“I know,” she said. “And it’s okay. It’s all in the past, everything’s forgiven. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Yes, I do. If I could take it all back, I would.”

“I wouldn’t,” she said.

The words took me by surprise, and I blinked. She smiled up at me, her own hand resting against my cheek.

“Everything that happened, even when we were kids, led me right here, to you and Claire. And in the end, that’s all I really care about. I love you, too, Jackson.”

I broke into what had to look like a wild, moronic grin. Not wanting to wait another moment, I tugged her toward me and pulled her into a kiss. She leaned into the embrace, her arms wrapping around my neck.

After a moment, we pulled away to see all the Gold Wolves staring at us with smug, knowing expressions.

“It’s about time,” Nolan said to Claire.

“No kidding,” Claire fired back with her own broad grin. “I’ve been waiting for ages.”

“Watch it,” Audrey said, though without any actual malice.

I laughed, kissing Audrey on the forehead as I wrapped my arm around her.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:42 am

For the first time since I'd arrived here, Jackson's house actually felt cramped. Slightly. And that was only because all of the Gold Wolves, myself, Mira, a baby, and two kids were all crammed into the living room despite ample other space. Cheerful music blared through the stereo system as we all relaxed.

"Oh, I wanted to give you an update on Rowen," Chris said.

Nolan groaned, throwing his head back. "This is supposed to be a party," he complained. "Do you have to bring up work?" When both Chris and Will shot him an annoyed look, he shook his head in exasperation. "All right, fine."

"What happened?" I asked, my eyes glancing over to Dani and Claire off in the corner. They were building something or another, both of them wearing identical expressions of joy on their faces. It had taken all of two minutes for the two of them to become fast friends.

"There's no sign of your dad anywhere," Chris said to me. "The Blood Moons kicked him and the rest of Reacher's cronies out of the pack. They just put a new alpha in charge, some guy named Jamie."

"I don't know him," I said.

"Well, the important thing is he's a council loyalist. He's got strong ties with them."

I didn't say anything at first, staring out the window in contemplation instead. On one hand, I should be grateful. Relieved, even. Reacher was gone, and I never had to worry about him again. But my father was still out there, and I wasn't entirely sure

how I felt about that. A tiny part of me worried that he might come after me, or worse, Claire. The thought alone was enough to send shivers up my spine.

Jackson seemed to notice because he wrapped his arm around me, pulling me against him in a side hug. “He’s not going to come anywhere near here,” he muttered to me, his thumb stroking my shoulder. “And if he does, we’ll be ready for him.”

“Him being out there scares me less than I thought it would,” I admitted. “It still makes me nervous, but not in the way I expected. More like I just want to keep my people safe.”

He chuckled, eyes sparkling. “And that alone should be enough to terrify your father. Your anger and protectiveness are one of the scariest combinations I have ever encountered.”

I shot him an annoyed look as he gave me a wide, playful smirk and winked. “You better watch yourself, or I’ll show you annoyed,” I shot back.

This time, his laugh came out full-throated, delighted, and utterly genuine. “There’s that fire I know and love,” he said, pulling me onto his lap. He kissed me on the cheek. “It’s good to have you back,” he muttered in my ear.

Smiling, I leaned over to his own ear. “Thanks for bringing me back in the first place,” I whispered.

He shook his head. “You did that all on your own,” he said, reaching up and brushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

The rest of the party blended together, people moving around and chatting, the girls running around. I relaxed, enjoying the relief I felt now that everything was done. It wasn’t until my conversation with Mira that I started growing nervous again.

“We haven’t talked about the elephant in the room yet, you know,” Mira said. She sat next to me on the couch and pulled Alex onto her thighs.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “Yeah, I know.”

“So. You and Jackson. Even all those years ago?” Mira raised her eyebrows.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Yeah,” I said. I ran my fingers through my hair as I forced myself to look at her. “I’m so sorry, Mira. I should have said something. I should have told you when we were teenagers as soon as I thought he might be my mate. But I didn’t know what you would say or how you would take it, and I was so afraid of losing you as a friend.”

Mira nodded, bouncing Alex up and down on her knee as she considered her next words. “I wish you had told me,” she said. “Because we are supposed to be friends. But I also understand why you didn’t. I get also why you didn’t tell me about Claire, and it’s obvious how much Jackson cares about you. I want both of you to be happy, and if you two together is what that entails, then I’m not going to stop you.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m glad you understand. You’re an amazing friend, Mira.”

“I am, but you’re not fully out of the woods yet. Do you know I have ten years of fun-aunt Christmas and birthday presents I have to make up for?” She shot me a mock-angry look. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted a niece I could spoil rotten? And all this time, I had one I didn’t know about?”

I laughed. “Maybe that’s a good thing. Fewer chances for you to give her those loud toys designed to drive a parent insane until the batteries ‘go missing.’”

“Of course it would be those types of toys!” Mira exclaimed. “That’s the whole point of fun-aunt gifts.”

Trying to keep a somber face, I said, “In that case, I’m terribly sorry I deprived you of your fun. How on earth will I ever make it up to you?”

“Oh, don’t worry, you’ll pay for it,” she said gleefully. “We’re talking the loudest, most obnoxious toys I can get my hands on for the next several years.”

“Watch it,” I warned. “Turnabout is fair play. Alex is still a baby, so I’ve got plenty of years to return the favor. And that’s not including the damage I could do when it comes to Dani. I’ve really been thinking she needs an electric guitar, and maybe a set of drums.”

“Careful, Mira. She means it,” Jackson warned, coming to stand behind the couch. “Audrey doesn’t do empty threats.”

“That’s one of the reasons I like her,” Mira joked, giving me a wink.

Jackson’s lip quirked upward in a half-smirk. “Same here.” His hand slid to my shoulder and began massaging it. I let out a soft sigh of satisfaction.

I angled my head to look up at him, raising an eyebrow. “Did you come here for something or just to sing my praises?”

“I was thinking I could use some fresh air,” he said. His thumb ran up and down my neck, sending shivers through my body that made my heart begin racing. He leaned forward and whispered in my ear. “Interested in joining me?”

I gave a knowing grin. “I think that sounds perfect.”

Mira gave a knowing smirk as I stood and followed Jackson to the back door.

Once we were outside, we dipped into the trees, our hands entwined. I couldn’t express how right it felt, as if this was always supposed to happen, as if we were

always supposed to be together.

We arrived at a clearing, sunlight streaming through the trees. Before I could utter a word, he pulled me into a kiss—deep, passionate, and full of need. I responded in kind. A jolt of fire rushed through me, settling between my legs as his rough fingers slipped beneath my shirt, his caresses sending tantalizing shivers through my body. His hand slowly moved upward, teasing me while his lips remained locked on mine.

An overwhelming hunger washed over me. I was too impatient to wait. I needed more. My fingers fumbled with his pants as he tugged at my shirt. My blouse fell to the ground at the same time his pants crumpled to his feet.

Heart pounding in my throat from excitement and anticipation, I crouched in front of him, pulling off his boxers. He sprang out, already erect. My stomach lurched with need at the sight.

I took his cock in my hand, fingers caressing it gently before wrapping around it. He groaned as my tongue ran along his shaft, teasing him. The moan intensified when I took him in my mouth, lips wrapping around the head. His hands dug into my hair. Glancing up, I grinned around his cock as my fingers continued pumping. The look of intense need and longing he was giving me drove my wolf insane and made the fire burning between my legs blaze hotter.

My tongue flicked across his tip, and he let out another inarticulate noise. My mouth glided up and down his shaft as I savored the taste of him. I could feel his cock stiffening even more as I continued pleasuring him.

After a moment, his own hand began thrusting my head back and forth, commanding the speed. His hips began bucking, thrusting his cock deeper into my mouth as he seized control. My own need burned even hotter as his grip on my hair tightened, his pumps getting more frantic and hungry. I could tell he was close, and his moans and grunts sent spasms of longing through me. I loved hearing the reaction I elicited from

him.

I knew he was about to come a moment before he did, his groans growing more frequent, more urgent. Then he exploded inside me, filling my mouth with cum. He let out a sigh of satisfaction, the thrusts growing slower.

I swallowed, relishing the taste as he slid his still-hard cock from my mouth. I licked my lips as I looked up at him, still on my knees.

“Better?” I teased.

“Hard not to be when you’ve got a mouth like that,” he quipped, offering me a hand to pull me up. I noticed the way he looked me up and down, hunger and lust still lingering in his gaze.

I gave a coy smirk and made to step away. “Well, if that’s everything, I guess we should return to the party.”

A low, irritated snarl escaped his mouth, and he pulled me against him, my bare breasts pressed against his chest as his fingers dug into my hips. A new jolt of pleasure lurched through me as I felt his cock already hardening against my pelvis, pressing against me as he pinned me in place.

“You think I’m through with you?” he growled, his hand pinching my nipple and twisting gently. “Not by a long shot.”

The words were enough to send spasms of delight racing through me, fueling the fire all over again as he pulled me down to the ground with him.

I tilted my head, smirking at him. “And what if I’m done?” I teased, turning and moving as if to leave.

“Maybe I don’t care,” he said with a primal growl that made my stomach jolt with excitement.

Without another word, he pulled me onto his lap, impaling me on his cock from behind. I cried out in pleasure as he thrust into me, sending new waves of pleasure rushing through me. His hands grasped my hips as he held me in place, continuing to buck wildly.

Each jerk sent new waves of ecstasy and need racing through me, his cock thrusting deeper and deeper with every pump. I cried out, each moan growing higher-pitched as that delectable mindlessness washed over me as I succumbed to his touch.

He reached his hand around me to take one nipple between his fingers and tugged, pinching gently in a way that sent ripples of pleasure through me. I groaned, barely remembering to breathe as he continued to pleasure me. My mind had gone blissfully blank, and my nails dug into his thighs. All that mattered in that moment was me and him, the sensations of lust and need coursing through my entire body.

A gentle force pressed against my clit as his thumb found it. My back arched, new ecstasy radiating through me, stoking the inferno inside me. My breaths grew more ragged, every motion of his bringing me closer and closer to the brink until I knew there was no going back. I was entirely at his mercy.

That thought seemed to be enough to unravel me. I screamed as I shattered, the waves of pleasure overtaking me as I savored the ecstasy of release. My toes curled as my back arched, my head moving back to rest next to his as I rode the sensation. His mouth moved over mine, smothering the scream as he continued to thrust into me, holding me hostage against him. His grip on me tightened, and a moment later, I felt him finish inside me.

He kept bucking as I ground against his cock, our bodies pressed against one another. For a wild moment, I wondered if he would keep going even though we had both

been sated. Eventually, though, he slowed, allowing me to slide off him.

“How was that?” he asked.

“Mmm. Certainly pleasant,” I said, smirking.

He grinned, reaching out and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. His hand lingered on my cheek, and I leaned into his touch, relishing the feel of him being so near.

“We should probably get back to the party,” he said after a long moment.

I tilted my head as I looked up at him, the faintest of smirks playing on my lips. “Are you sure about that?” I asked.

His eyes roamed over my body, that wolfish hunger flashing in them once again in a way that rekindled the flame between my thighs all over again.

“Maybe they can wait a bit longer,” he conceded, coming to lay next to me.

Before he could do anything, I moved atop him, straddling him. He gazed up at me with undisguised love and lust as his hands moved to my hips.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” he said.

I gave a playful smirk. “I do,” I said, then leaned down to kiss him. “But thank you for helping me remember it.”

THE END