



Targeted by Fate (Between The Greys #2)

Author: Lorelei M. Hart, Colbie Dunbar

Category: LGBT+

Description: I shouldn't even look at him. He's innocent... pure. But my wolf calls him mine. How long can I resist?

If wrong place, wrong time was a person, it would be me. I was the king of it. As a child, I stepped into our garage moments before it was hit by lightning and lost my sense of smell. When I was a student, I walked in on a classmate changing their grades moments before they were caught, resulting in my expulsion. After my first real job promotion, I went to dinner to celebrate and saw my boss cheating on his husband with his personal assistant and I got fired.

And now? Now I'm in the worst place of all: behind a dumpster as someone is murdered. If I get caught, it won't be as simple as finding a new school or another position, I'll be dead. So what do I do? I shift into my cat form and crawl underneath the dumpster, hoping for the best.

If "the best" is one of the murderers coming over and telling me I need to come with him, I go. I should be scared, petrified even, but I'm not. Instead, I jump right into his arms and start purring. What is wrong with my cat?

Total Pages (Source): 24

1

BOAZ

“We have a problem.”

Alpha ended the call in his typical abrupt fashion, but he’d said all he needed to, and I had to hotfoot it to pack headquarters.

My mind whirled as I jumped in the car. Passing the bakery which my former lover owned, I spied him through the window, grinning at his new husband. I was happy for him because what we’d had... well, it’d scratched an itch. I wasn’t looking for a mate, and being a pack Beta, I was awaiting my fated.

And the baker? He was human and had been looking for a good time. It wasn’t a big deal when we stopped seeing one another, and I was glad he’d found a guy who loved him, something I wasn’t capable of.

But as I zoomed past a set of lights when they turned amber, my mind switched from a former bedmate to business. Whatever was going on, Alpha wanted me to handle it.

Unlike my brothers, I was a company man in that I was pack, through and through. They were in the private sector, even though they were still part of the pack and always would be. Unless they did something so horrendous, something that went against everything we stood for, that violated our pack code and Alpha kicked them out.

Knowing my bros, I doubted that would happen. They were argumentative, creative, sassy and forward-thinking, but they obeyed and stayed within the boundaries of what was acceptable to the pack, sort of.

Again I quashed thoughts of my family and concentrated on getting to headquarters. If humans were aware shifters existed, they'd probably imagine us meeting in a dingy alley or a cave in the woods. But our pack, Crescent Moon, owned a spanking-new building, all five floors.

Alpha was standing in the boardroom studying a laptop balanced on one hand. Unusually for him, his hair was in disarray and one button on his shirt was undone. He must have been shifting, likely outside the city, when he got a call or message, and he'd come straight here rather than going home.

"Boaz, what took you so long?" Alpha hadn't glanced up, but he had scented me. He turned the laptop toward me, and I scanned the text and the accompanying images. There was a sharp intake of breath—from me—as I peered at the gruesome scene.

"Shifters?"

He nodded.

Not surprising. Unless shifters had been involved, Alpha would not have called me.

The photos were from Pulsepoint, a club that shifters frequented. I'd enjoyed evenings there, but I hadn't been much since I was promoted to Beta.

The grotesque images were of men and women, their faces frozen with exaggerated expressions, reminding me of gargoyles, arms and legs at awkward angles and the skin around their throat and mouths gouged as though they had been clawing for breath. A pinkish foam circled their mouths, and they were drenched in blood

My belly churned, and I told my wolf to control it because I couldn't throw up in front of Alpha. Later, when I was alone, I'd grieve the loss of my fellow shifters.

"This isn't the bear shifters, is it?" The bear den, formally headed by Alpha Germaine, sold weed. Or used to. They'd ordered the hit on my now brother-in-law, Rhodes.

"No. Some new group who arrived in town recently, and they've been pushing sales at nightclubs." He continued by saying other Alphas in town had reported their members being offered this new wonder drug. "But until now, it was just another recreational drug joining the buffet of what was already available.

"Someone laced it or swapped it to hurt shifters specifically." It wasn't a question. I'd leaped to the conclusion, and until I was shown evidence that contradicted it, I was sticking with the theory.

Shifters had lived in harmony with humans, mainly because humans weren't aware of our existence. But if they stumbled onto our kind, would they be so threatened they'd kill us? It was a possibility.

But my theory was a drug so potent that it would fell a shifter and quickly had to have been created by other shifters. Why? To start a war? Because they wanted to destroy us? There were numerous possibilities, but people other than me could figure that out.

Even without Alpha issuing an order, I understood my purpose: to hunt down and eliminate the culprits. Alpha hadn't asked the other Betas because I was his chosen successor, though I wouldn't be if I messed this up.

"Find who did this and end them."

I had the night, any longer and Alpha might assign someone else to do the job. But I

had a fire in my belly, a rage that was intensifying by the minute, and when I found the perp, I'd kill him or them slowly, making sure they were conscious for each bone-breaking, blood-spattering second.

After sending a brief text to three of my people, I drove to the nightclub, and not bothering to park, I braced myself because the scent of death strangled me so I gasped for breath, and it pushed me back against the car. My body sagged as the stench clogged my nostrils.

Taking deep breaths got more air into my lungs, but I sniffed my clammy skin. The air reeked of blood, and I imagined microscopic pieces of shifter flesh filtering through the air. Gods, I couldn't throw up, not as my men pulled up and jumped out of the car.

There was no need for a phone call, an ID, or a punch in the jaw. One glance at us and even the lowest ranking cop, manning the line of yellow tape, let us through. I noted their trembling hands. Oh yeah, they might not know what we were but we radiated power, and no one dared stop us.

Unlike human detectives, there was no need to issue my men with a list of instructions. They knew what to do. While our eyes and ears worked overtime, it was our noses that would detect the scents, human and shifter alike, who had come in contact with the deceased. And whoever had touched the drugs my kin consumed would not escape.

I steeled myself for the dead bodies, contorted on the luxurious sofas, sprawled on the carpet, and crumpled in a heap by the long bar.

I need your help . I couldn't do this without my beast. He had to filter out the extraneous scents and focus on what was detected on all the victims.

My team and I worked quickly, not taking notes with pen or paper or a phone, but sniffing out the culprits.

“Boss.” That was my number one man, Josh.

I held up three fingers but I had detected it or them too. Three scents, distinct from the others, that mingled with the drug of choice, possibly Duskthorn, and a chemical.

The waitstaff were cowering in a small office at the back and details spilled out of them about what they’d seen and heard.

“I scented those guys near headquarters last week.” That was Josh.

After phone calls and a couple of dead ends at a hotel and guest house, we secured an address.

While I wanted to find out the why, I wouldn’t be taking any prisoners.

We pulled up a block away from a motel. One light shone from an open door as men shoved bags in a car. They jumped in but caught sight of us as we ran toward them. The one behind the wheel reversed—he rivaled any F1 driver I’d cheered on TV—and took off in the opposite direction.

Shit! Now we had to chase them. Thank gods this was a rundown area of town, full of abandoned factories, so there wasn’t much traffic.

Josh jumped in the passenger seat while the other pair got in the second car. I put my foot down, not caring about speed limits or stop signs, and took off. Their tail lights visible in the distance enlarged as we grew closer. Josh wound the window down, and the wind whipped at his hair. He leaned out and aimed his gun. The shot rang out, bursting a back tire, and the vehicle careened across the lane to the opposite side of

the road, the driver unable to right it. Another shot shredded the other back tire, and the car skidded.

Two people jumped out as the car slammed into a lamppost, leaving Josh to dispose of the driver. I charged after the other two, my men at my heels. The pair in front kept looking over their shoulders. A rookie mistake.

They veered into an alleyway. Another huge mistake because this wasn't a thoroughfare but a dead end. Dead being the operative word because that was what they'd be, their bodies splattered over the brick walls and the potholed asphalt they treaded on.

The shrieks when they discovered there was no way out put a grim smile on my lips, and I stopped running. My wolf would take them out, and instead of pulling back as I did when he hunted, I would be at the front of his gaze as his canines tore the flesh from their bones.

“Why?”

But they took their fur, scrawny wolves who were no match for my beast. I'd get the answer somehow but not from these fools.

Not yet , I told my wolf as I stood, arms folded, not bothering to reach for the gun that was always on my hip.

My men surrounded one wolf, playing with it as a cat would a mouse, while I made the other wait. I almost wished I smoked because this would be the perfect time to light up, a nonchalant move that would create more tension and make my soon-to-be victim unsure of my next move.

Leaves on the ground rustled as the wind picked up. It didn't rate a mention when I

was about to end someone's life except... except... the breeze brought something with it, something unexpected that turned my head one way and the other.

My beast ripped through my skin and sniffed the air.

Mate, he hissed.

No, it couldn't be. The universe couldn't be so cruel to show me my mate, knowing I had to kill him.

Get closer.

He padded toward the wolf as my men teased and taunted the second one until a quivering howl echoed around the alley, marking that other wolf's death throes. He was of no consequence.

My wolf circled the beast who understood he was about to die.

Not him .

Thank gods. End this now .

With no warning, my beast flew at the remaining wolf and sank his teeth into his neck. Blood from an artery spurted over both wolves, fur and flesh flew into the air. Combined with a sickening crunch as bone splintered and what was left of the other beast splayed over the blood-soaked alley.

I took my skin and barked at my men to arrange a cleaning crew.

But I had to find my mate. He was here somewhere.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am

2

KEANE

Finding a job right after you'd been fired sucked. I wasn't even fired for being crappy at my job, either. Not even close. I was fired the day of my big promotion, the one I'd earned. I'd been appointed the manager of my division. It was middle management. I wasn't going to be making the big bucks, but it was the step up that would let me not have instant noodles for dinner twice a week and eat the same generic cereal every morning for breakfast.

It was the promotion that was going to allow me to not worry if I took a shower a few minutes too long and used more hot water than I had budgeted for. It was the promotion that said I finally got rid of my bad luck—bad luck that began as a child when I lost my sense of smell thanks to being in a garage hit by lightning.

Silly me, when the storm came in, I thought it was best to get out of the tree cover and inside a building, picking the abandoned building. How wrong I'd been. I didn't know until my first shift, when my cat came out into the world for the first time, that I barely had the sense of smell of a human, and while in my fur, my cat had none. If only that were the worst event.

That bad luck followed me like my shadow. It even got me expelled from college for walking in as someone was messing with grades. Stupid bad luck.

After my promotion announcement, I went home straight and pulled out the frozen pizza I had planned for dinner. Sure, it was a day to celebrate, but I had no one to do

that with. My family had never been close, and I sucked at making human friends. It was me against the world.

But there was something about the pizza that looked so pathetic and bland that had me tossing it back in the freezer. Why did I need someone to celebrate with? I earned the promotion... I was worth going to a celebratory dinner at that little Italian restaurant I had been eyeing since I moved in.

If only I had stuck with the pizza instead.

I walked right inside the restaurant and sat myself as the sign instructed. If I'd taken two seconds to look around, I'd have chosen better. Before I could order a soda, I realized that it was my boss at the table next to me. Shouldn't have been a problem, right? Except when that boss was there with their personal assistant—the one they weren't married to, even though they were, in fact, married. I caught them not only breaking company policy, but cheating.

I swore to them that I wouldn't tell anyone, that their secret was safe with me. And what did my boss do? He fired me on the spot and blacklisted me from pretty much every insurance company in town—or maybe all of them. There were only two I hadn't applied to yet, and neither was taking applications.

Which was what led me, on a night when I should've been safe in bed at home, to be wandering from club to club and bar to bar, hoping that someone would give me a chance to at least sling some drinks. I might not have been the hottest guy in the world, but my ass looked good in a pair of jeans and I crossed my fingers that would give me an edge. And while my cat wasn't like the fiercest shifter there was, I could take on a human if need be, and I thought that was enough to get a job.

Except apparently you needed experience to get strangers drunk, even in the seediest of bars. And that's where I ended up pivoting to when Pulsepoint all but laughed at

me after I waited a half hour for their manager. I sat nursing a glass of water, watching everyone, thinking that I might be able to pick up enough about the place to get a job. Wrong. They didn't get past my first name. Snobby asshats.

One by one, they turned me down. And with each rejection, I went deeper into the bad parts of town—figuring there they would have less interest in experience and pedigree and whatever else the first bars had been looking for and more about wanting a body to do the work.

The last bar gave me hope when I walked inside. It was dark, dingy, and had sticky floors. There were omegas offering services for the evening on the not-so-sly. There were quite a few underage customers that no one seemed to care about. It was not a rule-following kind of place. I had to be good enough for them.

Or not.

“Hey, is the owner around?” I asked.

The bartender turned to me, looked me up and down, and snarled, “Not for you.”

“Who do you think I am?” Maybe he had me confused with someone else, like a criminal. This place felt like one that would cater to that crowd. Not that I was going to judge. A job was a job.

“Don't care. You don't belong here.” He went back to pouring a draft.

“I'm just looking for a job. Even... even work in the kitchen.” Yes, I was resorting to near begging, but rent didn't pay itself.

“Get lost.”

And so I did. But I didn't get lost alone, despite not inviting anyone along for the ride.

Instead, I realized nearly too late there was not one but two alphas following me. Great. Fucking great. At first, I considered running. And then I realized that wasn't going to be much help in the saving department. In this form, I was slow—or at least too slow to outrun pretty much everyone.

Instead, I stopped and turned to face them head-on.

“You got a problem?” I sounded a thousand times more confident than I was.

I tried to find any indication they were shifters and was so grateful I found none. Their eyes were 100% human, and based on the way they were bloodshot, they were drunk. That made my odds better.

“You walked by us. Didn't even let us buy you a drink,” the taller alpha slurred his words.

“I was looking for a job, not a date. Sorry.” And had I noticed them, I'd have been more careful when I left, that was for sure.

“Might as well go back. Saw there was an omega checking you out.” I was such a liar.

“No. We want you.” The older of the two stepped forward and went to put his hand on me. I stood there acting like I was scared, which I was, but not as scared as I hoped to portray. The second he got close enough, I jammed my palm into his nose.

Blood started gushing out, and before his friend could react, I kicked him in the balls, grateful they'd had so much to drink, because in a fair fight, I would've lost against

them. I still might.

And then I caved and did what my cat had wanted me to do from the beginning, I ran.

And I ran and I ran and I ran.

I turned the corner, not stopping to look and see if they were behind me, unsure what the steps were that I heard. Could've been someone from any of the local businesses, or it could've been them. I needed to get out of here. I cut down an alley, discovering far too late that it was a dead end.

There was no way out without going back the way I came. I reached into my pocket to grab my phone, hoping to figure out exactly where I was and where to go from here, when I heard a crash, which startled me enough that my keys fell out of my pocket and bounced under the dumpster.

Fucking great.

I climbed in behind it to fetch them just as I heard people rushing in. There were more than the two guys I'd left, and at first I thought that was a good thing. But then I figured out they weren't running together, some were running away from the others. Maybe they wouldn't look back here. Maybe I'd be okay. My bad luck had hit again.

These weren't men. Hot human men, anyway. They were shifters, predatory shifters. No one would ever accuse the energy flowing off of them to be that of a bunny or squirrel. A better sense of smell would be really handy. At least then I'd know who I was up against.

My heart started to pound as the scene unfolded before me. My gut said it was the mafia. I didn't even know how I knew. It could've just been rivals beating each other up. But something told me—the cold, heartless commands were not unusual. This

was their norm. That left organized crime of some sort.

I'd have been better off chancing things with those drunk-ass alphas.

I heard a wolf growl and did what any small, adorable shifter would do. I freaked out, my cat taking over, pushing my human side down, and crawling out of my clothes and under the dumpster. I crossed everything that I'd be able to hide long enough for them to leave. Goddess knew I wasn't strong enough to fight them, and running? Yeah, that wouldn't get me far. They could easily track my furry ass, and without my car, it would be an easy hunt.

These weren't humans. They weren't going to see my clothes and toss them in the dumpster and not think twice. They were going to know that I was here. They were going to see my cat and instantly recognize me for who I was. There was nothing I could do but wait and hope.

Everything was a blur. It was too much coming at me, all at once. So much was happening. My cat was pushing me down and the sound of my heart racing flooded my ears.

My cat gave me no freedom, fearing I'd put us in danger. As if I could make this whole situation worse than it was... There were dead shifters and live murderers on the other side of the dumpster now. I didn't know who the good guys were, or the bad guys for that matter. There was a good chance they were all bad guys.

And then they left. Not all of them. The dead ones were still there. Or at least their blood was. I wasn't even sure if they'd removed the bodies yet, my ability to focus completely stolen.

But the man—the man in control—his slow footsteps came closer and closer. And he squatted down, looked under the dumpster, his body naked and blood-covered. He

looked like a horror movie poster.

“Come here.” It wasn’t a request.

And then what did I do? I crawled out from under the dumpster and jumped into his arms, fucking purring.

Apparently, I went from having bad luck to having a death wish.

Except... why wasn’t I scared?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am

3

BOAZ

My mind is blank .

Not true. Your thoughts are tumbling over one another .

I sighed because my beast was so literal.

But I was naked and covered in blood and tufts of fur. Gross. Two dead wolves were on the opposite side of the alley, and I was holding my fated mate—our first meeting which should have had us falling into one another’s arms and mating—who was a cat.

Kitten! The name popped into my head. This cat wasn’t a kitten, but rather it was a term of endearment, and if we ever met in person and mated, that was what I would call him.

I cradled him against my bare chest, but the metallic stench of blood smeared over my skin, in my hair, and puddled over the asphalt was obstructing my mate’s scent.

His tail swished, the tip brushing over my chin, and goosebumps frogmarched over my chest while my cock engorged. That couldn’t happen, not yet. We hadn’t formally met, not that shifters of old bothered with pleasantries, but my mate had his fur. We couldn’t move forward until he took his skin.

Maybe he didn't scent me as his mate, so we'd have to get to know one another as humans did. Maynard mated a human, one he'd met years before, so if my trigger-happy brother could court his mate, I could too.

The cat peered over my shoulder, and I swung around, not wanting the gruesome images to be coupled with his memories of meeting me. His body shuddered, his faint heartbeat pounding against my chest.

I stroked him, and he purred while I whispered that the dead were bad guys and I would always protect him. Not knowing how much he'd seen or heard, I figured that was enough for now until we could talk, face to face, man to man.

A faint rumble in the distance told me the cleaners were on their way, and I didn't want to be naked, standing on shifter remains, holding my mate when they arrived.

"I'm going to put you down while I get dressed."

In what? My beast was looking at the shredded remains of my clothes.

Damn! I'd have to race out to the car.

Still hugging the cat, I bent low, grabbed my keys and a second set that scented like my mate. Keeping to the shadows, I made it to my vehicle and grabbed the bag of clothes I kept in the trunk. The cat curled up in the passenger seat while I pulled on a T-shirt and pants and jumped behind the wheel.

The cleaners got to work, and the head guy acknowledged me with a nod. While they kept their voices low, I picked up them complaining about the mess and the stink. The bodies were still warm, and a human would not have identified any decay, but shifters' heightened senses had the cleaning crew putting on masks.

“You’re safe. I’m not leaving you.”

A niggling worry wormed its way into my brain. My mate hadn’t shifted, and even if he didn’t recognize me as his one and only, why hadn’t he taken his skin? He’d witnessed some or all of a shifter takedown, gory deaths that weren’t a part of most current-day shifters’ lives.

But my family were mafia, our pack controlled swaths of territory in the city and beyond, and while I didn’t kill shifters gone rogue every day, it was part of my job description.

“Sit tight. We’re going h—” I couldn’t say “home” because I shared a place with my younger brothers. They’d be asking a million questions about how we met and how many bad guys I took down. They’d be criticizing my technique—both my killer instinct and how I reacted when meeting my mate—and they might terrify my one and only.

I thought back to how Rhodes had reacted when we confronted him, and my body heated up as a flush crawled over my face and chest. Our behavior when we met Maynard’s mate wasn’t something to be proud of. But in our defense, mating a human was a huge deal, something our brother hadn’t considered.

Concentrate on our mate, not your brother’s .

My wolf was right. But perhaps I was thinking about Maynard because I didn’t want to consider that my mate had a problem with me. Maybe he was a pacifist and didn’t believe in taking another life. It was possible, though I doubted his beast felt the same way. I’d watched cats of all sizes, wild and shifter, tease their prey for hours before devouring them.

So did I think my mate had a problem with spilling blood? Nope. I was scared that he

was sickened by the slaughter he may have witnessed and was waiting for an opportunity to escape. My belly roiled, and I took deep breaths because I refused to show weakness in front of my mate. My ego wouldn't allow it, and I needed to be strong and exhibit courage and kindness.

I was a mess, outside and in, and I started the car. I was about to tell my mate to buckle up and burst out laughing as an image of the cat wearing a seat belt appeared in my head. My mate fixed his green eyes on me, and the intensity of his gaze sent shivers up and down my spine.

Putting the car in gear, I pulled onto the road, thankful there was little traffic because I didn't look behind me. But where to go? Not home, not headquarters, and not some rundown motel. My mate needed to understand I had means and could treat him like a prince—no, a king.

Thought you didn't believe in a monarchy .

I don't . I didn't, but from an outsider's perspective, an Alpha who ruled over a pack wasn't that much different to a monarch. And I was his Beta.

“I'm going to take you somewhere nice where you can shift and shower. I'll order food, and we can talk.”

The cat meowed, but he stayed where he was and didn't leap onto my lap. Whether that was a positive sign or not, I wasn't sure.

There were numerous hotels where the pack had hosted functions, and the management were shifters. I chose the closest, and as I gave the valet the keys, a bellboy arrived to take the luggage. Thank gods I kept cash in the car, and I stuffed a fistful of bills in his hand and carried the cat and the bag myself.

But when I arrived at the front desk, the staff were human. I wasn't familiar with the name of the manager on duty which was displayed on the wall. Not wanting to create a scene, I asked for a room and was told I had to pay a pet fee.

I bristled at the assumption that my mate was a pet, and I gripped the cat, hoping he didn't freak or worse, shift and tell the desk clerk what he thought of him.

"It's okay, Kitten." He wriggled in my arms, and I slapped a smile on my face as if I dealt with the situation every day. "He thinks he's human, not a cat."

My explanation didn't go over well with the front desk clerk. He wasn't a cat lover based on his quizzical expression.

"It's a joke." I had to shut up because I was making it worse.

While the guy tapped at the computer, I thought about how my brothers would react if they could see me. I wasn't the Boaz they'd known all their lives, the one who followed the rules and chastised others who broke them, as all of my brothers did! I'd be the butt of their joke when they found out.

Clutching the key card, we took the elevator, and I locked the door behind us when we entered our room. I placed the cat, my mate, on the mattress that was covered with a plump duvet.

"It's okay, no one will hurt you here. You can shift."

Nothing. A big fat nothing.

He doesn't like us .

How can you say that? We're adorable . So adorable we'd just dispatched a shifter in

a bloody battle.

I needed a shower because the coat I'd shrugged on before getting out of the car was covered with dried blood. But if I said I was going to shower, my mate might think I expected him to join me.

Shit, what a mess.

"Would you prefer I went into the corridor or the bathroom?" I grabbed a fluffy white robe. "You can put this on if you're shy." It hadn't occurred to me to look for his clothes in the alley.

The cat padded to the robe and curled up on top. My jaw dropped. What if... what if this wasn't my mate and he was just... I gulped. Just a cat.

He scents as our mate .

Thoughts ricocheted through my head. Gods, maybe the scent didn't belong to the cat but someone who had petted it or the owner. My mate might be crying himself to sleep over his lost kitty.

"Can you give me a sign? One tail flick for yes you're a shifter and two for no?"

Damn, I was losing it. If he wasn't a shifter, he wouldn't understand what I was saying. I considered phoning Maynard, but my phone was where? In the alley? No, I'd picked it up. It was in the car.

The cat closed his eyes, and I took one last look at him before closing the bathroom door and showering off the blood. When I came out, the feline was asleep, purring softly.

He's lonely, I'm sure of it . My beast was urging me to comfort our maybe mate, so I removed my robe and gave him his fur.

My brothers would taunt me for the rest of my life if they found out I slept with an alley cat who I thought was my mate.

KEANE

I couldn't shift. I tried. Gods, how much I tried. But no matter what I did, I was unable to take my skin. It was frustrating, but more than that, I could see that it was distressing this man. This man who was my mate. And more than anything, I longed to comfort him.

He was mine, and it was my job to make his life better, not more difficult.

I couldn't scent that he was my mate, obviously, because my nose didn't work. But my cat recognized him, repeating over and over again that he was ours. I trusted him on this.

As terrified as I should've been, having a wolf who'd just murdered people carry me while he was still covered in blood, put me in the front seat of his car, and take me to some random location, I wasn't. Not a single ounce of fear flowed through me.

If anything, I felt safer than I ever had before.

I hated the distress I could feel rolling off of him when he kept telling me I could shift and that it would be okay. He felt guilty, like he was responsible for me staying in this form, like he believed I was scared of him and it was a protective move on my part. He had no way of knowing that his presence comforted me.

The day had been long before I even went into that alley, and now I was exhausted. I

was also so very confused. Adding to all of that was my being stressed the fuck out about not being able to shift. But I would trust this man with anything, including my safety, which made no sense... until I listened to my cat and accepted that he was ours. And now that I had, I curled up in a ball.

I fell asleep while he was in the shower, and when I woke up, his wolf was wrapped around me. I wanted to lean in and rub against him, to gather his scent. I might not be able to enjoy it, but my cat insisted we needed to be sure others would sense that he was mine and back off. Not that there were currently any “others” around. Fair to say I was already pretty possessive of him. I stayed still, afraid that if I moved, if I woke him, he’d shift and try to get me to do the same. And I knew I wasn’t able to, at least not until I got some sleep.

So instead of stressing more, I let myself fall back asleep.

The next time I woke, he had taken his skin, still wrapped around me, but very much human. Moving as little as possible, I took him in, trying to memorize every inch of his body.

This was my mate. He was mine.

He had scars... scars that shifters shouldn’t have. The wounds must have been really severe to leave any faint traces at all. How hard had his life been? Was this life, always his, or was it what he had chosen for himself? All I knew about lives of crime I’d learned from really crappy movies. I doubted they were close to the authority on the subject.

He’d tell me... hopefully. That was if I could wake up and ask him, pull myself out of this body... but I couldn’t. It would have to wait.

I must’ve moved too much, because he woke up. His mouth curled into a smile. His

eyes were so sweet, so caring. There was a softness to him—one I hadn't seen last night.

"You're awake," he said, reaching down to pet me.

I wasn't one to like being petted. It just felt... yucky. But with him, I enjoyed all of it and never wanted it to end.

"Do you think today, maybe, you could shift back? And we could talk? I promise you, I won't hurt you. I kind of need you to—because right now I'm second-guessing myself. Worried that maybe you aren't a shifter after all, and you're just a cat that I found in the wild via the Cat Distribution System... and I've lost my mind."

I rubbed my chin against his shoulder, trying to comfort him.

"You're not... are you?"

I shook my head, trying to mimic what my human head would do. He sat up.

"I gotta hit the bathroom for a minute, but then I can get you something to eat and figure out... everything else."

He was already in the bathroom when I realized what he meant by "everything else"—for me to use the bathroom. Because in this form, I wasn't using the toilet. But also, I didn't want a cat box. How humiliating that would be.

He came out and sat on the bed.

"I want to feed you... but I think we need to get you to a doctor first. I should've thought of that sooner."

I felt myself retract.

“A shifter doctor. Not a vet, silly cat.”

I hardly felt silly. Vet or not, I didn't like the idea of someone poking around my feline body. But if he needed me not to eat before he figured things out, I trusted him.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why is this so difficult? We're supposed to find our mate, fall into each other's arms, and live happily ever after. That's how it's supposed to work, right?”

He closed his eyes. “Yeah... that's not how it works. It's not how it worked for my brother. It's not how it worked for my parents. It's only how it works in fairy tales.”

I let out a mew of understanding. At least that was my attempt.

“How about we go now? Then we'll figure everything out from there.”

I padded over to him, rubbed my chin against his leg, and went to the door.

“You wanna go outside?”

I let out a little meow.

“Are you running away?”

I shook my head again, the best I could. Thankfully, he seemed to understand.

“You need privacy outside?”

Another meow. Thank gods he threw on some clothes and carried me to the elevator

and then straight outside so I could take care of things, because there would be nothing as embarrassing as having my mate see my beast using the bathroom.

“I’ll come right back for you. Okay? I need to check us out.”

I attempted to nod and then took off to the fancy bushes that were part of the landscaping to take care of business. Like he asked, I went back to the huge glass doors and waited. Not for long, though. He had our stuff in his hands.

“Let’s go.” He started toward the car, which the valet had already brought around, then turned back and looked at me. “Did you want me to carry you?”

That was all the invitation I needed. I ran over and jumped up, glad when he caught me, even if it meant dropping his bag. He carried me straight to the car, and placed me in the seat beside him and went back for his bag.

On the way there, he told me about the doctor—how he could be trusted, how he’d used him for a good chunk of his life. Not just for his family, but for the people he worked with. He refrained from saying who those people were, but we both knew. We’d been in that alley together. It was no secret.

We pulled into a neighborhood, parked the car, and went into a non-descript office. He tucked me into his button-down, pressed against his chest, nestled in his warmth... exactly where I wanted to be. At least until he reached the doctor. That wasn’t where I wanted to be at all, but that didn’t make it unnecessary.

He explained to the doctor everything that had happened, minus the murdering part, and set me down on the exam table.

“I’m here. Don’t worry, I’ve got you.”

And that was when the embarrassment hit.

The doctor poked and prodded at me, pulled back my gums to look at my teeth, inserted a thermometer in a place that really didn't need to be witnessed by my mate, and eventually drew some blood.

"I don't know what's going on," the doctor said. "But something must have triggered this. It's not meeting his mate, though. That I'm sure of. If anything, that should have pulled him out. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He walked out, and I hopped onto my mate's lap, where he assured me everything would be okay. He also made a point of letting me know that he hadn't watched the exam. I didn't know how true that was—but I held onto it, because the alternative was far worse.

The doctor came back only minutes later. His face was not reassuring.

"So, I hate to bring this news to you... but there are drugs in his system. That's why he can't shift."

"Drugs? You mean like... he was toking up?"

"No." The doctor's face was grim. "He's lucky he's still alive with the kind he has flowing through him."

I hadn't taken drugs. Ever. Under any circumstances. I didn't even like to drink. I had no idea what was happening. I replayed the evening before—I'd had a few drinks of water at a couple bars while waiting to talk to the manager. Could that have been it? Could it have been something I inhaled during the altercation with those drunks? Were they not drunk at all, but high?

I had no idea.

But the way my mate sucked in a breath and looked down at me, eyes wide with shock—and maybe a little fear?—

I knew.

He thought I did drugs.

And it disgusted him.

I disgusted him.

Fuck.

5

BOAZ

“So what do we do?” I spoke through gritted teeth because I was pissed that my mate took a drug, not because he was sick but for recreational purposes.

He was a shifter, so why did he need to get high? He just had to shift, that was better than any manufactured drug. But no one should ask me how I knew that! Lips were sealed.

“He's not dead.”

“Ya think?” The doc raised a brow at my shouting, but he'd stated the obvious. I was expecting some long-winded medical explanation with big words that he'd need to interpret.

But I was taking the anger out on him instead of my mate because my mate couldn't or wouldn't shift.

This was so fucked up.

“Best guess is wait it out.”

I didn't get the damned doctor out of bed so he could tell me to sit on my ass and do nothing. Turning around so I didn't yell at him again, I fisted my hands, trying to funnel the fury from my body, not that it did any good. Anger was festering and

bubbling inside me, and I might explode if we didn't come up with a better solution.

“But when he shifts, he may need rehab. Even shifters can become addicted.”

Taking a deep breath, I contemplated having a life partner who was addicted to drugs. He was my mate, and though we hadn't met in person, I adored him. That wouldn't change, but I'd have to rethink my lifestyle and that of my family: no alcohol or gambling. None of them took drugs, though they wouldn't tell me if they did, knowing I'd judge them.

I dug my nails into my palms, wishing it was my mate marking me, but he was meowing, and I chose to believe he was trying to communicate. But I was so peeved about what he'd done to himself, I ignored his cries.

Cats are independent .

I bit back a snarky response to my beast. This wasn't the time to tell me about cat traits.

He might walk out and never return if you judge him.

I eyed the closed door, but cats were sneaky and they could squeeze through tight spaces.

“Is this room cat-proof?”

“Huh?”

“Nowhere the cat can escape.”

The doctor narrowed his eyes. “Not that I know of.”

I picked up my mate, and he mewed. It was safer having him in my arms so he couldn't escape. Not because he hated me, though he might. But he'd witnessed me murdering another shifter. If he lived a quiet life away from other shifters, he might've been planning to bolt.

"Thanks. I'm going to take him home."

"Watch him carefully and offer him plenty of water." The doctor added that I should bring my mate back when he took his skin so he could run more tests.

That kinda horrified me 'cause what if he couldn't ever take his skin, and if he did shift, the drugs might have altered him forever.

Do you think he could become a lion or a tiger?

Not like that. I'll explain later.

I texted my brothers in our group chat. Meet me at the house. Ten Minutes. Urgent.

My phone lit up with messages.

The house? Are you talking about our home?

We're out of snacks. Bring more. Of course that was Lake.

Do you know what time it is? Apparently I'd woken up Maynard's daughter, Luna. Oops!

I'm in bed .

Did you kill someone? We all got notifications about the drug deaths .

I ignored them all, especially about the snacks. Lake would have to buy his own.

The five of us still lived in the family home, as our parents had moved to the countryside when they retired. But our folks were on yet another cruise. I didn't understand how they could be stuck on a big boat with a lot of people and unable to escape. Ewww!

I held out my hands, and the cat walked into them purring. He snuggled against me as we headed out. Having been in the car twice previously, he understood what to do and settled into what I now thought of as "his" seat.

Not wasting time, I took the shortest route home, and at this late hour, there wasn't much traffic. Maynard had arrived before us because his car was parked on the street, and my brothers would all be awake and eager to discover why I'd called an emergency meeting.

Thinking back to when Maynard had done the same, I wondered why none of my siblings hadn't caught on to it being about a mate. But they always said I'd be the last to mate, and I hadn't told anyone that I'd broken up with the baker.

Once my folks found out I'd met my one and only, they might move back into our house because they were also on vacation when Maynard met Rhodes. Or maybe they would go on back-to-back cruises, as they were always pestering us to mate and give them grandbabies.

With one hand holding the cat, I went to punch in the door code, but it was flung open to reveal my five brothers standing in a semicircle.

"That's the big emergency? You adopted or found a stray cat!" Thiago tut-tutted and yawned.

Lake glanced behind me, and his face fell when I told him I couldn't stop off for snacks because of the cat.

"You could have gone to a drive-through," he huffed and flung himself on a sofa.

"Seriously? You wake up my kid because you got soft and adopted a cat... from the street, judging by the matted fur."

I shoved Maynard's hand away as he picked a grass seed off my mate. "Stop it!"

Five faces and annoyed voices must have been too much for my mate. He crawled over my shoulder, but I pulled him back. There were so many nooks and crannies in this place that I might never find him if he ran off.

Ezra groaned. "Am I to believe that you're a cat dad now and we all have to bow to the kitty's whims?"

"Kitty litter is in your room, bro," Riggs snapped.

"Stop it!" That was my Beta voice, and my siblings froze.

Riggs gave in. "Fine. The litter can go in the laundry."

"Shut it, you fools, and listen. I've met my mate."

"I knew it." Thiago leaped off the sofa. "Is he human? Did you stash him in the trunk of your car?"

"Is he handcuffed? I thought that was what we did to our brothers' new mates." Riggs had forgotten about kitty litter, and both he and Thiago had latched on to memories of when we met Rhodes for the first time. He chuckled, and he and Lake fist-bumped.

Ezra opened the door and peered outside, yelling there was no mate in the driveway, until I shouted again and told them they were asshats. “My mate is right here.” I pointed to the cat snuggled under one arm.

My announcement was greeted with five furrowed brows and huhs.

“Dude, that goes against shifter law and human ones.” Maynard lowered his voice. “That’s gross and?—”

I screeched, and the cat clawed my jacket. “Shut the fuck up, bro. He has a problem.”

“I think you’re the one with?—”

I glared at Lake, and he shut up.

“He can’t shift, and I think he either took some of the drugs at the Pulsepoint...” Or elsewhere. Until he shifted, it was all guesswork.

My brothers didn’t let me finish.

“Why would a shifter take drugs?”

“That’s not a great start to a relationship.”

Maynard sneezed and stepped away, saying he might be allergic to cats. I tossed a box of tissues at him, saying he was fine.

“I’ve heard of similar cases in the last month,” Ezra piped up.

“Was it deliberate or his drink was spiked?” Lake put his face close to the cat and meowed. It’d serve him right if he got scratched. “Like the ones that killed those

shifters.”

“Do you speak feline?” I snapped. My brothers were my support network, and they weren’t helping.

“Sorry, no.” Lake waved at my mate

Ezra pulled up a message board on his laptop and scrolled through the posts. “See here and here.” The people posting assumed the drinks had been spiked. “But none of those instances were deadly as the Pulsepoint ones were.”

If that was what happened to my mate, perhaps he didn’t ingest the drug deliberately.

“But why?” Lake was puzzled why someone—shifters or anyone—would poison people. “What message are they sending?”

“Some asshats do it for kicks and others because they want to take advantage of omegas, especially.” I hated that it was true of our present-day society.

“I’m convinced that your mate being drugged and the shifter deaths are related.” We were silent after Maynard’s pronouncement.

“The deaths happened in our pack territory.” Riggs stabbed his finger in the air. “They killed our kin, and they did it on our land.” He clapped me on the back for killing the errand boys, but those guys we ended were the paid hands. Not the guys at the top.

“Who is behind this?” Ezra closed his laptop.

“Until we find out, you may be a target, Boaz, having killed some of their guys.”

I hugged my mate, and he nestled his head in the crook of my neck. If people were looking for me, I had to keep the cat safe. Handling a gun while holding a cat wasn't ideal, but I couldn't put him in a cage.

"You should leave town." Maynard was tapping his phone. "Go to the cabin for a few days."

"Who are you messaging?" If he was sending out an alert about where I was going, he was putting me and my mate in danger.

"Grocery order. It'll be here in twenty minutes. Then you take off. You can't do your job as Beta and protect your mate when your mind is filled with 'what-if' questions about him shifting."

I'd have to let Alpha know. I'd filed a report and spoken to him from the hotel but hadn't mentioned meeting my mate or his little problem.

"I'm not one for the countryside." The cabin wasn't in the middle of nowhere. It was just outside a small town, but it was secluded and surrounded by an electrified fence.

"Stop being a baby." Riggs folded his arms. "You have a mate to consider."

"Fine." I'd take off into the wilderness with my furry mate and wait out both his feline to human status and whether I was in danger from unknown elements of the mafia world.

Great!

KEANE

My head wasn't working right, and it made no sense. At first I thought it was my memory, but I'd been learning a lot about my mate. Learning and retaining it. We'd been here for a few days, and I remembered all of our conversations. At least I thought I did.

He chattered on and on during the day, telling me about himself, his brothers, his family—even his job. He explained to me what he liked, what he didn't like, when he first got his wolf. So many things that stayed right there in the forefront of my mind. Heck, I could tell you about a math test he failed as a kid because he read the directions wrong.

But the more I tried to figure out how I got the drug—the doctor called it Duskthorn—in my system, the less I was able to remember that night at all. If I could remember every single detail of the past few days, shouldn't I be able to remember that? But the more I tried, the worse I failed.

I'd been going from place to place. I wouldn't stay long, leaving almost instantly in some cases. The weirdest part was I couldn't tell you what those places were... possibly restaurants or bars or maybe stores? But then again, I couldn't actually tell anyone anything, being trapped in my fur like this.

That night was incredibly blurry. Where I went and why? Not a clue, but I remembered that every time I left, I was flustered, almost angry. It was like a bad

dream you kept going through the same cycle of, never being able to break it.

And then—I met my mate, and I was in this form. I'd been under a dumpster when he found me. That I was sure of, but less because I remembered it and more because he told me. It somehow solidified or possibly created the memory.

But why? Why was I there? My gut said it had to be the result of something really bad. I wasn't one to wander the city in my fur. With my luck I'd run into more than one do-gooder human over the years who tried to catch me with the hopes of finding my owner. Sleeping in my fur in the sunlight cascading in through the window was enough adventure for me.

Except the night I met Boaz, apparently.

This entire situation was all such a mess, and it kept getting worse and worse and worse. My mate mentioned drugs. I wasn't someone who took drugs... ever. That wasn't me. And I hadn't even had any alcohol.

But why would he lie about that? He didn't come across as the type. But if I did have drugs in my system... was that why my memory was such a hazy mess? Probably. I wouldn't have done it on purpose, though. That I was sure of. Peer pressure had never been a powerful influence in my life, and being an omega, it was always safest to keep a straight head while out. It wasn't as if I had a beast that could do me any good in a fight. My entire superpower as a cat was looking up at people with my big eyes and winning them over with my cuteness.

Had I gone out looking for a hook-up? Did someone roofie my drink? That happened a lot on TV... so did it happen in real life? But also—wouldn't a roofie just make me pretty much fall asleep and be compliant? Not hide under a dumpster in my fur while my mate showed up.

I generally wasn't a hook-up kind of omega, but I was grasping at straws... any straw that might contain a single answer.

The whole situation was a mess, one I wasn't going to be able to get out of until I regained my skin.

It was moments like these, moments when my mate was outside, that everything got worse. My memory faded more quickly, my nerves ratcheted up, and my senses were overloaded, with the notable exception of my scent which was still gone. Was that from the drugs too? No. That had been longer. I thought. Arggg, this was so frustrating.

The longing for him to be by my side, to comfort me, to ground me, was overwhelming. He'd gone out with the trash, promising he'd be right back. Only a minute ago—or maybe five, ten? I wasn't even sure anymore.

I was spiraling.

My cat backed under the chair, hiding—I wasn't even sure from what. We were safe here. My mate promised us that, and he wouldn't lie to me. I might not remember much of who I was or how I got here, but I was sure of that .

And then the door rattled. It opened. And then... he came walking in. Relief flooded me. I ran over to him and jumped on his shoulder, wrapping myself around his neck, needing to be close to him. I rubbed my chin against his jaw and then licked his cheek.

“Did you miss me, little one?”

He'd taken to calling me that, which was honestly better than when he called me Kitten, although that was growing on me now too. Anything that showed affection

and not just disappointment in the drugs.

The Duskthorn I was still having a hard time believing I consumed—but wasn't the proof there? The doctor found it in my blood. The doctor I didn't remember.

I believed Boaz when he said that we went, or that they came to us, I wasn't sure which, but a doctor had seen me. I believed I was checked out and given tests and they came back positive for drugs. There was no reason for him to lie about that. But try as I could, there was no image of that in my head at all. Not even a hint of memory about it.

Maybe it was just being in this form for so long that was doing this to me. I'd taken naps, lots of naps, in my fur over my years. But never had I stayed there for more than overnight. Or maybe I had and those memories had faded too.

Was I turning into my cat? Would the human side of me just fall away? Was that what was happening?

He reached up and pulled me down from his neck, holding me close in his arms. "Hey. Hey. It's okay, I promise. How about some tuna? You like tuna, right?"

I did. And I'd been eating a lot of it. I appreciated that he was giving me tuna and not cat food. I'd done that once in this form, and whoa, did I regret it when I shifted back.

A soft purr began to build in my chest. This was where I belonged, wrapped in his arms.

He brought me to the kitchen, sat me on a chair, and grabbed a can of tuna. It was the good stuff too—not the 99-cent bargain tuna. It was processed with oil, nice thick chunks, and I enjoyed every last bite of it as he held it out to me, piece by piece.

I could eat it on my own. Physically, I was fine. My cat could jump and run and purr—all the good stuff. It was my brain that wasn't working. But there was something comforting about having him feed me like this, taking care of me. And piece by piece, I ate it.

Then, after he cleaned up the bowl, he carried me to the bed, sat me on a pillow he'd set up for me, and joined me, taking out a book and reading it aloud until I fell asleep.

It was the story of a prince who found a treasure map and set off on an adventure. I must've been more tired than I realized, because I drifted off before he got to any of the good stuff. I didn't remember anything past him making a plan to leave the castle under the full moon. But then again, my memory had been shit lately, so maybe I listened to the entire thing.

A crash woke me. It was cold. So cold. And I went to grab my blanket, to wrap it around me—and realized pretty quickly I wasn't home.

Where was I?

I climbed out of bed, my two legs rather wobbly, and found the source of the noise almost instantly. A book about a prince had fallen onto the ground. Had I been reading this? It didn't seem like my kind of book, but then again, I wasn't even sure where I was.

It was comfortable, though. Safe even. I belonged here. There was no urgency to leave. But also... none of this space was mine.

“Where the fuck am I?” My voice was scratchy, as if I hadn't used it in days. “And how did I get here?”

I climbed back into the bed, hoping it would trigger a memory, not wanting to leave

despite not knowing where I was. Maybe this was a dream. Yeah, that was it. Nothing else made any sense.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:04 am

7

BOAZ

“How did I get here?”

My mate scrambled for the covers and pulled them over his naked body when I stepped in.

I stood back from the bed, not wanting to overwhelm him.

“You’re...” He gulped. “You’re my mate.”

Phew, that was a load off my mind. At least we didn’t have to dance around one another, date maybe, and endure the pushing and pulling I’d observed with humans.

But the poor guy had no memory of how he got here.

“I’m Keane. I should’ve mentioned that.”

“I’m Boaz, and I’ll explain what happened from the time we met, but can I get you coffee and something to eat?”

He peered out the window. “From? Looks like we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“I have supplies. Nothing fancy, just coffee and toast?”

He nodded, but his pained expression and wiggling butt had me pointing to the bathroom before I skedaddled out of the room.

I jumped up and down in front of the sink and did silent clappy-claps because he recognized me as his mate. But the images burned into my mind of his naked body after he shifted led me to burn something else: the toast.

The smoke alarm blared, and Keane raced out with a towel wrapped around his hips. He clutched it with both hands, but it slid lower, giving me a glimpse of a patch of dark curly hair.

“What’s happening?” He tore toward the front door, rattling the handle but unable to undo the bolt. He lost his grip on the towel, but while his shifter reflexes may have been suppressed, he was able to catch the fluffy piece of flannel before it hit the floor. I did get a good look at his butt cheeks and crack. Nice.

“Sorry.” I reached out to grab him but reconsidered. Not knowing what to do with my hands, they dangled in the air. “That was me burning the toast.”

Keane glanced at me over his shoulder. “That’s it?” He sniffed. “Oh. I thought the cabin was on fire.”

“I’ll start the process again.” I tossed out the incinerated pieces of bread and poured a cup of coffee. “While you’re waiting for food, here’s something hot to drink.”

Keane grinned after taking a sip. “Ahhh, that’s good.” He eyed the toaster. “Interesting you refer to toast as food.”

Hmmm. I wondered if cat shifters had an aversion to bread. “I can make something else.”

“No, it’s fine. Toast is great, but I never understood how people can go to work or school after eating only a crispy piece of bread.”

We had something in common. I wasn’t much of a toast guy either. A few bites and it was gone, leaving crumbs everywhere.

“Go back to bed and I’ll bring the toast in with more coffee.” Keane had already drained his cup, and I poured him another one.

“And then we’ll have the talk?”

I’d overheard humans refer to the talk as a precursor to a break-up, but we weren’t mated and technically we’d only just met. It was either that or he needed me to explain how babies were made. Pretty sure I’d read in a novel that was how some humans approached the sex talk with their kids.

“Okaay.” This was going to be interesting.

“About how I got here.”

“Right.” Light dawned in my befuddled brain. “The talk. Yes, I’ll get you up to speed.”

I inwardly cursed at my choice of words, as I’d made him sound like a car. But Keane trotted back to bed, and I got cracking on making more toast. Not wanting it to burn again, I readjusted the timer and stood by the toaster waiting for it to pop up.

Placing honey, butter, jam, cheese, and ham on a tray, along with more coffee and milk, I strode into the bedroom.

“Wow! A feast!”

“Wasn’t sure if you’re a sweet or savory person... in the morning.”

Keane closed one eye. “I can be either.”

I guzzled half my coffee to avoid responding, though my cock did.

“Now I want you to fill me in.”

Gods, he had to stop talking like that. My dick swelled even more.

“Okay.” I had another kind of filling in mind, but that would have to wait. “What do you remember?”

“Alphas following me out... I think.” He rubbed his scalp. “My memory is fuzzy.”

We had to discuss the drug situation. No detours or delays allowed.

I cleared my throat and took some seconds to formulate my thoughts.

“I know what you’re going to say,” he added.

I almost fell to my knees and thanked the goddess for getting out of that awkward situation.

“You’re thinking when are we going to get naked and mark one another.”

Wait? Was I? No, absolutely not. I was about to discuss something else, but I couldn’t quite grasp what that was. It eluded me.

“Ummm, can we put a pause on that? Ummm, this is a little delicate.”

Hysterical laughter filled my head as I imagined my five siblings reacting to me using the word “delicate.” That wasn’t me. I didn’t dance around difficult situations but rather jumped in with both feet.

“It’s about the Duskthorn in your system.” There I said it, and there were no take-backsies.

Who are you? Even my wolf picked up on the change in me.

Keane held up his hands in surrender mode. “I swear I didn’t ingest that on purpose.” He grabbed me. “Please, please believe me.” Teardrops lined his eyelashes, and they sparkled in the early-morning light.

His sincerity was apparent in his eyes as he pleaded, and also his shaking hands and the blood draining from his cheeks.

“I do.” Whew. That was one huge potential problem crossed off the list. “My brothers and I suspect patrons’ drinks were spiked. You were lucky because some shifters died.”

“Were there any cat shifters?” he asked.

“They were not among the dead.”

There was a pause as I thought back to our meeting in the alley. That extended until the break in the conversation was beyond awkward. We’d leaped from the drug issue to people dying, and that led me to the killing in the alley.

“I was there,” he said in a quiet voice as his lower lip trembled. “Hiding under the dumpster. I have vague memories of getting from a bar to the alley—I think I was looking for a job.”

Perhaps he'd shifted and leaped into the killers' car. Not that it mattered. That was the past.

"I'm sorry, not for what I did but that you witnessed me slaughtering one shifter."

Keane clamped his teeth on his lower lip before replying. "More of a massacre. I remember it now."

Ouch! If I could have planned how to meet my mate, that wasn't it. I could almost smell the blood, though I'd had multiple showers since.

"If me and my men hadn't eliminated them?—"

My mate put a finger to my lips. "They had to be crushed. I don't know how I know this, but I do. My cat trusts you." He fisted his hands, and his nostrils flared. "I wish I could have joined you but a house cat isn't much of an adversary against a wolf." He forced a chuckle.

Another hurdle cleared. He didn't think of me as evil. I was calling it a win.

"You're not scared of me?"

"No way," he scoffed. "But is that your job? Taking down bad guys."

Shit. I hadn't prepared for the question. Telling a mate that I was mafia, my whole family was part of organized crime, that had been a big deal. And now it sounded like maybe he didn't fully remember. Gods, I hated drugs and what they had done to my mate.

"On TV, guys like you are?—"

“Mafia.” I blurted it out because my wolf was nudging me to be honest. Keane would have to decide if being my mate trumped that. Being mafia wasn’t a job. It was who I was, and it was intertwined with being a shifter.

My mate nodded. “I kinda suspected.”

I let his words hang in the air. It was up to him to speak up, and I had to count the seconds until he did. One, two, three. Gods, why was he taking so long?

“If someone had told me my mate was mafia, I would have cowered, thinking I’d be hiding from possible assassins 24/7 if we were together.”

I sensed a but coming, and not waiting for Keane to say it, I piped up. “But?”

He grinned, and that smile gave me hope. “You’re not known for your patience, are you?”

“Not really.”

“The mating pull is so strong, I’m willing to accept your way of life with conditions.”

I had to ask. “What are those?”

“That you allow me to come with you when you get the rest of those fuckers.” He punched the air and mimed shooting a gun. “I’ve never owned a gun, but I could learn.” He added that cats weren’t much use in a war unless it was with other cats or dogs. “I’ve had standoffs with dogs.”

“I should call the doctor.”

“Because I fought dogs? I don’t have rabies.” Keane screwed up his nose. “And if

you're referring to that asshat who suggested I might be a drug addict, could I take a pass?"

"Ummm. We could see another doctor." If my mate was pissed at the guy, I was too, even though I had thought the same thing. Hmmm, I'd better be honest before we started our relationship. "He's not the only one. An asshat. I wondered that too."

My mate shrugged. "It was a reasonable assumption." He purred, and my body tingled. "But he's not my sexy mafia mate, so I forgive you but not him."

Shoot, I was going to come in my pants if he kept talking.

"We should call him." I had to change the subject or my pants would split and my dick would bound out.

"You do that." Keane licked around his lips.

I turned my back on my mate, trying to stop my heart from racing and my length from swelling. The doctor said to see him in twenty-four hours to make sure the drug was no longer in Keane's system.

"Oh, whatever shall we do while we're waiting."

KEANE

I lay on the bed, wondering how I managed to be near him this long without begging him to take me. The pull was so strong, stronger than I'd ever felt before. There was still so much to figure out, like where I'd gotten the drugs. Had it really been while I was looking for a job at that club or bar, and if so, why hadn't it hit me earlier? My mind should've been on all of that, but it wasn't.

My mind was on Boaz's mouth, what lay beneath his clothing, and why his hands weren't already on me. I licked my lips, wondering where to go from here. Should I make the first move? Should he? Should we wait for the doctor after all?

He answered for me, moving his body so that he was hovering over mine, so close and yet so unbearably far away. He stayed there like that, leaving me breathless with need, his lips only a few inches from my own.

"Please." I didn't even pretend to have restraint. I wanted him, needed him, now.

His lips crashed into mine, raw and fervent. My mouth moved with his, and I arched, inviting him closer, helpless against the mating pull, my slick entrance begging for attention.

I gripped his shoulders, not willing to let him leave. "Boaz," I gasped, barely a whisper.

He pulled back, looking down at me, eyes barely human. “Keane,” he breathed. “I’ve got you.”

He pressed me into the mattress, his lips devouring me, his chest rumbling, his beast so close to the surface.

I grabbed at his chest, my hands tugging at his shirt. “Off,” I begged.

He paused, then took over as he yanked it over his head, casting it aside. I inhaled sharply. I’d seen him naked before, but this was different. I was human, and he was... he was Boaz.

He took my mouth again. Our kiss broke, leaving me completely breathless. His lips wandered from mine, pressing hard against my neck, lingering there as I squirmed beneath him. I gasped as he moved lower, kissing the hollow of my throat, my chest, his hair brushing a path as he traveled lower and lower. I trembled beneath him, the sensations unlike anything I’d ever felt before.

“Boaz,” I whispered again, my voice barely my own.

He drew back, only to look at me. “You smell incredible,” he murmured, and I felt myself flush, the heat of it racing across my skin. He found my mouth once more, his kiss rough and hungry, my taste now on his tongue.

“Too many clothes.” He needed his pants gone, and he took the hint, getting up long enough to divest himself of the denim.

My fingers curled against his skin, pulling him back down, needing his flesh against mine.

His breath caught as I reached between us, taking his hardness into my palm. He was

thick and heavy, and my breathing faltered at the anticipation of it being inside me.

“Keane,” he groaned as I gave it a jerk.

His hands were everywhere, tangled in my hair, on my hips, grabbing my ass. It was too much while at the same time not being enough.

I pulled away from his mouth, dragged my lips along his jaw. “Let me taste you. I need to?—”

My words broke as I rolled him onto his back and sank lower, my lips and hands tracing a path down his chest. His fingers threaded into my hair, urgent and pleading as I got lower and lower, until I was on my knees between his thighs. I looked up and caught him watching me with an intensity that stole what breath I had left. It was as hot as the sun.

His cock was heavy against my cheek, and I nuzzled into it, my lips trailing open-mouthed kisses along its length. His hand tightened in my hair, pulling at my scalp, urging me closer.

I took him into my mouth, my tongue swirling, teasing, and he gasped, a harsh and beautiful sound that went straight to my cock. I closed my eyes, losing myself in the feel of him, the stretch of my lips around his thickness. He bucked against me, his control slipping as quickly as my own. I moaned around him, slick and ready for him, but unwilling to stop, the ache between my legs more than I could bear.

His hips thrust forward, once, then again, a rhythm almost too much to take, and his head fell back, teeth bared, throat exposed. My memory kept slipping away, and for a split second, I contemplated grabbing his phone to take a picture of him like this so I wouldn't forget the glorious view before me.

“Keane,” he said again, choking on the word. He pulled me up, half lifting, half dragging me as he turned me, pressing my back into the bed, one hand tight on my shoulder, the other on my ass, his body pressed against mine. “If you kept going, I was going to come.”

“That’s kinda the point.” I stuck out my tongue.

“The first time I come with you, I want it to be in this glorious ass as I mark you as mine.” There was something so raw, so primal, so sexy about that.

“Then take me already.”

“Patient, Kitten. Patient.”

He settled between my legs, guiding my thighs apart and walking a trail up my thigh to where I wanted him most. He circled my entrance, teasing me in a slow sensual torture. Just when I thought I couldn’t take it anymore, he breached my entrance with one finger, showing me a glimpse of what was to come next. In and out he moved, adding a second finger, and then a third, until my begging was anything but subtle.

“I’ve got you.” It was a promise

He lined himself up with my aching hole, and I felt the pressure, the thickness of him, as he began to push inside slowly. He filled me, inch by incredible inch, stretching me wide. “You’re so slick for me.”

“Only you.” My body accommodated, slick and needing all of him, all at once.

I shuddered, moaning his name as he buried himself deep inside, until I felt his balls against my ass. We were as close as two bodies could get.

He held me, hands tight on my hips, not moving, letting me adjust to the intrusion.

“Move. Please.”

He pulled back, thrust into me, deep and relentless, and the friction, the pure heat, made my head spin. I pushed against him, meeting each thrust with equal force, until I was lost in the rhythm.

He fucked me, desperate now, full of urgency, like he would never get enough. I couldn't either.

“Keane,” he groaned, guttural, and I felt him swell inside me, felt the catch and hold of his knot, locking us together. It filled me, impossibly thick, and I arched into him as I bit into his shoulder and he did mine, marking each other as mates.

“Keane,” he said, softer now, his lips against my hair. “Mine.”

I shivered at the sound of it, turning to see his eyes, so close to mine. “Yes. Yours.”

His arms were strong, inescapable, and I let myself sink into them as he rolled us around, leaving me on top. I was too spent and happy to care where he ended and I began. We lay there, the rest of the world fading away, until it was only the two of us, a mess of limbs as I drifted off to sleep.

The rest of the world would still be there when we woke up... the drugs, the violence... his job. But for now, we were nestled in our new bond, enjoying the gift that fate had given us, being one for the first time.

Tomorrow we could deal with the ugliness of this world. Now? Now was about us.

9

BOAZ

“We should go.”

Keane was still in bed, the sheets wrapped seductively around his hips, the mating mark visible on his shoulder.

He tilted his head. “I’d rather come.”

A fierce heat erupted from my center and rippled over my skin. This mate of mine, this cat shifter, had tamed me. I no longer preferred to be at Alpha’s beck and call but in bed, naked, with my beloved.

I kneeled on the mattress and whispered in his ear. “Me too, but you need to get checked out.”

Keane rolled onto his belly. “But the bad guys might be after you.” He’d voiced his fears that if the shifters who spiked the drinks were aware he’d survived, they could come after him too because he was a witness.

I doubted that, because the staff, who weren’t drinking and who were weaving between the tables and around the dance floor, would be more likely to remember who was sober than a customer who’d consumed alcohol and been drugged.

But if I was a target, I didn’t want to have to both defend my mate and fend off

attackers. Keane would be safer at the family home, and that was what I'd told Maynard this morning when he called.

"There's a family-slash-pack meeting at our place later, so we have to get going. But doctor first." I held up clothes that had been left in the cabin by one of our family for him to wear.

Keane threw off the sheets. He and his naked butt sashayed to the bathroom. He paused in the doorway and said over his shoulder, "I'd like to play doctor with you." He wiggled his hips and disappeared, leaving me dripping with sweat and my cock painfully hard.

I was tempted to follow him, but I gripped the nightstand, repeating in my head that duty came first, both to my mate and to my family and pack.

While I drove to the doctor's, Keane clamped his hand on my thigh. My flesh tingled, and I gritted my teeth, determined to continue driving and not pull over, yank down my mate's pants, and plow into him.

"Do you know what you're doing to me?"

My mate stared straight ahead, but he couldn't hide his grin. "I do."

But when I pulled up outside the doctor's office, my sassy mate vanished and was replaced with Keane who sported cheeks drained of color and a quivering lower lip.

"What if there's permanent damage?"

"Firstly, don't let your mind go to the worst conclusion, and secondly, if there's a problem, we will find a way to solve it." I took his hand and squeezed, and he returned it with a wan smile.

But the doctor was all smiles when he told us the tests came up negative. “There’s no longer any traces of Duskthorn in your blood. It’s possible that you had an accidental dosing, possibly an unwashed contaminated glass, and that your small beast skewed the testing results. But whatever the case, it’s all gone now.”

Keane flung himself into my arms, and we kissed, and he even stuck his tongue down my throat. I considered shoving the doctor out of the examination room and getting naked, but Maynard would be peeved if we were late.

“Seems there’s been a new development since we last met,” the doctor observed.

“Well, yes. I’m no longer stuck in my fur,” my mate muttered. He hadn’t forgiven the guy for thinking he was an addict, though he didn’t have the same misgivings about me.

“Do I have to meet all your brothers? Can’t we do it one by one?”

I’d forgotten he hadn’t officially met them as Keane, the man, and I would have arranged a more informal introduction, but both my older brother and Alpha texted, telling me to hurry.

“Sorry, my love. With Alpha present, they’ll behave.”

He shot me a glance as I steered the car around a corner. “And if Alpha wasn’t there, what would they be doing? Hanging from the chandeliers?”

“We don’t have chandeliers.”

My mate side-eyed me. “That’s what you got from what I said?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” He patted my thigh, but my cock was so engorged, I worried I’d greet my brothers with a huge boner.

Keane nibbled a nail. “I should be more nervous about meeting your Alpha because of what you told me about Maynard and his mate.”

I batted away his worry with one hand. “That was because my brother-in-law was human,” I clarified. “Not that we don’t like humans, but it was complicated by Maynard having to reveal he was a hitman.

“He’s a hitman!” We’d pulled up outside our house, and Keane’s voice boomed across the street.

“Ummm, yeah.” Probably should have mentioned that before we arrived. “But the good kind.”

Keane smushed his face with both hands. “So when I meet him, should I duck? Or yell, ‘Don’t shoot?’”

I grabbed both his hands. “My darling, look at me and breathe in and out.”

“I have done that every second since I was born, Boaz. You don’t need to tell me how to breathe.” His voice rose so by the end of the sentence, he was screeching.

My mate walked away and waved me off when I tried to approach him. “Just let me be.”

I stood back, wishing I could take him in my arms and smother him with kisses, but I respected his demand that I leave him alone.

I shuffled my feet on the driveway as the curtains in the living room twitched. Two,

then three, four, and finally five faces appeared. I ignored them because Alpha's car wasn't parked on the street, so he must have been running late.

When my mate strolled over to me, he apologized, saying though we were mafia, and he hadn't had a problem with that, having a hit man in the family, someone he'd share a meal with and celebrate with, was a bigger deal.

"He takes down bad guys." I kept the information to myself—for the moment—that he was supposed to kill his mate. That was a detailed discussion for another day.

Keane took a deep breath. "Better get this over with." He tucked his arm in mine, and the curtain twitchers vanished. "Looks like we have a welcoming committee."

"Oh, you saw that?" I laughed. "No need for introductions."

Like the last time I was here, the door was wrenched open, but only by Lake, our baby brother. The other four were nonchalantly sitting on various sofas, pretending to read—did they know how to read?—or watching TV.

"Hello, I'm Lake, the youngest and most sane of the brothers." He hugged Keane, and my mate melted into his arms. Lake was the easiest-going of my siblings, though he could handle himself in a fight, and his wolf was fierce.

"And we have chips and dips if you're hungry."

One by one my remaining brothers came over, and I introduced them. Maynard, being the eldest, was last.

"We're so glad the effects of the drug have worn off, and we'd love to welcome you to the family properly, but we have new information of what happened to you and the others at the club."

A car pulled up outside. Alpha! As the pack Beta, I opened the door and introduced him to my mate. Alpha was more circumspect than my brothers and probably came across as gruff, but I'd warned Keane.

He didn't wait until everyone was seated, and I'd barely closed the door when he stated, "We have confirmation that the Ironclaw pack from out of state was behind the poisoning."

Ezra held up his computer. "I tracked their messages that they thought were encrypted." He grinned. "But they were wrong."

"Let me guess. They want to muscle in on our territory." Thiago punched a sofa cushion.

"They weren't explicit in their messages, but that was what we gathered," Alpha added. He glanced at Ezra who nodded.

Everyone in the room bristled, and Riggs was on the edge of his seat. I half expected him to race out the door, yelling, "Now we go after them."

I wished Keane's introduction to the family could have been more relaxing, with everyone getting to know one another over dinner. My brothers would all talk at once, my mate would forget who said what, and we'd all laugh and argue about which TV program to watch.

But Keane's presence in my life was because of his near-death experience and the deliberate killing of our kin. This had to be addressed, and there was only one way to do it.

Alpha's expression, which was always... dour... became more serious. His brow wrinkled.

“So the drugging wasn’t accidental, they intended to kill shifters and send a message to our pack.” Thiago got up and paced the floor.

“Exactly. If we don’t deal with the Ironclaw shifters, they’ll keep killing us.” Alpha sank into an armchair.

“We have to go to war, don’t we?” Lake’s expression was serious, but there was no fear in his eyes. He’d killed before and was one of our best fighters.

“Yes,” the rest of them, except for Keane, said in unison.

“I want to be involved too.” My mate stood up.

Now everyone’s mouths gaped, and everyone looked at Keane and then at me. They expected me to say what they were all thinking because I was the one who always stated the obvious.

But I was Keane’s mate, and I hated to hurt his feelings.

While I hesitated, Maynard spoke up. “But Keane, you’re a cat!”

KEANE

“I’m not just a cat!” My entire life, I’ve been underestimated because of my beast. Fuck, I was one of the worst culprits in that—always thinking I was useless, not good enough, weak. But something had changed now that I’d been mated.

And it wasn’t that I felt stronger—I didn’t. I was woefully unprepared for all of this. But I was determined to be exactly what my mate needed me to be. I was going to be strong. Fierce. And I sure as shit wasn’t going to be a weak point in his life—someone he needed to worry about, someone he needed to rescue, someone who would hold him back.

“We need a minute alone. Let’s finish this later.” Power radiated off my mate.

I started to go toward the door, and my mate’s hand rested on the back of my neck. His lips were near my ear, his voice calm and soothing. “Not you. You stay. They need to leave. We need to talk.”

I leaned into his touch, and he let out a growl—and everyone left. Every single one. And without a single question. At least not one spoken out loud.

The power emanating off him surprised me. I knew he was strong. I’d witnessed it first hand. But he wasn’t the Alpha or the head of the family. I’d very wrongly thought that meant he would stick to the hierarchy. Nope.

It was hot as fuck.

“Here.” His voice was low and calm as he guided me down to sit and knelt in front of me. His hands cupped my cheeks, holding me in a sweet, steady grip. Gone was the wolf that gave no room for disobedience, and in his place was this sexy, sweet man. I liked to think that this side of him was reserved only for me.

“Listen to me, omega mine. You’re not just a cat. You’re my everything. My job, my sole purpose for being, is to make you happy and to keep you safe. I will not let you be in harm’s way.”

I pulled back. “Let me? You think this is a case of you allowing me to do anything?” The anger boiling up from me was disproportionate to his words, but I couldn’t help it. I was pissed. “I’m your mate. I’m your equal. Yes, you’re a wolf, and you’re strong and fierce and have a jaw that could snap me in two, but make no mistake—the Goddess sent me to you because I am yours. Not to own. Not to coddle. But to walk beside... until we go home to Her.”

Never in my life had I stood up for myself like this. Not once. But with Boaz, I felt safe enough to let him know exactly how I felt.

His jaw dropped. And then... out came a chuckle.

“Don’t you mock me.” I pushed him back onto his heels. Or more accurately, he allowed me to push him. Had he wanted to stay exactly where he was, I didn’t have the strength to do anything about it.

“I wasn’t.”

I gave him the stink eye.

“I swear, I wasn’t. It’s just... you’re so full of surprises, and it made me happy. You’re mine, Keane, and I can’t believe I’m this lucky.” He stood up, held his hand out for me, and I tentatively took it, unsure what was going on.

“Let’s go. I’ll train you. I was just scared.”

Scared. My big sexy alpha was scared. I stood up and wrapped my arms around him.

“This should make you less scared.”

He grabbed my hand.

“Because it means we can be the kind of team that no one can come between.”

He dragged me out, barking at everyone waiting in the hallway about “continuing this discussion later,” and brought me straight to the car.

We ended up at a very nondescript building. If anything, it looked like an abandoned storefront, with apartments on top like something out of an old movie. But as we stepped inside, I realized it was so much more.

“This place is mine. It’s where I train. I don’t go to the public ranges or gyms. I never want people to see my weakness.”

“I don’t think you have one.” At least none I could see.

“I do. And it’s you.”

I cringed, not wanting to be his Achilles heel. I was a shitty actor, despite trying to school my face. He must’ve sensed what I was feeling, because he brought his hand up to my cheek and pressed his forehead to mine.

“It’s not a bad thing. If anything, it’s a good one. Because it means that I will no longer be reckless, no longer rush into things without worrying if it’ll be my last mission.”

Down the stairs we went into a homemade shooting range. I’d never seen anything like it. Boaz opened what I thought was a closet and turned out to be a small room, a room filled with guns.

So many guns.

Were they automatics? Hunting guns? BB guns? Air guns? They could’ve been anything—though I highly doubted they were BB or air, since the mafia didn’t mess around.

“What do you want to start with?” he asked as if that were a reasonable question.

I looked around. They were all so overwhelming, knowing that the second I picked one up, I’d hold the power of life and death in my hand, something my beast didn’t have on his own. Maybe if I’d been a dragon, it wouldn’t feel so life-changing. But I wasn’t. I was a freaking housecat.

“What gun did you start with?”

He walked to the back of the room, opened a box I hadn’t noticed, and pulled out a little gun. Little compared to the others, anyway.

“This one.” It was orange camo, hardly fierce-looking.

“A BB gun, then.” I could handle a BB gun.

“No. Not a BB gun.” As we walked into the main room, he told me the story of how

he got the gun as a young boy—how he'd been fearful of them and didn't want to pick one up. And the orange was chosen to make him less nervous, to make him comfortable enough to give it a try.

From there he went into full-on school teacher mode, that was if school teachers taught you how to destroy your enemies. He explained the gun's components, one by one. Showed me how to take it apart. How to put it back together. He went through every single safety lesson that could possibly exist. And then tested me on the information. All of that before I was able to pick it up and try it for myself.

“Okay, I'm going to guide your arms and show you how to hold it. Then I want you to aim at the number one over there. And when you're ready, ease the trigger.”

I wasn't expecting it to be easy or for the force of it to be so strong—nearly knocking me off balance. But I did it. I shot it and stayed on my feet. I didn't, however, even come close to hitting the number one... but I'd done it. And that was something more than I was able to say when I first stepped foot in here.

We spent the next hour with him helping me, aiding me, guiding me, until eventually I hit my target. It was a huge target, but a win was a win.

Just when I felt accomplished, he gave me a new target. And another. And another, until I could barely stand and my arms were like jelly.

“That's enough for today. You did so well.”

“Do I get to keep that gun?” I never thought I'd ask for a weapon, but I never thought I'd mate into the mob either, so there was that.

“No. You're not ready for that yet.” He pressed his forehead to mine. “But soon... soon you will be.”

“Are we coming back here tomorrow?”

“Yes and no.” He put the gun away and brought me back up to the second floor, which was filled with dummies and punching bags and those things you see at the end of a football field that players ram into. I was so outside my element. “Tomorrow we’re coming here, and I’m going to teach you how to take someone down using your hands. Because?—”

“Because my cat is so weak?”

“No. Your cat isn’t weak. But there are times when you don’t want to allow another to shift and acting quickly is key. And there are many humans in this city. Shifting in front of them would be bad.”

I hadn’t even considered that, I was too quick to jump to being butt hurt.

“Do you think I’ll be able to handle this?” Suddenly, my confidence faltered. Now I was worried. Could I handle this life?

“Yes. Fate made you mine for a reason. I promise you, Kitten, I’ll teach you how to keep yourself safe.”

“And you too.” I tapped his nose. “I want to keep you safe too.”

He shook his head, rolling his eyes. “Yes, and me too.”

I wasn’t sure he believed it, but I was going to make it true. Because he deserved a mate who could handle this life—and give back as much as they took.

And I was determined for that to be me.

BOAZ

I was so impressed with my mate. He trained in human form and learned hand-to-hand combat. He could use a Glock and now hit bullseyes 99% of the time. But most importantly, we had trained his beast to sniff out drugs, or the drug: Duskthorn.

Duskthorn was basically the only thing he could scent and I hated that for him. The doctor assumed it had something to do with being drugged and the synthetically enhanced addictive nature of it. Everything we learned about this drug made us more determined to eradicate its distribution in our city and ideally everywhere.

In cat form, he was a sneaky little feline. Whereas a wolf was almost impossible to disguise in the city, no one paid attention to a stray cat. Keane became our lookout and was able to feed us vital information about the Ironclaw pack and their drug dealings.

We were able to disrupt the supply chains by going to the source: the harbor. A cat wandering the docks and onto ships, one who had been trained to sniff out drugs, was invaluable, though I worried the vessels would set sail with my mate onboard.

They were storing the drug in a warehouse near the dock, but it caught fire and the fire brigade took all night to put it out. That was thanks to my sneaky mate and his beast who set the contents of the warehouse alight.

But while the drugs were cremated, many of the Ironclaw members who harbored and

sold them were alive. One more ship docked, and Keane detected Duskthorn on board. That vessel had already departed from its origin port before the warehouse was destroyed, and the captain had no choice but to continue the journey.

With Alpha's approval, my brothers and I and handful of trusted pack members were entrusted with ending the trade.

We hid on the docks, in amongst the metal shipping containers, piled three and four high. One by one, the Ironclaw shifters carried crates from the bowels of the ship to a container on the far side of the dock. They were wary, treading softly and looking around them as if they expected to be intercepted. Also their scent was heightened, signaling they were scared, and even though the night was cold, their reeking body odor drifted to us on the breeze.

We had the advantage as the Ironclaw shifters needed their skin to transport the goods. Wolves were for tracking and fighting but not for moving crates. If they hadn't invested so much money in the drug deal, they may have shrugged off the loss of the warehouse and its contents. Or perhaps their Alpha and his Betas were just greedy and didn't mind losing pack members in a war, as long as they eventually made money.

Keane was crouched low beside me, and I squeezed his hand before he shifted. If the Ironclaw guys caught a whiff of his scent, they'd recognize it as shifter. But I sprayed him with a combination of pheromones and ammonia, basically artificial cat pee. Oof. What a stink!

His purpose was to distract the Ironclaw gang which would give us an advantage.

"What the fuck?" One of the Ironclaw shifters dropped his crate, and it toppled into the water. The others hunched over, their crates thunking on the gangway or deck, and someone fired a shot.

“Stop with the gunfire,” a voice hissed from the gangway. “It’s a damned cat. Probably looking for rats.”

Considering they’d lost the warehouse and its contents, they weren’t being overly careful, but they must have paid off the security people—or perhaps just offed them.

“Keep moving. Our boss will be pissed if we’re late, and Rolo, you have to retrieve that crate.”

“Boss, it’s at the bottom of the ocean by now.”

“Rolo, you’ll be on the ocean floor weighed down with a concrete slab if you don’t go get it.”

If we waited long enough, these bozos would eliminate one another and we could go home.

“Shit, that damned feline scratched me.” That wasn’t Rolo. “I’m going to kill it.”

“For fuck’s sake, forget the damned cat.” These fools were yelling and making a huge racket while they were unloading contraband.

Keane had already put some of the Ironclaw guys on edge, but I was worried one would grab him by the neck and bash him against the side of the ship. I conjured up images of my mate’s beast, limp and dangling from a meaty fist.

Stop. You have a job to do. My beast was telling me to concentrate.

I motioned to my brothers and the others to be ready. Keane had one more trick in his repertoire.

“Ahhh.” The yell echoed and reverberated around the containers. “It’s on my face. Get it off.” For a wolf shifter, that guy was a big baby.

There was another thunk, a crash, and more swearing. A second gunshot and a screech, the scent of blood replacing the salty aroma of sea water.

With the Ironclaw members in disarray, shooting at one another, we took our fur and attacked. They were at a disadvantage, and our beasts leaped on them, sinking their canines into their flesh before they could shift. One died before he hit the ground, two went overboard and screamed they couldn’t swim.

Bye-bye.

But the remaining Ironclaw guys took their fur, and they were worthy of the title warrior. One tore Lake’s beast’s ear half off, while Thiago’s opponent clawed his underbelly. The gangway and desk became slick with blood, but as one large wolf leaped at me, a tiny beast flew through the air, clamping onto the wolf’s head. He shook himself, trying to get rid of my mate, but while he was blindsided, I ripped his throat out, and he collapsed with blood gushing from his wounds.

One of the shifters escaped, his wolf’s footfalls thumping along the dock until they faded in the distance. But even if we had killed them all, they would rise again. They reminded me of that arcade game Whack-a-Mole where you eliminated one and five took its place.

I took my skin, and my mate’s beast flew into my embrace as Ironclaw blood mingled with our own.

“You were the hero of the night.”

* * *

My brothers recovered from their injuries, and Keane insisted on training with us even after we'd quashed the supply of Duskthorn.

"Maybe we shouldn't be using your mate like... you know, a dog." Lake adored Keane and didn't want to insult him and his beast.

My mate shifted and grinned at my youngest brother. "That's sweet of you, but humans have trained rats to ferret out landmines, and there's research into whether elephants can be trained in similar techniques."

"Wow! From small animals to huge ones."

"And honey bees!"

"No. You're kidding me." Lake tapped his phone. "Oh, you're not."

"That's enough for today." Thiago waved us away as he was headed to the woods to shift and hunt.

But my phone beeped just as he tossed off his clothes.

"Glad I'm not the pack Beta." Thiago took his fur and bounded off.

Keane shrugged on his shirt and studied my face. "I was looking forward to a night alone, but I'm guessing Alpha needs you."

"Needs us." I flipped the phone around so my mate and Lake could read the text.

"But we did our job and stopped the supply of Duskthorn. How could there be more deaths?" Keane took the phone and tapped on the link. He dropped the device, but Lake swooped in and caught it.

“Leave a message for Thiago, and get Ezra and Riggs to meet us at headquarters.” Maynard was off on a job and wouldn’t be back until this evening.

I left Lake to round up our brothers and took Keane aside. “This is bad. Are you sure you want to be involved?”

“Of course. I’m part of the pack.”

At headquarters, I consulted with Alpha before he spoke in front of pack members.

“This latest incident involved the death of Crescent Moon shifters, our kin, and we assume the Ironclaw shifters are again responsible.”

The initial deaths, on the night I met my mate, were on our territory but the shifters who died were from packs in and around the city.

“But Alpha, how are they bringing in the drugs?” one shifter asked, and the rest of the crowd murmured in agreement.

“Rather than storing the drugs in a warehouse, they’re hiding them in children’s toys, and that is how they are getting through customs and to the general population.”

Children’s toys. The scumbags. We had to stop this.

“I have a suggestion.” Keane put up his hand.

Alpha nodded. He preferred using as few words as possible.

“Why not inform the human authorities? The drugs may be intended for shifters, but if the police discover drugs secreted in toys, they won’t know who the intended victims are.” He elaborated and explained that most of the police didn’t know we

existed.

I was so proud of my mate for his suggestion but wondered how Alpha would react. Shifters liked to deal with our problems ourselves and not farm out the responsibility to humans.

“That’s an excellent idea, Keane.” Alpha approved.

We had contacts in the police department, but it would be sensible to do it anonymously because the police might think we were dealing and just going after a rival gang.

But we had suspicions humans in law enforcement had been bribed by the Ironclaw Alpha. We bribed them too, but we weren’t hiding drugs, just expecting them to overlook run-of-the-mill city hall business.

“That was clever,” I whispered to my mate after the meeting.

Ezra, being the tech genius, was tasked with planting anonymous messages while we waited, hoping it couldn’t be traced back to us.

The raid was front page news a few days later, but Alpha informed us not to get too cocky.

“They won’t give up. They’ll find another way.”

KEANE

Now that I had settled into my new home with Boaz, received my replacement ID, thanks to losing mine behind the dumpster, and had recuperated, it was time to get back to the job hunt. As much as I dreaded it, not because I didn't want to work—I did, but being rejected time and time and time again? That was crappy.

And then add to that, the last time I went out to pound the pavement, I'd been drugged. And that experience turned job hunting from being awful and bad for my self-esteem to also being dangerous. But I couldn't let it get me down. I needed to do this. My mate deserved a mate who contributed.

I'd listened to far too many podcasts about how to get jobs lately, hoping for a hint of how to be successful and for a glimpse at what the current job market looked like. I was trying to find something... anything... to give me a leg up. They talked a lot about how to “brand” yourself, and there were a few hints on what to say when asked why you were fired from your last position. That was pretty helpful, given that saying, “My boss was a cheating asshole and I happened to see him out with his side piece, so he fired me to cover his own butt” wasn't good optics.

I pulled up my job search profile and started browsing again, seeing if any company I was interested in had any listings. And then I took the risk—I started looking at jobs I didn't quite qualify for, not in the truest sense, and decided that was the route to go. As long as I could sell myself, that tiny missing skill wouldn't be noticed, right?

I filled out online application after online application after online application, only stopping when my mate insisted, telling me I'd done enough for the night. And then before I could get too in my head about all I could be doing to find work, he distracted me in the best possible way... with his tongue.

From the beginning, I knew that my place was by my mate's side. Other than grabbing some things from my apartment, I hadn't been back. He was mine and he was my home. Full. Stop.

Boaz offered to help me get a job, and he would, but I didn't want that. I didn't want to always be dependent on him. I wanted him to be able to depend on me, too. I couldn't keep staying with my mate, eating his food, letting him spoil me, and not contribute. It just wasn't in me.

He insisted I was contributing, by learning how to protect myself and by staying safe and blah blah blah . He never "blah blah blah-ed" or talked over me, but that was how my brain processed it. This was all self-imposed.

When I woke up, I declared today the day I was going to get a job. I printed out a bunch of résumés, threw on my best business casual, and headed to a new part of town. I was going to wait around for interviews that may never come. I was gonna do this.

It was a good day to go out looking too, because Boaz had a meeting that was going to take up a good chunk of his day, and frankly, knowing he was occupied had me not feeling guilty about being away from him. Because once again, I was self-imposing rules and regulations onto me. I needed to get over that.

The rideshare dropped me off at a central location and I took out my new phone, looked at my list of places to stop at, and went to the first one. It was a small office that was hiring and asked for people to apply in person. It sounded absolutely

perfect... until I caught the person at reception, out of the corner of my eye, tossing the résumé straight into the trash. It was another case of “they weren’t really hiring.”

That was the most frustrating part of this. It wasn’t that I was applying for jobs and there were better candidates. Most of the jobs didn’t even exist from what I could tell. Why were they advertising them? I didn’t know. Humans were weird.

My next stop was a small insurance company that was looking for someone to watch the front desk. They called it some weird, bloated name, but that was what it boiled down to. And I got an interview on the spot, which felt great—and I thought I did really well. They said I would hear from them “soon,” only to discover, “soon” meant when I was one block down at a coffee shop grabbing something to drink where I got a text saying:

We’re sorry, but we’ve decided to go another direction.

And since there was no way they could’ve interviewed anyone else in that time, “another direction” was simply their way of saying: Not you.

A medical clinic was next. It was shifter-owned, and the person who took me to fill out the application—on their computer, which apparently were different from computers at home, told me very bluntly that they didn’t like to hire what they considered “prey.” Apparently, my beast just didn’t suit their big-cat vibes or whatever.

It was getting frustrating. That was a lie. It had long surpassed “getting” and was now in the middle of frustration dumpster fire.

I stopped at a little café for lunch and to recalculate my day. And while I was waiting for my sandwich, I got a text from my mate: I hope your day is going well. You’ve got this, Kitten. You’ve got this.

I looked down at the phone. He had so much more belief in me than I had in myself. Thanks, getting lunch now, and I punctuated it with three happy faces.

Then I put my phone back in my pocket just as my number was called. People were starting to come in, the cafe pretty crowded now, and I was glad I was able to get a table. My sandwich was good, but I spent most of the time tapping away at my phone, seeing if any new positions opened up.

“Anyone sitting here?” I looked up and saw a man who I guessed was either a bear or maybe a raccoon shifter. Hard to tell. Stupid nose.

I tilted my neck so he could see the mating mark on my shoulder, and he chuckled.

“No, I just need a place to eat.” He showed me his mark.

“Oh. Sorry. Please, join me.”

I liked that about the shifter community. You didn’t have to play the “Oh, I have a boyfriend” or “I don’t have a boyfriend” game. You just showed your mark. Boom. Done. Message received.

I went back to work, typing away on my phone, grabbing a bite of sandwich here and there as he ate. And eventually, I just gave up on finding more positions and put my phone down a little too hard.

“Bad day?” he guessed.

“Bad multiple days. I’m looking for a job, and either I can’t get an interview, or there is no real job, or once I do get an interview, they’re ‘going in another direction.’” I used air quotes for that.

“Well, I know a place that’s hiring. Not sure it’s what you’d be into.” That sounded cryptic, but I was desperate.

“I’m into just about anything right now.” I went on to tell him about how I caught my boss cheating on his husband and lost my position.

“Eek. That sucks.”

“Yeah, no kidding. So as you can see, I’m game.”

“All right. The bar is called Moonbound. Apparently, they hire anyone. Well, anyone that—you know—is like us.”

I assumed he meant shifter, but it felt too rude to ask if he was a cat too.

“Thanks for the help.”

“Yeah. No problem. We’ve all been there. Thanks for the table.”

I didn’t even catch his name as he walked away, and I decided to keep this bar as a last resort. I’d been down that route before, and it didn’t go very well.

Last resorts came quickly when you were looking for a job. Four hours later, I was walking into Moonbound. And unlike the last time I went through the service industry process, they said yes almost instantly.

I said, “I’m looking for a job,” and the bartender was like, “Let me get the boss man.” The owner came over, and... boom, I was hired.

They didn’t really ask me anything. Just said, “Here are the hours. Here’s the pay. You get tips. But if you break it, you pay for it. So don’t drop trays.”

I should've been happy. I should've been excited. I should've been thrilled. I got a job. One that was fairly easy as far as learning curves went.

But there was something about the owner that put me ill at-ease, and I couldn't quite place what that was. He didn't leer at me. It wasn't sexual, for sure. Maybe I was just still holding on to what happened last time.

Whatever the case was, I wasn't going to let that happen again, not at any bar. Because for all I knew, it was a patron who'd spiked the drink. If that was how I even got the drug in my system. We still didn't quite know.

But bottled water from now on. Done.

"Thank you so much for the opportunity," I said, shaking his hand.

"Sure. Be here tomorrow on time. Probably want your jeans a little snug, you know—for those tips."

"...Yeah, okay. Can do."

I left hating the discomfort I was feeling, but at least now I was going to be able to do my part.

And that was something, right?

13

BOAZ

It was Rhodes's and Maynard's turn to host the monthly family dinner.

I was dreading when we had to cook for my brothers, as neither Keane nor myself were great in the kitchen. Maybe we could order takeout and pretend we made it. Nah, my brothers would suss out the deception and never let me forget it.

On the way to my brother's new house—he'd sold his luxury apartment—set back from the road, on a large piece of land and with high-tech security courtesy of Ezra, plus he'd hired armed guards, we bought wine and a potted jasmine that they could plant in the back garden. When it flowered, it'd give off an amazing scent at night.

This was Keane's first time meeting Rhodes and their little one, Luna. Even though Rhodes was human, he and my mate were both outsiders who had been welcomed into the family and the pack through mating. I hoped they'd become friends.

"Been cuddling bunnies today?" Thiago quipped as we walked in.

I rolled my eyes and ignored him.

"What's that about?" Keane asked.

"He thinks he's being funny."

“Nah, he’s been in a meadow, skipping through the wildflowers before picking some and sniffing them as the sun kissed his cheek.” Riggs ducked, apparently expecting me to throw something at him.

But I let my wolf shine through my eyes.

“Tell me,” my mate insisted.

“Boaz was always the hard-ass brother.” Rhodes, the relative newcomer, had experienced my displeasure and wrath on our first meeting. “But now...”

“Now he’s a little pu—” Lake froze, his lips pursed.

I understood what he was going to say, but my mate was a cat, and he couldn’t say I was a pussy without offending him.

But Keane winked at me. “I love when he purrs and brushes against my legs, wanting to be fed or patted.”

My brothers glanced at one another, their eyes darting around the room.

“It’s a joke, guys. Lighten up. Besides, he doesn’t purr, he meows.” My mate giggled, and after a moment’s hesitation, everyone joined in.

“Please sit,” Maynard ordered.

Lake and Riggs helped bring the food out; my little brother probably figured being in the kitchen, he could sneak a taste or two.

During the meal, my mate continually checked his watch.

“You have somewhere to be, Keane?” Thiago asked as he stabbed a piece of carrot with his fork.

“Work. My new job starts today!” He was bouncing, he was so excited.

“What?” My mate had insisted he had to get a job, and he’d told me he had found one in the service industry. But to me, that was serving behind a counter in a department store or waiting tables. What was he doing at night?

“I told you, love.” He placed a hand on my thigh and squeezed. He was either signaling he wanted sex or for me to shut up. I guessed it was the latter.

I’d been so absorbed with work, a possible war, and the influx of drugs, that I hadn’t been paying attention to Keane’s job search. But now I perked up, wondering what he was doing in the late evening. Was he a valet at a high-end restaurant?

“Yes, I know.” That much was true. He had, and I’d responded that he didn’t have to work. “But tell me again exactly what you’re doing. It slipped my mind.”

“Psst, Keane.” Ezra beckoned Keane across the table. “That’s Boaz code for I have no clue because I was concentrating on something else.”

“Not true,” I protested. It was, but I didn’t want my mate thinking I didn’t listen.

“It’s the Moonbound.”

There was hushed silence at the table, with pairs of eyes on my mate and the rest on me. Anger, confusion, doubt, and anxiety flooded my mind. What was he doing there? It was a well-known haunt of gangsters, and not our kind of criminals. Bad dudes, who’d stick a knife between your ribs if you blinked wrongly. It used to be owned by a drug lord, but a consortium of high-flying businessmen took it over after

he was assassinated.

Maynard handed me a glass of water. Smart guy. He understood I'd blurt out something I'd later regret. I guzzled the cool liquid and some dribbled over my chin. Thiago shoved a napkin at me. My brothers knew me so well and were trying to save me from being a total asshat.

No one said anything as they waited for me to respond. My brothers were never quiet, even when we were watching a movie, so this was an indication of how they were weighing the situation and waiting to see what I'd do.

I formatted a sentence in my head, dismissed it, and came up with another one as the seconds ticked by. Keane's pinched expression was a sign he was worried about my reaction.

"Interesting. What do you do at the club?" Maybe he was a bartender or a bouncer. Nah, not the latter. While he was tall, he was small-boned and slim.

"I serve drinks. Is that a problem?"

"Nope!" I popped that P hard.

"Great. I have to go." He got up and thanked Maynard and Rhodes for the meal.

I offered to drive him, but he'd already arranged a car, and it pulled up as he was saying his goodbyes. He had refused bodyguards after the incident at the dock, saying it wasn't necessary.

"Call me when you're done with your shift, Kitten, and I'll pick you up."

"Will do." He kissed me on the cheek and jumped in the car.

I waited until the tail lights vanished down the drive and out the huge gates, and I closed the door. I should have insisted he take security with him.

“Guessing we have plans this evening.” Lake was helping clear away the dishes while Maynard brought out dessert.

“You did. You all came here,” Rhodes called from the kitchen.

“Not that, my darling.” Maynard pulled out a chair for his mate. “They’re going clubbing.”

“We definitely are, but aren’t you coming?” Riggs asked our oldest brother.

“Can I beg off? Luna isn’t sleeping well.” Maynard yawned

“No, you have to come, big bro.” Lake clapped a hand on Maynard’s shoulder. “All five of us have to be there for Boaz and Keane.”

“Are you checking up on your mate?” Rhodes gave me a piece of pie.

“You bet.”

The club was notorious for drug dealings, and I didn’t like my mate working there. Yes, it was upmarket, but the clients were sleazy, and the deals done in back rooms were not just illegal but immoral. Human trafficking being one of them, where people and money exchanged hands.

I didn’t want Keane near that. Even though he was a shifter and it was easier to escape if he was bundled into a van, I didn’t want to chance anything happening to him.

“You should go with your brothers.” Rhodes nudged his mate. “I’ll get up tonight if Luna wakes.

We waited an hour, though I couldn’t sit still. My brothers played computer games while I researched the club and the regular members.

“Boaz, stop pacing. You’ll wear a hole in the carpet.” Riggs yanked me onto the sofa, but I counted the minutes until I reckoned we could go.

Everyone piled into my car, and Maynard and Ezra fought for the front seat, just as they used to when we were kids.

“What is that noise?” There was a crunching coming from the back, and I worried.

“Lake,” my brothers shouted. Of course he’d brought a bag of corn chips.

“What if they won’t let us in?” Thiago asked as we got out of the car. “They’re very particular about their clientele.”

“Money talks, bro. You know that.”

As predicted we sailed inside after I stuffed a crisp Ben Franklin in the bouncer’s palm.

“Act normal,” I hissed as my brothers hovered around me in a half circle.

“We are.”

“On second thought, that’s a bad idea. Don’t draw attention yourselves. Spread out.”

I don’t like our mate working here . My wolf had been quiet during dinner and

Keane's reveal. But he was on edge, ready to take his fur and pounce if anyone put a hand on our mate.

I almost sneezed at the cloying scent of cologne. These mobsters really went overboard on the aftershave. But scent wasn't the only excessive aspect of the club. Everything was gold and velvet, and the walls were lined with mirrors. Gods, the flashing lights reflecting off the mirrors would give any human a headache. A mist wafted up from the dance floor. Dry ice.

I left my brothers and wandered to the long gleaming bar. I didn't want any alcohol, needing to keep a clear head, and the bartender raised a brow when I ordered a soda water.

It was still early and the crowds were sparse. Should have thought about that because Keane might spot one of us. But the place was huge and the lighting dim, but he'd sense me if he came close.

I leaned one elbow on the bar and scanned the room. People were dancing, talking, and roaming around, and from my position, I couldn't see anything on the second floor.

Lake and Riggs were talking to a guy who looked familiar, and I couldn't see Maynard, Ezra, and Thiago. My oldest bro was probably curled up in a corner fast asleep.

Taking my glass of soda, I mingled with the crowd, scanning the tables on the upper floor, but my vision was limited by the lighting, so I climbed the wide circular staircase.

But when I reached the top, I spied the VIP room tucked away at the back. And Keane, dressed in a snazzy tight-fitting suit, was chatting to... oh no. Him! He should

have been in hiding and here he was in public acting as if his business hadn't been decimated by our pack.

My hackles rose as my mate laughed at something the guy said.

Oh no! No, no. This wasn't happening.

14

KEANE

It was my first night working at my new job, and unlike what they told me to do, I did not wear my tightest jeans. I just wanted to go in, serve some drinks, and leave. I didn't want to give any hint to the customers that I was there for anything else, and I was sure to wear a shirt that showed off my mating mark.

This was a job, nothing more, and I could tell my mate was not happy about where I was working. He'd said multiple times that I didn't need to work and that if I wanted to I should get one I loved. But I wanted to contribute fiscally. And right now, this was the way to do so.

Boaz had been so busy he hadn't heard me tell him that I even had a job. He didn't need the added stress of having me work somewhere he wasn't comfortable, and that already had me planning to keep the job hunt going. But for now, this would have to do. And who knew, maybe I'd finish my first shift and discover it was the best job ever. I'd work, go home, and show him lots of money and all would be great. Or maybe it would suck, and I'd go home and never come back. But either way, I was doing this. I owed it to both of us to at least try.

I went in, and it wasn't very crowded, still as dark and dingy as I remembered it. The floor was sticky and the air smoky, despite smoking inside being illegal in this state. But a job was a job, right.

I asked for the owner. They weren't there, but they sent over a manager. "You the

new guy?”

“Yeah. Keane.”

“All right, come with me.” So much for small talk.

I followed him to what I thought was the office, but it turned out to be a corridor that led to a whole other establishment. There were offices along the way and storerooms, but the vibe was very different when we came out the other side.

“I’m confused.”

He looked at me. “You’re working at Moonbound?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, you were just at the bar side. And now you are in the club side.” The owner hadn’t mentioned that at all.

The manager, who still had not told me his name, stopped and looked at me like I was the stupidest creature they ever did see. “You were hired to work at the club.”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“Well, maybe you were hired to work at the bar, then. That would explain those jeans.” Those , as if they were to be looked down on. Oh well. I wasn’t here for fashion week. “You’re working at the club now. We need the help. There’s already a line outside.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I stood there waiting for him to tell me what to do next.

“Well, do you want the job or not?”

“Yeah, I want the job.” The vibe was so different in this room, but my feet weren’t sticking to the floor, so there was that.

“All right, look around and tell me what you notice.”

I listed off a bunch of random things I saw, and he let out a long sigh.

“Wrong. You’re underdressed.” Why was this guy such an asshole?

“Huh?”

“Look at the servers. They’re all wearing suits.” It took me five seconds to see he was right.

“He told me to wear jeans,” I explained.

“He was gonna have you work at the bar. I’m not.”

“This is all I have.” Even at home I didn’t have a suit.

“Come back with me. I’m sure we have one that will fit you.”

We ended up in one of the storerooms where he tossed me a suit. “It’s as close as we’ve got to your size. Get changed and meet me on the floor.”

“This is a storeroom, not a changing room, not a bathroom.”

“Correct. Now get dressed. Time is ticking, and I want to tell the bouncers to start moving the crowd in. Hang your clothes on the hook when you’re done.”

I did as he said, putting on the suit. The suit did not fit, at least it didn't feel like it fit. It was tight, but maybe that was the look.

Part of me said I should leave, but club was nicer than bar, right? This was like a promotion of sorts. Please let it be better than my last one.

I found the manager, who gruffly said his name was Ralph. Before we could talk, a man in red came over and said, "I'll take... I'll take him." He pointed to me.

What the fuck.

"Understood." Ralph watched the man in red leave then turned to me. "Change of plans again. You're going to be running VIP tonight."

"I don't even know how to do the non-VIP," I said.

"Doesn't matter. VIP's easy here. It's small. All you have to do is get people what they want, and usually it's a bottle of something, so you don't even have to mix drinks. Keep them happy and done."

"I—I don't even know where everything is." Or anything, for that matter.

"Hank!" Ralph called over his shoulder. "Give the new guy the ten-minute version of training."

"Can do, boss."

Hank, dressed in an outfit similar to mine but fitting much better, came over. "All right, try and keep up."

Hank gave me a quick tour, showed me how to order drinks, where to put in meal

tickets, and how to cash out. I wasn't sure I remembered a single thing. It was all coming at me so quickly, but the next thing I knew, I was being brought to the VIP room, which actually looked more like I was walking into something pretty darn sketchy than someplace fancy.

I guessed I always thought it would be elegant and regal and red carpets for a VIP room. But this wasn't that. It was dingy, dark, and smoky. But it did have privacy, which I guessed was the point. When I got inside, the man in red was there beside a blond alpha in a suit vest with a T-shirt under it.

"About time you got here. Tell the bartender I want my regular," the alpha barked. "With four glasses."

At least it wasn't going to be just him. I wasn't sure how long I'd be comfortable being around this alpha while I was alone. Pretty sure that time had already passed.

"Who should I say wants their regular?"

"He'll know who I am." The man looked me up and down.

I scurried out to the bar. Said what the man told me to say to the bartender and waited.

"Oh, the alphahole is here." The bartender's response was hardly comforting.

I still didn't know who the guy was, but I had a bottle of wine and four glasses on the tray heading back out a minute later. There weren't even four people in the room when I left, but I was hoping there would be when I got back. I wasn't looking forward to any alone time with him.

I brought the tray to him. There were other people in the VIP area now, but they

didn't seem to pay me any mind. At least we weren't alone. "This is what the bartender sent."

"Yeah, because it's my regular. Hurry up, open it."

I fumbled with it. A lot. This was not my skill set, but I eventually got it open and poured a glass for the man and held it out to him.

"Fill all four," he ordered

"Yes, sir." I reached for the next glass.

"Alpha."

"Excuse me?" I was so confused.

"Yes, Alpha," he instructed.

Great. It was one of those assholes.

"Yes, Alpha," I repeated back like a good little worker bee.

I poured the four glasses and set the nearly empty bottle down.

"Is there anything else I may do for you?" Like leave. Please say leave.

"Yeah. You need to drink yours."

"Oh, I'm working—" I reminded him.

"Did I ask you if you were working? I don't pay to drink alone." He picked up a glass

and handed it to me, and I shook my head.

“I’m working, sir. It’s my first night.”

“You’re working, who?” It was going to be a long-ass night if he kept talking to me like this.

“I’m working, Alpha. This is my first night. I don’t think I’m supposed to be drinking?—”

He threw a hundred-dollar bill and I watched it fall to the tray. “There’s more. Drink.”

I thought back to that night, the one where I was drugged, how I swore I wouldn’t drink so much as a sip of anything that didn’t come from my own bottle. But I was the one who poured this wine, right? So it was fine. I opened it and everything.

Gods, I wished I had poured smaller portions. I took a sip. It wasn’t horrible. I wasn’t a wine kind of guy, but the Alpha drank his down and barked, “Keep up.”

He reached to take the hundred-dollar bill back, and something in me snapped. I wasn’t going to get fired my first day, and I definitely wasn’t going to lose what I thought would probably be the grand total of my tips over a little wine.

And I downed my drink.

“That’s what I’m talking about.” He threw another hundred-dollar bill on the tray. “Grab yours.”

I went to reach for the glass, but missed. And I reached again, but missed. “I don’t understand what’s?—”

“Just relax.” He pushed me onto the couch. “Just relax and enjoy. You’re getting for free what most people have to pay for.”

And that’s when everything started getting so blurry that I had to close my eyes.

Fuck.

I was drugged. When had they slipped it into my drink? I hadn’t looked away for a second... except when I watched that stupid money land on the tray.

Double fuck.

I tried to get up. He pushed me down. I tried to get up again. At this point, I didn’t even know if I was up or not. I was flailing my arms, or at least trying to, when I heard my mate’s voice—just as everything went dark.

Dark.

15

BOAZ

Gods, I had to get Keane away from that creep.

My shallow breathing rattled up my throat, my poor lungs acting like bellows being squeezed. My chest hurt, and I paused, weighing up whether my beast should tear the guy's head off and take my skin in the middle of the club or if I should shoot him in the heart.

Neither option was keeping things on the downlow, but to heck with that. This was my mate. No one and nothing stood between him and me.

But someone wrenched me away from the VIP entrance. More than one someone.

My five brothers' faces resembled the sky before a thunderstorm.

“Don’t.” It was Maynard’s hand holding me back.

I tried to fling him off, but he and his wolf had strength I could only dream of.

“Let me go.” My teeth had been replaced by my beast’s canines. Fur, ears, tail, and muzzle would be next. I didn’t care if I lost my place in the pack, if I was outlawed and had to live the rest of my life in a cabin on a remote mountain.

None of it mattered, only that Keane was safe and he and I were together.

“We need a plan.” Ezra showed us the layout of the VIP suite that he’d downloaded. Or hacked into, because the club owners didn’t advertise that.

I shoved his hand away. There was no need to see the sofa placements, the bar, expensive coffee tables, or private booths. I shuddered at the last one, thinking Keane might be there serving drinks and getting groped.

“He’s with that fucker, Cassian. The Ironclaw Alpha.”

“Who has his goons at the door.” Riggs jerked his head toward the entrance. “And probably more inside.”

“And they are packing,” Lake noted. “Obviously.” He put his hand on his own gun.

Ezra stabbed the phone. “But there are private entrances here and here.”

“So?” My voice was louder than intended, and heads swirled in our directions. More than one drink spilled on the expensive carpet. “What use is that?”

We huddled together, keeping our heads down.

“True, but there will only be security at the private entrances and not a club full of people with phones videoing you with your gun blazing.”

“I would hope you’d be at my side, so it’s guns, not a gun,” I huffed.

“Look.” Maynard steered us into a corner. “We don’t know there’s a problem other than Keane is with a drug lord.”

“Do you hear yourself, dude?”

“Okay, that came out wrong.” Maynard chewed his lower lip. “Not sure how to make it sound right. But Keane isn’t doing anything wrong. He’s working and has no idea who Cassian is.” Maynard crossed his arms.

I gulped in air, trying to tamp down my rage at Cassian and my annoying older brother. Maynard was the suave one who could pretend to make sense of the most ridiculous garbage, while I was all bluster.

Glass splintering had us whirl around. The humans who were laughing and drinking nearby hadn’t picked up on the glass shattering, but every shifter was staring at the VIP entrance.

One guy, with a deep cut on his brow and a blood-spattered shirt, swayed and slurred his words, saying there’s been an accident with one of the hosts.

“That’s it. I’m going in and not through the back door.” My reasoning for charging in the main entrance was the staff would be distracted, and I was convinced whatever had happened involved Keane. And to heck with starting a war or continuing one. No one toyed with my mate’s safety.

“Right behind you.” Thiago reached for his gun, but Riggs hissed at him and said we’d never get through the door if we brandished our weapons.

I strode toward the door, and a security guard shoved his arm out, smacking me in the chest. I paused, glancing down at his burly arm, and raised my head, allowing my beast to shine through my gaze.

He was a shifter, and I expected him to return the favor. If his wolf resembled his human, he’d crush me, but his attention was diverted by another VIP staggering out. I took advantage of his distraction and barreled past him, my brothers at my heels.

The dim lighting inside had me blinking. While my eyes adjusted quicker than a human's, I inwardly raged at the delay.

My gaze alighted on Keane. He was standing—barely—his head lolling forward and his tongue hanging out. Oh shit. This was how the staff at Pulsepoint had described the shifters who'd been drugged. He was anything but fine.

Cassian was leaning on the bar, a cocktail to his lips, and for a second I wavered. Help my mate or kill Cassian. I could do both but not at the same time. I chose Keane, even though this would give Cassian and his drug-spiking thugs ample opportunity to kill us.

He caught sight of us, and the lazy conceited smile on his lips faded.

“Ezra and Thiago, with me.”

I needed my remaining brothers to fan out around the club and hoped Maynard and Lake were surrounding Cassian.

“My darling, I've got you.” I steadied Keane as he studied me with glazed eyes. A crushing of bones and a crack, along with grunts and thuds, alerted me my brothers were engaging with the security guards.

“I don't... don't feel so good.”

“You've been drugged, but you're going to be fine.” I hoped that was true.

“I don't feel furry l-l-like the last time.” He hiccuped.

A body collapsed at our feet, blood gushing from a head wound. One less to worry about.

“Ezra is going to take you to the doctor.” I hated not being with my mate, but he needed medical attention, and I had to be here.

My mate looked over my blood-spattered shoulder as a man was flung against a wall. More blood spurted from his neck, but his eyes told the true story. He was dead before he hit the floor.

“Go, and I’ll see you soon.” Ezra put an arm around Keane and led him out. Our own bodyguards would drive them to the doctor.

I whirled around now that my beloved was safe. “Where is he?”

The VIP room, which minutes earlier had been pristine and sumptuous, was now splattered in gobs of flesh and fluids. But I wanted Cassian. Whether he administered the drug or gave the okay for someone else to, he was responsible for my mate almost dying. And many others. Not that I knew the quantity of the drug Keane had ingested. But I had no doubt if left unattended, he would’ve suffered severe, maybe life-threatening consequences.

Maynard was bent over catching his breath while Thiago and Lake inspected the bodies, making sure they’d stopped breathing. One guy pleaded for his life, but Riggs took aim and put a bullet in his head.

“That’s all of them,” he said as he walked toward us, climbing over bodies.

“All but one.”

I headed for the back of the club. The exits were almost invisible, covered in the same garish wallpaper as the walls. Flinging open the door, I caught sight of Cassian hemmed in by bodyguards making his way to a car.

Not giving a shit about being outnumbered or whether my brothers were with me, I charged out, fur rippling over my arms. My clothes vanished, and my wolf raced as if he had the wind behind him. Leaping over one car, he landed on Cassian, and the guy went down, splatting on the concrete. Nasty. Squashed Cassian.

The bodyguards shrieked and fled. So much for loyalty. They'd be dealt with later.

Cassian was still breathing, and I took my skin, much to my wolf's annoyance as he wanted to finish him off. Grabbing him by the neck, I hauled him to his feet and flung him over the car hood.

He grinned, blood staining his teeth. "You'll never win. You can't stop us. I'm just one man."

"One man less." I gave my wolf his fur, and his canines ripped through Cassian's throat. A gurgling was the indication he was dying, no cry, no whimper, just blood oozing.

"This needs a clean-up crew." Thiago was on the phone while Maynard gave me his coat. It was huge and covered my butt. It'd do until I got to the car.

"We'll stay and deal with the police, and I'll call Alpha. Go to Keane." Maynard waved me away.

My mate was at the clinic, adjacent to the doctor's office. It was for shifters and manned by shifters.

"Hey, how are you, Kitten?" The doctor had already told me Keane was doing well.

"What happened?" My mate picked dried blood off my face. "I hope the other guy is worse off."

“Depends which one you’re talking about, but Cassian is dead, along with his bodyguards and some hangers-on in the VIP room.

“Cassian. Cassian. Shit he was the one who drugged me. I should’ve known. He tipped so well, and I poured the wine, but...”

“Judging drug lords by how well they tip is not a reliable scale.” It was my fault because everyone was aware Keane was my mate. That made him a target.

“I’m glad you killed him. Wait, it was you who ended his life, right?”

I nodded.

“Good riddance. The world is better off without him in it.”

16

KEANE

I slept for nearly three days after being drugged at the club. I spent most of the time in my skin—my cat falling back. I almost shifted out of rage when I first discovered what happened, but after that, my beast had been chill. My mate was by my side the entire time.

When I woke up long enough to roll around, I could feel his warmth, his safety, his love. As I got up to use the restroom, he was there to keep me steady on my feet. After I woke because my throat was so dry I couldn't speak, he gave me a drink. He was my protection, my love, my home.

The dreams I had during this time were wild. I dreamed of standing by Boaz's side in the club that night and watching him take out that asshole. And the weirdest part was—I liked it. Like there was pride in that piece of shit being expunged from this planet... destroyed.

I blamed the drugs for that dream, because my brain didn't work that way.

Except... what if it did? What if this was who I was now? What if I was irrevocably changed now that I was mated into the mob? This wasn't the first time I'd experienced such violence, nor was it the first time I did so drugged. That had to mess with a shifter.

I also dreamed of floating on the river. I was in my fur and on a little raft, the kind

you tried to make as a kid with sticks in the backyard that you were sure would really hold you up but never did. Only in my dream, the raft did hold me up, and I floated along with little rainbows sparkling around, like the kind that a prism would make in a window.

I didn't even try to make sense of this dream. My cat didn't love water. I had long since outgrown trying to make a raft. And why would there be prisms in the trees? Instead, when I woke up, I snuggled into my mate, feeling like I was almost ready to get up. His arms held me close as I drifted off again.

The next dream I remembered was a full-fledged nightmare—but it wasn't about the mafia. It wasn't about being drugged. It wasn't even about zombies. Nope. It was much worse than that. It was about job hunting.

I was attempting to get a job as an accountant and going through 52 interviews for the same position, all of which included a math test. And I did not know enough about accounting to know if you even needed a math test, but apparently, I was just doing test after test after test. And when I woke up, I found myself sitting right up straight—and I was finally fully awake.

“Hey, you're up.” Boaz's sweet voice, the one he reserved for me, surrounded me like a hug.

“Yeah, I'm up-up.” As opposed to when I padded to the bathroom or drank something my mate gave me as I stirred. This was wide awake, awake.

“How you feeling?”

“I don't know. I had weird dreams, and I'm still tired, but my head isn't spinning, so that's good.”

“Do you need help to the bathroom?” he offered, and I thought back to that first night when I’d been in my fur and so embarrassed about having to pee. So much had changed. I didn’t need help, but I’d have accepted it, for sure.

“Nah, I got it.”

Not only did I have to pee, but my mouth tasted like I had eaten from the bottom of the dumpster I had hid behind the day I met my mate.

I brushed my teeth, took a shower, and when I came out, Boaz had a cup of coffee in his hand for me. “You probably need this.”

“Oh, so much.” I brought it to my lips and tipped it back, the liquid barely touching my tongue when I realized I wanted no part of it.

“I guess I’m still not doing well.” I pushed it back at him. “Sorry.”

“No sorry needed.” He took the mug from me. “Let’s go eat.”

“Yeah, okay. Just a minute.” I pulled on some pajama pants and a shirt, and the two of us went to the kitchen, where he fried up some bacon, some toast, and eggs. It was hardly a fancy meal, but it was good—at least the first few bites. But then my stomach started getting queasy.

“Maybe it’s too soon to eat.” I set my toast down.

“No,” Boaz said. “The doctor said you’d be fine to eat, and you’ve been having a little bit of soup.”

Soup? Was that what I’d been drinking? That was how much I’d been out of it.

“I think I don’t feel so good. I’m going to—” And then not feeling so good turned to a race to the bathroom, where I lost every bit of the breakfast my mate had given me. Once again, I was brushing my teeth, and this time, I just climbed right back in bed.

“I’ll try again tomorrow.” I yanked the covers up. “I just need more sleep.

“Maybe shift?” My mate sat on the bed beside me, put his hand to my forehead like a parent checking their child’s temperature.

“No, I’m not that kind of sick. And I’m scared to shift,” I admitted. “Last time... last time I couldn’t shift back.”

“This isn’t like last time, Kitten. So try not to worry too much about that.” He was right there. Last time was a fight-or-flight response. This would be me attempting to heal. The two were not the same.

“Yeah. Okay.” I climbed out of bed, pulled my jams off, and called forth my fur. My cat landed on all fours with a thump, Boaz looking down at me. I rubbed against his leg, purring. He liked it when I did that.

“See? That’s better.” He scooped me up. “Now, let me cuddle you. I missed you like this.”

I jumped from his arms onto the bed, curled up on his pillow, and he climbed in beside me.

“I guess I could take a little time off today.” As if he hadn’t already been taking a ton of time off every other day. His entire focus had been on me. And while I appreciated that, I also knew that he had a lot to accomplish between meeting some other Alphas to discuss new intel and dealing with finances.

I fell back asleep, and when I woke up, I was in my skin again, the urge to use the bathroom and empty my stomach hitting me right at the surface. Twice in one day was two times too many.

This time, when I came out, my mate was there, letting me know that the doctor was on their way.

I was scared, scared the doctor was gonna say the drugs hadn't left my body, scared that I was in for more badness before things got good, scared that this was going to be my new norm. So much fear and thankfully for nothing.

The doctor was in our room for less than a minute when he said, "Oh, this has nothing to do with the club," with a smile on his face.

"What do you mean?" Boaz asked.

"Inhale deeply, Alpha."

The doctor didn't bother telling me to do the same because he knew my nose was shit from my last exam. I'd probably go see him about my nose at some point. This doctor listened better than any I'd ever consulted before. He could possibly have a better shot at not necessarily fixing it, but at least making my scenting issue better.

My mate did as requested, sucking in a deep breath.

"No." He smiled brightly as he spoke, drawing out the O. He leaned in close and did it again. "Ah, this is the best news ever."

I was so confused.

"Wait... will the drugs mess it up? Do we have to worry?" Boaz's tone went

suddenly dead serious.

“No, Boaz. You and your mate don’t have to worry. The baby was very protected even before those drugs entered the body.”

“Baby?” Is that what this was? I was pregnant?

“Yes. You’re gonna be dads.”

“So there’s only one? Or am I having a litter?” I had so many questions, but those were the ones that popped out first.

The doctor shrugged, obviously amused.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re having one or a thousand.” Boaz cupped my cheek sweetly. “Because however many they are, they’re part of our family.”

“You—You can pipe down right there.” I made my best growly face at my mate. “I am not having a thousand babies. I don’t mind a respectable litter, but past that—no.”

He barked out laughing, as did the doctor. Apparently, my desire to not give birth to an entire army of kittens was amusing to them.

And now that I was thinking about it... it was amusing to me too.

17

BOAZ

“Stop what you’re doing!”

Too loud , my wolf complained.

My mate froze as he was reaching inside a kitchen cupboard for a mug. “What?” he screeched and ducked, grabbing a frying pan as he lowered himself to the ground. “Who? Where?” He gripped the pan’s handle as if he was going to bash someone with it.

Shit! I’d scared Keane, and I was supposed to be helping and protecting him. I sank onto the floor beside him and with one hand removed the pan while I draped the other around his shoulders.

“I didn’t want you to strain yourself. Tell me when you need something from a high shelf.”

“That’s it?” His voice was at screech level 10. “All of that was about a mug?” He put a hand to his chest. “My heart is racing and hurdling over fences, thinking someone is attacking us.”

“I’m so sorry, Kitten.”

He patted my arm and sighed. “I know. Now help me up because I need my one

coffee a day.”

I settled him on the couch and made the coffee. When I handed it to him, I asked if he had any plans for the day. If he was leaving the house, I’d have to tell Josh to cover for me at work. But Alpha would notice if I was missing and demand an explanation. Alpha’s generation of shifters rarely took a day off, and they didn’t skip work when their mate was pregnant.

“Not much, just working from home.”

After the fiasco of Keane working at the nightclub, he’d found a work-from-home marketing position.

“Lunch is in the fridge, and there’s a post-it note with how many minutes to put it in the microwave.” I hadn’t cooked, but I’d ordered in and researched online how long it’d need to be heated. No way was I having my mate cooking near an open flame on the gas cooktop. Way too dangerous, especially with me at pack headquarters.

“I think I’ll manage.” My mate rolled his eyes but pulled me in for a kiss before I headed out.

“Call if you need anything.”

“I will.” He waved me away and took out his laptop.

As soon as I got in the car, I checked the app that was linked to a camera I’d installed in the living room. There was another in the bedroom, and I’d add a third in the nursery before the baby arrived.

And I’d installed a tracing app on his phone.

Lake told me I should have informed Keane about the cameras, and he was right, but if I did, he'd insist I remove them. Technically, I had told my mate about the cameras and the tracking app, but he'd been almost asleep. But I'd never taken notice of all the dangers in a home until my mate got pregnant. He might slip in the shower or trip over a mat. He might bang his head on a cupboard or fall down the stairs. Gods, how did anyone survive living in a two-story house?

Even though shifters' injuries were usually minor and we could repair them thanks to our beasts—though not the drug-related ones our kind had suffered in the night club poisonings—Keane was pregnant, and I worried that him ingesting that drug twice would have a long-term effect on him and the baby.

After I parked the car at headquarters and before I got out, I checked the app. All good. My mate was still on the sofa tapping at the computer keyboard. But wait, was that a full cup of coffee on the table? I peered at the grainy image. He'd drunk half before I left the house, so this had to be a second one.

The doctor had said one a day while pregnant. Maybe I should rush home, but my beast settled my nerves, saying Keane would never harm our baby. He was right. My mate adored the little one in his belly, even though he wasn't showing yet.

I breathed in deeply before setting foot in the office. The next hour was a whirlwind of activity. Not the killing kind but paperwork and planning. The boring kind. The role of Alpha included meetings, handshaking, issuing orders, reams of paperwork, and an occasional war.

Did I really want the job? Oh yeah, I did, and Keane would be an excellent Alpha Omega.

It was lunch time before I got a break and checked the app. But my mate was neither in the living room or the bedroom. Maybe he was on the toilet? I waited, but he didn't

appear. He must be sick and I had to get home, but when I called, he answered straight away.

“Hi.” There was a lot of background noise, so he either was watching TV or he was out. Where were the bodyguards? They were supposed to contact me if he left the house. We’d come to an agreement about security during his pregnancy, though he still hated having bodyguards hovering.

There were three missed calls on the phone. Damn.

“Where are you?”

“Shopping.”

My heart was beating so loud Keane might be able to hear it. “And the bodyguards?”

“I told them to take their lunch break. They aren’t needed when I’m choosing avocados or waiting in line at the bakery.”

Gods, not the bakery my former lover owned. Eeek!

“You can’t eat bread, cake, buns or pies. They’re bad for pregnant omegas.”

“Wait.” He must have put the phone down or placed it against his chest because I could only just pick up his muffled words. And he was talking to a very familiar voice.

Damn, he was going to hear about my escapades with the baker. I dreaded the tales my ex lover was regaling him with.

“What did you say about not eating bread?”

“Oh, ummm, that bakery isn’t very good.

“How do you know which bakery I’m at?”

Well, shit. I’d been so focused on protecting my mate, I’d revealed I was tracking him.

“Ummm...”

“Are you following me?” His voice wasn’t at Level 10 but it was rising.

“Following. That’s an interesting word. Technically no to following.”

“Boaz!” Now he’d lowered his tone, and I was freaking out.

“Yes,” I squeaked.

“Tell me.”

Damn. I confessed, and my mate was silent as I fumbled and tripped over words trying to explain how I wanted to protect him.

“Home, now!” He ended the call, and I took the elevator to the parking garage. I was in deep doo-doo, and I considered dawdling home. But my phone beeped with a one-word text.

Now!

Shit.

Keane arrived at the same time as me, and he parked in the driveway. He stormed

into the house, dumping the bags of groceries on the island, and headed into our bedroom.

I followed behind, my head down. The word “meek” seemed appropriate, but I’d never exhibited that type of behavior previously.

“What the hell, Boaz? I’m your mate, the father of your child, not someone you’re hoping to, what? Kill? Imprison? Banish?”

I fell to my knees on the carpet and tried to take my mate’s hand, but he wasn’t having it.

“I am you mate, your equal.”

“Yes.” How could he think otherwise?

My mate tossed his phone at me, and instead of ducking, I let it whack me on the forehead.

“Take it off and whatever else you have on your phone.”

I flicked my gaze toward the camera, hidden in the clock.

“You didn’t.” Keane leaped off the bed and stomped on the clock. He got under the covers and pulled them over his head. His body shook with loud sobs, and it was my fault.

“May I get under there with you?”

“No, go away.”

I sat cross-legged on the floor until my mate stopped crying, and he flipped off the covers.

“Still here?”

“I made a huge mistake, and I’m an asshat, but I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yes.” Keane sat up and folded his arms. “You invaded my privacy.”

Privacy? Growing up in a pack and with five brothers, there was none of that.

“I was worried something might happen to you.”

“Something might.”

Whoa! My eyes filled with tears, but I blinked them away.

“Life is shit sometimes, but we take precautions and do the best we can.” Keane patted the bed, and I sat beside him.

“But that’s not good enough. We have bodyguards, cameras, and guns.”

“No.” He shook his head. “That’s not the life I want to live. I accept your lifestyle, but I can’t live in a prison.”

“Bodyguards?”

“Maybe, but not all the time. If I’m out with friends at night.”

“At night?” I flipped back onto a pillow. My heart sped up, and my shallow breathing punctuated the silence in the room.

“It’s called having a life, Boaz.”

The pack and family had been my life, but now it was expanding. I’d have to learn new skills.

“Okay, I’m cool with that.” I’d have to be.

Keane kissed my cheek. “It must be hard letting go, but you’re opening yourself up to possibilities.”

I attempted a smile.

“You’ll get used to it. It’s like a roller coaster.”

I hated rides, they made me sick to my stomach, but I’d try.

“Now about you and the baker.”

“What?” I pulled the covers over my head. “Never met the man.”

18

KEANE

After a couple days of nonstop rain, I was so ready to get out of the house and get some fresh air. One of the downsides of working from home was that there was no reason to go places most days. And with all the bad weather, I didn't.

And now that I didn't have bodyguards following me everywhere, there was a sense of freedom. My mate had meant well. He hadn't been trying to be a dick. He loved me, had seen me harmed not once, but twice, and he wanted me safe. I could hardly be mad at him for that.

After a small breakfast of six eggs and oatmeal, I wrote Boaz a note letting him know where I was heading. Eating while pregnant was such a weird thing. There were times when I didn't even want to think about food, others when I wanted everything I could get my hands on, others where I had a craving that was non-negotiable, and those like today when a half-dozen eggs served with a bowl of steamy oats sounded like the absolute perfect combination.

After getting dressed, I set out for the day. I didn't have much planned—I was still in the exhaustion stage of pregnancy—but I needed to get out of the house, get some fresh air. And also, we needed tuna. Fine, it was me. I needed tuna.

As cliché as it was, tuna was exactly what my baby was craving. Tuna, tuna, and more tuna. How very feline of me. The human pregnancy food lists all stated to limit tuna while you were pregnant. The human list could suck it, because my cat couldn't

get enough of the stuff.

But my first stop was going to be the public library. There was a time I used to buy all my books. Back when I had a good job, that was. Now I borrowed them, and it worked out great.

I suspected that if I let my mate know I was wanting to start building on my collection, he'd make sure that happened. He was good like that—always looking out for me, always trying to give me what I needed. And now that I was pregnant, it was almost a flaw, because he was so doting I had to be careful. I couldn't even hint at a craving without it showing up on my plate or in my bowl. I could only imagine the book situation if I asked for a trip to the bookstore.

I took a ride share to the library and went inside. Today was the first day of a two-day painting class I'd been eyeing. I was hardly an artist, but I loved to try new things. The teacher helped us blend our colors and get the base of our painting done. They used big, fancy words, but basically, we did what I called underpainting. We covered the canvas with the background, and we'd be putting our main item on later.

Mine was a truck that I took from their inspiration board, but others had houses or cabins—which I supposed were houses too, but they were in a different section of the board, and a few had animals. Animals seemed far outside my realm of painting skills, so I avoided all of those. A truck I could probably handle. Maybe. I'd find out next week.

After class was finished and my painting was on the drying rack, I headed to the new releases and found a mystery that looked pretty fun. There was someone who could talk to ghosts trying to solve a ghost's murder, but somehow the ghost didn't remember how they got killed. The plot was a little sus, but it sounded like fun, so I checked it out and put it in my bag and waited at the front door for the ride share.

I knew Boaz preferred that I had bodyguards with me. He was showing me his confidence and trust in me by letting me go alone and without all the tech tracking me. I didn't want to break that trust, but also... I wasn't quite ready to welcome bodyguards back into my life with open arms.

Ride shares felt like a good compromise to me. Driving myself meant that people might recognize my car, the one Boaz insisted on buying. Ride shares were sort of chaotic in their methodology. Up until you ordered your car, you didn't know what kind of car was coming or when they'd be there. Everything was fairly random, which in my mind made them a lot safer than, let's say, the bus where there were set times.

Still, there was a chance for something to go wrong, for someone to follow me. I tried not to worry about that, though. It wasn't like I could stay inside forever.

The car was there when I reached my door, and I jogged to it and climbed in.

Grocery shopping was next, and as odd as it was for me to say, I was looking forward to it.

The elderly fox shifter driver made small talk, asking me if he had the right location. "Yeah, That's the one. They have a sale on tuna." And even if they didn't, I was going to buy as much as I could get in the cart, which guaranteed that my cravings would be over by the time I got home. That seemed to be the way of things with this pregnancy.

He chuckled. "Yeah, it's their can sale. I saw the flyer. My mate made a list... a long one. Did you know they have over a dozen different kinds of beans in those cans? Why does anybody need that many different kinds?"

"I don't know—to mix things up?" Did he think I had the answer? Pork and beans was my idea of fancy legume cuisine.

“Well, according to my mate—” and the driver went off on the way his mate made chili and soup and even burgers out of the beans. They air-fried some to make their version of chips, baked brownies with them... you name it. Their mate was into it.

Even though the older man acted like he was complaining, I could hear the pride in his voice. “So maybe you’ll run into him there.”

After my short ride with him, I was really hoping I would.

“Well, if I see anybody filling up their cart with beans, I’ll be sure to say hi.”

I got out of the car, grabbed my cart, and headed inside. I didn’t really need much and did a quick perimeter of the store before heading to the canned goods. But just as I was about to turn toward the tuna, I saw someone I recognized out of the corner of my eye. And when I turned to get a better look, fear filled me.

I couldn’t remember where I’d seen him before, but it wasn’t good.

I reached to the back of my pants, remembering too late I hadn’t brought the gun I’d been trained on—the one I tried to take with me everywhere. But the library had a no-gun policy.

Crap.

Maybe I should’ve brought bodyguards.

The man looked at me, recognition crossing his face, before he pretended to reach for a box of macaroni on the end cap like he hadn’t just seen me. Then, as I turned down the aisle, he raced the other way.

And because I’m a bona fide bad decision maker, what did I do?

I didn't call my mate. No, that would've made sense. I didn't call his brothers either, because again—that would've been smart. I didn't even ignore the whole thing and just put tuna in my cart. No. I followed the other shifter, who had abandoned his cart.

Why was he scared of me? Why was he leaving?

I kept my distance, pretending to be looking at different things until he walked out the door. I counted to fifteen and followed him, thinking maybe I could get a driver's license plate number or something.

But I didn't, because he didn't get into a car. He walked down the street.

I followed him, trying to stay unnoticed. I thought I'd succeeded... until I turned the corner and found myself in an alleyway. Seconds later, the clacking of boots on the pavement told me people were coming up behind me.

It was like that first night, where I'd been trapped. Only this time, I wasn't hidden behind a dumpster. I wasn't there accidentally. I'd been lured.

I was the prey, and they were coming to get me.

I stopped, turned on my feet, made sure my legs were in position to keep my balance. I wasn't going to go down without a fight.

Only when I finally met their eyes, there was a group of them—and each one had a gun pointed at me.

My fists weren't going to do shit here.

“Kitty, kitty,” one of them said. “We're gonna go on a trip. You can do this the easy way, or you can do this the kneecap-less way. Which do you choose?”

As if there was a choice to be had.

Sorry, Boaz. I really am. I should've let you keep all the spy gear on my phone. Heck, I should've let you put an AirTag on me.

And now? Now I was about to see my last day.

Because these guys... they meant business.

I was fucked.

19

BOAZ

“I’m home.”

I flourished a bunch of flowers over my head, expecting Keane to fling his arms around me and say I was the best mate ever. And I was.

But the house was quiet. Not unusual, because he needed extra rest thanks to the little one growing in his belly.

I crept into the bedroom with the flowers behind my back. Poking my head around the door, my smile faded. The bed looked exactly as it had this morning when I made it before going to work.

What the...?

My heart constricted, and my wolf complained, telling me to cut it out and find Keane.

“Okay, stay calm. Nothing’s wrong. He’s fine. We’re all fine.”

Talking out loud to an empty room was supposed to convince me that was true. Damn, why had I listened to Keane when he insisted on getting rid of the damned cameras and tracking app. I slammed my fist on a nightstand, and it cracked and splintered, pieces of jagged wood scattering over the lush carpet my mate had bought.

This was what happened when I listened to other people. “Why?”

Slumping onto the couch with my head in my hands, I tried to piece together my scrambled thoughts. I could make this right because that was what I did for the pack. I was a fixer.

“Think, Boaz.”

Keane was working at home, so there were no bodyguards, but we had a security system on the gates and around the house. Keane had agreed to those because someone had snatched a parcel he had delivered.

“Okay, I can do this.” I logged into the system and scrolled back until my mate left the house around lunch time. Shit, he’d been gone for hours. He might have been kidnapped and flown across the country by now.

There was no one else in the feed, apart from me when I left for pack headquarters.

I screamed into a cushion, my frustrated tears wetting the expensive fabric. Oh no, Keane would be pissed at me. And I longed for him to be angry because he’d be here, safe and wagging his finger while pointing out the material needed to be dry cleaned.

Ezra. He was the tech guy of the family. He’d hack into the city’s CCTV network and find my mate.

“Help,” I barked into the phone without waiting for him to answer. “Keane’s missing. I need your skills.”

“I’ll bring the others.”

Ten minutes later two cars pulled up. Four brothers in one and Maynard in the other.

They stormed in with glowering expressions and guns at the ready.

“Spill.” Ezra had his computer open, and the others roamed around the house, opening and closing doors.

I blurted out the details, and my brother paused his typing. “Did you try phoning him?”

His words hung in the air, but they were muddled and I couldn’t make sense of them. Had I called Keane? I checked my phone. Nope.

“And he didn’t message you.”

“Ummm...” My brain had stopped processing my thoughts the moment I exited the empty bedroom.

He had agreed he’d let me know if he was going out alone, and I flipped through the many apps on my phone. There was one, but I didn’t receive a notification.

“It says, ‘Going to the library and then grocery store.’”

“It’s a place to start.” Ezra typed furiously on the computer and told me to get something to eat. “You’re not thinking clearly.”

That had been happening a lot since I met Keane. I was consumed by him.

Lake had me sit at the kitchen island while he made sandwiches for everyone.

“He was at the library, but I can’t find any sign of him leaving.”

I leaped up. “Great, he’s still there.” That was why he wasn’t answering his phone.

He had to mute it at the library.

“Where are you going?” Thiago asked.

I yelled over my shoulder I was going to the library.

“Wait!” That was Ezra, and I closed my eyes, wishing he hadn’t spoken. He was going to tell me something I didn’t want to hear. “The library closed early today because they have a private fundraiser this evening.”

“Okay, he stayed for that.” He was giving money to a worthy organization; the library.

“Nah, invitation only, black tie, super exclusive, the elite of the city.”

Not something a mafia’s mate would be invited to.

My stomach churned, and I rubbed a hand over it, reminding me of Keane doing the same over his pregnant belly.

“Why did I listen to him?” I tugged a fistful of hair and raged at my mate.

“Boaz!”

That was a tone that only an older brother could use, and I kinda stood at attention, waiting for Maynard to berate me.

“Keane needs the Boaz of old, the single-minded asshat who’d never met a problem he couldn’t solve.”

Had I lost my edge after meeting Keane? Maybe I wasn't the right candidate for

Alpha or even as a mate.

“When Keane is safe, you can go back to whatever this lovesick version of you is.”
My oldest sibling accompanied his putdown with a grin.

“Hate you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He cuffed my ear, and my wolf growled.

“Keane made you get rid of all your sneaky stalking technology but did he ever share his location on the family sharing group?”

“Huh? My mate isn’t on the brothers’ chat group.”

“Not that.” Ezra explained about the phone app. I had no clue what it was or if I had it. But my brother took my phone and held the display in front of my face. “You thought he’d gotten his way regarding keeping tabs on him, but he let you know you could find him if you looked.”

Tears blinded me. Keane had trusted that I wouldn’t abuse that privilege.

Ezra placed two fingers on the phone display and searched the map. “He’s not at the library.”

My belly performed flip-flops, and I begged the universe to tell me my mate was on the way home or about to walk in the door.

But when my brother glanced at me, his pale cheeks told me all I needed to know.

“Just tell me.”

“He’s on the far side of town.”

Okay. Maybe he had a friend there or he’d taken another job and not told me about it. Nope, we had a pact that he’d always disclose any new clients or jobs because of what happened with the club.

The room was silent as four of my brothers shared worried glances.

“Just tell me, Ezra.”

“It’s in or close to the office rented by what remains of the Ironclaw pack.”

“What? But I took out Cassian at the club, and you all killed his bodyguards and Betas.” With the top echelons destroyed, the pack was in disarray and would take years to recover.

“Seems like there’s someone with enough power and know-how to want to hurt you specifically.”

Cassian’s mate, Asher. It had to be him, because that was what I did when Cassian tried to kill Keane.

I removed the gun from the holster and checked the bullets. “I’m going to get him.”

“Of course you are.” Riggs stepped forward. “And we’ll be with you, but you can’t go in blind, Boaz.”

He made sense. I liked plans. They prevented people from getting killed, and these were my brothers. Alpha would be pissed if we caused another incident as we did at Moonbound. But mates came first, and as angry as he might be at us drawing attention to ourselves, he wouldn’t fault me for doing it. My methods maybe.

“Fine. I’ll give us fifteen minutes to plan, and after that, I’m in the car.”

We sat around the kitchen island, each of us researching. The roads surrounding the building and any dead ends. The location of the CCTV, how many pack members were likely at the headquarters, and how many of those were aware Keane had been kidnapped and on their premises.

My mind went back to the night Keane and I met, and I struggled to breathe. He was a cat. He didn’t have a ferocious wolf inside him. Cats had nine lives, and my mate was a wily one. He wouldn’t go down without a fight.

But he had our baby in his belly, and he’d protect our little one until his last breath.

Maynard put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t think that. It will blunt your skills, and we need you to be on top of your game.”

Lake and Riggs went to the basement and got ammunition and more weapons. Thiago had his knives.

“We drive to here and cut the engines for the last fifty yards.” Ezra showed us a place two blocks from the Ironclaw building.

Four of us would surround the building, while I’d be the distraction by knocking on the front door. But while I knew few details of Asher, he’d been mated to Cassian for years according to what we’d discovered, and he would expect me to come with my brothers. But while our headquarters was on five floors, theirs was ground level.

And that gave my brothers the opportunity to do something unexpected.

20

KEANE

My head pounded, and I tried to reach over to pat my mate, have him help me... or I didn't know what... but I needed his comfort and a pain reliever at the minimum. I couldn't remember having a headache like this before.

Except when I went to grab him, my arms didn't move. I tried again and again, but it was like they were stuck, filled with lead. They didn't move even an inch.

A voice I didn't recognize, far too close, far too sinister, broke through the silence. Something akin to a smelly pillowcase was pulled from my head and before I could adjust to the lighting, water came gushing down on me. Cold-ass water.

My eyes popped open.

I was sitting in a chair, not lying down like I'd originally thought. I was so disoriented. I blinked, trying to clear my eyes as water still cascaded over me.

"Where am I?" It came out harsh and broken, like when I first woke up after being drugged. Had I been drugged again? No, that didn't make sense. I went to the library, and then?—

Everything started coming back to me. Following the man I half recognized. Turning down the dead end. Getting caught. Being thrown in the trunk of a car. A bag being shoved over my head. It had been moist, and everything tasted weird.

And then... nothing. Nothing until I woke up like this.

“You were far too easy to catch.”

He was right. I forgot everything Boaz had trained me in as far as personal safety went. Every single thing. I was 100% responsible for my own predicament.

The water stopped, and the sound of plastic hitting concrete echoed in the room. I still couldn't see anybody. The voice was coming from behind me, but I already knew who it was. It was the person I had followed. Those other ones weren't the mastermind—they were bodyguards. Or probably bodyguards.

“You... why? Why?”

“Because.” The person behind me walked in front of me, and sure enough, it was the face of the man I'd followed, just like I'd suspected. “Because you made it so easy. My plan was to do recon, to find your weakness, and you handed it to me on a silver platter. I guess what they say is true—curiosity killed the cat, or at least it is about to... very slowly and painfully.”

Why had I been so stupid? I promised my mate I'd be safe, and I'd been anything but.

“Why me?”

He reached out and slapped me. Hard.

“Try again,” he seethed.

“Who are you?”

Another slap.

“You followed me. You know who I am.”

“Except I don’t. I recognized you, but I don’t know from where or from when.”

This time he didn’t slap me. Instead, he pulled out a gun and aimed at me.

“Let me remind you. Mister ‘My Suit Doesn’t Fit and I Take Money Without Giving Back What I’m Owed.’”

Suit. Money. Fuck. Why had I ever gone to Moonbound?

“You were in the room that night.” I didn’t remember him being there exactly, but I did recognize him, so it made sense. But if he was, how was he alive? My mate killed them all.

“I wasn’t there yet, but I was at the club. My mate was getting us a nice little treat.” He ran the gun along my cheekbone. “And what did you do?” He smacked me with his pistol. “You brought your men in. Slaughtered him. Slaughtered my mate. Mine. He wasn’t yours.”

Fuck.

Everything fell into place. This was the mate of that piece of shit Cassian who drugged me. And now he was seeking vengeance. As sick as it was, I understood where he was coming from. Had I lost my mate... I couldn’t think about what I’d do.

“What kind of Alpha does your pack have, letting his mate work at a place like that. If I’d known you weren’t some disposable omega, I’d have picked another. It’s your fault my mate is dead and vengeance will be mine.”

Boaz had taught me so many ways to protect myself. Not a single one of them was

helpful right now. I was tied to a chair. I couldn't kick. I couldn't move my hands. I couldn't feel my cat.

The best I could do was wiggle, but if I wiggled too hard, I'd end up on the floor.

Basically, I was fucked.

But I had to be strong. Because it wasn't just me—my baby was here. I was entrusted with their safety until they came into this world, and my own dumbass mistakes weren't going to be the death of them and me.

Please let Boaz realize I'm gone. Please let him realize he has a way to find me . I should have just told him to leave an AirTag in my wallet. That would've been easy. He could find me when he needed to. It wasn't like I didn't trust him—I'd just been throwing a fit that day because I'd been shocked and surprised. This whole life was new to me.

I thought to shift, to bring forth my cat. Maybe I'd be able to get out of my bindings then. But the man in front of me—his beast would take me out. And we weren't alone. I could tell where the others were, based on his subtle little head nods to different corners behind me.

My lack of scenting ability was making all of this more difficult. I didn't know if there were one or fifty people behind us or if they were human or shifter.

I needed to buy time.

“Your mate picked me.” I instantly regretted the words. Another slap. “I mean... to serve. To serve him.”

“No. I picked you. It was me who saw you and thought you'd be fun and asked him

to fetch you. I saw you walk into the bar and had you moved over to VIP. You think that was an accident? You hadn't earned your way to the prize position. That was me." He squatted down to be eye level with me and put the gun against my temple. "And what did you do? You took what was mine."

He scented the air deeply and then again, stood up, and barked out orders. "Find out what that is, and if someone is the cause, end them. I don't care if it's teens thinking they are funny."

I couldn't smell it at first. But then—smoke. The unmistakable scent of smoke. Even with my dulled senses, it was overtaking me.

"I should kill you now." His eyes kept darting back and forth. Then his foot came up and knocked me back, the shock of it stealing my breath.

"Burn, kitty, burn."

He ran out of the room, leaving me all alone.

I had to get out. I had to leave. I called my cat—he wasn't there. I called him again. Still not there.

Whatever was on the smelly bag that was over my head when I woke up— had made it impossible for me to shift.

Fuck.

Growls in the distance grew closer. The smoke worsened. There were shots—multiple shots—and I flinched at every one, my head the only thing moving. I had to get out of here. I did. I needed to save my baby.

I started to squirm. Back and forth. Back and forth. Hoping to inch the chair across the floor. Making no progress.

Then—the sound of a door being broken open gave me a surge of hope.

Cassian's mate would have just opened it. He had the key. This was someone else. Someone here for me.

Maybe it was a firefighter. Maybe it was my mate. It didn't matter who it was.

I needed out.

“Help!” I called out. My voice came out as barely a whisper, turning into a fitful cough. My eyes were getting heavy.

The last thing I remembered before everything went black, was the entire chair being picked up with me in it.

My mate was here.

I was safe.

And then there was nothing.

I came to in the car. I was in my mate's lap, and we were going fast.

“Please, please wake up. Please wake up. Please wake up,” he said over and over again. I couldn't crack my eyes open. I tried to move. I must've moved enough where he noticed, because he could feel it too.

“I'm here. I'm here. It's me.” His kiss on the top of my head gave me the strength to

open my eyes for the first time.

“Mate,” I croaked. It was crackly and awful.

“Don’t worry. You’re safe now. You’re safe.”

I tried to say something—tried to tell him I was sorry.

Instead, I went out again. My body too weak. My lungs burning. It was too much.

When I woke up the next time, I was in our bed. My mate’s wolf was curled up beside me, protecting me.

I reached over, my arm finally working, and placed my hand on his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

He got up, licking my face, then jumped off the bed to shift.

“Maybe we could go back to AirTags.”

He chuckled.

“Please tell me everyone’s all right.” My hand went to my belly.

“Our baby is fine. And we’re all fine. But Cassian’s mate, Asher—his men—they’re gone. They will never harm you again.”

“Please tell me you tore his flesh from his body.”

“I didn’t have time. I had to rescue you instead.” He tapped my nose. “I shot him.”

“That’ll do,” I whispered. “That’ll do. Please hold me. I need to know this is not a dream and I’m really here.”

He took me in his arms and promised me that everything would be okay.

I was home.

21

BOAZ

Alpha was on vacation, something I couldn't recall him doing previously, and I was the temporary head of the pack.

As expected it was a lot of paperwork, negotiations, and handling rivalries from other packs. But I made sure to get out with Josh and my men and crack some heads and read the riot act to pack members.

Keane's bump wasn't huge yet, but he had blossomed in recent weeks. As he worked from home, he reasoned he wouldn't need to take paternity leave until just before the baby came.

We'd gone back and forth on whether he would work after the birth, and he'd agreed to cut back on his clients and work part-time, only doing the remote tasks. Rhodes and Maynard said we'd both be exhausted and to take as much time off as possible.

But as I was the stand-in Alpha, my days were long, and we had dinner together at headquarters or used a video chat and ate together in our respective locations.

As I ate my stir-fried noodles, I mused how Keane would fit in when he was the Alpha Omega.

"What?" He froze with a fork halfway to his mouth. "Is that a thing? I didn't grow up in a pack."

I dropped my chopsticks, trying to figure out how he had never been aware the Alpha's mate played a role in a pack or den. But our Alpha was a widower, his mate having passed away in a car accident some years ago. So Keane hadn't witnessed an omega in the role.

"Is that like a president's spouse? Or a queen's consort? They walk five steps behind and smile and nod at everyone but never accomplish anything?"

"Not at all. The Alpha Omega runs charities, organizes fundraising, and makes sure the pack is a cohesive unit."

Keane rolled his eyes. "But has no power of his own." He harrumphed and went back to eating.

How did I approach this? My mate didn't appear to recognize that this was the role he would step into.

"You can make the role whatever you want when you take it on."

"Me? But I have a job I enjoy, and we'll have a child or maybe children. I can't be the Omega Whatever."

I let it go because Alpha was only in his 50s. He wouldn't retire—or gods forbid, die—for decades. And I was busy carrying the burden of the pack while my mate was growing our baby.

One month after I assumed the temporary role, Alpha returned with a tan and a jaunty disposition. Odd. He was always so dour, and he rarely smiled, but now he almost skipped around his office.

Maynard was at headquarters one afternoon because Alpha had a job for him. Not as

a pack member but his other role as a hitman. He emerged from the meeting convinced that Alpha was going to make a big announcement.

“He hasn’t mentioned anything to me.”

Maynard gave me a look but said nothing.

“Boaz.” That was more like the Alpha I knew, his voice booming from the office open door.

I scurried in, and my gaze rested on a framed photo on Alpha’s desk. He picked it up and ran a finger over it, and his face softened.

“I’m retiring.”

“What?” Shoot, I’d never screeched at Alpha, but he didn’t glare or yell back. “Why? What are you going to do?”

He handed me the photo. “I’ve been given a second chance, Boaz.”

Second chance? At what? No, he couldn’t go anywhere because that would leave me in the hot seat. It was my dream to become Alpha, but not yet. I wasn’t ready. He had to be joking.

Does Alpha joke? My beast wasn’t following the ins and outs of the conversation.

“I met someone while I was on holiday.”

This didn’t sound good. He was talking about affairs of the heart. I wanted him to stop, and I was tempted to slap a hand over his mouth.

“I mated again. The universe has blessed me with another mate.”

“But why retire? You could still head the pack and be a loving mate.”

“I want to devote the rest of my life to being with my new mate.”

What could I say to that?

But he hadn't confirmed that I was his successor. That entailed calling a meeting of the pack council. This was the prize I'd been working toward all my adult life, and instead of running toward it, I was backing away.

“This is your future, Boaz. I've arranged a meeting of the council this evening.”

I had to get home and tell Keane. If he was against it, I'd give it up. It'd be hard, especially as the new Alpha would choose his Betas and I probably wouldn't be included.

I could join my brothers in the private sector, but that future looked pretty bleak. I wasn't a computer guy. I hated wearing a suit, and I was hopeless at selling anything.

Alpha gave me an hour to speak to Keane. I called him from the car and said I was on my way with some big news.

“You're not pregnant, are you?" he quipped.

“Very funny.”

“So spill. What's the news?" My mate was sprawled on the sofa, a bowl of cherries resting on his belly.

I filled him in, and he didn't say anything until I was done.

"Do I have to give up my life for the pack?"

"Not at all. You can work and make the Alpha Omega role your own. There are no rules." He'd have to be more visible than he was now which was... Ummm, I doubt he'd visited headquarters, and he'd never been to any pack functions.

"Maybe we could start a daycare. Many omegas work, and paying for childcare is expensive."

I latched onto that idea. It'd be popular with everyone, and we had a lot of unused space at headquarters, especially on the first floor. "That's perfect.

"So, is that a yes? We accept the positions of Alpha and Alpha Omega?"

Keane's blank expression was puzzling. "Were you seriously willing to give up your dream?"

"Ummm, yes." Was that a trick question?

My mate beckoned me closer. "You were willing to do that for me?" He grabbed my collar and wiped his tears with it.

"Of course. I'd give up everything for you and our little one. I cradled his bump and kissed it. The baby kicked a response.

"What's our little one saying? I can't speak baby-kicking-from-the-womb."

"Let me interpret." Keane ruffled my hair. "I love you, Papa."

Now it was my turn to cry. “Where are the tissues when you need them?”

We snuggled on the sofa, and I explained I had to give Alpha my answer.

“Tell him yes. But first, let me clarify, will I have to declare a lot of buildings open and make speeches?”

“No. Why would you do that? When the daycare opens, you might have to say a few words.”

“Will I have to walk among adoring crowds, receiving gifts and asking meaningless questions?”

“Hardly.” Who did that? Sounded awful.

“What about a crown and a long cloak?”

I gave him a look. Was he jerking me around? I didn’t know anyone who waltzed around town wearing a crown. Kids playing dress up, perhaps.

“The pack doesn’t own any crowns.”

“Then I accept the role of Alpha Omega. Sounds like a hoot. But I have one request.”

I kissed his brow. “Anything, my love.”

“Next time there are bad dudes who have to be killed, I want in on it. You’re aware how my cat can pounce on people from a height, based on the incident at the docks. This Alpha Omega enjoys breaking bad guys’ bones.”

Memories surfaced of him clawing a guy’s face until it resembled a piece of meat.

“Absolutely.” We’d make a great team. “But you can’t participate in a kill if you’re pregnant.”

“Deal. Better give Alpha the good news.”

I couldn’t tell my brothers or parents until Alpha had informed the council, but as usual, they were pissed at me when they found out. Four of them were at the door later that night. Maynard was on the phone while pacing the floor with his daughter who was teething.

“You! The Alpha? Do we get any perks for being your brothers?” Lake asked

“No.”

My one-word answer was met with groans.

“No and again no. Besides, none of you work for the pack. You are pack, but you have your own jobs and lives.”

“I’m signing Luna up for the daycare.” Maynard said his goodbyes before I could remind him I’d been Alpha for about an hour.

“We should celebrate.” Thiago hauled me to my feet.

“The only celebrating I’m doing is making tea and going to bed with my mate. You go and have fun.”

I begged them not to get into trouble because I didn’t want to be roused from my bed.

“We’ll do our best, old man.” Ezra winked.

“Shame we don’t have a cake.” Keane studied me over the top of his tea cup.

Oh no, not bakery talk.

KEANE

I went to pull up my pants and button them, only once I got them up, they wouldn't button. I knew this day was coming and had been delaying it, wearing my mate's sweats instead. But it was time to just accept the fact that I needed to go get paternity clothes.

I didn't want to. It wasn't that I didn't love being pregnant or carrying our baby and keeping them safe. I loved the way my body changed to accommodate the growing life inside me, I just hated clothes shopping. Everything looked great on the rack, but then when I went to put it on, the sizing was messed up or it fit weird in spots, especially my shoulders.

I was not in the mood to face the racks, but it was time. It was either buy new clothes or walk around naked. Boaz would love the naked plan if it was only us, but that wasn't how life worked.

I took out my phone and messaged Boaz. You busy?

It was a stupid question. Of course he was busy. He'd been working his tail off in his new position and looking out for me. Absolutely, he was busy.

But two seconds later, the phone rang. When I answered it, the first words out of his mouth were, "I'm never too busy for you, my love."

Now I felt guilty. It didn't take much lately. My hormones were all over the place, and extreme emotional responses were pretty much my norm.

"You don't even know what I'm gonna ask. I should've waited until you got home."

"Mate, I'll always rather you call me right away, no matter what it was."

That was oddly specific. There had to be a story there.

"What can I do for you, Kitten?"

"I'm—I'm calling uncle," I grumbled.

"Uncle?"

"Yeah... I need to get some clothes that fit. These won't even button."

"I've got you. Go into the closet. There's a bag with a stork on it. Grab it."

I waddled over there, and sure enough, there it was, and inside? Inside it were a bunch of different paternity clothes. Best. Mate. Ever.

"When did you do this?" I hugged the pants close to me.

"When you stopped wearing your button pants?" Of course he'd noticed. He noticed everything.

"Thank you, alpha mine."

"Nope. We're not doing that. These are clothes to get you to the store. Get dressed. We're going out. We'll buy some more. You don't want to do laundry every other

day.” That was true. “And there’s someplace I want to stop.”

“Okay. I’ll be ready.” I didn’t hesitate to agree with him. I still didn’t want to go get clothes, but “someplace I want to stop” was a surprise, and I was there for that.

I barely had my clothes on when my mate came home. “I’ve been wanting to do this for a while.”

I was still confused. Why would he be that happy about me getting new clothes? That didn’t really make sense, but also... he did like to spoil me.

I pulled him in for a kiss. “You’re the best. How did you find clothes that fit me so well?” I picked up my shirt and showed him how the pants still had room but were nice and firmly up—no chance of falling.

“I know your body, Kitten.” He placed his hand on my growing belly. “I’ll call ahead and have them pull more of these styles for you.”

“You... what?”

“I’ll call ahead. You hate clothes shopping.” Every time I thought he couldn’t be any more perfect, he went and did something like this.

“I really do. But I don’t remember telling you that. Do you know everything about me?”

He gave me a deep kiss, and I nearly forgot that I’d asked him a question. “I pay attention, if that’s what you mean. But no, I don’t know everything. I learn something new every day. It’s one of my favorite things.”

We arrived at the paternity store to discover they had, in fact, pulled out a bunch of

clothes all in the same type, style, and size as the ones he picked out for me and had them bagged and ready to go. I didn't even try anything on, letting Boaz scan his card, and away we went.

"That was painless. Thank you."

He put his hand on my belly. He loved doing that. I liked it too. "Anything for the father of my baby. Now... now it's time for the good part."

"The good part? Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

We drove out of the city into a much more rural area than I'd been in a long time. It was beautiful, but the farther we got, the more confused I was.

"We aren't going to visit a pack, are we?"

I knew that would eventually be part of my responsibilities, but I needed a heads-up—or twenty—before that happened.

"Nope. We're going to see a human."

That piqued my interest. Twenty minutes later, we pulled into a farm and up to their barn, where a small sign read: Handmade Furniture.

He walked around to my side of the car and helped me out. We went inside, where the person sanding a rocking horse stood up straight and smiled.

"Is it time?" The man set down his sander.

“It’s time.” My mate wrapped his arm around my middle.

The man came over and shook my hand. “I’m Doug, and this was one of my favorite projects. It was such an honor to create them for you.”

I didn’t understand—was I getting the rocking horse or what? But he led us to the back of the shop, where there were a ton of bookshelves.

“These are for you.” My mate kissed my cheek.

“They’re custom and will fit the dimensions your husband gave me. But they’re movable instead of built-in. So if you ever decide that you want to move, you can easily take them with you.”

My old shelves had been plastic crap. Nothing like these.

I hugged Boaz, barely getting my arms around my belly.

“Now it’s your time to pick the finish.”

Doug showed me gobs of choices, but my eye instantly went to one that reminded me of my childhood bed frame. It was funny how memories stuck like that. He told us he would deliver them in a week, and my mate and I left.

I thought we’d go home next, but no. My mate had more surprises for me, and our next stop ended up being a huge bookstore.

“Here.” He handed me a gift card. “If you don’t spend every single penny here, I’m not taking you home.” He was teasing. Probably.

“Okay. I can do that.” It wasn’t hard to spend money at a bookstore. But then he told

me to turn it over—and I saw the total amount, and my jaw dropped. “They make gift cards that big?”

“You already agreed. No take-backsies.” He ran a finger along my mating mark, knowing full well what that did to me.

“Okay, I will do this because I know that you like to dote on me, but I’m using a lot of it for the baby.”

“I accept your terms,” he said, kissing my cheek. “I know you love your books.”

I’d lost many over the years, in moves, in shitty apartments, at college, and I did miss them. They were kind of my thing. The library had been great, but there was something about having a copy on your shelf for whenever you wanted them.

My first stop was the children’s section, where I found a nice employee and told her, “I want to start a library for our baby.”

When I told her our budget, her face lit up. The next thing we knew, the counter was filled with books.

“Are we going to be able to read all these to them before they’re in college?” Boaz asked, clearly amused.

“We’re going to read to them all the time. And probably this one—” I held up a book that had been my favorite as a child, “you’ll have memorized pretty early on. Let’s check these out, and then come back for the rest.”

I used pretty much the entire gift card in that one corner of the bookstore, and when I started looking for books for myself, I was much more cautious—until my mate realized what I was doing.

“You know that’s not the only money we have, right?” He stood in front of me, holding my eyes.

“I know.”

“Books. Buy books. Lots of books, or I’m going to buy them for you. And you know I have bad taste.” He didn’t. I might not want to read the kind of books he’d pick out for himself, but he paid attention to detail. I’d have been surprised if they weren’t 100% to my taste.

“You spoil me.”

“Kitten.” He nipped my ear. “That’s my job. So maybe let me do it.”

“Only if you let me do my job. Later.” I ran my finger down his chest.

“Oh? And what job is that?”

My hand slid straight down his body, then back up again. “To see if I can make my mate purr.”

23

BOAZ

Even though I'd been Alpha for months, we hadn't had time for an official ceremony. Keane harped on about it, saying the pack should get together to celebrate, but I explained that wasn't our way. Or it hadn't been Alpha's... former Alpha's way.

"But you're Alpha now. You can start your own traditions."

I thought about it, and while Alpha had never drawn attention to himself, as mafia we did enjoy ceremony, so perhaps it was time to mesh the two customs.

"You should stamp your personality on the pack." That was Maynard's offhand remark as he was on his way out to "a job."

"Do we call you Alpha all the time?" Riggs asked. "Even when you're at home?"

"Yes." Lake grinned. "Or he'll kick your ass."

"Don't be ridiculous. Only call our brother Alpha if he's pissed with you." Ezra chuckled.

I sighed. My brothers would never stop jerking me around, but if I needed them, they'd be beside, in front, and behind me.

But I'd been busy, weighed down with paperwork, but also I'd refused to be desk

bound, so I spent hours each day visiting pack families whether they lived in a tiny apartment or a mansion.

The pack owned a lot of businesses, and while I hadn't visited each one, I had contacted the managers and gone over the spreadsheets. My brothers told me I had underlings for that and the pack needed an Alpha who didn't appear haggard with bags under his eyes and his clothes hanging loose on his thinner-than-usual frame.

If I were to have a formal introduction to the pack, I hoped we could pair it with the opening of the daycare at headquarters, but we were still waiting for planning permission. Keane insisted we weren't allowed to bribe anyone at City Hall to speed the process, because we couldn't cut corners with regards to children's safety.

"Fine, I give up."

We were having a family dinner at my brothers' home, where I had lived before mating. They'd put together a meal which Maynard said was passable, and the rest of us tossed crudités at his head. None of them hit him because he had super speedy shifter reflexes. Maynard and Rhodes's dog, Momo, turned his nose up at the vegetables on the floor.

"Give up on what?" Riggs sipped a glass of wine. "Being a nice person?"

Everyone laughed and banged the table with their fists. My family was so tiresome.

"We'll celebrate." Keane's due date was a few weeks away, and while I would have preferred to wait until after the baby was born, Rhodes suggested getting it done before.

"You'll be exhausted in those first few weeks post-birth."

“Okay. Next Friday night.”

There were no medals to pin on my chest, no head to crown. I did have a head, but there were no crowns in the pack. Keane suggested serving cocktails and nibbles. He and I would circulate, introducing ourselves to pack members we hadn’t met, and I’d give a short speech.

“Very short.” He gave me a look. “No one wants to listen to a long one. Trust me.”

That was fine by me. I hated talking in front of large groups of people, though my family disagreed, saying I’d been telling them what to do since birth. So rude!

And now here we were. Headquarters was festooned with decorations, and waiters circled with drinks and tiny bites of food Keane said were nibbles.

My mate was dressed in a dark green paternity suit that matched the color of his eyes. Being very pregnant, he couldn’t stand for long, which was perfect for getting away from groups of pack members who wanted to talk forever about my failings. Not everyone was enamored with what I’d achieved so far.

Keane tucked his arm in mine as we made our way around the room. But he winced and was breathing deeply and stumbling.

I took him aside. “I can have someone drive you home. You should be in bed.”

“No, I’m fine, but there’s not much space in my belly, and it’s uncomfortable for both the baby and me.”

But every few minutes he gripped my arm, and his labored breathing worried me. He’d produce a wan smile, and we continued our rounds of the function room.

“I know that look.” An elderly omega I hadn’t met gazed at Keane’s bump.

“End-of-pregnancy kicks in the ribs.” My mate nodded. I knew my mate well enough, and he was masking his pain.

“No.” He touched Keane’s arm. “You’re in labor, dear.”

“Labor?” My voice echoed across the room, and everyone turned toward us.

My brothers assembled behind Keane.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“We’re ready to help Keane give birth.”

“And boil water if needed.”

“Remember, we were present when Luna was born.”

How could I forget Rhodes going into labor in the cinema.

“You’re not in labor, are you?” Surely the process started slowly with a few twinges, but Luna’s birth had been quick.

“Maybe,” my mate panted.

“Think of it this way, Boaz.” Riggs slapped me on the back. “You won’t have to give your speech.”

“Will you stop your little bro fest and pay attention to me?” Keane complained. “I’m about to bring your niece or nephew into the world.”

“Hospital or home?” Thiago tucked his arm in Keane’s, but I elbowed him out of the way. That was my job.

“I won’t make it to either.”

My mind went blank. Where would he go? He couldn’t have the baby with the pack milling about and gawking.

“Your office, Boaz.” Maynard took charge.

“But he can’t have the baby there.”

Keane hissed at me, his cat shining through his eyes. “You may be Alpha, but I say where this baby comes into the world. Your office it is.”

I raised my hand to salute, but Lake yanked it down and glared at me. “What’s wrong with you,” he mouthed.

Maybe I was in shock, but my brothers were taking charge and leading Keane to the elevator, and I had to step up. Or step into the elevator.

Hurry , my wolf urged.

The seven of us squeezed in the elevator, no, eight including Rhodes. I wondered if everyone was going to help or if they’d wait outside my office with champagne and pop the cork when the baby cried.

Keane dug his nails into my palm, groaning and saying, “Here comes another one.”

“Sounds painful.” Ezra elbowed Thiago and told him to shut it.

When we reached the entrance to my office, I steered my mate inside and then went to bar the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked my family.

“In there.” They spoke in unison, but Rhodes put up his hand.

“As I’m the only one who has had a baby, I vote that I come in and the rest of you stay here.”

There were howls and the stomping of feet, reminding me of Luna, but they backed off, muttering that they never had any fun.

I closed the door and the blinds, and Rhodes put the sofa cushions on the floor.

“Huh. I knew that sofa would come in useful someday.”

Keane draped his arms around my neck, his eyes tightly closed and swayed his hips. He rested his head on my chest as another contraction wracked his belly.

“Get rid of these damned clothes.” He frantically yanked off his jacket, ripping buttons and tearing the fabric. “Get them off me.”

Rhodes and I made quick work of undressing him, and I helped my mate lie down. He raised his knees, crying out as the cramps wrapped around him.

“Help me, Boaz. I can’t do this alone.”

I froze at those words, but just as I had taken the former Alpha’s place and met the challenge, now I had to be the best mate to Keane.

I lay beside him and took his hand. “We’re going to breathe together.”

“Fuck breathing. I’m screaming.”

“Screaming it is.”

We yelled together, him drawing blood on my palms as the contractions helped bring our baby into the world.

“Can you see the baby, Rhodes?”

“I see dark hair.”

“Oh my gods, we’ve done it.”

Keane whimpered.

“Ummm, you’ve done it, Kitten. Sorry.”

“Ahhh.”

“Keep pushing, Keane.”

If I bore down like my mate was doing, I might need to rush to the bathroom, so instead, I shouted encouragement. “You’ve got this.”

“The head!” Rhodes was yelling as loud as my mate.

“Did you hear that, Keane? We have a head.”

“Push, Keane. The baby’s almost here.” That was Rhodes, and I took him at his word.

“Almost here, love.” My mate was doing all the work, and I was just repeating what Rhodes said.

“You did it,” Rhodes squealed.

Keane flopped to one side, and I grabbed his chin, thinking he’d passed out. His body reminded me of a rag doll kids played with in movies, but he grinned and held out his arms for our baby.

“A beautiful baby boy.”

Rhodes left the room, and my mate nuzzled our son. He was red and plump and wriggling on Keane’s chest, but his eyes were open, and they were the same color as my mate’s.

“We have to think of a name.”

We hadn’t been able to agree on one, but our baby was here, and we had to name him.

KEANE

“Felix, it’s time to go.”

I already had the car packed, and all I was waiting for was Felix to decide which shoes he was going to put on today.

Since turning three, he’d gained independence in different ways than I’d expected—mainly with his shoes. Our sweet boy was all about footwear. He didn’t care what clothes we gave him to wear. He didn’t care what coat, what haircut—none of that. But he had shoes for every occasion, and he was very matter-of-fact about there being only one right choice. I thought it would fade as he got older, but he was nearly four and just as shoe-focused, if not more so.

Today, we threw a monkey wrench into that routine. We hadn’t told him where we were going—just that it was a surprise. We couldn’t wait to tell him that our second little one was on the way.

Felix came running out with two different sneakers on. That was a first.

“So... you decided?” I asked, looking at his feet.

“No. So I did both.” For a child his age, he had some pretty solid problem-solving skills.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Is Papa coming with us?” He looked around for Boaz.

“Yeah, he’s already out by the car.”

Felix ran ahead of me, straight to his papa, who helped him get buckled into his seat, and we were off to give him the good news—and to show him the surprise we’d picked out for him, which was our first stop.

I’d forgotten how much he wasn’t a fan of long car rides. He asked over and over again: where were we going, were we there yet, were we staying overnight... and then back to the beginning again.

Boaz was much more patient than I was with that. He answered every question like they were information-seeking—because, at three, they actually were.

Eventually, we got there. It was the same farm where Boaz had ordered my bookshelves when I was pregnant and had since picked out a smaller one for Felix’s room.

“We’re going to a farm. Is that so you can shift?” Felix asked as Boaz parked the car.

I shook my head.

Boaz took the reins. “No. And remember how Daddy told you there are shifters and there are humans? And humans don’t really know about shifters?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, that’s where we are right now. So we’re not going to talk about Papa’s wolf or Daddy’s cat or anything related to that, okay?” Boaz repeated a conversation we’d had often in his young life.

“Okay, Papa.”

He was really good about knowing what to say and when, but it was still nerve-racking going places with lots of humans at this age. It wasn't too big of a deal if he did slip up. Humans had a tendency to brush it off as imagination. But I preferred to err on the side of caution.

We got him out of the car and went into the shop, where the woodworker, Doug, was already there, smiling brightly. I loved watching the way he lit up when he was showing off his work.

“I'm Doug. Are you here to see your present?”

“I'm Felix,” he said, grabbing my hand, slightly unsure. “Are you Papa's friend?”

The man squished his nose like he was thinking hard. “I don't know if we're friends, but I make special presents for your Papa to give to the people he loves. And I made one for you.”

“You made something for me?”

“I sure did. Your daddy and papa came over and helped pick it out. Then I made it. Do you want to see?”

Felix dropped my hand so fast and ran to the man, who led him out back to where his finished “big boy bed” was. It had carvings of cats and wolves on it—not overly fancy, but definitely beautiful.

“It's perfect! Except... where's the bed of the bed?” Felix walked around the frame.

“Do you mean the mattress?” Boaz ruffled his hair.

Felix nodded.

“That we have to get from a different store. This is just what we call the frame. What do you think?”

He ran to Doug and hugged him, telling him how much he loved it.

“Now you get to pick what color it—” Doug was cut off by Felix’s excitement.

“Blue!” Felix shouted.

“Well then.” Doug smiled. “Let’s go look at the different kinds of blue.”

Felix was already there, flipping through swatches like a designer on a deadline. He picked his favorite, and Doug promised that the bed would be ready next week.

Felix skipped back to the car, thrilled to pieces. He was getting his big boy bed—completely unaware that the reason why was because he was going to have a new sibling, and his current bed would be converted back into a crib.

Our next stop wasn’t far. It was on friendly pack lands, the pack Alpha someone Boaz knew through his position. The land was available for any shifters traveling through who needed to let their fur out—or scales, or feathers. They weren’t picky.

“What are we doing here, Daddy?” Felix asked.

“We’re going to have a picnic.” I’d packed sandwiches and drinks, along with some cut-up fruits and vegetables. It wasn’t too fancy, but it didn’t need to be. At his age, having food he would eat was good enough.

“A picnic with Papa’s wolf?”

“If you want.” Boaz picked him up and tickled his side, the field filling with giggles.

We went into the field, laid down the blanket, and ate our food. Then it was time to tell him the good news.

I pulled out a book Boaz and I had made for the occasion. It was just pieces of paper stapled together, but that didn’t matter. Felix loved books, especially the ones we created as a family. Every occasion needed one in his mind, and we were happy to oblige.

He’d been making his own for a while now, all pictures, and he would read them to us over and over again. It was the most adorable thing ever. Eventually, we planned to turn them into something more polished. But for now, stapled paper it was.

“Is the book my surprise?” He looked thrilled to pieces.

“No, sweet one. But the book has your surprise in it.” Boaz started reading the story of a Papa and a Daddy who loved each other so much, they had a little baby named Felix. It told how they loved eating together and playing games, and how that would never change.

But something would.

That was when Boaz turned the page to a picture of me holding a new baby. They were bundled up, since we had no idea yet who we were having yet, but it was obviously a baby.

“And that means that this summer, Felix, you will have a brand-new baby brother or sister.”

“I get to be the big one?” He watched me wide-eyed in anticipation.

“Yes, you do,” Boaz said. “What do you think?”

“I’m gonna be a big brother?”

“That’s right.”

“Cool beans!”

That was a new phrase, one he’d learned from his cousin Luna. No idea where they got it from, given it was an older saying, but everything was cool beans lately.

“Can we take a nap now? We sleep out here with Papa’s wolf and your cat?”

We were very lucky having a three-year-old who loved his naps. Boaz said he was embracing his inner cat, not that we knew who his beast might be. Not yet.

“Of course we can.”

Sleeping outside was one of his favorite things, so it didn’t surprise me that he asked. We got undressed, took our warm animal forms, and the three of us curled up on the blanket in the late-day sun.

Life didn’t get much better than this.