



The Fated Mate Bandit (Trash Pandas #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I fell in love with Silver in the third grade. He was my first everything. First best friend, first crush, first kiss. When he chose me out of all the omegas chasing after him, I felt like the luckiest guy in the world.

But fate had other plans.

Just after graduation, I met Daryl. From the moment I laid eyes on him, I knew he was my fated mate. I tried to hide my disappointment. My heart still belonged to Silver, even though I was destined for someone else.

I did my very best to be a good mate to Daryl. Even when he hurt me, I forgave him and kept trying to make things work. It wasn't until I got pregnant that I realized I couldn't stay any longer.

Showing up on Silver's doorstep isn't the world's best plan. He might turn me away. But I have nowhere else to go.

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SILVER

The knock comes in the middle of the night. I blink my eyes, unsure if the sound was real or a fragment of dreams. Then it comes again.

Thump , thump , thump .

I glance at the clock on my nightstand. It's two o'clock in the morning. No one visits at this hour unless they're in trouble. Fear surges through me. I grab for my phone, hoping I didn't miss a text from Quin. He shackled up with an ex-con who just got out on murder charges. But there are no messages on my phone.

Maybe he lost his phone, or Slade broke it in a murderous rage. I jump out of bed, not bothering to put on a shirt even though I'm only wearing a pair of boxer briefs. Quin won't care that I'm mostly naked. Then I remember he might have Chime with him, and I grab a pair of shorts, awkwardly pulling them on as I rush toward the door of my bedroom. It takes far too long to get from my room to the front door. I bought this house a year ago, and I still feel guilty about how large it is.

When I open the door, Quin isn't the one standing on my porch. It's Lucas, an omega I never thought I'd see again. He's older now, with circles under his haunting brown eyes and a jawline made sharper from all the weight he's lost. But he still has the same honey-brown hair and full lips. I remember how soft those lips were back when he was mine to kiss. That seems like a lifetime ago.

His hand rests on his belly, which juts out like a bowling ball from his body. I shouldn't be surprised he's pregnant. We're twenty-three, and he's been with his fated mate for five years. But it still makes my heart ache to see him knocked up with another alpha's baby.

I always thought he'd have children with me.

He turns his head ever-so-slightly, and that's when the light falls on his right cheek. Its skin is pink and swollen. All at once, I notice the obvious things I missed between the shock of seeing him on my porch in the middle of the night: the torn collar of his shirt, his bare feet, and the way his hands are trembling.

"I'm sorry to bother you this late at night," he says. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

I hold my arms out to him. I shouldn't, of course. Gray wolf shifter omegas are repulsed by the scent of other alphas once they've found their fated mate. But the gesture is instinctual. I want to protect him from whoever hurt him. I've always wanted to protect Lucas.

He takes one halting step forward, then rushes into my arms, burrowing his nose into the crook of my neck, the way he used to after escaping one of his alpha dad's drunken rages. I wait for him to jerk away, put off by my scent, but he inhales deeply and nuzzles in closer, wrapping his arms around my waist.

It feels good to hold him in my arms, even after all these years.

"Who did this to you?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, he just clings to me tighter. But if it wasn't his mate, Daryl, then he wouldn't be on my porch, would he? He'd be in his mate's arms instead.

“C’mon, let’s get you inside,” I say softly. I guide him further in, so I can close the door. I notice there isn’t a car parked in my driveway. Lucas doesn’t have a bag or a suitcase. He’s here all alone with just the clothes on his back.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

He nods against my chest. He’s holding on to me so tight, his baby bump presses against me. It makes the protectiveness I’ve always felt for him even worse.

“What are you in the mood for? I have eggs, some of Quin’s bread, bananas.”

When we were younger, he never said no to food. He could down my omega mom’s baking faster than Link, and that’s saying something. But instead of perking up at the idea of eating, Lucas sobs.

I thread my fingers through his hair and pull him closer. “You can stay with me for as long as you need,” I whisper in his ear. “I’ll take care of you.”

It isn’t a promise an alpha should make to a mated omega. I know that. But Lucas’s sobs slow, and he says, “Really? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Ever since the first night I saw Lucas fleeing the trailer park in his wolf form, I’ve known that he needed someone to take care of him. Back then, I didn’t question whether it should be me, I just chased after him. And tonight, I don’t care what’s appropriate or normal. Lucas came to me, and that means I’m allowed to help him in whatever way he wants.

He slowly withdraws from me, keeping his gaze on the ground as he does it. His body is tense, as if the movement requires all his willpower and strength. Exactly like when

we were kids and he forced himself to rise from our cuddle pile.

Cuddling was something we did a lot as kids. He'd run off in his wolf form once or twice a week, clearly scared out of his mind, and I'd follow. At first, I ran after him in my human form and tried to talk to him, but he was too scared to shift back into a human for hours after his altercations with his father, so eventually, I decided to take my animal form too. We couldn't talk like that. Raccoon and wolf mouths aren't suited for human language. So I curled up next to him and rested my snout on the soft fur of his back. I wasn't sure he'd let me, but he relaxed the moment I did it.

We stayed like that for hours. He'd sleep or just lie there burying his nose into my neck. We weren't supposed to cuddle as a raccoon and wolf, of course. Shifters are only supposed to share their animal forms with their families and their mates, but it didn't feel wrong to share that side of myself with him.

Eventually, he'd stand up and back away, his eyes fixed on the ground, his body coiled with tension. There was always a determination in his face, as if he was doing something that required great self-control. I think it was hard for him to leave our cuddle pile and return to the real world.

"How about some French toast?" I suggest.

His head bobs up and down. "Thank you. I mean, thank you, sir."

Always with the "thank yous" and the "sirs." Link used to complain that Lucas made us look bad with his politeness.

I place two fingers under his chin and lift it until he meets my gaze. "I'm not a sir to you, Lucas. Not now, not ever."

There's such pain in his eyes, like he wants that to be true, but he knows it isn't.

What happened to him over the last five years? I know better than to ask the question out loud. He won't tell me.

Lucas has always had his secrets.

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LUCAS

Silver's hair is short. I try not to stare at it as he weaves through the kitchen, grabbing ingredients for French toast. When we were kids, his silver hair was halfway down his back. It made him look like an elf from Middle Earth or a character from a Studio Ghibli film. That made his role in my life feel more plausible, somehow. He was simply Howl giving me sanctuary in his moving castle or a Galadhrim warrior protecting me from the orc Dad turned into every time he drank.

Now Silver's hair is almost shaved, and in place of the lean muscle he had in high school, he's all shoulders and big biceps. He's still beautiful. He has the same prominent cheek bones and big brown eyes it was so easy to get lost in back then. But his beauty is harder now—more real. He's no longer the magical boy who seemed plucked out of a book.

That's strangely comforting. His realness feels solid and safe. I want to burrow against his big chest and revel in the hard warmth of his body. But I can't do that again, no matter how tempting it is. Silver isn't my alpha. I place my hand over the crook of my neck where the scar from Daryl's bond bite is imprinted on my skin.

Whether I like it or not, Fate chose Daryl for me, not Silver. And for wolf shifters, Fate always gets the final word.

"Quin has his own bakery now," Silver says, pulling two pieces of bread from a bag labeled, Bandit Bakery. The logo is adorable, with a little raccoon head next to the

text. It's very Quin. "And a little daughter named Chime. She's so cute. Let me find a photo." Silver sets the bread down and pulls his phone out of his back pocket. His lock screen is a picture of a little brown-haired girl grinning at the camera. She has Quin's dimples and big brown eyes.

"She's beautiful," I say.

He looks at the photo and smiles. "Yeah. Smart as a whip, too."

It's easy to get caught up in Silver and his family. Belatedly, I realize that's probably the point of this conversation. Whenever I was afraid and stuck in my human form, Silver would start a conversation about one of his brothers. Hearing about them calmed me down and made me feel like part of their family. That was my ultimate fantasy as a child—that I'd wake up and discover I'd been transformed into a raccoon shifter and had to be adopted into their family.

When we got older that fantasy changed, of course. I wanted to be Silver's mate, not his brother. But I never stopped wanting to be a part of his family in one way or another.

"I'm sure you heard about Link going pro," Silver says, smoothly moving from one brother to the next. "He has an obscene amount of money, but he won't spend it on anything except Chime. He still goes dumpster diving and everything. I keep telling him that the paparazzi are going to catch him one of these days."

I can't help but smile. Link and Silver were best friends in high school. They were always wrestling or challenging each other to do stupid things. I ended up timing their races or counting their push-ups. Link usually won.

I loved that Silver continued on anyway. He didn't even get mad when he lost.

“Coin has been recording some music, here and there.” Silver pulls out an electric grill and plugs it into the outlet on the island. “I guess he’s on the shortlist for this recording studio in Austin, and they call him up whenever they need someone to play the guitar or drums. He’s an airplane mechanic, too.”

Coin taught me how to play guitar when we were younger and even let me borrow his guitar every day to practice. He was so patient with me, even when I had panic attacks, which made me feel special, because he wasn’t patient with any of his brothers.

Silver cracks a few eggs into a bowl and starts mixing in the milk and vanilla. He doesn’t stop to measure, he just eyes it, like his omega mom. “Tin’s training horses. He lives like a hermit out on this ranch in the middle of nowhere. Our moms make him visit once a month, but other than that, he just stays out there all the time. They’re worried about him not having a social life, but he seems happy to me. He was never a social guy.”

I never knew Tin as well as the others. He spent every weekend with their Aunt Emerald helping out with her animal sanctuary.

Silver dips two pieces of bread into his concoction and tosses them on the grill. They sizzle on contact. After going almost all day without food, my stomach gnaws with hunger.

“What about you, Lucas?” Silver asks.

I glance up at him, the calming effect of talking about his family vanishing as I realize it’s my turn to give him an update about my life. My swollen cheek is self-explanatory, isn’t it? Does he really want me to spell out how miserable I’ve been during the last five years?

“I’m six months along,” I finally say.

“How long are gray wolf shifter pregnancies?” he asks.

“Nine months. I’m having a litter of three, so it might be less than that.”

His eyes widen in obvious surprise. Most mammalian shifters take limiters to avoid multiples. Raccoon shifters are one of the few shifter species who have full litters on purpose. The problem is, limiters cost money. Birth control costs money, too. Daryl promised he’d use the condoms I got for free at the clinic. Maybe he did.

Or maybe he didn’t. He complained about them all of the time.

“Have you filed a police report about that bruise?” Silver asks.

I shake my head.

“Do you want to?”

I shake my head again. What would be the point? I learned a long time ago that there are crimes the police care about and crimes they don’t. An alpha abusing his family is firmly in the latter category.

“Did he hurt you anywhere else?” Silver asks.

“No.” Not this time. But there’s no need to say that part out loud.

Silver flips the French toast. They’re perfectly brown, which comes as no surprise. Ruby, his omega mom, taught all her sons to cook. Even her honorary son. I missed her almost as much as I missed Silver at first. That’s why I spent so much time in the kitchen during my first year with Daryl. I felt closer to her when I made her tuna

casserole or spaghetti with her signature meat sauce.

“Can I tell my family that you’re here?” Silver asks.

My heart aches for the sense of belonging I left behind all those years ago. Back in high school, it was far too easy to become attached to Silver and his family. His moms bought me Christmas presents and washed my clothes. His brothers showed me their raccoons and I showed them my wolf. I didn’t see how fragile it all was until it was too late.

“No,” I say.

Because I’m not Ruby’s son. I’m not Coin’s brother either. Fate didn’t choose that family for me, just like She didn’t choose Silver as my mate. I can’t let myself get wrapped up in the cozy ease of Silver’s world without remembering that I don’t belong here.

I’m just a lone wolf passing through.

3

SILVER

The fragile man shaking with sobs that I found on the doorstep has transformed into someone reserved and careful. He answers my questions with one or two words as he eats his French toast and calmly thanks me when I show him to the guest room where my brothers sleep any time they stay the night.

Holding him while he sobbed was easier than leaving him in that room all by himself. Maybe that's because I still want him, and I'm a selfish person. Or maybe it's because the sobs seemed more honest. There's a wall between us now—a coldness that's foreign after how close we were in high school. I don't know what to make of it.

I wander back to my bedroom and close the door. My first instinct is to call Link. He's shit at giving advice, but he's a good listener. The problem is, I think I need advice.

I call my omega mom instead.

“Hello?” Her voice is throaty and confused. “Are you okay?”

I glance at the clock. It's three in the morning. I got so caught up in what's going on with Lucas, I forgot what time it is.

“I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to wake you.”

“Do you think I’m normally up at this hour?” she asks, a teasing lilt to her voice.

“No. I just lost track of time.”

“What’s going on, sweetie? Is something wrong?”

“No, I mean, yes, but I can’t tell you what it is,” I stammer. God, I should have thought this through before I started making phone calls.

“Okay,” she says patiently.

I know what question I want to ask her. It’s incredibly stupid, and she’ll probably be able to figure out exactly what’s going on based on my question, but I have to know.

“Do you remember when I asked you about putting my paws on someone who already had a fated mate?” That’s how raccoon shifters claim their mates. We put our paws on their chest while in our raccoon forms.

“Yes, I remember.”

“You said it would still work. That I could override a fated bond if I wanted to,” I say more to myself than to her.

“I also said that you shouldn’t do it. Raccoon shifters are lucky. We can choose to be with whoever we want. Shifters with a fated mate can only bond to that one person. It isn’t kind to rip away someone’s only chance at love like that. It’s gotten raccoon shifters into a lot of trouble in the past.”

I know all of that. It’s why I didn’t put my paws on Lucas back when we were eighteen, even though I really wanted to.

“What if someone’s been with their fated mate for several years, though? Would it still work?” I ask.

Mom sighs. “What’s going on over there?”

“Nothing. This is a purely hypothetical question,” I lie.

“A purely hypothetical question at three in the morning?”

I pause. “Fine. It’s not hypothetical.”

“How long has this guy been with his mate?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Okay. Is his name Lucas?”

Of course she figured it out. I’ve never been good at keeping secrets from her.

“I can’t tell you the specifics of what’s happening right now. I just need to know if putting my paws on him will work if he’s been with his mate for five years.”

There’s a long pause on the other end. I can feel her exasperation, even a hundred miles away.

“The bond fated mates share is very special—” She begins.

“Yes, I know that.”

“It’s difficult for someone to go from an intense relationship like that to another deep bond so quickly. People need time to heal and figure out who they are on their own.”

“But what if he’s in trouble? Getting a bond removed requires a warlock, and that’s expensive. Wasn’t Nikki’s bond removal over \$100,000?”

Nikki is Aunt Emerald’s friend. She’s a gray wolf shifter too.

“Sweetie, you only get to put your paws on one person your whole life,” she says.

“But—”

“You called me in the middle of the night to ask me this question, so let me answer. The magic in your paws is not there to save someone money or rescue them. It exists solely to bind you to the person you love. Now, if Lucas is that man, and he loves you as much as you love him, then the two of you need to have a conversation about that.”

I take in a deep breath. “I understand, but will my paws be able to override a bond that’s lasted for five years?”

“Yes,” she says softly. “If he loves you, and you love him.”

“I’ve loved him since we were kids?—”

“You loved the eighteen-year-old version of him. A lot can change in five years.”

She’s right. I’ve changed a lot in the last five years, too. I graduated from college, joined the Air Force, and travelled the world. I’m very different from the small-town alpha Lucas dated in high school.

“Look, if you put your paws on Lucas, you know I’ll support you. You’re a good man, and I have no doubt that you’ll do the right thing, whatever that may be.”

“What if I don’t know what the right thing is?” I ask.

Confessing my feelings might make things more complicated for Lucas. Will he feel like he can still stay with me if I tell him I love him? He said he didn’t have anywhere else to go. The last thing I want to do is make him uncomfortable in the one place where he feels safe.

“Talk to Lucas,” she says. “Communication is important, especially if you want to put your paws on someone.”

“Thanks, Mom. Sorry for calling so early.”

“It sounds like you had a good reason. Bring Lucas over if you can, okay? I miss that boy.”

“I’ll try.”

We say our goodbyes, and I end the call, still confused about what I should do next. Normally, Mom’s advice is a lot more useful. Maybe I should have called Link after all.

Because I’m a dick, I text him, knowing full well what time it is.

Are you up?

To my surprise, I get a response.

I am now, asshole.

I grin and call him. He answers on the first ring.

“What the fuck, man? You better be on fire or something.”

I laugh. “Sure. Because calling you is the logical thing to do if I’m burning to death.”

“Ugh. If you get me up at three in the fucking morning, you don’t get to make fun of whatever comes out of my mouth. What is so urgent that you couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

I wince. He’s probably not going to like this. “Well, there’s this omega?”

“Seriously? You called me at three in the morning about a guy?”

“Fine. Then I won’t tell you who I want to put my paws on,” I say.

He lets out an agonized groan. “I hate you.”

“But you want to know badly enough that you’re going to listen to me, right?”

There’s a long pause. “Maybe.”

That’s as good as I’m going to get from him at this admittedly unreasonable hour. If he hadn’t woken me up in the middle of the night so many times during our college years for a ride home from yet another drunken frat party, I’d feel guilty.

“So, this omega shows up on my porch in the middle of the night. I haven’t seen him in years,” I start, then Link interrupts me.

“It’s Lucas.”

“What? How did you know?”

“A guy you haven’t seen in years shows up on your doorstep and you want to put your paws on him? Of course it’s Lucas. I watched you mope over him for three whole years in college.”

“Three years? I did not?—”

“Yes, you fucking did. It was so bad that an omega snuck into your bed our junior year wearing nothing but lacey underwear, and you sent him home without so much as a glance at his very nice ass. It was awkward for everyone. Especially me, because he tried to hit on me before he left, and the moment had serious incest vibes. Gave me the biggest ick of my life.”

I laugh. I’d forgotten about that.

“You laugh now, but at the time, you were the biggest mopey McMoperson,” he says.

“That can’t be a word.”

“Like I said before, if you wake me up at three in the morning, I get to say whatever words I want. How is Lucas doing, by the way? Is his creepy fated mate still hanging around? He always gave me serial killer vibes.”

I sigh. “Any alpha with a mullet gives you serial killer vibes.”

“Yeah. Because that is the serial killer haircut of choice.”

“Says who?” I ask.

“Says me, and I get to say?—”

“Whatever you want. Got it. I can’t tell you what’s going on with Lucas. I’m sorry.

But I think you might be right that his mate is...”

“A serial killer? Really?”

“No, of course not. Jesus. But I think he might be dangerous.”

Link swears under his breath. He may joke about Lucas’s mate being a serial killer, but he cares about Lucas just as much as the rest of us.

“You gotta put your paws on him, Silver,” Link says. “To keep him safe.”

This is why I hesitated to call Link first. He oversimplifies things. Which is part of the reason I love him so much. The world is an easier place to understand while I’m talking to him. Everything is pure good or evil. Even haircuts.

“I’m not sure Lucas wants me to put my paws on him,” I admit.

“Maybe not now, but after you do it, he’ll have to love you. And I promise that loving you will be better for him than loving the mullet man?—”

“You mean Daryl.”

“Oh, that’s right. His name is Daryl. That’s a serial killer name to go with his serial killer haircut. This guy can’t be good.”

I laugh silently. God, I love Link. What would I do without him there to say something stupid enough to make me laugh?

“I think Lucas should get to decide who he wants to love, regardless of what’s best for him.”

In other words, I should talk to him. Just like Mom said.

Link sighs loudly. “Fine.”

“Thanks for talking with me about this, though. I should probably let you go.”

“What?” he scoffs. “That’s what you got me up for? Seriously?”

“Yeah. I just needed... to feel better.” It sounds stupid when I say it out loud, but it’s true. It’s hard to live alone after spending my whole life sharing a room with at least one of my brothers. Sometimes I just need to hear their voices.

“Maybe you should have eaten a hot dog or something, then. Because calling me this early is bullshit.”

I laugh again. “You’ll get back to sleep just fine.”

“Yeah, but still. You’re interfering with my EDM cycle.”

I smile. “It’s REM cycle. EDM is a type of music.”

“Oh yeah.”

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay. Say hi to Lucas for me. I still think you should put your paws on him, but not from me, obviously. Like I mentioned earlier, incest vibes give me the ick.”

I laugh and end the call. I still have no idea what I’m going to do, but I think I can go back to sleep now, too. That’s a start.

I'll figure out the rest later.

LUCAS

Every scent in this house is a comfort. The bathroom has hints of Silver's cologne and the thick blanket he gave me from his own bedroom has the distinctive musk that's 100% him. The guest room he lets me sleep in whispers of family visits. Coin's scent is on the pillow, and the sheets smell like Ruby's favorite lotion.

I promised myself I'd be strong if I came here and not get swept up in how wonderful Silver is. But I inhale each scent longer than I should, savoring how safe I feel in this place. The large bed with its four pillows and soft sheets is so different from the mattress on the floor at home. For the first time in months, I fall asleep easily.

When I wake the next morning, there's a moment when I forget about what happened last night. I forget about the fight with Daryl and the way he struck me across the face, even though he promised he would never hit me while I was pregnant. I forget about running away with nothing but the clothes on my back and my phone. I even forget about using Daryl's Uber account to get a ride to Silver's neighborhood. I open my eyes, fully expecting to be in our tiny bedroom with Daryl asleep at my side.

Silver's guest room is bright and big with some of the picture frames from his mom's home hanging on the walls. Photos of his brothers grinning at the camera remind me why I came here in the first place. Silver has always been more than an ex-boyfriend to me.

Once upon a time, he was my home.

I slowly sit up and get out my phone. There are twenty calls from Daryl and a long string of messages. As I scroll through them, reality comes flooding back.

I'm sorry. I lost my temper. Please come home.

Where are you?

This isn't funny, Lucas. Get back here.

You're starting to scare me. Answer my calls.

Call me back. It's two in the morning.

WHERE ARE YOU?

Look, I know I messed up, but this is starting to get ridiculous.

Call me back.

Please call me.

A knot of dread forms in my stomach. If I go back to Daryl, I know he'll forgive me. I've certainly done it before. The first time he hit me, I stayed at a motel for a full week before I went back. I promised myself that I would never let an alpha treat me the way my father had.

But it turns out that motel rooms cost more money than a server at a diner can afford, and going to a shelter was a lot scarier than what Daryl might do to me. So I returned to our apartment and said my apologies. Things got better for a few months, and then he did it again. During the first year, I walked out every time it happened. But after a while, it was easier to skip the threatening-to-leave stage. I knew I wasn't really

going to do it. At least not longer than a few days. I had nowhere to go and no way to make it on my own.

What is my plan here? Last night, I was so certain that I couldn't stay if Daryl was going to hit the kids, too. That's what he did when he hit me so hard I fell down onto my stomach. The flurry of kicking in my womb while I laid there on the floor scared me. Did he hurt them? Would some part of their brains remember that pain?

Would my children grow up fearing their alpha dad as much as I feared mine?

I can't go back. I don't know what I'm going to do, I just know that I won't put my pups through that. I hide my phone under the pillow without responding to Daryl.

My stomach rumbles with hunger. First, I'll get something to eat, then I can figure out a plan.

I wander out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. Silver is sitting at the kitchen table, typing on a laptop. At some point, he swapped out his pajama pants for white-washed jeans and a T-shirt that hugs his biceps and pecs in all the right ways. I feel a little guilty for how much I enjoy looking at him. Technically, I'm a bonded man.

Maybe that doesn't matter once your alpha hits you. I don't know.

"Um, hi," I say awkwardly.

He looks up at me and smiles. "Good morning. How did you sleep?"

"Good. Thank you."

He stands. "I haven't had breakfast yet. How about I make us some pancakes? I could whip up my mom's buckwheat pancakes that you like so much."

I make those pancakes for myself on days when I feel lonely. They remind me of sleepovers with Silver and his brothers, and being allowed to eat until I was full.

“I could make them, if you like,” I suggest. “Maybe I could cook and clean for you in exchange for staying here. I know it isn’t much?—”

He shakes his head. “Absolutely not. Your feet are swollen. Why don’t you sit down and put them up?”

I glance down at my feet. They’re almost twice their normal size.

“I’m sorry?—”

“Lucas, it’s okay. You came here for help, right? I want to help you, and I don’t mind cooking.” He pulls out a chair and gestures to it.

I sit down in the chair reluctantly. How will I work with feet this swollen? I had a hard enough time holding down my job with all the throwing up I did in the first trimester, but at least I could still walk.

Silver pulls out the chair next to it and pats the seat. “For your poor feet.”

I lift one foot, then the other. I hate the way Silver winces at their size. There was a time when he looked at my body like I was the most beautiful thing in the world.

Silver walks over to the kitchen and starts grabbing ingredients from the cupboard. “My boss said I could telework for the next few days. I still have a lot to do, but at least I’ll be around. I figured we could go shopping tonight after I get off. You’re welcome to wear one of my shirts until then. It won’t fit well, but at least it’s clean.”

Wolf shifters often wear their mate’s clothing in the honeymoon phase of the

relationship. It's the smell. We like being reminded of our lover while we go about our day. It's completely inappropriate for me to wear another alpha's clothing, though. Kissing Silver would probably be less intimate than that. But the idea of being surrounded by Silver's scent is so wonderful, I know I won't tell him no.

It's only until tonight when we can buy something else.

"Thank you," I say softly. "I'll pay you back when I find a job?"

"No way. You don't owe me a cent okay? And no rush on getting a job. I can take care of the expenses for now. You said you're six months along, right? You could stay with me until the pups come, and then start looking for work once they're six or seven months old."

That would mean staying here for nine or ten months before I started looking for work. "I couldn't impose on you like that," I say.

He looks away from me. "What if it wouldn't be an imposition?"

"What are you talking about? You're spending money on me and cooking for me."

"I just mean, what if I want you here?" he asks, meeting my gaze again. "What if I missed you?"

He missed me? It's been five long years since we were together, and here he is, living in a big, beautiful house with a good job. Why would it even occur to him to miss me?

"I'm bonded to Daryl," I remind him and myself. Especially myself.

He drags a hand through his short hair. "Do you still want to be?"

“It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“There are ways to remove a bond,” he says.

I hold back a bitter laugh. “I can’t afford a warlock, Silver. You know that.”

“A warlock isn’t the only way.” He watches me closely, as if he’s waiting for some kind of reaction. I have no idea what he’s talking about. If there was an easy way to remove a bond, half the wolf shifters in Texas would do it. Hating our fated mates is something we pass down generation to generation, like poverty.

“Like what?” I finally ask, when it becomes clear he isn’t going to volunteer the information on his own.

He swallows hard. “My paws. I could break your bond if I put my paws on you.”

He means claim me as his mate.

The enormity of what he’s offering makes me speechless. He’s always been kind, but that’s on another level.

“No,” I say so quietly, I’m not sure he heard. I’m not even sure I want him to hear. It wouldn’t be fair to let Silver sacrifice his own chance at a happy future to save me. But a small part of me wants to let him.

If only I was selfish enough to ignore what it would cost him.

5

SILVER

“ N o.” The word is more an exhalation than a whisper. It’s almost like he doesn’t want to say it.

Fucking hell . How am I supposed to interpret that response?

“If you don’t want to bond to me, I understand. You can still stay here.” That’s what I should have said at the very beginning. I’m already fucking this up.

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” he repeats. “I’m not a raccoon shifter. I don’t get to choose who I end up with.”

I walk over and sit in the chair next to him. I hate the way his back straightens at my close proximity, his body always on the alert. When we were younger, I desperately hoped that being with me would make him less afraid of the world. I guess Daryl fucked that up along with everything else.

“I’m trying to give you a choice here,” I say.

He lowers his gaze to his hands. “No, you’re trying to give me your choice.”

“What do you mean?”

He takes in a deep breath. “Well, raccoon shifters are the luckiest people in the

world.”

“I wouldn’t say that. People hate us.”

Lucas gives me a sad smile. “Because they’re jealous, Silver. You get to bond to anyone you want. It doesn’t matter what shifter species or secondary gender. You can choose anyone—love anyone. Do you have any idea how precious that choice is? Most of us are stuck with whoever Fate chooses for us.” He says the last few words like they’re a prison sentence. Maybe for him they are.

“You don’t have to be stuck with Daryl. If I put my paws on you?—”

“Then you’d be stuck with me,” he says. “Don’t you see? I’d get to have a choice, but you wouldn’t. You’d be saddled with an omega who has swollen feet, stretch marks, and three pups on the way. That isn’t fair.”

Is that all he thinks he is? Stretch marks and swollen feet? I don’t know whether to feel sad or angry. Here Lucas is, six months pregnant, and instead of being cherished and cared for by his alpha, he’s on the run and believes he’s worthless.

If I was a violent man, Daryl would be in a world of hurt right now.

“Look at me,” I say.

He raises his gaze to meet mine.

“I think you’re beautiful.”

He turns away from me again.

“Lucas,” I say. This time I cup his jaw and tilt his face in my direction. “Raccoon

shifters have big litters. Stretch marks come with the territory. If you were carrying my kits, I would kiss every part of your skin that stretched to make space for them.”

His eyes well with tears. “Daryl doesn’t feel that way.”

“Then Daryl is wrong.”

He leans into my hand, just like he did last night, so desperate for affection that he’s accepting it from an alpha he doesn’t feel worthy of. I hate this. I want to ignore everything he’s saying right now and just put my paws on him already. It’s clear that he’s miserable with Daryl. But the last thing Lucas needs is another alpha pushing him around.

How could I give him a choice without giving him my choice, as he put it?

“Maybe we could do a trial run,” I suggest.

Lucas furrows his brows in confusion.

“You still have three months before the pups come, right? What if we pretended to be mates for the next month or so? Just to see how it feels.”

That would solve everything. We’d have time to get to know each other again. I could pamper Lucas the way he deserves during his pregnancy and shower him with the physical affection he craves. Then maybe he would understand how deep my feelings are for him.

“What do you mean pretend?” Lucas asks. “Like some kind of role play?”

“No. We could just interact like we would if I put my paws on you. Not as a role play, but a real trial.”

He shies away from my hand. “That would still be you giving me your choice, just slower.”

“No, it wouldn’t. I want you, Lucas.”

He shakes his head. “You couldn’t?—”

“Stop telling me what I’m supposed to want. Why don’t you call Link and ask him how hung up on you I still am.” I pull my phone out of my back pocket and hand it out to him. “Or call my omega mom and ask her how much she misses you. My family is my world. You know that better than anybody. And they absolutely adore you. Even Coin likes you, and he doesn’t like anyone. But that doesn’t matter, right? Because you have stretch marks? How shallow do you think I am?”

I feel bad for my outburst the second the words are all out. I’m usually careful to not blow up in front of Lucas. But my anger doesn’t startle him. He considers me for a long beat, the wheels obviously turning in his head.

“Then this isn’t just a charity project for you,” he says carefully.

“No, of course not.”

He wrings his hands together nervously. If this was back in high school, I’d hold those hands in mine and help him calm down, but I’m not sure he still wants that.

“If we did this trial run, and you lost interest, could I go stay with your moms?” he asks. “Just until I have a job? I won’t tell them anything about what we’ve done together.”

If I lost interest? Jesus . Does he think I have the attention span of a toddler?

“Of course you can. Anyone in my family would take you in. You know that. But I’m serious about this, Lucas.”

He takes in a shaky breath. “Okay. How exactly would it work? Would I sleep in your bed?”

“Yes. I mean, if you want to. You don’t have to if that’s too much.”

He swallows hard. “Is it too much for you?”

I shake my head.

“Would we kiss or... do other things?” he asks.

“If you want to.”

He scrunches his shoulders together. “You wouldn’t want to, right? I’m pregnant?—”

“I definitely want to,” I say.

Lucas’s cheeks turn a bright shade of pink. It reminds me of the times we made love back in high school. His face and chest always flushed after he orgasmed. He was so beautiful like that. Whether we were curled up in the back seat of Coin’s car or lying on a copse of wildflowers in the prairie near the trailer park, I always loved looking at him in the afterglow when he was all pink and sated. That was when he was at his calmest—when all the stressors of the world melted away.

“Just give me a month,” I beg. “If either of us don’t want to move forward after that, I swear I’ll back off.”

Lucas bites his lip, still uncertain. Am I pushing something on him that he doesn’t

want? But why would he melt into my touch if he didn't want me? That has to mean something, doesn't it?

Mom was right about one thing: I don't know Lucas like I used to.

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6

LUCAS

I allow myself to get lost in Silver's big, brown eyes. We used to sit like this for hours—not kissing or making love, but simply looking into each other's souls. The chemistry between us was thick enough that just being in the same room with him was enough to make my heart race.

Would it be so wrong to let myself be with him for a few weeks? It's the complete opposite of keeping my distance from him and not getting attached again, but it would give him time to sort through his old feelings for me. That would probably be helpful for him in the long run. In the meantime, I could be close to him, sleep next to him, possibly even give him pleasure.

My stomach twists with guilt when I think of Daryl. But I told him that we were through. It's not really cheating if I broke things off. Besides, if he wanted to be with me, then he shouldn't have beat me while I was pregnant.

There's just one problem I can't ignore because of my anger for Daryl or the deep loneliness in my chest.

"I'm not sure I could do anything sexual with you," I admit. "Gray wolf shifters usually can't cheat. Our bodies reject anyone but our mates."

As the old saying goes, the only person a gray wolf shifter can fuck is the one they don't want. Who knows how many gray wolf pups have been conceived with good,

old-fashioned hate sex. I think I was made that way.

“Isn’t it a scent thing?” Silver asks.

I nod.

“You don’t seem to mind my scent.”

My cheeks burn hot. “Right. We aren’t bothered by the scent of the alphas in our pack. And I... showed you my wolf form.”

If Daryl knew I’d given that part of myself to another alpha, he would have been furious and justifiably so. But I don’t regret it. Those moments when I cuddled with Silver in my wolf form were the happiest of my life. Even sex didn’t compare to how special I felt when he rested the snout of his raccoon on my fur and sighed contentedly.

Silver had sex with a lot of omegas before we got together, but he only shared his raccoon with me.

“So, what you’re saying is that my scent isn’t a problem, but kissing or sex might be?” he asks.

“Yeah. I don’t know how my body will react.”

He drags a hand through his short, silver hair. “Okay. Would you want to try it out? No pressure or anything, but we could kiss, just to see what happens.”

I look down at my dirty, torn shirt and huge belly. How can he want me like this? Is he claiming that he does to make me feel better?

“What if I just touched your lips?” he asks. “That’s kind of like kissing, right?”

“Okay,” I say.

I hold my breath as he lifts his hand to my face. He gently ghosts his thumb along my bottom lip. My skin sparks under his touch.

“How’s that?” he whispers.

“Good,” I mutter. It’s such an inadequate response. My body feels more alive than I have in years.

“Could I kiss you?” Silver asks.

“Yes.”

He leans in and presses his lips to mine. I inhale sharply, shocked by the electricity between us. I’d forgotten that kissing could be like this. My heart races and a long-forgotten heat coils between my legs.

He pulls back suddenly, searching my face. “Was that okay?”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel nauseous? Uncomfortable?”

I shake my head.

A wide smile spreads across his lips. “Does that mean we can do this? Will you be mine for a month, Lucas?”

I place my hand on my swollen belly. In three months' time, I'll have pups to care for. I should be focusing on finding a job and getting my finances in order, not getting distracted by Silver. But it's been so long since I felt alive.

Maybe this is what real happiness looks like—not a long-lasting, steady thing, but a brief jolt of joy you have to cling to before it's gone.

“Okay,” I agree.

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7

SILVER

A m I a little disappointed that Lucas wants to take a shower, rather than make out with me all afternoon? Maybe. He still seems a little distant as I give him some clothes to wear and show him how the shower works. Which is fine. He's been through a lot.

My phone dings. It's a message from Link.

Have you put your paws on him yet?

Instead of working, which is what I should be doing right now, I message him back.

No.

Link sends me a series of question marks. I roll my eyes and briefly consider calling him again, then I get a message from the brother group chat.

Coin: We need to have a meeting. In person.

My stomach drops. Coin has never suggested a meeting before. What is going on?

Sequin: Are you okay?

Cufflink: Yeah, man. That makes it sound like you're dying. And you look like shit

lately, so you could actually be dying. Are you dying? For the record, I don't want you to be dying.

Bless his heart. Link sometimes has a hard time communicating his love.

Coin: Silver's place is a good central meeting point. Can ya'll make it there by seven o'clock tonight? Quin doesn't need to come.

Sequin: Why not?

Coin: I'll talk about it with you later.

Talk about ominous. But if Quin doesn't need to be there, that rules out a lot of potentially scary things like a cancer diagnosis. At least there's that.

Silver: Just so you know, I have a houseguest.

Sequin: Who?

Tinsel: I don't think I can make it to Silver's by 7:00. Sorry, Coin.

Coin: That's fine, Tin. You don't need to be there.

Cufflink: WTF? Why do I need to be there, but not Quin and Tin?

Sequin: Who is Silver's houseguest? Did someone move in with you? I didn't know you were dating anyone.

Cufflink: Silver's not dating his houseguest yet... but he should be.

Oh my God, I'm going to kill him.

Sequin: WHO?

Coin: I'll see Silver and Link at 7:00. This is not a conversation that should be overheard by a houseguest. Get them to leave.

Coin is such an ass sometimes.

Silver: I'm not kicking out my houseguest for this.

Cufflink: Yeah, he can't kick out his houseguest. We could go to a bar or something.

Coin: This is not a conversation we can have at a bar. I'll bring the camper, and we'll talk in there.

Uncle Dagger has an ancient camper that he loans to family members whenever they can muster up enough cash for a road trip. Every summer of our childhood we took that old, rusted thing to a national park or state campground far away from the unrelenting heat of Southern Texas. It's the reason the scent of mothballs and mildew make me feel nostalgic.

Cufflink: Why do you have the camper? Are you going somewhere?

Coin: On tour.

Sequin: On tour, as in a music tour?

Coin: Yes.

Sequin: With what band?

Cufflink: What about your job?

Coin: I have PTO saved up.

Sequin: WITH WHAT BAND?

Group chats are not the best method for wringing information out of Coin. Not that it stops Quin from trying.

Tinsel: I just talked to my boss, and I can make it. I'll need a place to stay for the night.

Cufflink: We can have a sleepover in the camper!

Coin: We're 23 years old. We don't call them sleepovers anymore.

Cufflink: Speak for yourself.

Sequin: I'm coming too or Coin is never going to tell me who he's going on tour with. Will you pick me up on the way, Tin?

Tinsel: Sure thing, Quin.

Cufflink: If Quin is coming, then that means he can bring cinnamon rolls. And cookies. And maybe Chime...

They argue about whether Chime should be there for whatever sensitive conversation Coin has in mind and how much food Quin should be expected to bring. I can't help but feel excited, like I do every time my brothers can manage to gather together. It's a rare thing these days.

The only problem is that my brothers are going to show up at my house in less than seven hours, and once Quin sleuths out who Coin is going on tour with, he'll want to

know about my houseguest.

Cufflink: Guess what I found dumpster diving last night?

Sequin: What?

Link sends us a photo of large stuffie in the shape of a turkey. It's realistic enough that it might be taxidermy, but I'm not sure. It's an unsettling thing to be uncertain about.

Coin: Tell me that didn't used to be alive.

Cufflink: It smells a little like formaldehyde, so I think it was at some point. Cool, huh?

I shake my head and laugh.

Silver: Some things should stay in the dumpster, man.

Sequin: Don't bring it tonight, okay? It might give Chime nightmares.

Coin: It might give me nightmares.

Cufflink: Does this mean you're bringing Chime?

Lucas emerges from the bathroom. His hair is wet, and he's wearing the faded Air Force T-shirt I loaned him, along with a pair of sweatpants that swallow his small frame.

Damn, he looks good in my clothes.

“Hey,” he says, hugging his body shyly.

I hold out my arms to him, and he steps toward me uncertainly.

“Am I interrupting anything?” he asks.

I shake my head and wrap my arms around his big belly, pulling him onto my lap. He smells of my soap and shampoo, which combined with my clothing, makes this whole trial run thing feel a lot more solid. Lucas is really mine for a whole month.

“I’m just chatting with my brothers.”

He curls up in my lap, resting his head on my shoulder. It’s such a sweet and affectionate gesture, my heart swells with want. Not a sexual want, but an emotional one. When was the last time an omega rested his head on my shoulder? I can’t remember.

“How are they doing?” Lucas asks.

It takes me a second to remember he’s talking about my brothers.

“They’re good. Coin has some mysterious thing he wants to tell all of us in person, and so he invited them all over tonight. I tried to tell them I had a houseguest, and I couldn’t host, but?—”

“It’s okay,” Lucas says.

“I thought you said you didn’t want my family to know you were here.”

He burrows his nose into the crook of my neck. It feels so good, I close my eyes.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he says softly.

“Are you sure?”

He nods against my skin. “Just don’t tell them about the trial run, okay?”

“Okay.”

The idea of Lucas hanging out with my brothers again fills my heart with warmth. I wrap my arms around him, and he lets out a contented little noise that makes my heart race. It’s been far too long since we cuddled like this. I missed it so much in the months after he left that I could barely drag myself to class some days.

Somehow, I have to convince him to be mine forever. I don’t know if I can bear to lose him like that again.

LUCAS

Silver lets me sit in his lap as he works. It's a silly, stupid thing to stay there. I know that. But once I curl up on his lap, all the fear and stress melt away. Maybe it's the comforting scent of his skin or the slow thump, thump, thump of his heart. I can feel the pulse of it against my cheek, and it makes me feel so goddamn safe, I want to cry.

Silver types on his laptop like I'm not there most of the time, except for the occasional kiss he presses to my head or the hand he runs down my back. The first time I rise to go to the bathroom, he playfully traps me with his arms until I tell him where I'm going.

"Will you come back?" he asks.

"Do you want me to?"

He nods without hesitation. So I do come back. I try to give his legs a break now and again by grabbing a snack in the kitchen and getting a glass of water, but I return each time and allow myself to take comfort in his big, warm body.

At 4:30, he shuts his laptop. "I'm done for the day."

"Already?" I ask, not quite ready to get up, even though I've already cuddled with him for hours.

“Yep. I’ve been at it since 6:30 this morning.” He wraps his big arms around me and buries his nose in my hair. “Fuck, Lucas. You feel so good.”

My heart soars. Somehow, even with my big belly and swollen cheek, I’ve managed to make Silver feel good. I can hear the truth of it in his voice.

“We could just stay here for the rest of the night,” I say, only partially joking.

“Wouldn’t that be nice? But we need to go shopping before my brothers get here. I’ll never hear the end of it if they see you wearing my clothes.”

Reality returns with all its sharp edges. Silver’s brothers will see me pregnant with a bruised cheek in just a few hours. They’ll feel sorry for me and probably tell their moms about how sad my life has turned out.

That’s fine. It has to be fine. This is Silver’s house, and he should be able to invite his brothers over.

I climb off Silver’s lap. “Okay. I was thinking we could go to Walmart, if you don’t mind. They have inexpensive paternity clothes there.”

He stands up and raises his arms above his head in a big stretch. “Target is closer and their clothes are nicer.”

“Yes, but they cost more.”

He flashes me the dazzling smile that always mesmerized me in high school. “Don’t worry about money, okay? You’re my mate for the next month, which means I get to take care of you.”

That’s a line straight out of my fantasies. I shouldn’t let him. Soon enough, all this

will be over, and I'll undoubtedly have to pay him back for each moment of generosity, but I want the fantasy too much. Not necessarily the free stuff, but the experience of going shopping with Silver and letting him buy me things because he wants to.

This is my brief chance at happiness, isn't it? What if I just let myself have this?

"Thank you, Silver," I say.

"No problem. I enjoy buying stuff for the people I lo...ike," he corrects himself mid-word. Was he about to say that he loved me?

I can't read too much into that. He's caught up in the way things used to be between us. Otherwise, he wouldn't have offered to put his paws on me.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks.

"Yeah."

He puts his shoes on and leads me out to a clean garage with a white car parked at the center. He grabs a pair of gray flipflops from a bin by the door. "These are the smallest ones I have."

My feet are still swollen, so the straps almost fit. The sole is far too long, though, and they slap the ground as I walk.

"We'll get you new shoes in just a minute," Silver says, rushing around the car to get into the driver's seat. His car is as clean as his garage, which is a relief. My pregnancy has made me more sensitive to smells than ever before, and wolf shifters have an excellent sense of smell. The stench of Daryl's car is almost unbearable.

The Target is only a few minutes away. Silver parks in one of the spots reserved for pregnant omegas near the front of the lot. I expect him to keep his distance from me as we walk to the front doors. My cheek is still very swollen, and the last thing he needs is for someone to think he's beating up his pregnant mate, but he grabs my hand and laces our fingers together. Pleasure rushes through me, with little sparks emanating from where our fingers are intertwined.

"Is this okay?" he asks.

I nod.

Silver does get a few suspicious looks from the other customers as we make our way into the store. He doesn't seem to notice.

"Hold on, let me get a cart," he releases my hand and rushes toward a row of carts, then hurries back. I assume we won't be holding hands anymore because it would be awkward, but he grabs for my hand again anyway.

"Do we need a cart?" I ask. "I can just hold the clothes."

"You'll need more stuff than you can carry," he says, awkwardly pushing the cart one-handed.

"What do you mean? I just need a shirt and maybe some underwear."

He scoffs. "You don't have anything, Lucas. You'll need a whole wardrobe."

My stomach sinks. That isn't what I expected when I agreed to this shopping trip.

He steers the cart to the back of the store where the men's clothing is. In the corner near the dressing room is a small section of paternity shirts and pants. I scan the

shelves for prices and find the clearance rack tucked behind the selection of tank tops.

“Look, they have a few things on sale,” I say, heading for the rack.

He tugs on my hand. “And they have some nice things here. Do you like this shirt?” He points to a pale yellow button-up that looks incredibly soft. It’s my favorite color. But it’s at the front, and everyone knows the clothing on display is more expensive.

“The clearance stuff is fine,” I tell him.

He releases my hand and slides his arm across my back, pulling me in close to press a kiss in my cheek. I squeeze my eyes shut and savor the softness of his lips and the warmth of his body.

“Get what you like,” he whispers, his breath hot on my ear. “This is Target, not Bloomingdale’s. I can afford it.”

“You make that much in the military, huh?” I tease. My alpha dad was in the Army, once upon a time. I wasn’t under the impression that it was a lucrative profession.

“I’m a data analyst for the Air Force. I don’t make a ton of money, but I make enough to be comfortable.” He leans in close, “And support a family.” His tone is soft and earnest. Fate help me, but I let myself imagine what that would be like. Silver coming home from work every day to find me in the kitchen, cooking dinner for our family. In my fantasy, he takes time to hug each of the pups as if they were his own, and then comes over to kiss me.

The idea of a life like that makes me ache deep in my chest. I think that’s what happiness would look like for me, if I were ever allowed such a thing. I reach for the pale yellow shirt. The fabric is just as soft as I thought it would be. I could wear this in Silver’s kitchen during the next month, couldn’t I? Cook for him the way I would

if we were mates. I know all his omega mom's recipes.

I put the yellow shirt in the cart.

"There you go. What else do you like?" he asks.

I run my fingers over a folded pair of denim shorts. Silver used to like my legs. These would show them off. "Would it be okay if I got some shorts?"

He grabs for them and puts them in the cart.

"Do you think the blue denim or the black denim look better?" I ask.

He lets out a breathy laugh and grabs for the black denim, too.

"I don't need both," I say.

"Two pairs of shorts isn't going to break the bank. How about some sleep shorts? You used to like those," he says, grabbing for some pajama shorts.

"Oh. I thought I was going to wear your clothes to bed." I try to hide the disappointment in my voice, but I'm not very successful.

He leans over and kisses my cheek. "You can wear my clothing whenever you want, baby."

The endearment makes me weak in the knees. Baby. That's what he called me in high school, and I thought I'd die with happiness every time. It made me feel so special.

He tosses the pajama shorts into the cart. "It will be nice to have something to lounge around the house in, though."

He's incredibly generous, and despite how selfish it may be, I love it. Just like every other part of him, his generosity makes me feel safe.

"Could I get another shirt?" I ask, eyeing a white T-shirt that looks wide enough to accommodate my baby bump all the way to the end of my pregnancy.

"Of course," he says. "You'll need at least five or six, don't you think? This one looks comfortable." He picks up a sleeveless workout shirt that's the same pale yellow as the first one he spotted.

"I like that one a lot. Thank you, Silver."

He kisses my cheek again. "You're very welcome. How about you get four more shirts and some pants, then we'll go get you some shoes. I forgot we were planning to look at those first thing."

That's more paternity clothing than I have at home. Daryl thought it was a waste to buy clothes I would only wear for a few months. Maybe it is. But I get to be happy this month, so I carefully select four more shirts and a pair of jeans with an elastic waist big enough to grow with me.

"Are you sure this isn't too much?" I ask. The cart is halfway full of my clothing.

"Not at all. Let's get you some shoes."

He pushes the cart one-handed to the shoe section where he lets me pick out a pair of sandals, some athletic shoes, and a nice pair of loafers. I can't believe he's going to spend so much on me. After we're done picking out shoes, he heads for the personal hygiene section.

"What kind of soap and deodorant do you like?" he asks, leading me down an aisle of

bottled shower gels.

“Oh, um, I can just use yours. I mean your soap, that is.”

He stops the cart. “I want you to be comfortable, Lucas. Pick out some soap, shampoo, and deodorant. I also think we should get you some lotion. Pregnant guys like lotion, right? Isn’t that a thing?”

I hold back a smile. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Well, you should get some. Whatever kind you like.”

I scan the shelves of soaps and shampoos. There are so many options. Over the last few years, I’ve bought my soap and shampoo at the dollar store. It always comes in a bar, not a bottle. Even when I was growing up, bar soap was what we bought. It’s cheaper.

“Any kind I like?” I ask. “Are you sure? These are expensive.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Although, I won’t lie. I like smelling my soap on you.” He bites his lip and looks at me with a heat in his eyes that I remember all too well. Surely, he couldn’t be coming onto me. I’m six months pregnant and absolutely huge.

“Then I should use your soap, right? If you like it?” I say.

“Pick out some soap for yourself. You can use mine when you’re feeling flirty.” He smiles at me, and God. I can’t think when he smiles like that.

“Oh-okay. Yeah. Sure.” I turn to the wall of soaps. Even though there are rows and rows of options, one bottle calls to me right away. It claims to smell exactly like prairie wildflowers. I pick up the bottle and flip the lid. It’s close, I guess. I can pick

out the floral undertones and the scent of the hardy grass that grows near the trailer park where we grew up, but the smell of dry earth is missing.

That's probably for the best. My memories of that prairie are both good and bad. It's the place where Silver and I cuddled and made love, but it's also the place I took refuge every time my dad got angry. I don't want to be dragged back in time every time I take a shower.

"I want this one," I say, putting the bottle in the cart.

We find a shampoo and conditioner with the same scent. He even puts a lotion specifically made for a pregnant omega's belly in the cart. I feel like a spoiled prince with all this stuff.

"Do you still love chocolate?" he asks, as we walk toward the register, hand in hand.

"Um, yeah, but you don't have to?—"

He stops and tosses a big bag of chocolate peanut butter cups into the cart.

"Silver—" I protest, but he starts pushing the cart again.

"I'm allowed to buy my mate chocolate," he says.

My stomach fills with butterflies.

SILVER

Lucas walks out of my spare bedroom wearing his new light yellow shirt and shorts. He looks like an entirely different man than the one I found on my porch last night. His lips are quirked up into a smile on one side, and his eyes are bright. Even the swelling on his face has gone down, leaving only a light patch of purple on his skin.

“Wow,” I say, openly ogling him. His long legs in contrast with his baby bump are undeniably sexy. I probably shouldn’t be into that, seeing as how I’m not the one who got him pregnant, but here we are.

Lucas bites his lip nervously. “Thank you for the clothes.”

“Of course.” I hook an arm around him and pull him in close, until our lips are only a few inches apart. “Anytime.”

His chin tilts up, as if his mouth is made of magnets and mine are pure metal. I love how easily he melts into me, like Daryl never existed. “How much time do you think we have before your brothers get here?”

I glance at the clock. It’s five minutes to seven. “I don’t know. Fifteen minutes? Quin is coming, so they’ll definitely be late.”

Lucas kisses me. His lips are soft and taste of chocolate. I sink my fingers into his hair, holding him close, and his body sags against mine, surrendering to me

completely. I wonder what he would do if I gathered him into my arms and carried him to my bedroom. Would he let me make love to him?

“Ahem.”

I release Lucas and pull away from him to find a very flustered Tin standing in my kitchen. His face is red as a beet.

“Sorry to bother ya’ll,” Tin says. He grasps his cowboy hat and tilts it in Lucas’s direction. “Evening, Lucas. It’s nice to see you again.”

Lucas hugs his body and lowers his head. Shame nearly radiates off his body. “Hi, Tin. That wasn’t what it looked like.”

“I imagine it’s none of my business what it looked like,” Tin says. “Just thought you’d like to know the others are coming.”

Right on cue, Link ambles into the kitchen. He’s wearing the signature ball cap he adopted the moment he was drafted, and therefore, recognizable to most people in Texas. Prior to that, he was only college-football famous, which is still pretty famous around these parts. He wasn’t aware of it, though. At least not as much as he should have been. His agent was the one who insisted he start wearing a hat and more clothing. If Link was left to his own devices, he’d continue to walk around wearing only a pair of jeans, like we did when we were kids.

“Lucas!” Link raises his arms to give Lucas a big hug. I watch Lucas closely, not sure if that kind of affection will still be welcome. But Lucas smiles at him shyly and lets himself be enveloped in my brother’s big arms.

“We missed you so much, man,” Link says, squeezing Lucas with a fervor that concerns me a little bit, considering he’s pregnant.

“Lucas?!” Quin stands in the doorway of the kitchen, his arms full of bread and cookies. “Silver, you should have told us—” He stops when Link steps away from Lucas, revealing his pregnant belly. “Oh my... congratulations!” He smiles wide, his dimples popping. “That’s so exciting!”

Lucas ducks his head bashfully. “Thanks.”

Quin deposits the loaves of bread and bags of cookies on the table and walks over to give Lucas a gentle hug. “It’s been so long. I’ve thought about you a lot, but I wasn’t sure where you ended up. You aren’t on social media anywhere. I checked.” Quin starts rambling about all the social media sites where he searched for Lucas’s name. “Oh my God, I missed you. Losing you was like losing a brother.”

I notice the way Lucas’s eyes well with tears, and how he brushes them away so no one can see.

“I was just, you know, busy,” Lucas stammers.

“How far along are you? Can I ask?” He backs up to eye Lucas’s belly. “I mean, obviously I’m going to ask anyway, because I’m nosy like that. You have the cutest baby bump ever.”

Lucas rubs his belly with his hand. “Thank you. I’m six months along.”

That’s when I notice Coin in the doorway. Unlike Quin, who either didn’t notice the bruise on Lucas’s cheek or chose to ignore it, Coin stares right at it. “Lucas is your houseguest?”

I nod.

“And you couldn’t be bothered to tell us?” he asks.

“Things are a little complicated right now,” I say.

Coin approaches Lucas slowly, reaching up and brushing his thumb just below the bruise on Lucas’s cheek. “Who?”

“No one. Silver’s taking care of me. Don’t worry about it.”

Coin lowers his hand. “Okay. But if you ever need anything...”

“I’ll be fine,” Lucas reassures him.

Coin holds out his arms to Lucas. Not above his head, like Link, but low and hesitant. He’s always been so careful with Lucas, even when we were little kids. It’s Lucas who wraps his arms around Coin first. Coin lets out a breath in relief and holds Lucas tightly in his arms. “Are you okay?” he asks softly.

Lucas nods.

Coin pulls away first. He stands there, his face etched with concern for a full beat. He opens his mouth to say something, then shuts it again.

Since when is Coin speechless about anything?

A loud, familiar giggle comes from the other room.

“Did you bring Chime?” I ask.

Coin rolls his eyes. “He brought everyone, even though I specifically?—”

An enormous, tattooed man walks into the room with Chime sitting atop his shoulders. Slade. Who invited him? Chime is grinning from ear to ear and singing

something about a bear in a tree. He smiles back at her and sings along with his deep, booming voice. Quin looks up at them with such adoration, I almost forget that Slade is a murderer and doesn't deserve my brother.

"You probably remember Slade from high school. He's my mate now," Quin says. "I mean, obviously I have a mate now." He frames his face with his hands, calling attention to his new nose ring and dermal piercings. "That's why I have all the bling."

Lucas looks up at Slade, who is admittedly handsome, in a rugged, bad-boy kind of way.

I love the way Lucas smiles, like he couldn't be happier for my brother. "That's wonderful."

"Slade, you remember Lucas, my long-lost brother. Well, technically he's a wolf shifter, but he's an honorary member of our family."

Slade reaches out his arms, with Chime still in tow, and gives Lucas a careful hug.

"And this is our daughter Chime," Quin says, gesturing to her.

"It's nice to meet you," Lucas tells Chime. "Do you like chocolate?"

"Yes!" Chime squeals.

"There are some peanut butter cups on the counter that you could have, if your dads say it's okay."

Quin rolls his eyes, but he's still smiling. "You really are one of my brothers. Within two seconds of meeting my daughter, you're already spoiling her."

The inevitable chaos of my family takes over the kitchen. Link opens a loaf of bread and starts eating it out of the bag. Tin goes to get plates and glasses for everyone. Slade and Chime continue singing while he takes her over to the counter to find the chocolate. Sometimes this house feels horribly silent when I'm here by myself, and then my brothers show up, and they remind me of what this house could be if I had a mate and family of my own.

"Do you have cheese?" Link says, biting into two pieces of bread at the same time. "We could make grilled cheese."

"Of course I have cheese. I always have cheese," I remind him. I swear he asks every time he comes over. It's probably because his fridge is always empty.

"Wait, wait. The whole reason we came over here was to have a conversation," Coin says. "We can't get distracted with chocolate and cheese."

Link walks over to the fridge and opens the door. "Then have the conversation already. We're all here."

"Should we leave?" Slade asks.

"Yes. This should be a conversation for just the brothers. That can include you, Lucas."

Quin folds his arms across his chest. "You said earlier that I didn't need to be here, but now Lucas gets to listen to your secret? How does that make sense?"

Slade carries Chime out of the kitchen and into the living room. They're still singing that silly bear song. As much as I hate to admit it, I don't think I've ever seen Chime so happy.

“You can stay if you want to,” Coin tells Quin. “But you don’t need to because you already know what I’m going to say.”

Quin narrows his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

The sound of the front door opening and shutting echoes through the house.

“It’s about Slade,” Coin says. “I... sort of bugged his car. Well, my car. I bugged the car that I lent to him.”

“You did what? Are you fucking kidding me?” Quin lifts his chin and glares at Coin.

“I told him about the bug. I was completely transparent from the beginning,” Coin argues.

“Oh, so that makes it okay? Why do you have to be so mean to him? He’s a good guy, Coin. I know you think he’s this monster, but?—”

“You’re right,” Coin interrupts. “That’s what I came here to say. I overheard some things with that bug that changed my mind about him. And I just wanted to say, any reservations we had about him before were wrong. He’s a decent man.”

Everyone is stunned into silence, including me. What did Coin hear that would change his opinion of Slade so drastically?

“Didn’t Slade kill someone?” Tin asks carefully.

Coin opens his mouth to answer, but Quin shakes his head.

“Slade... protected his brother,” Coin finally says. “I think his actions in that particular circumstance were justified, and I don’t think he’s a danger to Quin or

Chime. In fact, I think they're safer living out in the middle of nowhere with him there. He would do anything to protect the people he loves."

If it was anyone but Coin, I'd be skeptical. But he's far more paranoid than I am. If he thinks Slade isn't a danger to Quin, then I believe him.

"What did you overhear, man?" Link asks.

Coin shakes his head. "I can't share that information with you." He turns to Quin. "I already deleted the audio files and removed the bug from the car. I swear that I won't tell a soul what I heard. But I thought our family needed to know that he isn't dangerous."

I wish I had overheard whatever was on that audio file. Something juicy, probably.

"If you tell us, we'll totally keep it a secret," Link promises.

Coin rolls his eyes. "Absolutely not. You're shit at keeping secrets. Also, I'm still mad that you brought the taxidermy turkey. That thing is nasty."

"You brought the turkey?" I ask.

Link grins and bobs his head up and down.

"What turkey?" Lucas asks.

Quin sighs. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

But Link is already on his way out the door, probably to go get it.

"It smells like the dumpster he got it from," Coin says. "We had to suffer the stench

all the way here. It was horrible.”

I can’t help but laugh.

10

LUCAS

I butter the bread while Link slices the cheese and Silver hooks up the electric grill. Tin babysits the tomato soup heating up on the stove and Quin sets out cookies on a plate.

It reminds me of when we were little and Ruby gave each of us a task to do before dinner. Chopping vegetables or stirring the gravy made me feel like one of her sons. She'd always say, "many hands make work light." I loved that.

"I can smell it from here," Coin says. "I bet Lucas is dying. He's pregnant and a wolf shifter."

He's referring to the stuffed thing sitting on one of the dining room chairs. At some point, it must have been a real turkey. It smells of death underneath the scent of rotten food and chemicals. But not all its feathers are real. Some of them have been replaced with more colorful variations, and its eyeballs are definitely fake. They have eyelids that open and close, like an old school babydoll.

"I'm okay," I assure them, even though the smell is really awful.

"He's just being nice," Coin says. "Lucas is always nice, remember? Even when he's dying from how bad your dumpster taxidermy turkey stinks."

Link waves away his concern. "Just wait a few minutes and you'll get used to the

smell.”

Silver lets out a cough that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. They haven’t changed a bit.

When we were growing up, Link was always doing something stupid that annoyed Coin and Silver found secretly amusing.

“I guess my question is... why did you want that thing?” Quin asks.

“Because it’s awesome!” Link turns to me. “It looks like it was stolen from a movie set or something, don’t you think?”

“The set of a horror movie,” Coin says.

I hold back a laugh because Coin is absolutely right.

Quin turns his head to look at it from another angle. “I think it’s the eyes that really creep me out. They’re too big for a turkey.”

“Aren’t turkey eyes all black? They don’t have irises, right?” Tin asks.

Quin points at him. “Right! That must be it.”

“Whatever. I like it. I think I’m going to put it in my living room,” Link says.

Silver and I finally bust up laughing. He leans against me, like he did when we were younger and Link’s antics made him bend over in stitches. I love the pressure of his body and the rhythmic bounce of his laughter. It’s all so nostalgic and wonderful.

I wish this night never had to end.

“Are you sure about that?” Coin asks. “You haven’t found a mate yet, and I don’t think that will help matters. Any guy you bring home is going to think you’re a serial killer.”

Link scoffs. “No, they won’t. I’m way too fun to be a serial killer. They’re always the silent and serious types.”

Silver just laughs harder.

“Link, you can stop cutting cheese now,” Quin says. “You’ve cut enough to feed a small army.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll go sit over there with my turkey that none of you are cool enough to appreciate. Except for Lucas. You like it, don’t you?” Link asks, looking at me hopefully.

I wince. “Um...”

The rest of them join in laughing, including Link. I love the way he can laugh at himself. He’s confident enough that Coin’s comments never seem to bother him.

“Do you know what you’re going to name your pups?” Quin asks, out of the blue.

“Oh, um, not yet.”

“Do you know their genders? You don’t have to say. I’m just curious,” he says.

“Not yet.” I look away from him, worried that he might guess just how few prenatal appointments I’ve been able to afford. Doctor’s appointments are expensive, and Daryl doesn’t want to apply for government aid. He says we can manage on our own without asking for handouts.

Wolf shifters rarely have complications during the pregnancies, so I hope everything will be okay. I certainly can't afford to go to the doctor now.

"It's so fun that you're having a litter," Quin says. "Three is a great number. Not too many to overwhelm you, but enough that they'll have friends. Our moms are going to be so excited to be grandmas again!"

"They'll be wolf shifters," I remind Quin. Not Ruby's and Shae's grandkits.

"Yes! They'll be so cute. I can't wait," he says. "You have to let me babysit."

Coin sits on the barstool next to me. "I'd like to help out too. I'll be going on tour soon, if you wanted to borrow my car for a while."

I glance at Silver, not sure what he'll think of all his brothers coming to my rescue.

He smiles. "Coin has a nice ride. When he's not driving around Uncle Dagger's smelly camper, that is."

"And now it smells like dumpster taxidermy turkey," Coin says.

They go back to teasing Link about the turkey. The rhythm of their conversation is natural and expected, like the crash of the waves upon a beach. It comes and goes with a familiarity that makes me feel safe.

"What if I swapped out the eyes?" Link asks. "Would it be less creepy then?"

Quin shakes his head in horror. "Don't remove the eyes. Oh my God."

"What do you think is underneath them?" Coin asks.

Tin shudders. “There are some things we don’t need to know in this life.”

Silver laughs and laughs. One of my favorite things about him is how much he loves his brothers. He never gets annoyed with Link the way the others do and he always enjoys Coin’s terse humor. He listens to Quin’s rambling and appreciates Tin’s occasional contributions to the conversation. He understands all of them.

Slade returns to the kitchen with a little raccoon perched on his shoulder. “Chime is ready for bed. I figured since you said Lucas was like your brother that she could come out like this, but if that isn’t okay?—”

Quin stands up on his toes to give Slade a kiss. He has to pull Slade down by his shirt to make it happen. They look so happy as they kiss each other, just like Ruby and Shae. I guess that’s what raccoon shifter bonds are like.

I can’t help but be a little jealous. I’ve never beamed like that while kissing Daryl.

“Lucas is family. He’s seen all our raccoons at one point or another.” Quin reaches up and grasps Chime’s furry little body. She stares at me silently as he brings her closer to me. “Lucas is a gray wolf shifter. His wolf is very fast and strong.”

It’s been so long since I’ve shifted, a part of me forgets that there’s any strength within me. Chime tilts her head curiously, like she’s trying to picture me as a wolf.

“His fur is silver, like mine,” Silver says. “When I saw his wolf for the first time, I thought he was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.”

My stomach flip flops. I always liked that our fur matched. When we were younger, I hoped it meant something. I don’t know what, exactly.

Coin looks at Silver with confusion in his eyes. The compliment probably doesn’t

make sense to him, seeing as how I'm bonded to someone else.

"Have a good night, Chime," Tin says, reaching out to pet her head. She leans into his touch and gives his hand a little lick.

Each of her uncles pats her head or scratches her ears. She licks them back, eager for their affection. There's no fear in her stance, no reservations in the way she loves them. The easy way they say goodnight to her reminds me of how different a raccoon shifter's childhood is from a gray wolf shifter's.

I place my hand on my belly. If only my pups could grow up in a family like this one. If only they could have a childhood full of ear scratches and good food—of love and safety.

But I don't get to wish for things like that. Not even for them. Fate has already decided what kind of life we're allowed to have.

"Did you want to say goodnight to Uncle Lucas?" Quin asks Chime.

She does a little nod that makes my heart swell in my chest. She has no reason to believe that I'm anything but trustworthy and safe for her to love.

I reach up and gently scratch her furry head. She tilts her snout up, pushing into my touch. A little rumble comes from her chest. Silver used to make that sound too, back when we would cuddle. I think it's a purr, of sorts.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Chime," I say.

She licks my palm in response, as if I'm another one of her beloved uncles. It's like the times I used to cook with Ruby in her kitchen—for a moment, I feel like I belong somewhere.

“It’s time to go to bed,” Quin reminds Chime. She scurries up Slade’s shirt and onto his shoulder, her fluffy tail outstretched behind her.

It’s hard to not imagine how Chime might act as a cousin to three pups—how they might play in their animal forms, the way young shifter children do.

“Goodnight,” Quin says, reaching up to give Chime a pet of his own. “I love you. I’ll join you in a little bit.”

Slade turns around and walks out of the kitchen.

“Where is she sleeping?” Silver asks.

“In the camper,” Quin says. “We’ll all be in there tonight, since I figured Lucas would be in the guest room, and there isn’t a bed in the extra room at the end of the hall.”

Silver glances at me. He wants to offer the guest room to Quin, since we’ll be sleeping in the same bed. But I’m not ready for his brothers to know that I’m cheating on Daryl. I’m not sure they’d understand, even if I told them about the abuse. For them, bonds are beautiful, wonderful things.

“Coin and I were planning to sleep on your couches,” Tin says.

“I can crash in your bed with you, right?” Link asks Silver. The two of them exchange a meaningful look before Link laughs nervously. “I mean, I’ll use one of your sleeping bags to sleep in the living room with Tin and Coin.”

Coin’s gaze darts from me to Silver and back again. “Okay. I could share a bed with Lucas, if that’s easier?—”

“Not tonight,” Silver says.

An awkward silence hangs over the room. They know something is up, and I’m just making things weird by not telling them. But the silence only lasts for a moment, before Slade leaves with Chime and Quin starts adding sandwiches to the electric grill.

“Are we going to keep the turkey in the dining room while we eat?” Coin asks.

The natural flow of conversation returns as Tin suggests they put the turkey in the garage and Link worries the heat will ruin it. The crackle of butter on hot metal and the swish, swish, swish of Tin’s spoon stirring the tomato soup are in the background as they argue about whether the turkey is already ruined and how stinky it is.

No one seems angry at me. They don’t even seem angry at Link, who is being a little unreasonable about the turkey. It’s all so calm and nice. I sit there and take in the comforting sound of their voices. One of the little pups in my womb kicks, as if they like the noise, too. I don’t like to think about their ability to hear most of the time. They must have overheard a lot of horrible things with Daryl. But tonight, I don’t have to worry about that.

“We could put it in your room,” Link says.

Silver shakes his head and laughs. “No, absolutely not.”

“We could vote on it,” Tin suggests.

Coin points at him. “That’s brilliant. Who votes for the turkey to go out in the garage while we eat?”

Every brother but Link raises their arms. They wait for a long beat before I realize

they're waiting for me to vote, too. I raise my arm hesitantly.

"Fine," Link relents. "But if it melts, ya'll are buying me a new taxidermy turkey."

"Says the millionaire pro football player to his poor brothers," Coin quips.

Silver elbows him. "Speak for yourself. I'm not poor."

"I am," Quin says, beaming.

"So am I," Tin chimes in.

This time when the silences comes, I recognize it for what it is. They've effortlessly added me to the rhythm of their conversation. All I have to do is join in.

"I am too," I admit.

"Fine," Link relents. "You don't have to buy me a new taxidermy turkey. But you do have to help me decorate the one I buy so it looks like Terrance."

"Terrance?" Coin teases. "You named it?"

"Yeah. After a guy on my team."

Silver throws back his head and laughs.

11

LUCAS

I wait until the chatter in the living room has silenced and the moon is high in the sky before I sneak out of the guest room. I pause outside Silver's bedroom door, not sure if he's still awake. Maybe I waited too long. But I only get to have a month with him, and I don't want to waste a single night of it.

Knocking would be a bad idea because his brothers might hear. I slowly open the door unannounced, hoping that Silver won't mind. The lamp next to his bedside is on, and he's sitting in his bed shirtless. He smiles at me from across the room. "Hey."

"Hey." It's just a whisper, but my voice feels incredibly loud.

He holds out his arms to me. My heart thumps in my chest. This afternoon, all we did was cuddle. Tonight, Silver might want more than that. I walk across the room and sit next to him on the edge of the bed.

He lowers his arms. "No cuddles for me, huh?"

"I want to. I'm just... nervous."

"It's just me, baby. You don't need to be nervous." He turns his palm up and slides it closer to me in a silent invitation. I place my hand on top of his, my skin buzzing from the contact.

“What are we... I mean, you said you wanted... What do you want?” I ask, not daring to look him in the eye. I’m the one who came in here. I have no right to ask him what he wants, but I’m not brave enough to ask for what I want.

I’m not even brave enough to admit it to myself.

He pulls my hand closer. I watch as he guides my palm down onto his thigh. There’s a thick blanket between my hand and his leg, but I can still feel the warmth of his skin through the fabric. He brings my hand between his legs, pressing my palm onto a firm bulge there. My mouth goes dry.

“That’s from just thinking about you sleeping in the other room,” he says.

My fingers tremble as I cup him over the blanket. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Unless that’s not why you came in here. We can just cuddle. But if you’re asking what I want.” He rubs my hand into his crotch, his eyes burning into mine.

“Oh. That’s...” All words leave my head as I feel him get harder. “Good. That’s good.” I stammer. God, I sound like an idiot.

He smiles. “Does that mean you want to mess around? Because I have to warn you, I’m not wearing anything underneath this blanket.”

I swallow hard. “Oh. I... um...” I finger the top of the blanket. It’s been so long since I got to look at his naked body. Not that I have any right to it, of course. But if we’re pretending to be mates...

I take in a shaky breath and slowly pull down the blanket, inch by inch. He has plenty of time to stop me, but he doesn’t. He lets me expose his lower abdomen and his hips.

His cock bounces up as I reveal his thatch of silver pubic hair. It's bigger than I remember with a shaft that's thicker close to the tip. I remember how it felt to have it inside of me. So satisfying—so intense. He filled me up until I wasn't sure if I could take it all, and then he filled me up even more.

He slides his fingers into my hair. "Lucas."

I push into his hand, eager to feel his fingers on my scalp and his palm cupping my cheek. His body and his scent takes me back to a time when sex was wonderful. With him, I orgasmed every time. I felt cherished and sexy. The nights we snuck out into the prairie to mess around were nothing but bliss.

I didn't learn until later that sex isn't always like that. Sometimes it's boring. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it makes you feel hollow inside because you know that your mate doesn't really want you. He just wants sex, and you're there. Especially the last few months. My pregnant belly repulses Daryl.

"Maybe I could keep my clothes on and just... with my mouth," I offer with a tiny shrug. That might not be what he's into now. I don't know. But I used to love the salty bitterness of his cum and the scent of his pubic hair.

"Is that what you want?" Silver asks.

"It would be easier, right? Then we wouldn't have to deal with, you know," I glance down at my belly.

"Come here," he whispers, tugging my hand forward.

I scoot closer to him, not exactly sure where he wants me. He hooks his arm around my body and pulls me onto his lap. It feels wildly different than sitting in his lap this afternoon because his beautiful chest is bare, and the unmistakable stiffness of his

erection is underneath my right ass cheek.

“I have a confession,” he says, leaning in and pressing his forehead to mine.

“What is it?”

“I’m into it.”

I pull back, confused. “Into what?”

He smiles sheepishly. “Into pregnant you? I don’t know if I’m into pregnant guys, in general. But you... well.” He runs his fingers down my back and over my ass. “I’m into it, Lucas. I want you—all of you.”

If I couldn’t feel the tip of his erection poking into me, I don’t think I’d believe him. I feel huge and ugly, not like some sexy version of pregnant omega that an alpha could conceivably want. I place my hand on the center of his bare chest. His heart races under my fingertips.

“Can I see you, baby?” he whispers in my ear.

I nod, even though I’m terrified of showing my body to him. What if he’s disappointed? What if he stops wanting me? I know he’d be kind about it, but it would be humiliating.

I don’t know if I’d ever truly recover.

He slides my shirt up, revealing the part of my body I’m the most afraid for him to see. My belly is huge and distended with white stretch marks extending from my belly button. Silver lifts my shirt over my head, so I can’t see his reaction until my shirt is completely off and discarded on the side of the bed.

He runs his fingers over the swell of my belly and down my legs with this feral look in his eyes that I remember from back when we were teenagers and messing around for the first time. I never had to wonder if he found me desirable. It was always written all over his face.

How could he still want me like this?

He circles his arms around me and lowers me onto the mattress. “Can I take off your shorts?”

I nod again. He could ask me almost anything right now, and I’d say yes.

He slips his fingers underneath my sleep shorts and yanks them down. I’m sure my erection is completely obvious now that only my underwear is covering it, but I can’t see for myself. My belly is too big.

“Fuck, baby. You’re so hard for me, you’re leaking all over your underwear.”

My cheeks heat up. “Sorry.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t you dare apologize for that. Can I touch you?”

“Yes.”

Instead of cupping me over my underwear, which is what I was expecting, he slips his hand underneath my underwear and cups me bare. Bliss shoots through me like lightning. I lift my hips off the mattress, ever desperate for more of him.

“Can I...” Silver says, inching his fingers down between my legs.

“Yes.” Of course, I say yes. He can touch me wherever he wants, do whatever he

wants. My body lights up with the pathway of his fingers, and I whimper when he finds that pucker of skin that makes me ache for more. I want to beg him, but I hold back. We've barely kissed. I'm bonded to someone else. What will he think of me if I beg for it?

He pushes one finger inside me, and I arch off the bed. The solid thickness of his fingers, and the heat of his gaze are too much. It's too wonderful. I'm not used to this. I'd forgotten what it was like to actually want someone inside me.

"Can I taste you, baby?" he asks.

"Yes." I don't know if he means my cock or my slick. It doesn't matter. The heat of his mouth circles around my cock just as he pulls down my underwear. I'm mortified that his head gently bumps into my belly as he goes down on me, but he lets out a breathy moan and takes me in deeper. I dig my fingers into the sheets and try not to call out. His brothers are still in the living room.

His finger pushes inside me again, faster this time. He finds that secret spot that Daryl is always too lazy to care about and strokes it. I rock into it, overwhelmed by his mouth and the wild sensations his fingers are creating within me. I can't see what he's doing because of my belly, and somehow, that's better. I think I'd be too embarrassed otherwise. He cups my balls and starts bobbing up and down on my cock, the muscles of his throat constricting rhythmically around the tip. I writhe, powerless to stay still. He's so giving—so kind. I can feel the pressure building, the orgasm coming. It's scary and wonderful at the same time. Because it's just as good as I remember. I thought I'd put Silver on a pedestal in my head—that there was no way he could be as good as my memories.

"Silver!" I cry out, as my body seizes up. I don't tell him in time for him to pull off before I come into his mouth, but he doesn't back off. He sucks me hard, and I thrust into his mouth, my vision going white. I'm unprepared for the wild pleasure that

crashes into me like a tidal wave. I claw at the sheets and thrash my legs, clamping down on his finger. My orgasm keeps going, and Silver continues with it, forcing his finger inside me, despite how hard I pulse around him.

When it's finally over, all the muscles of my body release, and I feel like putty on his bed. He lets my cock slip from his mouth and trails kisses up my belly, cresting over the top and kissing his way down. He veers over to my shoulders and kisses the crook of my neck before making it to my jaw, my ear, my cheek. "Oh, Lucas. I've missed you."

I can taste my cum on him when he kisses my mouth. It's a languid, long kiss; a gentleness that makes me want to hold on to him forever. He's the alpha I really want—the alpha I've always wanted.

Fate will punish me for that.

"Can I be inside you?" Silver asks.

"Yes. Please."

The drawer next to us opens, and I can hear the tear of a condom wrapper. It makes me tear up, so I kiss his mouth to prevent him from seeing. He doesn't know how much it means that he's grabbing for a condom without me having to ask.

"How do we do this and keep the pups safe?" Silver asks.

I roll over onto my hands and knees. I feel far more exposed like this with my belly hanging down and my ass in the air. But Silver doesn't pause for a moment. He just climbs on top of me, his large body covering mine like some kind of shield. I love the warmth of his chest along my back, and the hardness pressing against the crux of my ass.

“We never did it like this before,” he whispers, sucking at my earlobe. He wraps one arm around my chest, holding me close as he ruts against me, his slick cock sliding against my hole. “Fuck, Lucas. Why did we never do it like this?” The tip of his cock pokes at my entrance.

I rock back, eager to have him inside me, but the angle is wrong, and it slips out.

“Do you want me, baby?” Silver asks, grinding against me. He sucks at my neck, maddeningly close to my scent gland. That’s where Daryl bit me when we bonded. It’s also one of the most sensitive parts of my body.

“Yes. Please, Silver.” My cock is already hard again. My refraction period is almost nonexistent when I’m with him.

Silver’s mouth moves down my neck. He never dared do this when we were in high school. Everyone knows that an omega wolf shifter’s neck is off limits to anyone but their mate. There are so many nerve endings on my neck, my body can’t decide if I want him to move his mouth lower to suck on my scent gland or penetrate me. I hold my breath, desperately hoping he’ll know what I want without me having to ask.

His hips shift behind me, his hand reaching back to position himself. Then his mouth moves down and latches onto my scent gland as he slowly pushes inside.

I cry out from all the sensation. Silver’s cock is huge inside me, stretching my walls past the point of comfort. The fullness is almost painful. And his mouth—God, his mouth. He’s sucking hard at my scent gland, making me weak from the pleasure.

Then he pushes further inside me. It takes me a moment to register that he still hasn’t bottomed out. He goes deeper and deeper, scraping his teeth along the skin of my scent gland. I dig my fingertips into the mattress, unable to cope with the rush of another orgasm as it surges through me. My ass contracts around his thick cock, and

it hurts in the most delicious way.

“Fuck. Did you just come again, baby?” he asks.

I nod. “Please don’t stop. Your mouth... it’s wonderful.”

He latches his lips onto my scent gland and sucks again. I arch into him, no longer sure if my body is still coming or if I’m simply feeling pleasure. The lines between those two things are confusing now. He slides further inside, until his thighs are finally flush with my ass. We both moan. I feel the vibration of his voice against my scent gland.

“Oh, Silver.” This is better than it was before—better than I thought sex could be.

“I love you,” Silver says.

Deep down, I know that Silver loves the boy I was in high school. He doesn’t know me well enough to love who I am now. But I don’t care. I want his love so badly, I’ll take whatever version I can get. After all, I get a month of happiness. This is a part of that, isn’t it?

“I love you too,” I whisper back.

For a horrible moment, I wait for Fate to strike me with lightning or take Her revenge in some other way. I don’t deserve Silver or this mind-blowing sex. But nothing happens.

Then Silver moves. Just a little at first. He’s so big, that’s all I can handle. I close my eyes as he slowly pulls out halfway and then pushes back inside. We moan together again, and I can’t help but smile.

He lets out a breathy laugh. “See how good we are together.”

All thoughts of Fate and what I deserve fly out the window as our bodies move in tandem. We’re slippery with sweat and slick, and my neck is wet from his saliva. It’s messy, raw, and wonderful. He sucks at my scent gland with abandon, biting down every time he bottoms out inside me. He doesn’t bite hard enough to break the skin, but that doesn’t matter. I feel claimed all the same. When his knot starts to grow, I whimper from the stretch of it. He grabs my hips and thrusts hard inside me, his knot swelling all at once. I sob, the relief so sweet I can barely stand it.

He bites my scent gland deep enough that his teeth finally sink into my skin. My vision goes white, and I scream his name. In the back of my mind, I know there’s a reason I shouldn’t do that, but it doesn’t matter. My body is nothing but sparks and light. My orgasm goes on and on, Silver shuddering as he comes, too, grinding his glorious knot into me. It’s animalistic in a way sex never has been, and maybe that should make it less romantic, but I love the way Silver grunts in my ear as he ruts into me. I rock back to take him deeper, my breath coming deep and fast. The mattress screeches underneath us, the headboard banging against the wall.

“You’re mine,” he growls in my ear. The possessiveness makes my inner omega preen.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He slams into me one last time, pushing so deep inside me, I feel his cock’s claim of me as intensely as I felt the mark of his teeth. He buries his nose into my scent gland and inhales loudly.

When I glance over at him, my blood is on the tip of his nose. The sight of it makes me come. Not because it’s sexy, but because it’s feral and wild, like we’ve given ourselves up completely to our animal forms. My inner omega yearns to shift—to run

across the packed dirt of the prairie with him like we used to.

Silver rubs his right palm along my chest. The touch is possessive like the way he sucked at my scent gland. He's a raccoon shifter, so that's how he'd bond to me if he were in his raccoon form. Tears well in my eyes because I want that so badly. I would give anything for a life with Silver—absolutely anything.

Could he be happy with me? Would I ever be enough for him? Or would he regret his generosity the moment he finally realized what being stuck with me and three young pups truly meant?

“I love you,” I tell him again, my voice breaking with emotion.

Despite how selfish it is, I lift my hand and place it on top of his across my chest in a silent invitation.

“Baby, does that mean—” he starts, but I shake my head. I won't trap him like this. Even if every fiber of my being is screaming to be his. He deserves better than that.

12

SILVER

We lie on our sides, our bodies tied in the most intimate way.

I love you, too.

The words echo in my head like a mantra, impossible to ignore. His scent gland, puffy and bleeding from my bite, is only inches away, reminding me of our connection only moments earlier. He agreed he was mine. The way our bodies came together was pure perfection.

We have to talk about this.

For now, Lucas is sleeping peacefully in my arms. He drifted off almost immediately after we rolled onto our sides. I don't blame him, of course. Growing three pups inside your body must require a lot of energy.

I guess we'll have to talk tomorrow.

As we lie there, my hand naturally rests on his belly. I consider moving it because I'm not sure how Lucas would feel about me touching him there if he were awake. He seems ashamed of his big belly. A gentle flutter pushes against my hand. Is that one of the pups? I press my hand down, and I'm rewarded with a little kick against my palm.

When Quin was pregnant with Chime, he used to let me feel his belly when she was kicking. I'd talk to her in the womb so she'd know the sound of my voice once she was born. All of my brothers did. We wanted her to feel our love even before she took her first breath.

The pups in Lucas's womb aren't mine. I know that. And he's asleep, so I can't talk to them without him waking up. But I maintain a little pressure on his belly, just to say hello. The little pitter patter against my hand feels like they're saying hi back. Maybe someday Lucas will let me introduce myself to them while they're still in the womb. Maybe he'd let my brothers introduce themselves, too. Coin can play songs for them on his guitar and Tin can play them different animal sounds, just like he did for Chime. Quin used to roll his eyes when Tin explained bird calls to his belly, but I thought it was sweet.

My brothers are the best uncles a kid could ask for.

I fall asleep to the gentle kicks of the pups I hope I'll be allowed to love someday. The scent of Lucas, and his warm body in my arms are just as comforting as those little kicks. I drift into such a deep sleep that I barely register the alarm blaring from my nightstand the next morning.

Lucas stirs. "Is that your phone?"

I reach behind me for the offending noise. Luckily, it takes me a while to find it, and during the process I finally wake up enough to remember why I need to get up.

Ugh. The military's obsession with early mornings is the worst.

I press a kiss to Lucas's cheek and creep out of bed. It's a little tricky to find my clothes in the dark, but I manage to piece together a T-shirt and shorts before retreating to the bathroom to get ready for the gym. I literally get paid to work out,

which is nice. I like that part of it. I just don't appreciate doing it at five-thirty in the morning.

My brothers are still sleeping when I sneak past them and out into the garage. Or at least it seems that way until Coin wanders into the garage, bleary-eyed, just as I start the car.

I lower my window. "I'll be back in an hour. I'm going to the gym."

Coin crosses his arms across his chest. "Seriously? You just fucked Lucas while he's six months pregnant with another guy's kids, and you're leaving him at the crack of dawn to go to the gym?"

I knew we weren't quiet, but I'd hoped that my brothers slept through all Lucas's screaming. I guess not.

"I really have to go to the gym. It's for my job. But you can come along if you want to lecture me," I say.

Coin glares at me for a full beat before slumping over to the passenger's side of the car and opening the door. "Fine, but I'm not exercising."

"Of course not," I mutter under my breath.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you look like shit most of the time. Are you eating?"

He rolls his eyes. "This conversation isn't about me."

I put the car in reverse and back out of the garage. It's still dark outside and my

neighborhood is completely quiet.

“What do you want from me, Coin?” I ask. “Lucas is in a tough spot right now. You saw the bruise on his cheek. Do you expect him to go back to his abusive mate?”

Coin scoffs. “Of course not.”

“Then why can’t he have sex with someone else? He’s not with Daryl anymore. He shouldn’t have to stay celibate for the rest of his life.”

Coin clenches his jaw and looks out the window, despite the darkness. “I wasn’t judging him, I was judging you.”

“For having sex with a pregnant guy? Newsflash, Coin. Pregnant guys are people too, and people have sex. It’s not a big deal.”

He turns to me with anger flashing in his eyes. “Not a big deal? Are you fucking kidding me? Lucas is being abused by his alpha. He comes to you for help, and instead of saving him from Daryl, you fuck him? How is that not a big deal?”

“How am I supposed to save him?” I ask.

“By putting your fucking paws on him!” Coin screams in my face.

“You don’t know what’s been going on between us. I offered?—”

Coin sits back and looks out the window again. “Sure.”

“I did!”

“If you really offered, Lucas would have accepted. He’s still in love with you. It’s so

fucking obvious. He always has been. He never even noticed anyone else.”

There’s a bitterness to his voice that confuses me a little bit.

“He bonded to Daryl,” I remind Coin.

“Yeah. Because you didn’t ask him to bond to you instead. He would have if you’d bothered to ask. I’m sure of it. And now you’re messing around with his heart again, only this time he’s six months pregnant and in trouble. If you aren’t going to commit to him, then back off, so someone else can.”

“Someone else? Like who?” I ask.

He sighs and rolls his eyes. “Like me, you asshole.”

I stop the car in the middle of the road. If it wasn’t too early in the morning for anyone to be out, I’d probably have hit someone. “What?”

“Oh, c’mon. You must have guessed I had feelings for him too. I played guitar with him every day.”

“You were friends?—”

Coin lets out a bitter laugh. “Right. Because I’m so great at making friends.”

“But you never said anything.”

“Of course I didn’t. You’re my brother, Silver. I wasn’t going to steal your guy.”

I think back to all those times I saw Coin patiently demonstrate each guitar chord or bring Lucas a leftover cinnamon roll to eat on the school bus. I thought he was just

being kind.

I finally take my foot off the brake pedal and start driving again. “For how long?”

Coin shrugs. “Always.”

“What do you mean always? We’ve known Lucas since we were kids, Coin.”

He clenches his jaw. “Yeah.”

“But I didn’t start dating Lucas until our senior year of high school,” I remind him.

“Because you were oblivious. Like I said before, Lucas was never good at hiding his feelings for you. It was obvious to anyone with eyes that he was head over heels. Then I presented as an omega anyway, so... yeah. I never had a chance.”

I’ve noticed the way Coin talks about being an omega like it was a disappointment to him. I’ve never pressured him to say more about it. I figured he would when he was ready. But maybe this is a piece of that puzzle.

“Does that mean you wish you had presented as an alpha?” I ask.

He glances at me, then turns his gaze back to the road. “I don’t know. Maybe it would have made him see me differently. I’m not as pretty as you are, though. So probably not.”

I flash him a smile I’m all too aware is very pretty. He smiles, just like I hoped he would.

“Did you want to be an alpha just for him, or...” I trail off, hoping he’ll know what I mean.

Coin shrugs again. “Does it matter?”

“For fuck’s sake, Coin. Of course it does. I’m your brother. If you have some kind of gender thing going on, you can fucking tell me. Jesus.”

He smiles at that, too. In a weird way, anger is Coin’s love language. He doesn’t show emotion around people unless he really cares about them, and anger happens to be the emotion he shows the most. I’ve noticed that he responds well to my anger too, like I’m speaking his language.

He cocks an eyebrow. “Some kind of gender thing?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m fine with being an omega, but other people wish I wasn’t,” he says cryptically.

I sigh. “What the fuck does that mean?”

He gives me a wry, close-lipped smile. “The answer to that question involves explicit details about my sex life. Are you sure you want to know?”

“Oh, c’mon. Since when have you been a blushing violet? I’ve caught you in the back seat of a car with guys multiple times, remember?”

He doesn’t look the least bit embarrassed. “Right. And on both of those occasions, who was fucking whom?”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t paying attention. I was too busy wanting to bleach my eyeballs because I just saw my brother having sex.”

“You’re the one who wanted to know,” he says.

The truth is, I do remember who was fucking whom because it was surprising. The first time I'd caught him with an omega, so it made sense that Coin was on top. But the second time he was with an alpha, and it was still the same thing.

"You like to top," I say.

Coin nods.

"But you don't wish you were an alpha?" I clarify.

He shakes his head.

"And people have a problem with that? Why?"

He glares at me. "Oh, c'mon, Silver. What if Lucas wanted to top you every time?"

I can't imagine Lucas topping me. He's always been so sweet and submissive in bed. Not that I would mind if he wanted to take charge now and then, but our respective roles during sex have always felt natural and clear to me.

"Then why don't you just date omegas?" I ask.

He rolls his eyes. "Because I'm not attracted to most of them. Occasionally, I'll meet a guy like Lucas who I'm really into, but that's rare. And most of the time they're only attracted to alphas."

"I'm sorry." I had no idea dating was so complicated for him.

I pull into the gym parking lot and take a spot near the front.

"You need to put your paws on Lucas or let him go," Coin says.

“I’m trying, okay?” I admit, even though I probably shouldn’t. Apparently, I’m shit at keeping anything that’s going on with Lucas a secret.

“What do you mean? You’ve really offered to put your paws on him?” Coin asks.

“Yeah. He, um, doesn’t think it would be fair to me.”

“Are you serious?”

“I know,” I say. “I got him to agree to a temporary trial bond for a month. I have until then to prove to him that I really love him.”

“Do you?” Coin asks.

I nod.

He lets out a slow sigh. “Okay.”

“I’m sorry, Coin.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t be. I’m genuinely happy for you. He’s a great guy.”

This is the thing about Coin. He’s an asshole, but he’s still a good person underneath his tough exterior.

“Do you want to come in and work out with me?” I ask.

“Absolutely not. Give me your keys and I’ll come back to get you when you need a ride home.”

I reluctantly hand over my car key. “Fine, but you can’t tell anyone else about the

trial run, okay? I wasn't supposed to say anything about it."

"Then don't," Coin says. "I sure won't. But it's definitely not a secret to anyone sleeping in that house last night that you and Lucas are fucking. You're going to have to tell them something. Especially Link. He's a nosy bastard."

As much as I hate to admit it, Coin is right. I need to clarify what Lucas wants me to say to everyone.

"Thanks for talking with me about all of this. I'm sorry about... you know."

He laughs. "My crush on your guy?"

"Uh, yeah. That."

"Me too. I would never try to steal him or anything, you know."

"Yeah." I do know that.

"Go do your gym rat thing already," he says. "I want to go back to sleep."

I get out of the car. "Don't let Link bring that dead turkey back inside my house, okay?"

"Because I'm so good at getting him to behave," Coin says.

That's fair. I'm not sure anyone could get Link to behave. I jog toward the entrance of the gym, briefly glancing back to see Coin climbing into the driver's seat of my car. He really is too thin. I wish he was as open as Link is about his problems. I never really know what's going on with him. I didn't even know he was in love with Lucas.

Sometimes I wish Coin would let us take care of him the way he tries to take care of everyone else.

13

LUCAS

I wake alone in Silver's bed, but I can hear the water of the shower coming from the adjoining bathroom. His scent is everywhere: the pillow, the sheets, my skin. There's a lovely soreness between my legs too, that whispers of what we did last night together. I bring my fingers to the fresh bite on my scent gland and smile.

It feels wonderful to have the impression of Silver's teeth layered over the scar Daryll left on my skin when he bonded to me.

Silver walks into the bedroom with a towel on his hips. I stare at his bare chest shamelessly as he beelines for the closet.

"Good morning," I say.

He turns around, the towel lowering on his hips. He reaches for it, then pauses and lets it slide down his body, exposing every hard angle to me. It feels like such an indulgence to be able to see him like this, especially in the morning.

He walks to the bed and sits next to me. "Good morning, baby. How did you sleep?"

"Wonderful." I haven't slept that well in months, possibly years, but I don't tell him that.

"Good." He drags a hand through his wet hair. "My, uh, brothers sort of overheard us

last night.”

I think back to our lovemaking and realize it was because of me. I screamed out Silver’s name, among other things. What was I thinking? I knew they were sleeping in the house. They must think I’m such a slut for sleeping with their brother while I’m pregnant with Daryll’s pups.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to?—”

He presses a finger to my lips. “It’s okay. Last night was intense.” He bends over and presses a kiss to my forehead. It makes me feel so goddamn safe, I almost forget to be embarrassed. Almost.

“Do you want me to leave? Your brothers won’t want to see me after that?—”

“My brothers all love you and have been pressuring me to put my paws on you. This morning Coin actually threatened to do it himself if I wouldn’t man up.” He chuckles good-naturedly like it’s the most natural thing in the world for his brother to offer something that extraordinary.

“He did?”

Silver nods.

“That’s very kind of him,” I say.

Silver considers me warily. “Is that what you want?”

“What? No. I want to be with you.”

He takes my hand and squeezes it. “Good. Because I don’t know if I could give you

up after last night. That sex was fire, baby.”

I think back to the way he grunted and trembled while he was inside me. I know he wouldn’t be able to fake anything like that. I made him feel good.

“It was fire for me, too,” I say.

He releases my hand and reaches slowly across the mattress. He locks eyes with me as he places his hand on my belly. “I felt the pups move last night. They were kicking against my hand.”

Silver’s fingers were inside me last night, but somehow, the way he touches my belly feels a lot more intimate. I’m not sure I’m ready for it.

“I want to be a father,” he says. “I always have.” He rubs the bare skin of my belly under the blanket. As if on cue, I feel the tiny somersaults of the pups within me. Silver’s face lights up. “I think they’re saying hi.”

Tears burn in the corners of my eyes. Daryll has never touched my belly like this. He’s never acknowledged our pups in any real way except to complain about how fat I am or how much having pups will cost us. He’s certainly never said that he wanted to be a father.

“Wolf pups are different than raccoon kits,” I remind Silver.

He gives me a sad smile. “So you’ve said before. You’re worried I won’t love them because they aren’t raccoon shifters.”

“You didn’t like Daryll very much. They’re his pups?—”

“I don’t like your alpha dad either, but I love you,” he says. He bends over and

presses a soft kiss to my belly. “If you let me love them, I will, Lucas. I swear to you. I will love them with all of my heart.”

Tears slide down my cheeks. Up until now, I accepted that this trial run between Silver and me would be over in a month. I haven’t allowed myself to hope that I could be with him longer than that. It would be selfish of me, and the last thing I want is to ruin Silver’s future. But what if I allowed myself to be with him for my pups’ sake? Then it wouldn’t be completely selfish. They’d be better off here with Silver than wherever we’d end up if I ventured off alone.

“We could have more children,” I say, as Silver walks back to the closet.

He turns to look at me over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. We could have raccoon kits, too.”

He smiles. “I’d like that. They could sleep in the same hammock with the pups. All together, like how we used to cuddle when we were kids.”

More tears stream down my face. I can’t help it. The idea of giving my pups the same comfort I got from Silver and his brothers makes me emotional.

“Are you sure you want that?” I ask.

He nods. “I do.”

I hug my belly and let the tears fall down my cheeks. Silver lets me cry for a few moments without saying a word. He’s so patient. I wish I could be as wonderful for him as he is to me. I wish I could be enough to keep him happy.

What if I tried my very best? Could I come close?

I open my eyes to find him sitting at the edge of the bed, naked. He probably needs to get dressed and start his work day. I'm sure he doesn't have time for my histrionics.

"You have a whole month to decide." He gently brushes my tears away with his fingertips. "I won't rush you, okay?"

With that, he stands and dresses quickly before heading out the door.

14

SILVER

Link is sitting in the dining room, taking a bite out of a hard-boiled egg when I get to the kitchen.

“Congratulations, man. It sounds like things went pretty well last night. Do we have a new brother-in-law?”

I sink down in the chair next to him. “Not yet.”

“Really? I thought for sure you sealed the deal. Lucas was loud.” Link tosses the rest of the hard-boiled egg in his mouth and grabs for the second one on his plate.

“Sorry about that.”

He shrugs. “At least I couldn’t see you this time. Back in college?—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You fucked omegas in our room, too. Why are you up so early?” I ask.

“Coin made us get up. We have to leave in a few minutes. He’s got work, and Slade has to get back to the trailer park before ten. Did you know he’s taking up plumbing with Mom?”

“What?” Our alpha mom has been running the Fox Plumbing business by herself for

as long as I can remember. She won't even let Uncle Dagger's bookkeeping guy help her with her taxes.

"Yeah. I guess he's a licensed electrician, so they're expanding the business."

Tin appears in the doorway of the eat-in kitchen. His eyes are alert, and his face is already shaven. He probably gets up this early every day at the ranch. "Good morning. I hope you don't mind, but I already brewed a pot of coffee."

Coin squeezes around him and walks into the kitchen. "Thank you very much." He opens a few cupboards before locating a coffee mug. "Are you guys ready to go?"

Link shoves the remaining egg in his mouth and gives a thumbs up.

Chime scampers into the kitchen wearing a bright red dress and gold shoes. Link holds out his arms to her, and she runs toward him. At the last moment, he stands up and lifts her off the ground. She squeals with delight.

"What are we having for breakfast?" Quin asks, trailing behind her. Slade has his big, beefy arm around his narrow shoulders. They seem so comfortable together, which is bizarre. Back when we were in high school, Quin got all jittery and nervous every time Slade so much as glanced in our direction.

I guess a lot has changed for them, too in the last five years.

"Tin made coffee and Link raided my fridge for eggs. You're welcome to eat whatever you can find. I have bread for toast. There's cereal, yogurt, bananas."

Quin opens the fridge. "We could make pancakes." He smiles at something behind me. "For old time's sake."

I turn to see Lucas standing uncertainly in the hallway. He's wearing his new jeans and one of the nicer shirts. The collar is wide enough to expose his scent gland, which is still puffy and scabbed over from last night. I notice the way Quin's eyes dart to the bite, but only for a second.

"We don't have time for pancakes," Coin reminds him, taking a long swallow of coffee. "We need to be out of here in ten minutes."

"Are you sure we have to leave?" Quin asks. "We haven't seen Lucas in forever. Wouldn't it be fun to play hooky and bake cinnamon rolls or something?"

Lucas gives him the sweetest, shyest little smile. God, he's cute. I can't wait until he's properly mine.

"What do you think, Chime?" Link says, tickling her belly. "Should we play hooky and bake cinnamon rolls?"

She giggles. "Yes! Stop it, Uncle Link."

He sets her down, as requested. "Okay. But I think a tickle monster might be coming."

She rolls her eyes dramatically. "I'm too old for the tickle monster."

"That isn't possible. The tickle monster attacks everyone. Even old people."

"It does not!" she argues.

"The tickle monster only attacks people who consent, remember?" Quin says pointedly.

Link flops back down into his chair. “Okay, okay. But Lucas needs to have his pups already, so I’ll have more kids to tickle.”

Lucas does that sweet, shy smile again. I want to kiss him. Would he let me right here in front of my brothers? They already know we’re sleeping together.

I better not. I don’t want to push him into anything he’s not ready for.

“If ya’ll want to stay here, then be my guest. But I need to get to work,” Coin says.

Slade bends down to kiss Quin’s cheek. “I’m sorry, but I have to get to work too.”

“So do I,” Tin agrees.

Quin sighs. “Okay, fine. When do we get to see you again, Lucas? Could I get your number?”

Lucas hugs his chest nervously. I’m not sure he has a phone. I haven’t seen him use one since he got here.

“You can contact him through me,” I suggest.

Quin presses his lips together. “Um, I was hoping to be able to contact him directly. Do you have a phone number, Lucas?”

“My phone is kind of dead, so…” Lucas shrugs.

“I could buy you a new one,” Coin says. “If you need it. Or a charger, if that would be easier.”

Lucas glances at me. He’s overwhelmed. I don’t know if it’s because he’s planning to

leave us all behind soon, and he wants to make a clean break, or because this is triggering some kind of trauma in his brain. The strangest things used to scare him, and sometimes it didn't make sense, even when he tried to explain it to me afterward.

"Tell you what, I'll make sure you get Lucas's phone number as soon as we figure out if his phone is working." I step in front of him, putting a physical barrier between him and my brothers.

Quin steps back, the concern still etched on his face. I understand. We all missed Lucas when he ran off with Daryll. I thought he'd at least stay in contact with my family. They were extremely close.

"I just think he should know that he's family, no matter what," Quin says.

He means no matter what happens with me.

"Yeah," Coin agrees. "Lucas is family, even if the two of you don't get together. We don't want to lose him again."

I turn around slowly, not wanting to spook Lucas. His shoulders are rounded, his head ducked down. I wish I knew what was going on his head.

"I'm tired. I should go take a nap," he says softly. He retreats down the hall and into the guest bedroom at the far end. The door clicks shut behind him.

The silence that follows is thick and unnatural. We're not a quiet family. The only time our home was silent growing up was when everyone was asleep.

"Didn't he just get up?" Link asks.

Tin walks over to the fridge and pulls off a sheet of paper from the post-it pad where I

write my grocery lists. He jots his name and a phone number on the paper and sets it on the counter.

“We can write our phone numbers on here, and Silver can pass it on to Lucas.” He holds out the pen to Quin. He reluctantly takes it and writes his phone number on the paper.

“He had our phone numbers before, and he didn’t message us,” Quin says.

“Why not?” Chime asks.

Quin gives her a gentle side-hug. “I don’t know. Sometimes people have a hard time accepting love.”

“Why?” she repeats.

“Lots of reasons. Sometimes it’s because they believe they don’t deserve it.” He looks directly at Slade as he says this.

“Why?”

Slade holds out his hand to Chime. “Maybe no one’s loved them properly before.”

Chime takes his hand and follows him out of the kitchen. “Why?”

“That’s a good question.” Slade’s deep voice fades as they walk away.

“I guess we’re eating on the way?” Coin says, jotting his number on the piece of paper.

Link grabs the loaf of bread and a bunch of bananas on the counter. “Yep. Good luck,

man. I want all the updates, okay?” He writes his name and phone number on the paper, too, although it doesn’t look particularly legible.

Tin, Link, and Coin head out. Only Quin is left in the kitchen. He picks up the paper and hands it to me. “Do our moms know he’s pregnant?”

I shake my head.

“They need to,” Quin says.

“I know. But I’m not sure he’s ready yet.”

He purses his lips. “Okay. It’s just... he needs a mom. Or a dad or whatever. He needs a parent.”

“I’ll take care of him, Quin. I promise.”

Quin shoves his hands in his pockets. “Sure. But you’re sleeping with him, aren’t you? That makes things complicated. I think Lucas needs love that isn’t complicated right now. Make sure he charges his phone, okay? And ask if you can take him home for family dinner this Saturday. Tell him I’d love to see him.”

“Yeah, okay.”

He holds out his arms to me. I bring him in for a hug. He smells of vanilla and warm bread, as always.

“Thanks for coming over,” I say.

He pulls away. “It was good to see you. I left some cookies in the freezer for you and Lucas. I hope you can make it on Saturday.”

I watch him go, waiting for the inevitable loneliness that always comes after a visit from one of my brothers, but all I feel is concern for Lucas. I'm not sure if I should let him have space or go comfort him.

In the end, I decide to knock on the door to the guest room because of Quin.

I think Lucas needs love that isn't complicated right now.

I'll give Lucas all the love that I can, complicated or not.

15

LUCAS

Silver knocks on the door. I don't answer.

He knocks again. I stay in bed.

He knocks a third time. I know I should get up. I should apologize for not giving his brothers my number. I should tell him that he was right, I was wrong, and I'll never do it again. I should cook him a nice breakfast and plaster a smile on my face until he's too busy with work to notice how upset I am.

Except Silver isn't Daryll.

My heart still pounds as he waits by the door. I don't normally ignore alphas who want something from me. I give them what they want or try to calm them down. If neither of those things work, I run.

Lying here in this bed is the opposite of all that.

"Stay in there for as long as you need to, Lucas. I'll be working at the table when you're ready for company." His voice is calm and soft.

I wait for him to speak again, louder this time. I wait for him to pound on the door. I wait and I wait until my stomach gnaws with hunger and the phone under my pillow becomes harder to ignore. I haven't checked for any messages from Daryll since

yesterday morning. I know he'll come looking for me at some point. I just don't know when.

I slide the phone out. It's dead, of course. The battery was low yesterday morning, and it's an old phone. I could keep it under the pillow and continue to ignore it. What's the point of reading Daryll's messages anyway?

I slip the phone back into its hiding place and get out of bed. The house is completely quiet as I sneak out of the bedroom and creep down the hall. That must mean the others have left.

Silver is sitting at the table, like he promised. He doesn't seem angry. He's just typing on his computer and munching on a piece of toast. My mouth waters. I haven't eaten anything all morning.

What would Silver do if I walked over to the kitchen and made toast for myself? He didn't mind when I helped myself to food yesterday. I slowly step forward, holding my breath. I get all the way to the counter before Silver turns his head to look at me.

He smiles. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, um, fine. I mean, I was hungry, so I thought I'd... I'm sorry about the phone number thing. I didn't mean... I can give them my number. I'm sorry if they left because of me. I just?—"

"It's okay. They had to get back to work. They left you their numbers here." He holds up a torn piece of paper with four names listed: Tin, Coin, Quin, Link. Each has a ten-digit number underneath.

Back when I met Daryll, I deleted all their numbers because I didn't want to be tempted to call them. I knew I needed a clean break. Otherwise, I'd come crawling

back to Ruby's house every time I felt lonely. There were plenty of times I regretted that decision. Sometimes I fantasized about keeping in contact with Coin or Quin, just so I could feel the warmth of being close to their family again.

I approach Silver and take the paper from him. Now I have all of their numbers. I could text Quin: How are you? I could ask Coin what songs he's recorded. Maybe he could send me a link to listen to them.

It almost makes me want to charge my phone.

"You don't mind if I have this?" I ask Silver.

He furrows his eyebrows. "Why would I mind?"

"I don't know. They're your brothers?—"

"They're your brothers, too. No matter what. You heard what they said."

I don't remember that part very well. I was too busy thinking about my phone and the messages I haven't read from Daryll. But if Silver claims they said that, I believe him.

I fold the paper carefully and slide it in my pocket.

"Could I have breakfast?" I ask.

He stands up. "Of course. Let me make you something."

"No, I've got it. You keep working." I rush over to the fridge and open it before he gets any ideas about cooking for me anyway.

“Okay, but I wouldn’t say no to more cuddling today, if you’re game for that.”

My stomach does this little flip flop. There’s nothing I want more than to sit in Silver’s lap all day while he works. This is my month of happiness, right? Why shouldn’t I?

I make myself some toast and slather it with jam I find in one of Ruby’s old mason jars. That must mean she made it. I pour myself a glass of milk, too. The doctor said I need lots of calcium. I still haven’t had the courage to bring up prenatal vitamins with Silver yet. They’re expensive, and he’s already bought so much for me. I can probably go another day or two without taking them.

I pick up my plate and glass, ready to head over to the table, when I notice the iPad on the counter. I saw it yesterday, including the charger it’s hooked up to. It’s an older one, just like my phone. I’m almost certain it uses the same charger.

I could borrow it to charge my phone. I wouldn’t have to look at Daryll’s messages yet. I could swipe past them and text Quin.

No, not yet. I might see Daryll’s texts in the process.

I set my plate and glass next to Silver’s laptop. “Is it still okay if I…”

He holds out his arms to me. “Yes, I would love that.”

I curl into his lap and rest my head on his shoulder. His scent and warmth envelope me in a cocoon of safety that feels even better today. I nibble on my toast and peel my orange, all while cuddled close to him. After I’ve eaten and drank my milk, I’m completely sated and at peace. I fall asleep to the tap , tap , tap of his keyboard and the thump , thump , thump of his heart against my cheek.

“Lucas.” I hear Silver’s voice off in the distance. It’s a nice voice—a safe voice.

“Baby, it’s time to get up.”

I blink my eyes open. Silver is rubbing my back. To my utter horror, I’m drooling on his shirt with my cheek smashed against his chest. I sit up straight and wipe the drool from the side of my mouth.

“Sorry to wake you, but I really have to go to the bathroom. I needed to go a while ago, but you were sleeping so peacefully, I didn’t want to disturb you.” He smiles at me fondly, and my heart melts. I didn’t think anyone would ever look at me like that again.

I stand up and he turns in the other direction, sprinting for the hallway. I guess he really had to go. How long did he wait so I could sleep? His kindness makes me feel safe, just like being close to him.

Then, I have to go to the bathroom because I always have to go to the bathroom. I retreat to the toilet in the ensuite connected to his bedroom. While I’m peeing, I notice another charger. This one is just waiting on the counter. I don’t know if it’s for his phone or iPad. After I wash my hands, I look at it for a long time.

Silver has been very kind to me. He should have the right to know if an angry, violent alpha wolf shifter is about to come knocking on his door. At some point, Daryll will notice the Uber charge in our bank account. Will he be able to figure out what address I took the Uber to? How long will it take him to scope out the neighborhood and find Silver’s house? Will he even bother?

If I plugged in my phone I could get a feel for how angry he is.

I pull the plug out of the wall and slip the charger into my pocket. I don’t need to look

at the messages now. All I need to do is hook up my phone to the charger. Then I can look at the messages when I'm feeling braver.

The charger rubs against the paper in my pocket with all the phone numbers. Once I look at Daryll's messages, I'll reward myself by texting Quin. I smile as I walk through Silver's bedroom, imagining Quin's bright, happy replies. The fear doesn't hit me until I plug in the charger and reach for my phone.

I can do this. It's important to be able to warn Silver if Daryll figures out where I am. I take a deep breath and grab my phone, connecting it to the charger.

Silver appears in the doorway. I try to hide my phone behind my back, but it's too late. He's seen it.

"So, you do have a phone," he says. "That's good."

"It's dead. I'm just going to charge it. I took the charger out of your bathroom. I'm sorry. I should have asked. I just figured you weren't using it right now, and I was going to return it?—"

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. I don't use that charger much anyway. How about you keep it?" he asks.

"Oh. Sure. Thank you."

He steps back. "I should probably work. Feel free to join me, if you want."

I rush after him, leaving my phone on the bed, now connected to the charger. A part of me wants to stay and wait for it to be charged enough to turn on. Now that I've faced my fear, it would be nice to get it over with. But another part of me doesn't want to leave the dreamland of happiness I've found here with Silver. As long as I

don't look at Daryll's messages, he feels a million miles away.

Even if he isn't.

There's a reason I knew Silver moved to San Antonio. The diner where I work is only a few blocks away from the Lackland Air Force Base. An omega on the dinner crew mentioned a handsome alpha named Silver with silver hair to match back in April. With a little sleuthing, I found out he joined the military and bought a house in San Antonio. I even looked up the house on Zillow and foolishly imagined living here with him. The address was still in my browser two nights ago.

Daryll frequently went through my phone. If he can't get Silver's address through Uber, maybe he'll remember it from the tabs open on my internet browser. Or maybe he won't. I don't know.

There are lots of ways Daryll could find me and destroy my fragile happiness with Silver.

16

SILVER

Lucas stays curled up in my lap all day. After lunch, he takes my hand and places it on his belly where the pups are kicking. While they pitter patter against my hand, he tucks his head under my chin, and God. It's just as good as lying at the bottom of the hammock when I was growing up, and letting my brothers pile on top of me in their fuzzy raccoon forms. Lucas and these pups are my family. I can feel it in my bones.

"What if Daryll figures out where I am?" he whispers.

"Do you think he will?"

Lucas nods against my chest.

I close my arms around him and hold him tight. "If he shows up here, I'll tell him to get lost."

"But he'll be angry," Lucas says, his voice still soft and scared.

"I can hold my own, baby. It will be okay."

He tenses in my arms. "No. If he hurt you..."

"Better me than an omega who's six months pregnant and a lot smaller than he is."

“But you don’t deserve...” he trails off, and I hope it’s because he can see how illogical that sentence is.

“And you do deserve it?” I ask, trying to keep my voice calm and not completely succeeding.

“Daryll is the mate Fate chose for me.”

The utter finality of that hits me. Fate gave Lucas an alpha father who hit him, and then She chose Daryll, another violent man, for his mate. I can see how Lucas might conclude that he deserves what Daryll did to him.

“Do you think your pups deserve Daryll?” I ask.

He shakes his head rapidly. “They’re innocent. They haven’t done anything.”

Does that mean Lucas thinks he did something worthy of all this violence? My heart aches for him.

“You didn’t do anything either, baby.”

He moves on my lap, pulling away from my body ever so slightly. The inch between his arm and my chest feels like a huge chasm after hours of cuddling him close. “I did.”

“Whatever you think you did, it isn’t bad enough to justify what Daryll did to you. No one deserves violence, okay? Absolutely no one.”

“But Fate chose?—”

“Fate isn’t fair. She plays favorites. That’s what my omega mom said. Back when we

were kids, she explained that parents aren't supposed to have favorites. They're supposed to love all of their children equally. She said we were Fate's favorites because we got to choose our mates, but that didn't make us better than anyone else. It just made Fate unfair. Because good parents don't have favorites."

Lucas covers my mouth with his hand. "No, Silver. Don't say that about Fate. She could curse you."

I gently tug his hand away from my face. "Then let Her curse me. I will never agree with what She's done to you. I will never think it's fair or that you deserve it. Not ever."

Lucas's eyes well with tears. "She gave me you, too, didn't She?"

"Yes, but?—"

"Then She isn't that heartless." Lucas leans in to kiss me. "She gave my pups to you, too, didn't She?"

"Yes—"

He kisses me again. "She gave you paws to claim me, right?" He takes one of my hands and places it on his chest. "She put me in the same trailer park as you. She gave me Christmases with your family and cinnamon rolls baked by your mom. She gave me guitar lessons with Coin and laughter with Link. She gave me all those nights of cuddling with your raccoon."

I hug him tightly because I don't know what to say. Sure, Fate has given him plenty of good with the bad, but that still doesn't make Her fair. It isn't my place to say, though. Because Lucas is allowed to believe whatever he wants about Fate. He's allowed to worship Her the way most gray wolf shifters do, and he's allowed to fear

Her, too. I'm just grateful he thinks of me and my family as gifts from his deity.

"Does this mean you'll let me put my paws on you?" I ask.

He shrugs. It's not a yes, but it's not a no either. Other than the temporary trial run I got him to agree to, this is as far as I've gotten with him.

"Okay. I choose to interpret that as progress," I say.

He smiles shyly. God, that smile. He's so beautiful.

"Could I cook for you tonight?" Lucas asks. "Maybe I could make one of your omega mom's recipes?"

He's perfectly still as he waits for me to respond. This is important to him.

"Yeah, that would be great."

He stands up. "Okay. I'll get started, then. Is there anything you want?"

"If you're using my mom's recipes, I'm sure I'll like whatever you make. I don't cook for myself that often. Thank you, baby."

He beams at that. Maybe he wants to be useful. I guess he hasn't had the chance to do much besides rest and shop during the last few days. When we were growing up, he helped my omega mom cook whenever he could. I remember how much he'd light up every time she praised or thanked him.

He opens my pantry and scans the contents. I know it's old-fashioned, but the idea of Lucas cooking for me fills my heart with warmth. It reminds me of my omega mom cooking for our family growing up. She wasn't a traditional omega, of course. She

ran her own business, swore like a sailor, and had plenty of tattoos. But the kitchen was her domain, and she could cook better than anyone I knew. Even when we were struggling financially, we ate well because of her.

I've always secretly hoped I'd bond to an omega like that.

"Can you make my mom's beef stew? I think I have all the ingredients, but I can run to the store if you need anything," I say.

I've had plenty of beef stew since leaving home, and none of it holds a candle to hers. She adds just the right amount of spices and uses potatoes and rice instead of noodles. The recipe takes hours to make, or I'd cook it myself more often.

He smiles. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Thank you, baby. That means a lot."

Over the next few hours, I watch him cooking out the corner of my eye. He slices the carrots exactly the way my omega mom does and even holds the salt-shaker over the pot at the same angle, sipping at the broth to check the flavor as he sprinkles it.

The best part is how the cooking calms him. He gets lost in chopping, sprinkling, and stirring, barely noticing me or where he is. I don't remember him getting this absorbed in cooking when we were younger.

Is this how he coped with the last five years of being bonded to Daryll? It's strange to think of my cuddly Lucas finding solace in something other than human contact. He used to remain terrified for hours after altercations with his dad unless we cuddled.

He really has changed.

17

LUCAS

Silver has the good stuff. Thick beef stock, organic carrots, fresh basil that I find in a dainty clear box on the top shelf of the fridge. I reach for my phone because I never use fresh basil, and I'm not sure if I should add more or less. Then I remember it's charging in the guest bedroom.

And I remember the text messages I don't want to see yet.

I make a quick guess with the basil, rather than going to retrieve my phone. Over the next two hours, I make Ruby's recipe from memory, her voice echoing in my head, until I'm stirring a pot of finished stew. It smells perfect; it tastes even better. I've never been able to replicate Ruby's recipe with the cheap stuff I have to work with at home.

I turn off the burner and set the ladle on the counter. My heart is at peace, the way it often is after a long afternoon in the kitchen. I think of my phone again and the messages I must face at some point. I feel braver now than I have since I got here.

If I hurry and check the messages now, I won't have to worry about them while I'm eating with Silver.

I leave Silver typing away on his computer to retreat down the hallway and into the guest room. My phone is waiting on top of the pillow. I press the home button and wait for it to boot up. It's old enough that it takes forever. I worry about the stew

cooling on the stove. I could come back to this later, when my phone is finally on. But just when I'm about to stand, messages from Daryll pop up on the screen.

Are you fucking kidding me right now? You stayed out the whole night?

I went to the dine and they said you missed your shift. We need that money, Lucas.

Answer your fucking phone.

I hate this. Where the hell are you?

Answer your phone.

When I get a hold of you, you're going to be sorry for this.

What's your plan here? Take care of three pups on your own? I know your dads won't take you in.

No one will take you in. No one else loves you.

The words on the screen pull me back to reality. Daryll is my actual mate. The diner is where I work. Rent is due in less than a week, and he's right. We need the money. The last few days now seem like a dream—a dream I'll need to wake up from at some point.

Except... I press my fingers to my swollen scent gland. The scab from Silver's bite is still there. I reach into my pocket to find the piece of paper with a list of phone numbers on it.

There are people who love me.

I take out the piece of paper and add each of the names to my contact list. I text them too, starting with Quin.

Hi, Quin. This is Lucas.

I get a response almost immediately.

Lucas! Eeee! I'm so excited I have your number! Can I add you to the brother group chat?

I smile. Just like that, I'm his brother again.

Sure. That's fine.

He sends a smiley emoji.

I send the same text to Coin, Link, and Tin. Coin responds first.

Hey, Lucas. It's good to hear from you.

Link responds with a picture of Terrance wearing a bright pink feather boa. Check out what I found dumpster diving today.

I laugh. What a goofball.

Another text from Quin pops up on my screen, but this one was sent to four other people.

Guess what? I added Lucas to our group chat! Say hi!

Three of the people I already have saved as contacts: Tin, Link, and Coin. That means

the fourth number belongs to Silver.

I send a text to that number.

Hey, it's me.

I hear footsteps coming down the hall. Silver walks into the bedroom with a big smile on his face. "Hey. I have your phone number now."

I smile back at him. "Yeah."

"Thank you, baby."

It seems a little silly. We had sex last night and he bit my scent gland. Giving him my number should mean nothing after that. But Daryll carefully regulates my phone. That means I rarely give my number to anyone. Normally, when I get a text, I know it's from him.

That won't be true anymore.

"Are you ready for dinner?" I ask.

"Absolutely. It smells like heaven." He holds his hand out to me, and I take it, allowing him to help me up.

My phone dings several times. I take a quick glance at it to see the brother group chat blowing up.

Coin: Welcome, Lucas.

Link: Hi!

Tin: Hello

Quin: Link, you have to be on your best behavior so we don't scare him away.

Link: What do you mean? What do you think I'm going to do?

Coin: Share more photos of your dead turkey.

Link: Whatever. That glam shot of Terrance dressed up in his new scarf was a delight.

It's like sunshine filling up my phone. I flip it to silent before sliding it into my back pocket. The buzzing that follows is still a little scary. One of those messages might be from Daryll. But it also might be Coin teasing Link in the brother chat or Quin weighing in on whether the Terrance photos are creepy.

Silver and I return to the kitchen where the big pot of stew is still steaming on the stove. I fill the two bowls I got out earlier and carry them over to the table with crocheted hot pads identical to the ones Ruby used to have in her kitchen. Her omega dad always gave her a stack of them at Christmas.

Silver grabs the spoons and glasses, which is nice. Daryll never helps set the table. He brings a loaf of Quin's bread and a water pitcher to the table, too. In less than a minute, we're ready to eat.

I sit down and inhale the scent of Ruby's beef stew. Silver sits across from me, eagerly picking up his spoon and digging in. He moans appreciatively as he takes the first bite. I watch him eat for a few moments. The satisfaction of knowing I'm the one who gave him this simple pleasure drowns out all the fear and anxiety.

"You spoil me, baby. I wish I could eat your cooking every day," he says.

“Maybe you could.” My voice is soft and tentative. It seems like a scary thing to say. Not because I mind cooking, but because of what cooking for him every day would mean.

He looks at me for a long moment. “I’d like that.”

We get lost in each other’s eyes for a while. I get drunk on Silver and the wonderful meal until I’m so full of happiness and food Daryll doesn’t seem important anymore. Silver dishes himself up a second bowl of stew, and I watch him eat that, too.

“The consistency of the carrots is perfect. Not too soft, but not crunchy. And that beef. It’s spiced perfectly. This might be better than my mom’s.” He chatters on about the broth and the potatoes in a constant stream of praise.

For a moment, I think I might be enough to make Silver happy, if only in the kitchen.

No, not just the kitchen. There’s one other thing that I am very, very good at.

“Hold on, I’ll be right back,” I say.

I wander into the living room where there are several large throw pillows. I grab two and return to the kitchen.

“Will you scoot your chair out a little bit?” I ask, flashing him a flirty smile.

“What are you up to?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Trying to make you happy.”

His smile fades. “Baby, you do.”

“Please. Will you let me do this? I really want to,” I say.

He pauses for a moment, then he scoots his chair out like I requested. I place the pillows on the floor in front of his chair and rest my hands on his knees as I kneel down in front of him.

“What’s this?” he asks.

I press a kiss to his inner thigh. “I think you know what it is.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“I know. I want to.”

I reach for the button of his jeans.

He catches my hand in his. “Shouldn’t we do this in the bed where you would be more comfortable?”

“No. I want you to eat your favorite stew while I go down on you.”

He tilts his head, his eyebrows furrowed with worry. “That isn’t necessary?—”

“Please, Silver. This is something I want to give to you.”

He threads his fingers through my hair. “Okay. I won’t say no to having your pretty mouth on me.” He traces my lips with his thumb, making my skin tingle in his wake. His every touch makes me come alive.

He scoots his hips forward until he’s sitting at the edge of the chair, and widens his stance, allowing me easier access. This time he doesn’t protest when I unbutton his

jeans and glide his zipper down.

“Remember when you used to blow me in the back seat of Coin’s car?” he asks.

I smile. “And we’d hide under that musty blanket so no one would see us?”

He laughs. “Oh my God. That thing smelled so bad.”

“Yeah, but you smelled so good, it didn’t matter,” I say.

I pull his pants down and lean forward to nuzzle the growing bulge in his underwear. The musky scent of him overwhelms me with want. I mouth him over the cotton fabric and exhale my hot breath onto his length.

“Fuck, Lucas. That feels good.”

I yank his underwear down to reveal his growing erection. It’s still a little soft, so I take it in my mouth and suck. It has that perfect salty flavor of a man who’s showered somewhat recently, but not recently enough to wash away his natural scent. I take him deep into my mouth until the scent of his pubic hair is thick and heady.

He threads his fingers through my hair and stares into my eyes. They dilate as I lift up and take him deep again. Not deep enough to choke myself, but deep enough that his cock hardens in my mouth. His smooth flesh is hot and heavy on my tongue. I pull off him with a pop and lick his cock from root to tip, locking eyes with him as I do it.

“Damn, you’re hot when you do that,” he says. His eyes are hooded and his nostrils flared. I don’t think he’s just flattering me.

My thigh muscles tremble a bit as I take him into my mouth again and bob up and down. I’m not as strong as I used to be. I balance one hand on his thigh and grip the

base of his cock with the other, determined to rock his world anyway.

His hips tilt up, his body moving with my mouth, his fingers now gripping my hair instead of gently caressing it.

“Oh my God, I forgot how good you are at this.” He leans his head back, squeezing his eyes shut. He’s breathtaking like that, his Adam’s apple jutting out, the tendons in his neck bulging.

“It’s been too long since someone treated me this good, baby. I don’t think I’ll be able to last,” he warns me.

I ease off him, not ready for it to be over. “We just made love last night,” I tease.

He runs his thumb over my lips again. They’re wet with spit now. “You didn’t do any of this last night. Don’t get me wrong, last night was heaven, but this...” He pushes the tip of his thumb into my mouth. “Brings back memories. Do you remember that time in the art closet?”

During our senior year, Silver and I were tasked with organizing the art closet when we got detention for skipping class. The art teacher left us in there alone, and I was feeling bold that day. I asked him to lean against the door while I sucked him off. He kept laughing, like he couldn’t believe his luck, and he came ridiculously fast.

I came, too, with nothing but a little rubbing over my jeans to help me along.

“Do you remember that time with the bear?” I ask, circling his tip with my tongue.

Every summer his family would go on a road trip in his uncle’s old camper, and Ruby invited me to come along. The summer before our senior year, we went to the Grand Tetons. The mountains were cool with evergreen trees that stretched toward the sky

and hiking trails flat enough that I could occasionally keep up with Link. It was magical there. But Silver and I were fucking like rabbits by that point, and going a full week without sex felt impossible. So we snuck outside the camper in the middle of the night, and I blew him behind a copse of trees.

The last night we heard a deep rumble, and I turned around to find a bear lumbering through the forest behind us. Silver covered my mouth to stop me from screaming.

“I remember how sexy you were in those tiny shorts you wore hiking,” he says. “I could almost see the bottom of your ass cheeks in those things. Hiking behind you was torture.”

I smile up at him. “I know. That’s why I got them. To torture you.”

Back then, my body was something I was only beginning to understand the power of. I loved the way Silver ogled me and how his knees would go weak when he came in my mouth. It made me feel sexy and on top of the world.

I suck Silver into my mouth and grip the base of his cock, the way I know he likes. He groans. This time when I start moving up and down, I go slow at first. It feels like such a luxury.

Back in high school, we were always in a hurry. I savor the slippery shape of his cock in my mouth and the strength of his scent. I watch the tic of his jaw as I speed up—the flare of his nostrils. The way the tension rises in his body and the involuntary thrust of his hips are mesmerizing. As his breath quickens, and his cock thickens in my mouth, I slide my other hand into my own pants. I want to come with him, the way I used to all those times back in high school.

He cries out, and my mouth fills with thick, salty cum. I stroke myself only once before bliss skyrockets through me. I whimper around his cock, allowing his cum to

slide out of my mouth. He thrusts once, twice more, holding my head in place. That's what I asked him to do in high school. I loved it when he let go and gave me the most primal version of himself.

I worry that he'll question his instincts now. I'm pregnant, and he's been so careful with me. So I release his cock and lift myself up, the way I did back then. I never swallowed his cum. I always held it in my mouth until I could stand up and kiss him.

I climb onto his lap and grab the back of his head, bringing him in for an open-mouthed kiss. He spears his tongue in between my lips, shamelessly eager to taste his own cum. I moan, completely forgetting about my baby bump and changed body. It's like I'm back in high school, wearing those tiny shorts, confident and powerful. Silver even grabs my ass and squeezes it, like he feels it, too.

"I'm sorry, baby," he whispers against my lips.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

He sits back, his lips still shiny from his own cum. "I forgot to eat the stew while you sucked me off."

I laugh. "Oh well."

"In my defense, you were very distracting," he says.

We kiss again. His lips are slow and lazy against mine.

"We could try tomorrow," I suggest.

"Mmmm. We could."

He presses gentle kisses down my neck and nuzzles my scent gland. My heart skips a beat.

“I love you so much, Lucas,” he whispers in my ear.

“I love you, too,” I whisper back.

Maybe if I try hard to make him happy every single night, our love could be enough.

18

SILVER

A loud banging wakes me in the middle of the night. I disentangle my body from Lucas's, hoping he didn't hear the noise, too. Then it comes again.

Bang , bang , bang .

The clock says it's past midnight. I grab for my phone, wondering if have a text that can explain why I have a visitor this late, but there aren't any new messages. Lucas stirs beside me.

Bang , bang , bang .

He bolts upright, reaching out for me in the dark. "Silver, he's here."

Lucas doesn't have to explain who "he" is. We both know.

I want to reassure him it isn't Daryll. Back when we were kids, I often reassured him that the sounds we heard in the prairie weren't his father coming after him. But this is different.

"Wait here," I say.

"No! You can't go out there. I'll go?—"

I take his hand and squeeze it. “You’re pregnant, and Daryll is angry. It would be better if I went. I’m bigger than you. Also, I have combat training, remember?”

That’s a bit of a stretch. Sure, I know how to shoot a gun, but hand-to-hand combat wasn’t on the docket for me in basic training. I did what the traditional recruits called “Cupcake Camp” because I already had a degree in Cyber Security. I’m a lot more useful to the military behind a desk than in a foxhole.

Bang , bang , bang .

“I need to go. You stay here and call the cops if you hear any scary noises, okay?” I say.

Lucas shakes his head. “I’ll do it?—”

“Think of the pups, Lucas.”

That gives him pause. Before he can stop me again, I scramble out of bed and yank on some shorts and a T-shirt. “Stay here.”

As I rush through my house, I realize Daryll will be able to smell Lucas on me. He’s a gray wolf shifter and Lucas is his mate. He’ll probably know we had sex before I even open the door.

Fucking hell . This is crazy. Why didn’t I just call the cops?

“Lucas! I know you’re in there!”

Daryll’s voice is loud and booming. I think of Lucas, who hates loud noise, and anger rises within me. Who does this guy think he is? He hit his pregnant mate, and now he’s threatening him in the middle of the night.

I flip the deadbolt and open the door.

The man on my porch is a lot bigger than I remember Daryll being. His shoulders have filled out, and the mullet Link was so fond of has been shaved down to a buzz cut. He has at least a few days' worth of scruff on his face and dark circles under his eyes. Worst of all, he reeks of cheap beer and cigarettes.

Lucas is so sensitive to smell, I can't imagine him wanting to get anywhere near this guy.

I wait for Daryll to sniff out the situation between me and Lucas. Maybe smoking has dampened his sense of smell, because he stares at me expectantly for a full beat before his eyes narrow.

"You wanna tell me why you smell like my omega?" he snarls.

"Nope. Lucas left you. It's none of your business."

"Like hell it isn't. We're fated mates." Daryll tries to shoulder his way through my front door, but I stand my ground.

"Get off my property, or I'll call the cops," I say.

"Oh, is that how it is? Go ahead. When they get here, I'll tell them you're a coon shifter and you've got my omega in your bed. Who do you think they'll help then?"

That stops me cold. I'm far away from the relative safety of the trailer park where raccoon shifters band together when one of us is treated unfairly by the cops. So far, I haven't had to worry about that because of my silver hair. I look like a polar bear or arctic fox shifter.

“What do you want?” I ask.

Daryll’s lips spread into a nasty smile. “There you go. Now we’re talkin’. All you gotta do is go get Lucas, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“No,” I say.

“Then maybe I should call the cops. Tell them you abducted my omega. Put him under your spell. Bet your neighbors would love to hear that. Do they know there’s a coon shifter living next door?”

I’ve always known there would come a day when my neighbors would find out what I am. I decided long ago that I didn’t care. They can think whatever they want. I’m not ashamed of being a raccoon shifter.

But I am afraid the cops will take Lucas away.

“I haven’t put my paws on him,” I say.

Daryll laughs. “Of course you haven’t. I’m not worried about that.” He leans in closer, until I can smell his rancid breath. “Even a coon shifter wouldn’t want him now.”

Anger courses through me. I remind myself that punching Daryll won’t make him go away. It will probably just make him more violent.

“If nobody would want him, then why are you here?” I ask.

Daryll rolls his eyes. “Because rent’s due next week. And like I said, he’s my fated mate. I can’t fuck anybody else, and I’m horny.”

What a charmer. I can't believe Fate thought Lucas deserved to be with this guy.

"If you let me put my paws on him, you'd be able to fuck whoever you want," I say.

"If I let you? Are you fucking kidding me right now? If you want to put your paws on Lucas, be my guest. Free me from my misery."

I can't believe this. Daryll would give up his fated mate this easily? Like he was worth nothing?

"What about the pups?" I ask.

"Oh, you gotta take those, too. It's an all or nothing deal. I'm not paying child support." He winks at me, like he's telling a joke—a joke about abandoning his children.

"You'd be willing to sign away your parental rights?"

Daryll considers me skeptically. "Are you being serious?"

"Yes."

"So you're telling me that you want my fat, pregnant omega? And you want to adopt all three of my pups?"

I nod.

He throws back his head and laughs.

"Tell you what, Silver. That's your name, right? I will gladly sign over my parental rights the second my bond with Lucas is over, and I can stick my dick in somebody

else. That sounds like a fair trade to me. In the meantime, I need money to pay the rent. So go get him already.”

Daryll is probably drunk. He may not be willing to follow through on any of these promises when or if Lucas is ready to bond to me. But maybe it’s worth it to placate him, at least until then.

“How much money do you need?” I ask.

“Fifteen hundred.”

I don’t have fifteen hundred dollars in cash lying around. I could get it, though.

“Come back tomorrow at two o’clock. I’ll get you your money,” I say. “But only if you leave right now.”

“No way, man. I’m not falling for that. Go get Lucas.” Daryll sways a little. I bet he’ll fall asleep in a few minutes, regardless of where he is.

“Lucas isn’t coming out here. Leave now, and I’ll pay your rent this one time. If you don’t leave, the offer is gone.”

He steps back. “Fine, but I’m holding you to it.”

“Okay.”

He points at me. “I’ll get my money from you.”

“Okay,” I repeat.

“My money and my freedom,” Daryll says, slurring the last word. He stumbles down

the steps and toward an old pickup truck in the driveway. I would tell him not to drive if I thought he would listen. Instead, I write down his license plate. The cops can tell him for me.

I close the door and slide the deadbolt home, relieved that Daryll wasn't interested in fighting someone his own size.

I guess he only hits people who are too small to fight back.

19

LUCAS

I wake alone in Silver's bed, but I can hear the water of the shower coming from the adjoined bathroom. His scent is everywhere: the pillow, the sheets, my skin. There's a lovely soreness between my legs too, that whispers of what we did last night together. I bring my fingers to the fresh bite on my scent gland and smile.

It feels wonderful to have the impression of Silver's teeth layered over the scar Daryll left on my skin when he bonded to me.

Silver walks into the bedroom with a towel on his hips. I stare at his bare chest shamelessly as he beelines for the closet.

"Good morning," I say.

He turns around, the towel lowering on his hips. He reaches for it, then pauses and lets it slide down his body, exposing every hard angle to me. It feels like such an indulgence to be able to see him like this, especially in the morning.

He walks to the bed and sits next to me. "Good morning, baby. How did you sleep?"

"Wonderful." I haven't slept that well in months, possibly years, but I don't tell him that.

"Good." He drags a hand through his wet hair. "My, uh, brothers sort of overheard us

last night.”

I think back to our lovemaking and realize it was because of me. I screamed out Silver’s name, among other things. What was I thinking? I knew they were sleeping in the house. They must think I’m such a slut for sleeping with their brother while I’m pregnant with Daryll’s pups.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to?—”

He presses a finger to my lips. “It’s okay. Last night was intense.” He bends over and presses a kiss to my forehead. It makes me feel so goddamn safe, I almost forget to be embarrassed. Almost.

“Do you want me to leave? Your brothers won’t want to see me after that?—”

“My brothers all love you and have been pressuring me to put my paws on you. This morning Coin actually threatened to do it himself if I wouldn’t man up.” He chuckles good-naturedly like it’s the most natural thing in the world for his brother to offer something that extraordinary.

“He did?”

Silver nods.

“That’s very kind of him,” I say.

Silver considers me warily. “Is that what you want?”

“What? No. I want to be with you.”

He takes my hand and squeezes it. “Good. Because I don’t know if I could give you

up after last night. That sex was fire, baby.”

I think back to the way he grunted and trembled while he was inside me. I know he wouldn’t be able to fake anything like that. I made him feel good.

“It was fire for me, too,” I say.

He releases my hand and reaches slowly across the mattress. He locks eyes with me as he places his hand on my belly. “I felt the pups move last night. They were kicking against my hand.”

Silver’s fingers were inside me last night, but somehow, the way he touches my belly feels a lot more intimate. I’m not sure I’m ready for it.

“I want to be a father,” he says. “I always have.” He rubs the bare skin of my belly under the blanket. As if on cue, I feel the tiny somersaults of the pups within me. Silver’s face lights up. “I think they’re saying hi.”

Tears burn in the corners of my eyes. Daryll has never touched my belly like this. He’s never acknowledged our pups in any real way except to complain about how fat I am or how much having pups will cost us. He’s certainly never said that he wanted to be a father.

“Wolf pups are different than raccoon kits,” I remind Silver.

He gives me a sad smile. “So you’ve said before. You’re worried I won’t love them because they aren’t raccoon shifters.”

“You didn’t like Daryll very much. They’re his pups?—”

“I don’t like your alpha dad either, but I love you,” he says. He bends over and

presses a soft kiss to my belly. “If you let me love them, I will, Lucas. I swear to you. I will love them with all of my heart.”

Tears slide down my cheeks. Up until now, I accepted that this trial run between Silver and me would be over in a month. I haven’t allowed myself to hope that I could be with him longer than that. It would be selfish of me, and the last thing I want is to ruin Silver’s future. But what if I allowed myself to be with him for my pups’ sake? Then it wouldn’t be completely selfish. They’d be better off here with Silver than wherever we’d end up if I ventured off alone.

“We could have more children,” I say, as Silver walks back to the closet.

He turns to look at me over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. We could have raccoon kits, too.”

He smiles. “I’d like that. They could sleep in the same hammock with the pups. All together, like how we used to cuddle when we were kids.”

More tears stream down my face. I can’t help it. The idea of giving my pups the same comfort I got from Silver and his brothers makes me emotional.

“Are you sure you want that?” I ask.

He nods. “I do.”

I hug my belly and let the tears fall down my cheeks. Silver lets me cry for a few moments without saying a word. He’s so patient. I wish I could be as wonderful for him as he is to me. I wish I could be enough to keep him happy.

What if I tried my very best? Could I come close?

I open my eyes to find him sitting at the edge of the bed, naked. He probably needs to get dressed and start his work day. I'm sure he doesn't have time for my histrionics.

"You have a whole month to decide." He gently brushes my tears away with his fingertips. "I won't rush you, okay?"

With that, he stands and dresses quickly before heading out the door.

20

SILVER

Link is sitting in the dining room, taking a bite out of a hard-boiled egg when I get to the kitchen.

“Congratulations, man. It sounds like things went pretty well last night. Do we have a new brother-in-law?”

I sink down in the chair next to him. “Not yet.”

“Really? I thought for sure you sealed the deal. Lucas was loud.” Link tosses the rest of the hard-boiled egg in his mouth and grabs for the second one on his plate.

“Sorry about that.”

He shrugs. “At least I couldn’t see you this time. Back in college?—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You fucked omegas in our room, too. Why are you up so early?” I ask.

“Coin made us get up. We have to leave in a few minutes. He’s got work, and Slade has to get back to the trailer park before ten. Did you know he’s taking up plumbing with Mom?”

“What?” Our alpha mom has been running the Fox Plumbing business by herself for

as long as I can remember. She won't even let Uncle Dagger's bookkeeping guy help her with her taxes.

"Yeah. I guess he's a licensed electrician, so they're expanding the business."

Tin appears in the doorway of the eat-in kitchen. His eyes are alert, and his face is already shaven. He probably gets up this early every day at the ranch. "Good morning. I hope you don't mind, but I already brewed a pot of coffee."

Coin squeezes around him and walks into the kitchen. "Thank you very much." He opens a few cupboards before locating a coffee mug. "Are you guys ready to go?"

Link shoves the remaining egg in his mouth and gives a thumbs up.

Chime scampers into the kitchen wearing a bright red dress and gold shoes. Link holds out his arms to her, and she runs toward him. At the last moment, he stands up and lifts her off the ground. She squeals with delight.

"What are we having for breakfast?" Quin asks, trailing behind her. Slade has his big, beefy arm around his narrow shoulders. They seem so comfortable together, which is bizarre. Back when we were in high school, Quin got all jittery and nervous every time Slade so much as glanced in our direction.

I guess a lot has changed for them, too in the last five years.

"Tin made coffee and Link raided my fridge for eggs. You're welcome to eat whatever you can find. I have bread for toast. There's cereal, yogurt, bananas."

Quin opens the fridge. "We could make pancakes." He smiles at something behind me. "For old time's sake."

I turn to see Lucas standing uncertainly in the hallway. He's wearing his new jeans and one of the nicer shirts. The collar is wide enough to expose his scent gland, which is still puffy and scabbed over from last night. I notice the way Quin's eyes dart to the bite, but only for a second.

"We don't have time for pancakes," Coin reminds him, taking a long swallow of coffee. "We need to be out of here in ten minutes."

"Are you sure we have to leave?" Quin asks. "We haven't seen Lucas in forever. Wouldn't it be fun to play hooky and bake cinnamon rolls or something?"

Lucas gives him the sweetest, shyest little smile. God, he's cute. I can't wait until he's properly mine.

"What do you think, Chime?" Link says, tickling her belly. "Should we play hooky and bake cinnamon rolls?"

She giggles. "Yes! Stop it, Uncle Link."

He sets her down, as requested. "Okay. But I think a tickle monster might be coming."

She rolls her eyes dramatically. "I'm too old for the tickle monster."

"That isn't possible. The tickle monster attacks everyone. Even old people."

"It does not!" she argues.

"The tickle monster only attacks people who consent, remember?" Quin says pointedly.

Link flops back down into his chair. “Okay, okay. But Lucas needs to have his pups already, so I’ll have more kids to tickle.”

Lucas does that sweet, shy smile again. I want to kiss him. Would he let me right here in front of my brothers? They already know we’re sleeping together.

I better not. I don’t want to push him into anything he’s not ready for.

“If ya’ll want to stay here, then be my guest. But I need to get to work,” Coin says.

Slade bends down to kiss Quin’s cheek. “I’m sorry, but I have to get to work too.”

“So do I,” Tin agrees.

Quin sighs. “Okay, fine. When do we get to see you again, Lucas? Could I get your number?”

Lucas hugs his chest nervously. I’m not sure he has a phone. I haven’t seen him use one since he got here.

“You can contact him through me,” I suggest.

Quin presses his lips together. “Um, I was hoping to be able to contact him directly. Do you have a phone number, Lucas?”

“My phone is kind of dead, so…” Lucas shrugs.

“I could buy you a new one,” Coin says. “If you need it. Or a charger, if that would be easier.”

Lucas glances at me. He’s overwhelmed. I don’t know if it’s because he’s planning to

leave us all behind soon, and he wants to make a clean break, or because this is triggering some kind of trauma in his brain. The strangest things used to scare him, and sometimes it didn't make sense, even when he tried to explain it to me afterward.

"Tell you what, I'll make sure you get Lucas's phone number as soon as we figure out if his phone is working." I step in front of him, putting a physical barrier between him and my brothers.

Quin steps back, the concern still etched on his face. I understand. We all missed Lucas when he ran off with Daryll. I thought he'd at least stay in contact with my family. They were extremely close.

"I just think he should know that he's family, no matter what," Quin says.

He means no matter what happens with me.

"Yeah," Coin agrees. "Lucas is family, even if the two of you don't get together. We don't want to lose him again."

I turn around slowly, not wanting to spook Lucas. His shoulders are rounded, his head ducked down. I wish I knew what was going on his head.

"I'm tired. I should go take a nap," he says softly. He retreats down the hall and into the guest bedroom at the far end. The door clicks shut behind him.

The silence that follows is thick and unnatural. We're not a quiet family. The only time our home was silent growing up was when everyone was asleep.

"Didn't he just get up?" Link asks.

Tin walks over to the fridge and pulls off a sheet of paper from the post-it pad where I

write my grocery lists. He jots his name and a phone number on the paper and sets it on the counter.

“We can write our phone numbers on here, and Silver can pass it on to Lucas.” He holds out the pen to Quin. He reluctantly takes it and writes his phone number on the paper.

“He had our phone numbers before, and he didn’t message us,” Quin says.

“Why not?” Chime asks.

Quin gives her a gentle side-hug. “I don’t know. Sometimes people have a hard time accepting love.”

“Why?” she repeats.

“Lots of reasons. Sometimes it’s because they believe they don’t deserve it.” He looks directly at Slade as he says this.

“Why?”

Slade holds out his hand to Chime. “Maybe no one’s loved them properly before.”

Chime takes his hand and follows him out of the kitchen. “Why?”

“That’s a good question.” Slade’s deep voice fades as they walk away.

“I guess we’re eating on the way?” Coin says, jotting his number on the piece of paper.

Link grabs the loaf of bread and a bunch of bananas on the counter. “Yep. Good luck,

man. I want all the updates, okay?” He writes his name and phone number on the paper, too, although it doesn’t look particularly legible.

Tin, Link, and Coin head out. Only Quin is left in the kitchen. He picks up the paper and hands it to me. “Do our moms know he’s pregnant?”

I shake my head.

“They need to,” Quin says.

“I know. But I’m not sure he’s ready yet.”

He purses his lips. “Okay. It’s just... he needs a mom. Or a dad or whatever. He needs a parent.”

“I’ll take care of him, Quin. I promise.”

Quin shoves his hands in his pockets. “Sure. But you’re sleeping with him, aren’t you? That makes things complicated. I think Lucas needs love that isn’t complicated right now. Make sure he charges his phone, okay? And ask if you can take him home for family dinner this Saturday. Tell him I’d love to see him.”

“Yeah, okay.”

He holds out his arms to me. I bring him in for a hug. He smells of vanilla and warm bread, as always.

“Thanks for coming over,” I say.

He pulls away. “It was good to see you. I left some cookies in the freezer for you and Lucas. I hope you can make it on Saturday.”

I watch him go, waiting for the inevitable loneliness that always comes after a visit from one of my brothers, but all I feel is concern for Lucas. I'm not sure if I should let him have space or go comfort him.

In the end, I decide to knock on the door to the guest room because of Quin.

I think Lucas needs love that isn't complicated right now.

I'll give Lucas all the love that I can, complicated or not.

21

LUCAS

Silver knocks on the door. I don't answer.

He knocks again. I stay in bed.

He knocks a third time. I know I should get up. I should apologize for not giving his brothers my number. I should tell him that he was right, I was wrong, and I'll never do it again. I should cook him a nice breakfast and plaster a smile on my face until he's too busy with work to notice how upset I am.

Except Silver isn't Daryll.

My heart still pounds as he waits by the door. I don't normally ignore alphas who want something from me. I give them what they want or try to calm them down. If neither of those things work, I run.

Lying here in this bed is the opposite of all that.

"Stay in there for as long as you need to, Lucas. I'll be working at the table when you're ready for company." His voice is calm and soft.

I wait for him to speak again, louder this time. I wait for him to pound on the door. I wait and I wait until my stomach gnaws with hunger and the phone under my pillow becomes harder to ignore. I haven't checked for any messages from Daryll since

yesterday morning. I know he'll come looking for me at some point. I just don't know when.

I slide the phone out. It's dead, of course. The battery was low yesterday morning, and it's an old phone. I could keep it under the pillow and continue to ignore it. What's the point of reading Daryll's messages anyway?

I slip the phone back into its hiding place and get out of bed. The house is completely quiet as I sneak out of the bedroom and creep down the hall. That must mean the others have left.

Silver is sitting at the table, like he promised. He doesn't seem angry. He's just typing on his computer and munching on a piece of toast. My mouth waters. I haven't eaten anything all morning.

What would Silver do if I walked over to the kitchen and made toast for myself? He didn't mind when I helped myself to food yesterday. I slowly step forward, holding my breath. I get all the way to the counter before Silver turns his head to look at me.

He smiles. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, um, fine. I mean, I was hungry, so I thought I'd... I'm sorry about the phone number thing. I didn't mean... I can give them my number. I'm sorry if they left because of me. I just?—"

"It's okay. They had to get back to work. They left you their numbers here." He holds up a torn piece of paper with four names listed: Tin, Coin, Quin, Link. Each has a ten-digit number underneath.

Back when I met Daryll, I deleted all their numbers because I didn't want to be tempted to call them. I knew I needed a clean break. Otherwise, I'd come crawling

back to Ruby's house every time I felt lonely. There were plenty of times I regretted that decision. Sometimes I fantasized about keeping in contact with Coin or Quin, just so I could feel the warmth of being close to their family again.

I approach Silver and take the paper from him. Now I have all of their numbers. I could text Quin: How are you? I could ask Coin what songs he's recorded. Maybe he could send me a link to listen to them.

It almost makes me want to charge my phone.

"You don't mind if I have this?" I ask Silver.

He furrows his eyebrows. "Why would I mind?"

"I don't know. They're your brothers?—"

"They're your brothers, too. No matter what. You heard what they said."

I don't remember that part very well. I was too busy thinking about my phone and the messages I haven't read from Daryll. But if Silver claims they said that, I believe him.

I fold the paper carefully and slide it in my pocket.

"Could I have breakfast?" I ask.

He stands up. "Of course. Let me make you something."

"No, I've got it. You keep working." I rush over to the fridge and open it before he gets any ideas about cooking for me anyway.

“Okay, but I wouldn’t say no to more cuddling today, if you’re game for that.”

My stomach does this little flip flop. There’s nothing I want more than to sit in Silver’s lap all day while he works. This is my month of happiness, right? Why shouldn’t I?

I make myself some toast and slather it with jam I find in one of Ruby’s old mason jars. That must mean she made it. I pour myself a glass of milk, too. The doctor said I need lots of calcium. I still haven’t had the courage to bring up prenatal vitamins with Silver yet. They’re expensive, and he’s already bought so much for me. I can probably go another day or two without taking them.

I pick up my plate and glass, ready to head over to the table, when I notice the iPad on the counter. I saw it yesterday, including the charger it’s hooked up to. It’s an older one, just like my phone. I’m almost certain it uses the same charger.

I could borrow it to charge my phone. I wouldn’t have to look at Daryll’s messages yet. I could swipe past them and text Quin.

No, not yet. I might see Daryll’s texts in the process.

I set my plate and glass next to Silver’s laptop. “Is it still okay if I…”

He holds out his arms to me. “Yes, I would love that.”

I curl into his lap and rest my head on his shoulder. His scent and warmth envelope me in a cocoon of safety that feels even better today. I nibble on my toast and peel my orange, all while cuddled close to him. After I’ve eaten and drank my milk, I’m completely sated and at peace. I fall asleep to the tap , tap , tap of his keyboard and the thump , thump , thump of his heart against my cheek.

“Lucas.” I hear Silver’s voice off in the distance. It’s a nice voice—a safe voice.

“Baby, it’s time to get up.”

I blink my eyes open. Silver is rubbing my back. To my utter horror, I’m drooling on his shirt with my cheek smashed against his chest. I sit up straight and wipe the drool from the side of my mouth.

“Sorry to wake you, but I really have to go to the bathroom. I needed to go a while ago, but you were sleeping so peacefully, I didn’t want to disturb you.” He smiles at me fondly, and my heart melts. I didn’t think anyone would ever look at me like that again.

I stand up and he turns in the other direction, sprinting for the hallway. I guess he really had to go. How long did he wait so I could sleep? His kindness makes me feel safe, just like being close to him.

Then, I have to go to the bathroom because I always have to go to the bathroom. I retreat to the toilet in the ensuite connected to his bedroom. While I’m peeing, I notice another charger. This one is just waiting on the counter. I don’t know if it’s for his phone or iPad. After I wash my hands, I look at it for a long time.

Silver has been very kind to me. He should have the right to know if an angry, violent alpha wolf shifter is about to come knocking on his door. At some point, Daryll will notice the Uber charge in our bank account. Will he be able to figure out what address I took the Uber to? How long will it take him to scope out the neighborhood and find Silver’s house? Will he even bother?

If I plugged in my phone I could get a feel for how angry he is.

I pull the plug out of the wall and slip the charger into my pocket. I don’t need to look

at the messages now. All I need to do is hook up my phone to the charger. Then I can look at the messages when I'm feeling braver.

The charger rubs against the paper in my pocket with all the phone numbers. Once I look at Daryll's messages, I'll reward myself by texting Quin. I smile as I walk through Silver's bedroom, imagining Quin's bright, happy replies. The fear doesn't hit me until I plug in the charger and reach for my phone.

I can do this. It's important to be able to warn Silver if Daryll figures out where I am. I take a deep breath and grab my phone, connecting it to the charger.

Silver appears in the doorway. I try to hide my phone behind my back, but it's too late. He's seen it.

"So, you do have a phone," he says. "That's good."

"It's dead. I'm just going to charge it. I took the charger out of your bathroom. I'm sorry. I should have asked. I just figured you weren't using it right now, and I was going to return it?—"

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. I don't use that charger much anyway. How about you keep it?" he asks.

"Oh. Sure. Thank you."

He steps back. "I should probably work. Feel free to join me, if you want."

I rush after him, leaving my phone on the bed, now connected to the charger. A part of me wants to stay and wait for it to be charged enough to turn on. Now that I've faced my fear, it would be nice to get it over with. But another part of me doesn't want to leave the dreamland of happiness I've found here with Silver. As long as I

don't look at Daryll's messages, he feels a million miles away.

Even if he isn't.

There's a reason I knew Silver moved to San Antonio. The diner where I work is only a few blocks away from the Lackland Air Force Base. An omega on the dinner crew mentioned a handsome alpha named Silver with silver hair to match back in April. With a little sleuthing, I found out he joined the military and bought a house in San Antonio. I even looked up the house on Zillow and foolishly imagined living here with him. The address was still in my browser two nights ago.

Daryll frequently went through my phone. If he can't get Silver's address through Uber, maybe he'll remember it from the tabs open on my internet browser. Or maybe he won't. I don't know.

There are lots of ways Daryll could find me and destroy my fragile happiness with Silver.

22

SILVER

Lucas stays curled up in my lap all day. After lunch, he takes my hand and places it on his belly where the pups are kicking. While they pitter patter against my hand, he tucks his head under my chin, and God. It's just as good as lying at the bottom of the hammock when I was growing up, and letting my brothers pile on top of me in their fuzzy raccoon forms. Lucas and these pups are my family. I can feel it in my bones.

"What if Daryll figures out where I am?" he whispers.

"Do you think he will?"

Lucas nods against my chest.

I close my arms around him and hold him tight. "If he shows up here, I'll tell him to get lost."

"But he'll be angry," Lucas says, his voice still soft and scared.

"I can hold my own, baby. It will be okay."

He tenses in my arms. "No. If he hurt you..."

"Better me than an omega who's six months pregnant and a lot smaller than he is."

“But you don’t deserve...” he trails off, and I hope it’s because he can see how illogical that sentence is.

“And you do deserve it?” I ask, trying to keep my voice calm and not completely succeeding.

“Daryll is the mate Fate chose for me.”

The utter finality of that hits me. Fate gave Lucas an alpha father who hit him, and then She chose Daryll, another violent man, for his mate. I can see how Lucas might conclude that he deserves what Daryll did to him.

“Do you think your pups deserve Daryll?” I ask.

He shakes his head rapidly. “They’re innocent. They haven’t done anything.”

Does that mean Lucas thinks he did something worthy of all this violence? My heart aches for him.

“You didn’t do anything either, baby.”

He moves on my lap, pulling away from my body ever so slightly. The inch between his arm and my chest feels like a huge chasm after hours of cuddling him close. “I did.”

“Whatever you think you did, it isn’t bad enough to justify what Daryll did to you. No one deserves violence, okay? Absolutely no one.”

“But Fate chose?—”

“Fate isn’t fair. She plays favorites. That’s what my omega mom said. Back when we

were kids, she explained that parents aren't supposed to have favorites. They're supposed to love all of their children equally. She said we were Fate's favorites because we got to choose our mates, but that didn't make us better than anyone else. It just made Fate unfair. Because good parents don't have favorites."

Lucas covers my mouth with his hand. "No, Silver. Don't say that about Fate. She could curse you."

I gently tug his hand away from my face. "Then let Her curse me. I will never agree with what She's done to you. I will never think it's fair or that you deserve it. Not ever."

Lucas's eyes well with tears. "She gave me you, too, didn't She?"

"Yes, but?—"

"Then She isn't that heartless." Lucas leans in to kiss me. "She gave my pups to you, too, didn't She?"

"Yes—"

He kisses me again. "She gave you paws to claim me, right?" He takes one of my hands and places it on his chest. "She put me in the same trailer park as you. She gave me Christmases with your family and cinnamon rolls baked by your mom. She gave me guitar lessons with Coin and laughter with Link. She gave me all those nights of cuddling with your raccoon."

I hug him tightly because I don't know what to say. Sure, Fate has given him plenty of good with the bad, but that still doesn't make Her fair. It isn't my place to say, though. Because Lucas is allowed to believe whatever he wants about Fate. He's allowed to worship Her the way most gray wolf shifters do, and he's allowed to fear

Her, too. I'm just grateful he thinks of me and my family as gifts from his deity.

"Does this mean you'll let me put my paws on you?" I ask.

He shrugs. It's not a yes, but it's not a no either. Other than the temporary trial run I got him to agree to, this is as far as I've gotten with him.

"Okay. I choose to interpret that as progress," I say.

He smiles shyly. God, that smile. He's so beautiful.

"Could I cook for you tonight?" Lucas asks. "Maybe I could make one of your omega mom's recipes?"

He's perfectly still as he waits for me to respond. This is important to him.

"Yeah, that would be great."

He stands up. "Okay. I'll get started, then. Is there anything you want?"

"If you're using my mom's recipes, I'm sure I'll like whatever you make. I don't cook for myself that often. Thank you, baby."

He beams at that. Maybe he wants to be useful. I guess he hasn't had the chance to do much besides rest and shop during the last few days. When we were growing up, he helped my omega mom cook whenever he could. I remember how much he'd light up every time she praised or thanked him.

He opens my pantry and scans the contents. I know it's old-fashioned, but the idea of Lucas cooking for me fills my heart with warmth. It reminds me of my omega mom cooking for our family growing up. She wasn't a traditional omega, of course. She

ran her own business, swore like a sailor, and had plenty of tattoos. But the kitchen was her domain, and she could cook better than anyone I knew. Even when we were struggling financially, we ate well because of her.

I've always secretly hoped I'd bond to an omega like that.

"Can you make my mom's beef stew? I think I have all the ingredients, but I can run to the store if you need anything," I say.

I've had plenty of beef stew since leaving home, and none of it holds a candle to hers. She adds just the right amount of spices and uses potatoes and rice instead of noodles. The recipe takes hours to make, or I'd cook it myself more often.

He smiles. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Thank you, baby. That means a lot."

Over the next few hours, I watch him cooking out the corner of my eye. He slices the carrots exactly the way my omega mom does and even holds the salt-shaker over the pot at the same angle, sipping at the broth to check the flavor as he sprinkles it.

The best part is how the cooking calms him. He gets lost in chopping, sprinkling, and stirring, barely noticing me or where he is. I don't remember him getting this absorbed in cooking when we were younger.

Is this how he coped with the last five years of being bonded to Daryll? It's strange to think of my cuddly Lucas finding solace in something other than human contact. He used to remain terrified for hours after altercations with his dad unless we cuddled.

He really has changed.

23

LUCAS

Silver has the good stuff. Thick beef stock, organic carrots, fresh basil that I find in a dainty clear box on the top shelf of the fridge. I reach for my phone because I never use fresh basil, and I'm not sure if I should add more or less. Then I remember it's charging in the guest bedroom.

And I remember the text messages I don't want to see yet.

I make a quick guess with the basil, rather than going to retrieve my phone. Over the next two hours, I make Ruby's recipe from memory, her voice echoing in my head, until I'm stirring a pot of finished stew. It smells perfect; it tastes even better. I've never been able to replicate Ruby's recipe with the cheap stuff I have to work with at home.

I turn off the burner and set the ladle on the counter. My heart is at peace, the way it often is after a long afternoon in the kitchen. I think of my phone again and the messages I must face at some point. I feel braver now than I have since I got here.

If I hurry and check the messages now, I won't have to worry about them while I'm eating with Silver.

I leave Silver typing away on his computer to retreat down the hallway and into the guest room. My phone is waiting on top of the pillow. I press the home button and wait for it to boot up. It's old enough that it takes forever. I worry about the stew

cooling on the stove. I could come back to this later, when my phone is finally on. But just when I'm about to stand, messages from Daryll pop up on the screen.

Are you fucking kidding me right now? You stayed out the whole night?

I went to the dine and they said you missed your shift. We need that money, Lucas.

Answer your fucking phone.

I hate this. Where the hell are you?

Answer your phone.

When I get a hold of you, you're going to be sorry for this.

What's your plan here? Take care of three pups on your own? I know your dads won't take you in.

No one will take you in. No one else loves you.

The words on the screen pull me back to reality. Daryll is my actual mate. The diner is where I work. Rent is due in less than a week, and he's right. We need the money. The last few days now seem like a dream—a dream I'll need to wake up from at some point.

Except... I press my fingers to my swollen scent gland. The scab from Silver's bite is still there. I reach into my pocket to find the piece of paper with a list of phone numbers on it.

There are people who love me.

I take out the piece of paper and add each of the names to my contact list. I text them too, starting with Quin.

Hi, Quin. This is Lucas.

I get a response almost immediately.

Lucas! Eeee! I'm so excited I have your number! Can I add you to the brother group chat?

I smile. Just like that, I'm his brother again.

Sure. That's fine.

He sends a smiley emoji.

I send the same text to Coin, Link, and Tin. Coin responds first.

Hey, Lucas. It's good to hear from you.

Link responds with a picture of Terrance wearing a bright pink feather boa. Check out what I found dumpster diving today.

I laugh. What a goofball.

Another text from Quin pops up on my screen, but this one was sent to four other people.

Guess what? I added Lucas to our group chat! Say hi!

Three of the people I already have saved as contacts: Tin, Link, and Coin. That means

the fourth number belongs to Silver.

I send a text to that number.

Hey, it's me.

I hear footsteps coming down the hall. Silver walks into the bedroom with a big smile on his face. "Hey. I have your phone number now."

I smile back at him. "Yeah."

"Thank you, baby."

It seems a little silly. We had sex last night and he bit my scent gland. Giving him my number should mean nothing after that. But Daryll carefully regulates my phone. That means I rarely give my number to anyone. Normally, when I get a text, I know it's from him.

That won't be true anymore.

"Are you ready for dinner?" I ask.

"Absolutely. It smells like heaven." He holds his hand out to me, and I take it, allowing him to help me up.

My phone dings several times. I take a quick glance at it to see the brother group chat blowing up.

Coin: Welcome, Lucas.

Link: Hi!

Tin: Hello

Quin: Link, you have to be on your best behavior so we don't scare him away.

Link: What do you mean? What do you think I'm going to do?

Coin: Share more photos of your dead turkey.

Link: Whatever. That glam shot of Terrance dressed up in his new scarf was a delight.

It's like sunshine filling up my phone. I flip it to silent before sliding it into my back pocket. The buzzing that follows is still a little scary. One of those messages might be from Daryll. But it also might be Coin teasing Link in the brother chat or Quin weighing in on whether the Terrance photos are creepy.

Silver and I return to the kitchen where the big pot of stew is still steaming on the stove. I fill the two bowls I got out earlier and carry them over to the table with crocheted hot pads identical to the ones Ruby used to have in her kitchen. Her omega dad always gave her a stack of them at Christmas.

Silver grabs the spoons and glasses, which is nice. Daryll never helps set the table. He brings a loaf of Quin's bread and a water pitcher to the table, too. In less than a minute, we're ready to eat.

I sit down and inhale the scent of Ruby's beef stew. Silver sits across from me, eagerly picking up his spoon and digging in. He moans appreciatively as he takes the first bite. I watch him eat for a few moments. The satisfaction of knowing I'm the one who gave him this simple pleasure drowns out all the fear and anxiety.

"You spoil me, baby. I wish I could eat your cooking every day," he says.

“Maybe you could.” My voice is soft and tentative. It seems like a scary thing to say. Not because I mind cooking, but because of what cooking for him every day would mean.

He looks at me for a long moment. “I’d like that.”

We get lost in each other’s eyes for a while. I get drunk on Silver and the wonderful meal until I’m so full of happiness and food Daryll doesn’t seem important anymore. Silver dishes himself up a second bowl of stew, and I watch him eat that, too.

“The consistency of the carrots is perfect. Not too soft, but not crunchy. And that beef. It’s spiced perfectly. This might be better than my mom’s.” He chatters on about the broth and the potatoes in a constant stream of praise.

For a moment, I think I might be enough to make Silver happy, if only in the kitchen.

No, not just the kitchen. There’s one other thing that I am very, very good at.

“Hold on, I’ll be right back,” I say.

I wander into the living room where there are several large throw pillows. I grab two and return to the kitchen.

“Will you scoot your chair out a little bit?” I ask, flashing him a flirty smile.

“What are you up to?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Trying to make you happy.”

His smile fades. “Baby, you do.”

“Please. Will you let me do this? I really want to,” I say.

He pauses for a moment, then he scoots his chair out like I requested. I place the pillows on the floor in front of his chair and rest my hands on his knees as I kneel down in front of him.

“What’s this?” he asks.

I press a kiss to his inner thigh. “I think you know what it is.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“I know. I want to.”

I reach for the button of his jeans.

He catches my hand in his. “Shouldn’t we do this in the bed where you would be more comfortable?”

“No. I want you to eat your favorite stew while I go down on you.”

He tilts his head, his eyebrows furrowed with worry. “That isn’t necessary?—”

“Please, Silver. This is something I want to give to you.”

He threads his fingers through my hair. “Okay. I won’t say no to having your pretty mouth on me.” He traces my lips with his thumb, making my skin tingle in his wake. His every touch makes me come alive.

He scoots his hips forward until he’s sitting at the edge of the chair, and widens his stance, allowing me easier access. This time he doesn’t protest when I unbutton his

jeans and glide his zipper down.

“Remember when you used to blow me in the back seat of Coin’s car?” he asks.

I smile. “And we’d hide under that musty blanket so no one would see us?”

He laughs. “Oh my God. That thing smelled so bad.”

“Yeah, but you smelled so good, it didn’t matter,” I say.

I pull his pants down and lean forward to nuzzle the growing bulge in his underwear. The musky scent of him overwhelms me with want. I mouth him over the cotton fabric and exhale my hot breath onto his length.

“Fuck, Lucas. That feels good.”

I yank his underwear down to reveal his growing erection. It’s still a little soft, so I take it in my mouth and suck. It has that perfect salty flavor of a man who’s showered somewhat recently, but not recently enough to wash away his natural scent. I take him deep into my mouth until the scent of his pubic hair is thick and heady.

He threads his fingers through my hair and stares into my eyes. They dilate as I lift up and take him deep again. Not deep enough to choke myself, but deep enough that his cock hardens in my mouth. His smooth flesh is hot and heavy on my tongue. I pull off him with a pop and lick his cock from root to tip, locking eyes with him as I do it.

“Damn, you’re hot when you do that,” he says. His eyes are hooded and his nostrils flared. I don’t think he’s just flattering me.

My thigh muscles tremble a bit as I take him into my mouth again and bob up and down. I’m not as strong as I used to be. I balance one hand on his thigh and grip the

base of his cock with the other, determined to rock his world anyway.

His hips tilt up, his body moving with my mouth, his fingers now gripping my hair instead of gently caressing it.

“Oh my God, I forgot how good you are at this.” He leans his head back, squeezing his eyes shut. He’s breathtaking like that, his Adam’s apple jutting out, the tendons in his neck bulging.

“It’s been too long since someone treated me this good, baby. I don’t think I’ll be able to last,” he warns me.

I ease off him, not ready for it to be over. “We just made love last night,” I tease.

He runs his thumb over my lips again. They’re wet with spit now. “You didn’t do any of this last night. Don’t get me wrong, last night was heaven, but this...” He pushes the tip of his thumb into my mouth. “Brings back memories. Do you remember that time in the art closet?”

During our senior year, Silver and I were tasked with organizing the art closet when we got detention for skipping class. The art teacher left us in there alone, and I was feeling bold that day. I asked him to lean against the door while I sucked him off. He kept laughing, like he couldn’t believe his luck, and he came ridiculously fast.

I came, too, with nothing but a little rubbing over my jeans to help me along.

“Do you remember that time with the bear?” I ask, circling his tip with my tongue.

Every summer his family would go on a road trip in his uncle’s old camper, and Ruby invited me to come along. The summer before our senior year, we went to the Grand Tetons. The mountains were cool with evergreen trees that stretched toward the sky

and hiking trails flat enough that I could occasionally keep up with Link. It was magical there. But Silver and I were fucking like rabbits by that point, and going a full week without sex felt impossible. So we snuck outside the camper in the middle of the night, and I blew him behind a copse of trees.

The last night we heard a deep rumble, and I turned around to find a bear lumbering through the forest behind us. Silver covered my mouth to stop me from screaming.

“I remember how sexy you were in those tiny shorts you wore hiking,” he says. “I could almost see the bottom of your ass cheeks in those things. Hiking behind you was torture.”

I smile up at him. “I know. That’s why I got them. To torture you.”

Back then, my body was something I was only beginning to understand the power of. I loved the way Silver ogled me and how his knees would go weak when he came in my mouth. It made me feel sexy and on top of the world.

I suck Silver into my mouth and grip the base of his cock, the way I know he likes. He groans. This time when I start moving up and down, I go slow at first. It feels like such a luxury.

Back in high school, we were always in a hurry. I savor the slippery shape of his cock in my mouth and the strength of his scent. I watch the tic of his jaw as I speed up—the flare of his nostrils. The way the tension rises in his body and the involuntary thrust of his hips are mesmerizing. As his breath quickens, and his cock thickens in my mouth, I slide my other hand into my own pants. I want to come with him, the way I used to all those times back in high school.

He cries out, and my mouth fills with thick, salty cum. I stroke myself only once before bliss skyrockets through me. I whimper around his cock, allowing his cum to

slide out of my mouth. He thrusts once, twice more, holding my head in place. That's what I asked him to do in high school. I loved it when he let go and gave me the most primal version of himself.

I worry that he'll question his instincts now. I'm pregnant, and he's been so careful with me. So I release his cock and lift myself up, the way I did back then. I never swallowed his cum. I always held it in my mouth until I could stand up and kiss him.

I climb onto his lap and grab the back of his head, bringing him in for an open-mouthed kiss. He spears his tongue in between my lips, shamelessly eager to taste his own cum. I moan, completely forgetting about my baby bump and changed body. It's like I'm back in high school, wearing those tiny shorts, confident and powerful. Silver even grabs my ass and squeezes it, like he feels it, too.

"I'm sorry, baby," he whispers against my lips.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

He sits back, his lips still shiny from his own cum. "I forgot to eat the stew while you sucked me off."

I laugh. "Oh well."

"In my defense, you were very distracting," he says.

We kiss again. His lips are slow and lazy against mine.

"We could try tomorrow," I suggest.

"Mmmm. We could."

He presses gentle kisses down my neck and nuzzles my scent gland. My heart skips a beat.

“I love you so much, Lucas,” he whispers in my ear.

“I love you, too,” I whisper back.

Maybe if I try hard to make him happy every single night, our love could be enough.

24

SILVER

A loud banging wakes me in the middle of the night. I disentangle my body from Lucas's, hoping he didn't hear the noise, too. Then it comes again.

Bang , bang , bang .

The clock says it's past midnight. I grab for my phone, wondering if have a text that can explain why I have a visitor this late, but there aren't any new messages. Lucas stirs beside me.

Bang , bang , bang .

He bolts upright, reaching out for me in the dark. "Silver, he's here."

Lucas doesn't have to explain who "he" is. We both know.

I want to reassure him it isn't Daryll. Back when we were kids, I often reassured him that the sounds we heard in the prairie weren't his father coming after him. But this is different.

"Wait here," I say.

"No! You can't go out there. I'll go?—"

I take his hand and squeeze it. “You’re pregnant, and Daryll is angry. It would be better if I went. I’m bigger than you. Also, I have combat training, remember?”

That’s a bit of a stretch. Sure, I know how to shoot a gun, but hand-to-hand combat wasn’t on the docket for me in basic training. I did what the traditional recruits called “Cupcake Camp” because I already had a degree in Cyber Security. I’m a lot more useful to the military behind a desk than in a foxhole.

Bang , bang , bang .

“I need to go. You stay here and call the cops if you hear any scary noises, okay?” I say.

Lucas shakes his head. “I’ll do it?—”

“Think of the pups, Lucas.”

That gives him pause. Before he can stop me again, I scramble out of bed and yank on some shorts and a T-shirt. “Stay here.”

As I rush through my house, I realize Daryll will be able to smell Lucas on me. He’s a gray wolf shifter and Lucas is his mate. He’ll probably know we had sex before I even open the door.

Fucking hell . This is crazy. Why didn’t I just call the cops?

“Lucas! I know you’re in there!”

Daryll’s voice is loud and booming. I think of Lucas, who hates loud noise, and anger rises within me. Who does this guy think he is? He hit his pregnant mate, and now he’s threatening him in the middle of the night.

I flip the deadbolt and open the door.

The man on my porch is a lot bigger than I remember Daryll being. His shoulders have filled out, and the mullet Link was so fond of has been shaved down to a buzz cut. He has at least a few days' worth of scruff on his face and dark circles under his eyes. Worst of all, he reeks of cheap beer and cigarettes.

Lucas is so sensitive to smell, I can't imagine him wanting to get anywhere near this guy.

I wait for Daryll to sniff out the situation between me and Lucas. Maybe smoking has dampened his sense of smell, because he stares at me expectantly for a full beat before his eyes narrow.

"You wanna tell me why you smell like my omega?" he snarls.

"Nope. Lucas left you. It's none of your business."

"Like hell it isn't. We're fated mates." Daryll tries to shoulder his way through my front door, but I stand my ground.

"Get off my property, or I'll call the cops," I say.

"Oh, is that how it is? Go ahead. When they get here, I'll tell them you're a coon shifter and you've got my omega in your bed. Who do you think they'll help then?"

That stops me cold. I'm far away from the relative safety of the trailer park where raccoon shifters band together when one of us is treated unfairly by the cops. So far, I haven't had to worry about that because of my silver hair. I look like a polar bear or arctic fox shifter.

“What do you want?” I ask.

Daryll’s lips spread into a nasty smile. “There you go. Now we’re talkin’. All you gotta do is go get Lucas, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“No,” I say.

“Then maybe I should call the cops. Tell them you abducted my omega. Put him under your spell. Bet your neighbors would love to hear that. Do they know there’s a coon shifter living next door?”

I’ve always known there would come a day when my neighbors would find out what I am. I decided long ago that I didn’t care. They can think whatever they want. I’m not ashamed of being a raccoon shifter.

But I am afraid the cops will take Lucas away.

“I haven’t put my paws on him,” I say.

Daryll laughs. “Of course you haven’t. I’m not worried about that.” He leans in closer, until I can smell his rancid breath. “Even a coon shifter wouldn’t want him now.”

Anger courses through me. I remind myself that punching Daryll won’t make him go away. It will probably just make him more violent.

“If nobody would want him, then why are you here?” I ask.

Daryll rolls his eyes. “Because rent’s due next week. And like I said, he’s my fated mate. I can’t fuck anybody else, and I’m horny.”

What a charmer. I can't believe Fate thought Lucas deserved to be with this guy.

"If you let me put my paws on him, you'd be able to fuck whoever you want," I say.

"If I let you? Are you fucking kidding me right now? If you want to put your paws on Lucas, be my guest. Free me from my misery."

I can't believe this. Daryll would give up his fated mate this easily? Like he was worth nothing?

"What about the pups?" I ask.

"Oh, you gotta take those, too. It's an all or nothing deal. I'm not paying child support." He winks at me, like he's telling a joke—a joke about abandoning his children.

"You'd be willing to sign away your parental rights?"

Daryll considers me skeptically. "Are you being serious?"

"Yes."

"So you're telling me that you want my fat, pregnant omega? And you want to adopt all three of my pups?"

I nod.

He throws back his head and laughs.

"Tell you what, Silver. That's your name, right? I will gladly sign over my parental rights the second my bond with Lucas is over, and I can stick my dick in somebody

else. That sounds like a fair trade to me. In the meantime, I need money to pay the rent. So go get him already.”

Daryll is probably drunk. He may not be willing to follow through on any of these promises when or if Lucas is ready to bond to me. But maybe it’s worth it to placate him, at least until then.

“How much money do you need?” I ask.

“Fifteen hundred.”

I don’t have fifteen hundred dollars in cash lying around. I could get it, though.

“Come back tomorrow at two o’clock. I’ll get you your money,” I say. “But only if you leave right now.”

“No way, man. I’m not falling for that. Go get Lucas.” Daryll sways a little. I bet he’ll fall asleep in a few minutes, regardless of where he is.

“Lucas isn’t coming out here. Leave now, and I’ll pay your rent this one time. If you don’t leave, the offer is gone.”

He steps back. “Fine, but I’m holding you to it.”

“Okay.”

He points at me. “I’ll get my money from you.”

“Okay,” I repeat.

“My money and my freedom,” Daryll says, slurring the last word. He stumbles down

the steps and toward an old pickup truck in the driveway. I would tell him not to drive if I thought he would listen. Instead, I write down his license plate. The cops can tell him for me.

I close the door and slide the deadbolt home, relieved that Daryll wasn't interested in fighting someone his own size.

I guess he only hits people who are too small to fight back.

25

LUCAS

I pull the covers over my head and close my eyes. If only I could escape out the back door or apologize to Daryll. It isn't safe to just lie here and wait for something bad to happen. Every nerve ending in my body is tense and alert. I can hear Silver's voice off in the distance, but I can't decipher what he's saying. I hear Daryll, too. His voice makes my skin crawl.

What if Silver lets him inside? What if he hits Silver? Their conversation goes on for what feels like forever. I can't understand a thing they're saying. Their voices are too far away. But I do hear Daryll laugh.

Is Silver making friends with him? What is Daryll saying about me? Are they joking around with each other? Cold fear fills my chest. What did Silver say that Daryll thought was so funny?

I stay very still as I wait for Silver to return. Several scenarios run through my head. What if Silver hands me over, and I have to return to Daryll? No, he wouldn't do that. What if Daryll tells Silver why he hit me? Would he take Daryll's side? Or understand why Daryll lost his temper? No, Silver is never violent. I try to calm myself down and remember all the sweet things Silver has said to me over the last few days, but I can still hear Daryll's voice, and I know I'm not safe. The pups aren't safe. I should run.

The door to the bedroom opens. "He's gone, baby."

I stay underneath the covers. I still don't know what they talked about or what Daryll said. The mattress lowers as Silver sits next to me, placing his hand on my back.

"It's okay. We just talked. He wanted to come inside, but I didn't let him. He also wanted you to go with him, but I told him that wouldn't happen. He left on his own terms."

That doesn't sound like Daryll. He never gives up a fight without making a fuss.

"What did you say to him to get him to leave?" I ask.

"Well, he could smell that we'd had sex, so I told him I was serious about you and I wanted to put my paws on you."

I turn around and pull down the covers. "You did?"

Silver gives me a gentle smile. "Yeah. I hope that's okay."

"And he just left?" I ask. That doesn't make any sense.

"Not at first. We talked about logistics. The pups, for instance. I asked him if he'd be willing to sign away his parental rights."

My stomach drops. The possibility of Daryll suing for custody is one of the things that keeps me up at night. "What did he say?"

Silver reaches for my hand and threads his fingers through mine. "He said he'd be willing if he didn't have to pay child support."

"Really? Just like that?" Surely, it can't be that easy.

“Yeah. Just like that. I will need to pay his rent this month, which I can do. And... I’d like to adopt the pups. If you’re okay with that. If you aren’t?”

Tears burn in the corners of my eyes. “You’d adopt them?”

He squeezes my hand. “Yes. Then they’d be mine, right? I mean, I know they’d have Daryll’s genes and be wolf shifters instead of raccoon shifters, but I’d be their alpha dad. We could raise them together and be a family.”

They’d really be Ruby’s and Shae’s grandkids. They’d have four wonderful uncles. They’d be safe, loved, and cared for.

“What’s the catch?” I ask. “What did Daryll ask for in return?”

He shakes his head. “Like I said, he just wanted me to pay his rent this month.”

Daryll gave me and the pups up for the price of one month’s rent? I shouldn’t care about that. This is a happy development. It would be better to focus on Silver’s offer to adopt the pups. But what will I tell them when they’re old enough to figure out Silver isn’t genetically related to them? Will they be curious about their biological alpha father? Will they be hurt Daryll didn’t want them?

Deep in my heart, I’ve known for a long time Daryll wasn’t interested in being a father. He’s never been excited about the pups. This shouldn’t come as a surprise. But I ache for the little ones in my belly because I know how hard it is to be rejected by your alpha father. Even if you shouldn’t care what he thinks, it still hurts.

“If this isn’t what you want—” Silver starts.

“It is. I want to raise these pups with you.” In fact, I wasn’t able to get excited about the pups myself until he made me feel safe enough that I could picture a happy future

for them. Being with Silver is the right thing for all of us. “I just... wish Daryll loved his pups.”

Silver climbs into bed with me and gathers me in his arms. “I do, too. I would have shared them with him, if that’s what he wanted.”

“No,” I realize. “We couldn’t have shared them. I think... he would have hit them. That’s why I left.”

Saying that out loud is grounding. It holds me responsible for an unavoidable truth that I must face to be a good father to my pups.

“I think you’re right,” Silver says.

It’s a relief and horrible all at once. When the time comes to tell the pups about their biological alpha father, I’ll need to be honest. They deserve to know what kind of man sired them, even if it will make them feel bad.

I feel bad when I think about the kind of man who sired me.

But I’ve never touched a sip of alcohol because I knew my alpha dad. I’ve never experimented with drugs or gambled. I knew addiction was in my blood, and I think that saved me. Our pups will be able to have that knowledge without all the fear and pain I went through.

“I think I’m ready,” I say.

“For what?”

“For your paws.”

It's terrifying to utter those words. Silver might change his mind now that I've finally agreed. It's still hard to believe that he wants to claim me. It feels too much like the impossible daydreams that have kept me afloat for the last five years.

"Are you sure?" Silver asks.

I nod against his chest. Maybe I'm not worthy of him. He might regret bonding to me later on. He might regret becoming a father so suddenly, too. But I will do my very best to be good to him. I'll give our bond my everything.

I'll give our pups my everything, too.

As much as I hate to admit it, I never gave that to Daryll. I don't know if it would have made a difference. Daryll didn't give me his everything either. But I think Silver will.

Two people giving their everything to a bond has to be enough. It just has to be.

Silver tilts my chin up to look into my eyes. "When?"

I swallow hard. "Now. If you're ready."

He presses a soft kiss to my lips. "I've been ready to make you mine for a long time."

It's surreal to watch him sit up and take his clothes off, knowing what will come next. As much as I fantasized about being his mate, I never dared to dream about this moment. It was too big—too unrealistic. I never believed Silver would willingly commit to me in such a permanent, deep way. He was the magic boy from a book—my escape from reality. He was never my future or my fate.

Not until now.

His body shrinks, his hands transforming to black paws, his face elongating to the snout I remember so fondly. The moment I see his furry body and bushy tail, I recognize something I probably should have figured out long ago. He's already mine. Not his human form, but this side of him.

We cuddled so many times in our animal forms. Did he accidentally put his paws on my wolf chest? He must have.

That must be why he was never able to move on—why I was never able to love Daryll the way I should have. We were already tied together, we just didn't know it.

He scurries across the bed and nuzzles my hand. I run my fingers along the fur of his back. It's deeply satisfying to touch the man I now know I was always meant to be with. When I was younger I couldn't see what Fate was trying to tell me. I was too caught up in wolf shifter tradition and what was expected of me to see the pull of my connection to Silver for what it was.

I guess happiness is something you have seize—something you have to be brave enough to claim. If you just do what you're told and never fight for what you want, you can't blame Fate for the misery that follows.

Silver stands up on his back haunches and holds up his two front paws. Truth be told, it's a little cute. I grasp each of his paws and guide them to my bare chest. The moment they make contact, it's like being struck by lightning—or being struck by Fate. The joy is so sweet—so pure. It's Silver's love incarnate, and I'm sure the pups can feel it, too. They do happy little somersaults in my belly. Silver notices them kicking and puts his paw just above my belly button. A second rush of euphoria overcomes me. It's like he's claiming them, too. Not just legally, but in Fate's eyes.

I hold his paw to my belly, accepting the claim with all my heart. Tears roll down my cheeks as I stare into his black raccoon eyes. Now we are family—the thing I wanted

more than anything in the world. And I never have to say goodbye to him again.

His body expands back into his human form, his fur flattening to smooth skin, and his paws growing to gentle hands. He still presses his right hand to my belly, maintaining the connection between us. I feel the same pull to his human form that I did to his raccoon. We belong to each other in every way now.

Silver leans in until his forehead touches mine. “Can I make love to you?”

“Please.”

I run my fingers down his chest, marveling that this is the body of my mate. Not my boyfriend, not the man I desperately wish I could be with, but my mate. He gives me a sloppy kiss, sucking on the bottom of my lip and hooking his hand behind my head to pull me closer. It feels natural and easy to kiss him like this, like my lips were created just for him. The kiss turns my body to fire, a desperate yearning blooming between my legs. He slides his hand underneath my baby bump to where I’m already hard for him.

“You’re mine now,” he whispers.

“And you’re mine.” I can’t believe I get to say that out loud—that it’s real.

He sucks on my neck as he strokes me. He remembers the exact amount of pressure that I like, and his hand twists when he reaches my tip. I forgot how much that used to drive me crazy. The scent of my slick becomes thick in the air.

“Fuck, baby. You smell so good.” He nuzzles the crook of my neck. My skin is so sensitive there, I take in a sharp breath. He keeps stroking my cock with that maddening twist.

“Silver,” I whimper.

“I want to worship your body like I should have done the moment you returned to me.” He kisses my shoulder, my clavicle, my nipple. “Do you have any idea how excited I am to raise pups with you?”

Pups, not kits. My heart soars.

His mouth lowers to the swell of my belly. He presses gentle kisses along the most prominent stretch mark leading to my belly button. “I love your body, baby. It’s so fucking beautiful.” He rubs his cheek against me. The pups dance around in response. “I’m gonna knock you up again, keep you full of my babies until we have a whole houseful of them.”

I gush slick at that, which is a little embarrassing.

“Mmm, you like that?” he says, stroking me harder, the twist almost painful.

“Yes. I... don’t know why.”

He releases my cock and slips his fingers between my legs. “I don’t know why either, but the idea of knocking you up makes me wild. I need to be inside you.”

He can’t quite reach my hole, and I need him to be inside me, too, so I turn over. I’m no longer worried about my hanging belly or the size of my ass. I even spread my knees and lower my chest closer to the mattress, trying to present to him. It isn’t safe for me to lower my chest completely, and I can’t quite tilt my ass the way I could if I wasn’t pregnant, but the low groan that escapes his mouth assures me that it doesn’t matter.

“Oh, fuck. Slick is leaking down your legs,” he says, running his fingers down my

inner thighs where I'm sloppy wet for him. His tongue traces where his finger was, all the way up to the cleft of my ass. I hold my breath. Silver never tasted me there back when we were in high school. There wasn't time. He licks down my taint, and back up until he's tonguing my entrance. The hot, wet heat of his tongue makes me gush slick all over again. He laps it up, letting out a loud breath of satisfaction. Slowly, he pushes inside me.

"Oh!"

I feel my ass clamp down on his tongue. It's wider than a finger and slippery, so it doesn't stay inside me. He replaces it with two fingers, diving them inside so fast, my body reels with pleasure. There's a loud squelching sound when he pulls them out.

"Fuck, you're so wet and sloppy right now. So ready for me."

"Silver!"

"It's okay, baby. I'll give you what you need."

He pistons his fingers in again, jamming at my prostate. It's too much sensation all at once, and I come hard on his fingers almost immediately, even though he's not touching my dick. It spurts an embarrassing amount of cum onto the mattress. He keeps finger fucking me through my orgasm, and I rock with him, chasing the pleasure, drawing it out.

"Fuck, yes. I can still feel you spasming," he grinds out, continuing to jam my prostate, even though my body is squeezing him.

As soon as my body goes lax, his fingers are gone, and the spongy head of his cock pushes inside. It's bigger and wonderful. I need it. I rock back, eager to have him inside me. He gives me what I want and thrusts all the way home with a force that

makes me cry out.

“Tell me what you want, baby.”

“I want you to fuck me hard.” My voice is guttural and raw. I’d never let go like this with Daryll.

Silver grabs my hips and slams into me again. I grab for my dick, ready to allow myself this blinding pleasure. He pounds into me with abandon, our skin slapping together with a squelch from all my slick.

“I’m going to breed you,” he says, his voice staccato with every thrust. “Keep your belly full of babies, your tits full of milk.”

I come hard at the image, and I don’t have to be ashamed of whatever kink Silver has stumbled upon. We’re going down this road together. My slick gushes all over, my cock releasing even more cum.

“Yes, baby. Look how messy you are. I can’t wait until you’re messy with milk, too—until it drips from your chest when you come.”

He reaches forward and pinches my nipple. I scream, clamping down on his cock, just as he swells inside me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. I’m knotting you, baby. Breeding you.” He grabs my big belly. “God, yes.”

He grows impossibly large inside me, much larger than before. I let out a silent scream. I don’t think I can take it. He starts trembling and devolving into involuntary little thrusts. The movement is too much.

I come again, squeezing his enormous girth, and I scream out loud this time.

“Silver! Oh my God! Oh my God!”

He sucks at my neck, taking me higher. I shake my head, too overwhelmed. He doesn't stop. He seems to sense that I want it. Our bodies are communicating on a whole other wavelength. He grabs for my cock and strokes it, twisting it one last time.

I fall apart, my body spasming, my vision going white while pure bliss takes over. I claw at the mattress and scream “fuck!” at the top of my lungs. I can't get it to stop, and I don't want to. I need him pumping into me, growling in my ear, telling me how full I'm going to be with his kits. I imagine my huge belly full of his cum, and I throw my head back, wailing with pleasure.

The world goes black.

26

SILVER

We do nothing but sleep and fuck for the next two days. Every few hours, Lucas waddles out of bed to go to the bathroom, and doesn't return until an hour later with omelettes, spaghetti with my mom's meat sauce, or a salad with homemade dressing he just "whipped up." We eat in bed. It's a mess anyway, even though we change the sheets halfway through the first day. With the exception of a quick trip to the bank to get Daryll's money, and his very brief visit, our first few days together are complete bliss. We shower together whenever the mood strikes us and make out when he's too sore to have sex again. Most of the time we cuddle, whether we're asleep or not. The idea of being physically apart from him is painful.

On Saturday afternoon, Lucas drags me to the shower with a big grin on his face. "We get to go to family dinner."

I had almost forgotten.

He pulls out a container of potatoes he apparently baked yesterday and starts chopping them up for a potato salad. My mom's potato salad, no less. He hums to himself as he whisks around my kitchen, adding mustard and mayo with a butter knife, the way my mom does.

That's when I realize this is our kitchen. Well, his kitchen, if the last few days are any indication.

“I’m getting the impression that you want to be in charge of the cooking?” I ask.

He stops. “Um, yeah. If that’s okay.”

“It’s very okay. If there’s anything you need, please let me know. In fact, I should get you added to my bank account so you can buy stuff yourself.”

He takes a step back. “Oh. I’m still planning to get a job. I can get my own bank account and start contributing to the bills. I probably won’t make enough to pay half your mortgage, but I’ll give you everything I make.”

I can’t help but think of how casually Daryll admitted that he only wanted Lucas back because he needed to pay the rent and a body to fuck. I need to clarify that our relationship isn’t going to be like that.

“I can pay my own bills, Lucas. If you want to work, then you can. We’ll figure out childcare and all of that. But it isn’t necessary,” I say.

He wrings his hands. This is stressful for him. Maybe I need to be clearer about what I mean.

“I’ve always wanted…” I pause, not sure how to say this. If I phrase it wrong, I could end up coming off backwards or insensitive. “A relationship like my moms’. I liked that my omega mom was at home with us when we were kids. I guess I wanted that for my kids, too. That’s why I studied something in college that I knew would pay well enough to support a family.” I sigh because I think this is coming out all wrong. “But I don’t expect you to stay at home with our pups. I really don’t. If you want to get a degree in cyber security, I’d be happy to stay at home with them instead.”

Lucas’s lips quirk up. “You think I could get a degree in cyber security, huh? I don’t even own a computer.”

He's teasing me. That must mean he isn't nervous anymore.

"You could get a degree in something else," I say.

He continues stirring his potato salad. "Or I could stay at home with our pups."

"Is that what you want, or do you feel pressured?" I ask.

"I feel... excited. I want to put together a meal plan of your favorite dinners and make you lunches with those bento boxes you've never used underneath the sink. I like cooking for you, Silver. I was thinking I could put together a cleaning schedule, too. This house is so beautiful... I mean, wow. I never thought I'd live in a place like this."

I smile. "Me neither."

"We could hang the pots and pans from the ceiling right here," he says, pointing to a spot above the island. "And we could put a spice rack here." He points to the counterspace next to the oven. "I mean, if that's okay." His cheeks pinken and he ducks his head sheepishly.

"That's very okay. Make this kitchen your own. Consider it your work space. You can decorate it however you like."

He looks around the kitchen with a wistful expression on his face. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Thank you. This is... wonderful."

That's exactly how I felt when I stepped into this house for the first time. I couldn't

believe I was buying a stick build house on a tree-lined street a block away from a good school. Lucas came from the same trailer park I did, so he gets it.

I walk around the island and hug him from behind. “I think you and I could build a beautiful life together here.”

He leans against me. “We could raise a family. Grow old together.”

“Have lots and lots of sex,” I whisper in his ear and nip at the lobe.

He brandishes his spoon in my direction. “We don’t have time for that. We have to go to family dinner.”

A deep peace washes over me. I love family dinner. I look forward to playing with Chime and seeing my brothers every week. It’s rare that we can all make it, but I usually get to see Quin and Coin. Now Lucas can join us, the way he was always meant to.

“Let’s go take a shower, baby. It’s almost time to go.”

27

LUCAS

Silver enters his moms' house without knocking. I linger behind with my bowl of potato salad, a little nervous of what Ruby and Shae will say when they find out Silver put his paws on me. Technically, we aren't bonded yet. After a raccoon shifter puts their paws on their intended mate, it often takes a month or two for the connection to solidify. If Ruby or Shae disapprove, maybe our bond will never form.

If they disapprove, I don't think Silver would ever get over that.

"C'mon," Silver says, gesturing me forward.

The living room is exactly how I remember it. A large chandelier hangs from the ceiling, and the walls are covered in shiny picture frames. I glance around for the pictures I was included in, not daring to hope that they're still hanging on the walls. But there they are: our trip to the Grand Tetons, a photo of us doing homework at the table, Link doing a goofy face while Silver and I laugh. When I was in high school, I counted six photos where I was visible in some way, and all six are still displayed proudly.

Chime runs into the living room. "Silver!"

He lifts her off her feet and spins her around. She lets out a high-pitched giggle.

"Lucas, you're here!" Quin says, coming at me for a hug. "We're making oreos."

Come on.”

Silver smiles at me. “Go on. You love making oreos.”

I follow Quin through the hallway and into my favorite place in the whole world. It’s exactly as I remember it: dark scuffed cabinets, stained laminate countertops, and an old white fridge with duct tape on the handle. Coin is rolling balls of deep brown dough and lining them up on a cookie sheet in the corner. Ruby is in front of the open oven, pulling out a pan of cookies. She has dozens of bangles hanging from each wrist, just as many earrings dangling from each ear, and her hair swept up into a messy bun. There are more smile lines on her face, but other than that, she looks the same too.

Her face lights up when she sees me. “Lucas!” She glances down at my belly, and her smile only grows. “Hold on, let me set this down.” She puts the cookies on the stovetop, holding her arms out to me while the oven mitt is still on her right hand. I take a hesitant step toward her, clutching my potato salad in front of me like armor.

She hugs me from the side. “Welcome home. It’s so good to see you.” The scent of her lotion and her gentle touch are a reminder of all the hours we spent in this kitchen together. This was the one place where I always felt safe.

“It looks like you’re about to give me grandpups,” she says.

“Oh, um, yeah,” I stammer. “A litter of three.”

She smiles wide. “A litter? Congratulations. That’s so exciting. When are you due?”

Silver trails into the kitchen and slides his arm around my waist. Ruby watches his hand, then locks eyes with him. The silent question between them is obvious.

“I put my paws on Lucas two days ago,” he says.

Quin claps his hands with excitement and Coin smiles at Silver from the corner of the room. Ruby’s gaze darts between Silver and me, her expression unreadable.

“I discussed it with Lucas’s previous mate. He won’t be coming after us,” Silver says.

Ruby looks down at my belly. “The pups...”

“I’ll be their legal alpha father. Daryll is letting me adopt them.”

She reaches her arms out to Silver and gives him a big hug. “I knew you’d do the right thing.” She pulls away from Silver and hugs me again. “I am so happy for the two of you.”

“Then you approve?” Silver asks, his voice uncertain.

She puts her hands on her hips and raises her eyebrows. “You gave me Lucas as a son-in-law. How could I disapprove?”

“Mom, please?—”

“Sweetie, I’m thrilled. Lucas is a good choice. He’s kind, and I think he’ll be a wonderful father. You have my enthusiastic approval, okay?”

Her praise fills my chest with warmth.

“Thank you,” I say.

“You are very welcome, Lucas. I meant every word. Is that potato salad you brought with you?” she asks.

“Yes. Your recipe.”

She smiles and takes the bowl from me. “Thank you. That was very considerate. Do you want to help Coin roll oreos?”

Shae wanders into the kitchen with a vacuum in hand. “It’s officially broken. I tried to fix it.” She stops when she sees me. She looks at my belly, then to Silver, who now has his hand on the small of my back.

“Silver put his paws on Lucas a few days ago,” Ruby says.

Shae’s face brightens. “Oh. Then those are our grandkits?”

“Our grandpups. They’ll be wolf shifters, but Silver is still their alpha dad.”

Shae drops the vacuum on the floor and pulls me in for a hug. I forgot how intense her hugs are. I can barely breathe.

“Sorry. I should be gentle with the kits, I mean, pups. How many?” she asks.

“Three,” I say.

She rushes toward Ruby and hugs her so hard, Ruby’s feet lift off the ground. “We’re going to be grandmas again!”

I can’t help but laugh. The relief is overwhelming. They don’t just approve, they’re excited about the pups.

“Have you two picked names yet?” Shae asks.

“Oh, um, not exactly,” I admit.

“What were you thinking? We can help you brainstorm, if you like. Quin never let us help with Chime’s name.” Shae glares at Quin playfully.

Quin laughs. “I didn’t need help. Windchime was perfect for her.”

“I’ve always liked Galaxy,” Coin says.

“Oh. They’ll be wolf pups, so... we wouldn’t name them after something shiny, right?” I ask.

Coin shrugs. “They’ll be born into a raccoon shifter family. That makes them our treasures, right? Isn’t that why we name our kids after something shiny?”

My heart is so big, I think I’m going to cry.

“I like Galaxy,” Silver says.

“What about Star?” Quin suggests. “Or Moonbeam?”

Ruby smiles. “I love Moonbeam.”

Galaxy, Star, and Moonbeam. I could name them after the night sky. I think Silver put his paws on my wolf form for the first time under the night sky.

“Thank you,” I say. “For accepting them.”

“Oh, sweetie. We won’t just accept them. We plan to spoil them shamelessly,” Ruby tells me.

Quin laughs. “Isn’t that the truth? There are no ‘accepted’ children in this family. Just loved ones. Does this mean we can introduce ourselves to the pups? We have to get

them used to our voices before they're born, so they can know we're family."

Tears well in my eyes. "Okay. Yeah."

"Ya'll can roll oreos while you do that," Ruby says, pointing to the corner where Coin is still at work. "I need to get chicken on the grill, or we won't be eating until past Chime's bedtime."

Quin and I line up at the sink to wash our hands. When Silver was driving into the trailer park, it didn't quite feel like coming home, but this does.

Once our hands are dried off Quin crouches in front of me. "Hello in there. My name is Sequin. I'm one of your uncles. You have a lot of uncles."

Silver and I smile at one another.

"I'm the small uncle," Quin chatters on to my belly. "My mate is Slade, and he's the big uncle. With tattoos. Those are little drawings that people get done on their skin. Your grandma Ruby has a lot of them."

Ruby playfully swats him with a dish towel. "I don't have that many."

Coin kneels down next to Quin. "Hey, there. Welcome to the family. I'm Coin, the uncle who will make sure you have good taste in music."

We all laugh.

They take turns talking to the pups. Ruby and Shae too. Even Silver crouches down after they're all done and places his hand on my belly. "Hello, again. This is your alpha dad. All those nice people are my family. Your family. We're so excited to meet you."

I hear the truth of his words. It's undeniable. The tears that have been threatening to spill out finally escape down my cheeks. I love that our pups were welcomed by his family in this kitchen. It's where I felt welcomed into this family too.

"So excited," I repeat Silver's words, rubbing my belly. "You are loved, little ones. You are wanted." My voice chokes up before I can say anymore. Silver stands up and holds me in his arms. In that moment, I feel wanted too. Not just by him, but by everyone in the room.

I am truly home.

28

SILVER

I should not be doing this. I know that. It's a betrayal to Lucas and possibly Quin, who would probably want to be here too.

But there's a baby store close to the military base, and I have a full hour for my lunch break. I couldn't help myself.

"Do you have any silver cribs?" I ask the clerk, who is currently ringing up my admittedly full cart of items.

She scans the third box of silver star decals. "Do you mean gray?"

"No. Silver, like those."

"So not real silver. Just a shiny surface?" she clarifies.

"Yes. Something shiny. The shinier, the better. If you have anything with rhinestones, that would be amazing."

She pauses. "You want a crib with rhinestones?"

"Yeah. Or glitter. But not the kind of glitter that comes off when you touch it. That would be a mess. Just a surface that looks like glitter. You know?"

She picks up the phone next to her register. “Uh, sure. Let me call my manager.” She turns away from me. “Melanie, I’ve got a guy here who wants a crib covered in rhinestones and glitter. Can we special order something like that?”

I shouldn’t buy the crib without Lucas here. A crib is a big deal. It’s basically the biggest piece of furniture in the nursery. But I already ordered a rocking chair covered in glitzy fabric, three matching car seats with a shiny silver head cushions, and three wooden high chairs painted a metallic gold. So, he’s already going to be mad.

I might as well go big or go home.

A middle-aged woman with an impressive number of bangles on her arms and a wide array of facial piercings approaches the front desk. I know a raccoon shifter when I see one.

“Is this the guy?” she asks.

The cashier nods.

She checks out the rest of my purchases and gives me a knowing smile. “I’m loving the theme here. If you want a decked out a crib, I know a lady who makes custom furniture with bling. This is her business card. Tell her Tammy sent you.”

The business card shimmers in the light. I tilt it back and forth, mesmerizing by how shiny it is. “I like her card.”

Tammy laughs. “Yeah, she definitely understands her clientele.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“Sure thing. Congrats on... you know.”

“The litter?” I ask.

“Sure. And whoever inspired you to buy all this stuff. I hope you’re happy together.”

I glance back at my cart, and a wonderful realization sets in. Everything I picked out for the pups is shiny. Not because of some nursery aesthetic, but for another reason.

I can’t wait to show Lucas.

“Do you still want this stuff?” the cashier asks.

“Yeah, of course.”

She rings up board books with glittery covers, a set of crib sheets with a pattern of silver moons and stars, and a crib carousel in the shape of the sun being orbited by all the planets in the solar system. We probably don’t need all five of the sparkly blankets I found. My family is crafty enough that lots of people will make the pups blankets. But you can’t ever have enough blankets with shifter babies. They’re not great about keeping their diapers on, so the laundry is never-ending.

There are also chew toys. Not shiny, of course. Just the regular plastic variety. I read that wolf pups need plenty of those. I got tiny claw clippers that remind me fondly of holding Chime’s tiny raccoon form while Quin trimmed hers. And I got fifteen stuffed animals. That may seem like a lot, but according to the wolf shifter parenting blogs, a lot of the stuffies accidentally end up becoming chew toys. It’s good to be prepared.

After everything is bagged up, I take a quick photo—zeroing in on the shiny decals and board books. Then I send it to the old brother chat—before we added Lucas’s

phone number.

Sequin: Oh my God! Eeeeeee!

Coin: Is that what I think it is?

Cufflink: What do you think it is?

Sequin: Yes, it is! I'm coming over right now.

Cufflink: Why are you coming over?

Sequin: He started his collection!

Link: He did? But I can't make it to San Antonio today. Silver is supposed to be at work. Why are you not at work?

I take a selfie of me in my uniform and send it off.

Me: I am at work today. I'm on my lunch break.

Tinsel: Congratulations. I don't think I can leave the ranch today.

Sequin: No one needs to leave work. This is just for those of us who already have our collections. I'm bringing Mom and Aunt Emerald.

Me: What are you talking about?

Sequin: You'll see when we get there.

That's ominous.

Cufflink: Does this mean we can buy baby stuff now? Because I would like permission to buy those little sweaters they have for shifter wolf pups.

Coin: We live in San Antonio. They don't need sweaters.

Cufflink: Right. But I was thinking we should all go somewhere snowy for Christmas this year. So they could wear the sweaters.

I laugh.

Coin: Okay.

Me: Really? You're going along with this?

Coin: We could get pictures taken or something.

Oh my God. I love my brothers.

Tinsel: We could get a matching sweater for Chime.

Cufflink: Yes! How much am I allowed to spend on these sweaters? I found some that are \$300 each, and I think Quin will be mad if I buy those.

Sequin: Yes, Link. That's ridiculous.

Coin: What do they look like?

Apparently, Coin is going to dote on our pups as much as he dotes on Chime. I don't know why I thought he wouldn't. I guess I was a little worried about him still being hung up on Lucas. I should have known that wouldn't stand in the way of him spoiling his nieces and nephews.

Link sends the URL of the sweaters in question. They're a deep blue with white stars and moons woven into an argyle pattern. They're modeled by the cutest little wolf shifter puppies with pointy ears and bushy tails. Will our pups look like that?

Coin: I'll buy them.

Cufflink: Wait! That's not fair! I was going to buy them!

Sequin: No one is going to buy them. They're too expensive.

Tinsel: We can each buy one. Except for Quin.

Sequin: They're \$300.

Cufflink: I just bought 4 of them! Ha! Take that, Coin!

Coin: I just bought 4 too.

Cufflink: Fuck.

Sequin: Ugh. How much did ya'll just spend on sweaters the pups will grow out of in a few months and they can't even wear at home?

I laugh all the way to my car.

29

LUCAS

I get to spend the whole day making Silver's house our home. I have lots of time, so I go through each task slowly, resting my swollen feet when I need to. I start by wiping down the walls. I've always liked clean walls. Next, I scrub the bathrooms. After rushing around at the diner, being able to take a break whenever I want is such a luxury. I even watch TV for a bit when I stop for lunch.

Maybe I could go to the library with Silver later and pick up some books. I'll probably have lots of time to read.

I spend the afternoon getting dinner started and packing Silver's lunch for tomorrow. Every once in a while, I get a text from Quin. He sends me short, funny videos and asks how my day is going. Silver sends me messages too. Just flirty little one-liners that make me feel loved. I enjoy my day of cooking and cleaning in solitude, with the occasional conversation over text. It's nice.

At 4:30, I'm putting the lasagna in the oven, when there's a knock at the door.

Is it Daryll? He left calmly with his money last weekend, and he hasn't contacted me since. Did he deliberately show up unannounced when he knew Silver wouldn't be here?

The front door opens.

“Lucas! It’s us!” Quin calls out from the living room.

He enters the kitchen with Ruby and Aunt Emerald trailing behind them.

Aunt Emerald beams and me and gives me a warm hug. “Congratulations. I’m so pleased you’re going to be part of the family.”

Ruby hugs me too. So does Aunt Crystal, who I’ve only met a handful of times. Last, but not least, comes Uncle Dagger.

“Thought this woulda happened sooner, to be honest,” he says.

“What happened? Did Ruby tell you Silver I... what’s going on?” I ask.

Quin grins. “Should we tell him?”

“No, let Silver tell him,” Ruby says.

“Tell me what?”

A low rumble comes from the garage. Silver is already home. I was planning to change out of my cleaning clothes before he got here.

“That should be Silver now,” Quin says. “Just in time.”

“Just in time for what?” I ask.

Quin waves away my question, like it isn’t important.

After a long pause, the door to the garage opens, and Silver steps inside. He’s wearing his camo uniform and work boots with a matching cap. My heart skips a

beat. He's even more handsome in uniform. The rest of the people in the room fade away, and I go to him, standing on tiptoe for a kiss.

"Hey, baby," he whispers, smiling against my lips. "Damn, it's good to come home to you."

"See? They're perfect for each other," Quin says from the other end of the room.

"I know," Uncle Dagger agrees. "I thought they'd bond years ago. Silver had stars in his eyes for that one all through high school."

"His name is Lucas," Aunt Emerald reminds him.

Silver pulls away from our kiss. "This is a surprise. What are ya'll doing here? I mean, it's good to see you, but..."

"We're here to take you shopping," Quin says.

"Shopping for what?" Silver asks.

"For your collection. Quin said you started buyin' shiny stuff for your nursery. That means it's time."

I turn to Silver. "You bought stuff for a nursery?"

He winces. "About that... There's this cute little shop by the military base. It sells shifter baby stuff. I just picked up a few essentials. Chew toys, blankets, board books. We can go shopping later together. I'm sorry?—"

I kiss him again. He bought shiny stuff for our nursery. That means our bond is taking—that I get to be with him forever. I hold him down for a deep, toe-curling

kiss. Quin whoops in the background.

“Go buy whatever you want,” I say.

“But it’s our nursery. Don’t you care?—”

“Buy. Whatever. You. Want. Anything. If it means that our bond is solid now, I don’t care if you decorate the nursery with clown decals.”

Quin shakes his head rapidly and mouths a “no.”

Silver gives me a quick peck on the cheek. “Okay. I was thinking a star-themed nursery? To go with their names?”

“That’s perfect,” I say.

“Let’s get outta here. Most of the baby stores close early around here. And we gotta get to the piercer.”

The piercer? As in a body piercer?

I look at Quin, who has a nose ring and several dermal piercings. Is that part of the process? Ruby, Aunt Emerald, and Aunt Crystal all have piercings too.

I wonder what Silver will get.

“Have fun!” I say.

Uncle Dagger pats Silver on the back. “We brought a little money with us, but I gotta be honest with you. Quin cleaned us out not long ago, so we haven’t had a lot time to save for this. ‘Course, he was into fancy goblets. If all you need are some baby

blankets and chew toys, maybe we'll be golden."

Silver smiles at me just before walking out the door with his family.

"Shouldn't he change out of his uniform?" Aunt Crystal asks.

"Nah. It'll be fine," Uncle Dagger insists.

They close the front door behind them.

30

SILVER

Uncle Dagger and Aunt Emerald take the front two seats of the camper. The rest of us crowd into the bench in the cabin.

“Do we need to drive the camper for this?” Quin asks. He’s squashed into the corner.

“We have too many people for a car now,” Uncle Dagger says.

“Maybe it’s time for one of us to get a van or something,” Aunt Crystal mutters under her breath.

The camper has not been renovated since its glory days in the seventies, when avocado carpet and matching seat coverings were in style. Despite the smell of mothballs and mildew, Uncle Dagger’s managed to keep it pretty clean, but the shocks are not what they used to be. We bounce around with every divot in the road.

“What exactly are we doing?” I ask. “It’s good to see you and everything. Really, it is. But I just got Lucas back, and if he could come with us?—”

“It’s tradition for raccoon shifters to shop for their collection with their family,” Quin explains. “It’s a rite of passage.”

“It is? But no one ever said?—”

“We don’t tell the kids because they’re not invited,” Mom says. “It’s just those of us who already have collections of our own.”

Uncle Dagger does a sharp turn, and we all lean into Quin.

“This can’t be safe,” he squeaks.

“Where are we going?” Aunt Emerald asks.

“That baby store by the riverwalk,” Uncle Dagger says.

“That’s a human baby store. They won’t have shifter stuff. We should just go to a department store,” Aunt Emerald suggests.

“I think we should go to the piercer,” Quin says.

“What does Silver want?” Mom asks.

Everyone turns to me. Even Uncle Dagger, which means we narrowly miss running a red light.

Aunt Emerald grabs for the door handle. “Jesus, Dagger. I’m driving next time.”

“Well, where are we going?” he asks.

The truth is, I don’t want to shop for baby things without Lucas. I guess I did this afternoon, but that was on a whim. I want to do the rest of the shopping with him at my side. I think he would enjoy it, the way he enjoyed our trip to Target. But I can tell this shopping trip means something to my aunts and uncle. It means something to Quin, too.

“The piercer,” I say.

Getting my bling is a rite of passage I don’t want to miss.

“Aren’t there rules about facial piercings in the military?” Uncle Dagger asks.

“He doesn’t have to get facial piercings. He could get nipple piercings or a belly button ring,” Aunt Crystal says. “Maybe a Prince Albert.”

“Trust me, those are more trouble than they’re worth,” Uncle Dagger cautions.

That borders on more information than I needed to know about my uncle.

“Actually, I checked the regulations, and there are exceptions for some shifter types,” Quin tells us, matter-of-factly. “Raccoon shifters are allowed three facial piercings. You just can’t get a tongue ring or any piercing you can’t remove yourself, like a dermal piercing. Nose rings, earrings, and lip rings are all okay.”

I may have checked the regulations before I enlisted. I’ve wanted to get piercings for a long time.

“Let’s go to Ringtail,” Aunt Emerald says. “They’re still open.”

Mom slides her arm around me. “I got my piercings done at ringtail, back in the day.”

“All of them?” I ask.

She nods. “I got twenty-four piercings in one day.”

I know she has twelve in each ear. I don’t know where the other piercings are, and I don’t ask.

“I got my piercings done at Ringtail, too,” Aunt Emerald says. “They do a good job.”

It’s a rickety ride to the edge of town. Uncle Dagger gets on and off the freeway because he thinks the camper can handle it, and it becomes clear very quickly that it can’t speed up enough to keep up with the other cars. He mutters something about Coin needing to take a look at it as he pulls off at the next exit. Ten minutes in, the engine gets much louder, but we keep on going.

“I really don’t think it’s safe,” Quin repeats.

Uncle Dagger finally pulls into the parking lot of a shop called Finders Keepers with wind chimes hanging in the windows and patio furniture scattered outside. On the other side of the building is a small black and white striped door with a thin sign that says “Ringtail Piercing Studio” along the top. There are no windows, and the sign is barely readable from the street.

“An older couple owns both shops,” Mom explains, as we file out of the camper and to the door.

Quin opens it and pulls me inside.

It’s a simple set-up. There’s only one glass display of jewelry and one reclining chair in the back that looks like it was pulled out of a dentist’s office. No employee is working in the studio at the moment, but there is a sign next to a bell that says, “Ring me if you ever want to get pierced.”

Quin dings the bell. “What were you thinking?”

“Three in the right ear,” I say, pointing to my lobe and two spaces right next to it.

“Just your ear?” he asks.

I nod. "A lot of raccoon shifters have their ears pierced all the way up. I was thinking I could have three real piercings for work. Then on the weekends, I could add ten or more magnetic earrings on that same ear, just until I leave the Air Force and I can get them pierced for real. I want it to be obvious that I'm a raccoon shifter."

"They have other jewelry in the store next door," Mom says. "If you want rings, bracelets, necklaces, that sort of thing."

"I do. I want to wear as much jewelry as you," I tell her.

She smiles. "Okay. I think that will suit you, sweetie."

An older woman with short, gray, spiky hair and a row of piercings on each ear emerges from the back door. She has multiple eyebrow piercings and a large, thick septum piercing hanging from her nose.

"Sunshine!" Mom says. "It's so good to see you."

This woman is named Sunshine? Really?

"Good to see you too, Rube. Who's this?" she asks, pointing to me.

"This is my son, Silver. Silver, this is Sunshine, an old friend."

I hold out my hand to her.

"No offense, but I just washed my hands. What'll it be, kid?"

I point to the lobe of my right ear. "Three piercings in a row, right here."

"Sure thing. Rube, will you show him my website, and get him to sign the permission

form? I'm gonna grab some gloves."

The shop is small enough that my family completely fills it. Quin helps me sign the permission form and pick out a few studs. He sits right by my side as Sunshine sticks a needle in my ear three separate times. Uncle Dagger covers his eyes, and Aunt Emerald teases him about it. Mom tells me it's normal if my eyes tear up a little bit.

I think the three little holes in my right ear mean more because they're here. I'll always remember Quin holding my hand, and the way Aunt Crystal smiled when it was all over.

"Very handsome," Mom says.

Uncle Dagger turns a little green. "Except for that little bit of blood."

I'll always remember the way he passed out, too, and how we had to carry him to the camper where we laid him out on the bed in the back before Aunt Emerald drove us home.

LUCAS

Three months later...

Every evening, before I join Silver in bed, I go to the nursery. The whole room twinkles, as if made of magic. I like to run my fingers along the thousands of tiny decals Silver lovingly stuck to the wall, one-by-one, and sit in the rocking chair that's made wide enough for a family of multiples. The walls already have pictures of our family, and the bookshelf is completely full of bright stories I get to tell our kids.

It's perfect in this room. There's so much love in every item their alpha father picked out for them, including the certificate of adoption hung by the crib. I pick a stuffie from the basket of toys and hold it to my heart. The shimmer in the fabric has its own energy. Quin said Silver is able to capture his love and hold it in these items—that all raccoon shifters can do that with the items in their collection. It doesn't seem possible, and yet, it must be.

There's no other explanation for all the love I feel in this room.

That's why I come here when the pains in my lower abdomen get worse. I've gotten enough prenatal care to know that I can give birth here without much risk. Wolf shifters rarely have complications when they're young. I don't wake Silver at first. I just kneel on the floor and wait for the pains to come closer together.

Pain has never been a stranger to me. But the pain from before was unexpected and scary. These pains come with a rhythm. They're necessary. I rock with them, letting them open my body up.

The last three months, I have prepared every inch of this house for our pups. I've saved meals in the freezer. I've read every parenting book I could get my hands on from the library. I feel ready as the pains get worse, and I finally scream from the pain. Silver rushes into the nursery. He sees the liquid pooling on the floor underneath me. My water must have broke.

"Are you okay?" he asks, kneeling at my side and placing his hand on my back.

"Yes. The pups are coming."

The pain gets bigger and bigger. It's now worse than anything from Daryll or my alpha father. I cry against Silver, not sure if I can bear it. He rubs my back and whispers soft words I don't understand. I don't need to. His quiet strength helps me find my way through. I breath and I push. The pushing is glorious. I can feel something solid as I bear down. One of our little ones is coming. I scream as I put all my effort into it—as I give everything I am.

There's a glorious release and something falls from me.

"Oh, Lucas. You did it. Look at her."

Silver holds up the tiniest little gray pup. Her eyes are still sealed closed, and her nose is pink. A fierce love rages within me. I don't know if I've ever felt anything so powerful. She's perfect.

"Galaxy," he says.

"Yes." The name fits her perfectly.

The pains come again, but the pushing helps. I bear down again and again until there's a second release—a second gray pup with a pink nose who makes my heart grow so big, I don't think my chest will be able to contain it.

“Star,” Silver says.

The third pup comes easily. Only two pushes, and she comes shooting out, making Silver laugh. This pup is silver, like his sisters, but there’s a single black stripe on his tail. I’ve never seen a black stripe on a gray wolf’s tail, but Silver’s raccoon tail has lots of them.

It’s like Fate is screaming at me. She wants me to know this is how it was always meant to be.

“Moonbeam,” Silver says.

My body is tired, but for the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I’m finally able to shift. It’s a relief to return to the power of my wolf legs and sharp wolf teeth. This has always been my favorite form. I am fast as a wolf. I am fierce. I am bigger than Silver, which he never seemed to mind.

I lie on my side and guide our pups with my nose to my teets that are full of milk for them. Silver shrinks into his raccoon, too, and bends down to pick up Moonbeam, who is having difficulty getting to the food. Silver waddles back and forth, carrying Moonbeam with his paws, and sets him right in front of my body where he can latch on. Silver stays there, crouching over our little ones, his black eyes focused on them.

The room shimmers around us, full of hope and love. Silver’s love, that I never truly lost, even though I wasn’t brave enough to accept it for far too long.

I’m brave now. And for the first time in my life, I believe I’m enough.

The series continues with Link’s story. Get ready for Terrance’s return in an enemies-to-lovers romance featuring a raccoon shifter himbo and the uptight neat freak he

accidentally puts his paws on during a dumpster diving accident.