

WOLF SHIFTER PRETEND ROMANCE



WOLF'S CLAIMED MATE

SILVERLAKE VALLEY WOLVES

SANSA MOON

WOLF'S CLAIMED MATE

Wolf Shifter Pretend Romance

Silverlake Valley Wolves Book 3

Sansa Moon

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Chapter 1 - Sasha

“Don’t get me wrong, I *love* Silverlake Valley, but I do miss Atlanta when it comes to shopping.”

I grimaced as I flicked through the clothes rack. Small towns were pretty, and I loved the cozy businesses and joints to hang out in, but the clothing options were not where it was at.

Next to me, Thalia sniggered as she shook her head. She wore a cream-colored woolen turtleneck tucked into black cargo pants with her usual silver buckles and chains on. Once every two months, we’d go further into the field to escape the small-town fashion trends. It wasn’t that they were *terrible*; they just weren’t for me. I missed my leather miniskirts and mesh-paneled bodysuits that came with big city nightlife.

As Luna of Silverlake Valley, Thalia was important. She was *rich*. Thalia had risen in the ranks ever since her Mating Games more than a year ago. Now married to her mate and raising her baby daughter with a powerful pack at her feet, I couldn’t help but feel a little envious of my best friend.

It was a strange thing to feel envious of her. Thalia had always talked about me like I was the better of us two. Now I felt... not quite pushed out but not entirely as involved as I had been during her heartbreak recovery and climb back to herself. Getting her involved with Kato’s pack years ago had caused a rift between us. But Thalia had improved herself, and I felt a little lost at where I fit in with her now.

She had always depended on me. Now, she didn’t need me, and I couldn’t help but wonder what she had kept me around for.

I clenched my hand on the sweater I discarded in annoyance. I was *not* vulnerable. I hated these weak thoughts and shoved them, walking away.

Thalia, unaware of my inner turmoil, followed me. “Okay, so if we’re done in this one, then—*oh*, those boots would look gorgeous on you! I can totally see you at the Inferno in these.” She grabbed my hand, and we rushed over to the shoe racks at the back. For a second, it was like the old

days: me dragging Thalia out to shop her heartbreak away, retail therapy in Atlanta, while she talked about her plans to end Fenrys.

Now, she was married to him. How far she'd climbed.

I grinned, genuinely feeling more happy at finding our balance again, as I picked up the vanilla-colored suede boot. It was knee-high, something I'd pair with a black minidress. I *knew* I'd find the perfect dress, but it wouldn't be in Silverlake Valley. Somehow, the small town found the balance between clubbing and modesty—something I quite frankly despised—and it worked for some. Just not for *me*. I was a leopard, a woman who loved clubbing and dancing and drinking—I didn't want modesty. I wanted to own my sexuality and body and never let anyone take it from me.

I held onto the boots, laughing as Thalia watched me with a raised brow.

“What?” I said. “They'll be my new babies.”

“More like they'll be the key to getting the next guy in your bed,” she teased.

I grinned, going along with it as I bought the boots. We left, heading towards a store where she could buy Christmas gifts ahead of the holidays for Reina, her baby cub. She'd already bought Fenrys a new Rolex and Dior cologne, decking him in designer brands that I was envious of because she received tenfold. The new bag slung around her shoulder was D&G; the pants were Balenciaga, effortlessly casual but gorgeously tailored.

What Thalia didn't know was that I was still a virgin.

I was attractive; I got the attention from men that I enjoyed, but I'd never let anyone take me all the way with them. I enjoyed the flirting and the dancing and the conversation. The teasing games. But I just wasn't ready for the whole physical commitment. Part of me knew I flitted between men easily and I still wanted my first time to be meaningful.

“Should I buy Reina this?” Thalia wondered aloud, running her hands across a baby's beanie, the color an autumnal gold with orange trimming. I noticed the designer label on it and laughed.

“Thalia, she's not even two years old.”

“So?”

“Just because you have money doesn’t mean you need to deck out your toddler in designer things. She won’t even know it to appreciate it.” I fixed her with a smirk. “I *know* you love playing rich hot Luna, but we’re in a small town. Everyone fawns over you and Fenrys in your finery, but Reina can wait for that till she’s older.”

Thalia still looked unconvinced. She wasn’t shallow by any means, but she’d gotten used to Fenrys heaping luxury onto those in his inner circle.

Again, I couldn’t bite down the wave of envy.

“At least you have a family to buy for,” I muttered, unable to keep the comment to myself. I wasn’t angry at Thalia that she had everything I wanted. A family, security both within herself and her life financially. A home to call hers, a pack of her own. I’d never had that.

“Sasha—”

“No, no.” I waved her off, laughing without a lot of humor to the sound. “I don’t need whatever’s about to come out of your mouth; come on. You’ve known me too long to give me pity about my family. They turned their backs on me all those years ago. I tried to reach out, but they rejected me again. In the end, I should be glad I’m away from them.” I shrugged, trying to brush it off. Deep down, the impending holidays had always been a struggle, thinking of them, wondering if they missed me after I’d left my hometown, following my boyfriend, a wolf shifter. They’d disagreed with me choosing a wolf shifter rather than a leopard shifter, like they wanted.

“I know, but—”

“Lia, it’s okay. My father is someone I’m *definitely* better off without,” I muttered. “Abusive prick.” He’d been the worst of them. At least my mom’s awful go-to comment was her threat that if I left, I was never welcome to return. My father had been taunting, physically abusive at times, because of being young and in love with a wolf at the time. Well, I had left, and I hadn’t returned.

“I shouldn’t have bragged.” Thalia frowned at herself. “Or got pouty over knowing it would be a sort of waste to not buy my daughter a…” She checked the tag and laughed, covering her mouth. “Thirty-five-dollar beanie.”

I sniggered, shaking my head. “It’d be her new, very expensive chew toy.”

“Oh, God, don’t remind me. Last week, she chewed through the rubber bracket thing on Conall’s headphones.”

At the mention of Conall, I stiffened, walked on, tried to keep my composure.

Strong hands sliding into my hair, a tongue sliding against mine. My name was a cut-off groan as hips rolled against mine... Pulling away, walking away, an apology, and a locked-up heart.

Thalia was onto me, of course, she was. We’d been best friends for years. We’d been through heartbreaks, nasty contracts and pack leaders, family breakups, her pregnancy with Reina, and then everything with Dakota and Aidan a few months ago. We didn’t go through all that together just to hide things now.

Outside, the snow fell gently. Christmas was still another month away, but Silverlake Valley always got snow.

When we ventured out into it, it fell in Thalia’s hair, barely visible against the white blonde.

“Where to next?”

“I’m starving,” I told her. “I need, like, the biggest greasiest burger we can find.”

Thalia looked towards one of the few diners in town. “Jack’s?”

“Jack’s.”

Jack’s Diner was, for the most part, the college kids’ hotspot joint. But for us, we’d practically grown up in here, too, as had Fenrys. I recognized Jack’s son flipping burgers in the back kitchen, while the old man himself had passed down signature recipes and managed the books while he vacationed in Florida every summer.

“So,” Thalia said, as I took a huge bite of burger. “Conall.”

I choked on my mouthful, swallowing with a slurp of milkshake. “What about him?”

“Will you be buying him anything for the holidays?” She leaned into her straw, eyeing me mischievously over her milkshake. “You know, seeing as you’ve both agreed to work closely together to discuss Kato’s pack. You have the intel Fenrys wants Conall to build on.” She shrugged. “You never know, you two could be a couple by Christmas.”

I stared at her, lifting a brow. “A couple by Christmas,” I echoed flatly. “What are we, a *Hallmark* Christmas movie?” I shook my head. “No, there’s nothing between us. *Yeah*, I flirted with him a little the other month, and he was hot when he was angry with Aidan, but there’s nothing there. Honestly, I don’t even want to work with him.”

“I’m pretty sure you two were cozied up at the first meeting Fenrys and Aidan called together.”

“That was when he was hot,” I muttered.

“And now?”

Now, I was denying any sort of feelings I had towards the pack’s beta ever since the night after the meeting. He was a wolf; I was a leopard. I’d gone down that unfortunate road before. I didn’t need to do it again. Besides, it was *Conall*.

I ignored her question. “Can’t I just write down what I know and hand it to him in notes? He could make a pretty mind map.” I grinned, imagining Conall tied up in string.

“Well, no, not really. Don’t you think it’d be more beneficial for you two to work directly together to gain double the perspective? You have the past information, he has the current, or most recent, and together, that’ll build a future picture of what we can expect. Patterns, plans—”

“I don’t *want* to work with him, Lia.”

“I know you don’t like accepting help,” Thalia went on gently. “You value your independence. I *get* that. But this is for the pack. For all of our lives. If Kato’s pack, even with their leader dead, comes for Silverlake Valley again, then it’s not just the pack. It’s you, it’s innocent people, it’s people like we once were. Uninvolved but somehow dragged into the mess anyway.”

A stab of guilt went through me at that. I still harbored guilt for even getting Thalia involved in Kato's messy, twisted contracts the other year. Even if both she and Fenrys had forgiven me, I still was having a hard time forgiving myself.

"I can do this alone," I said, insistent. "And I work just as hard alone as I could with him. If anything, he'll be a distraction."

"Because he's hot?" she grinned.

"No, because he's—" The word came through clenched teeth. "Arrogant. Annoying. Talkative."

"It sounds like you'll both never run out of things to talk about, then." Thalia's smile was smug as she slurped her milkshake noisily. "You're working with him."

"But—"

"Luna's orders."

Chapter 2 - Conall

The Silverlake Valley gym was open twenty-four hours, and I was glad for that. At two in the morning, I needed to blow off some steam—I always had steam to blow off these days. I glanced at the two alphas that pounded the treadmills next to me. Fenrys, in his gray hoodie, his eyes narrowed, directed ahead, and ran without his breath, even laboring. He upped his speed twice, and increased his incline.

Next to him, Aidan punched his speed up, matching Fenrys. The two locked eyes. Aidan increased his again, Fenrys did the same. Except he increased the incline again, and Aidan increased his own.

I rolled my eyes. “Why don’t we get a ruler while we’re at it?” I muttered. Aidan snorted.

“He won’t agree to that,” the alpha from Oak Hill said smugly. “He knows he’ll lose.”

“Yeah?” Fenrys challenged.

“Sure. Ask Dakota. She has *all* the experience of just how much I’d win if we started measuring.”

His eyes flicked down, and then he pinched his index finger and thumb together. I noticed that they didn’t even miss a step on the treadmill.

“How about you *both* meet me at the punching bag,” I said. “And you’ll both have your asses handed to you.”

Aidan snorted. “Don’t be stupid. You can fight Jason.”

“No,” I snarled. I adjusted my treadmill up to theirs. I could be capable of matching the alphas. I didn’t only have to compete against another beta. The three of us sprinted competitively to the point where I didn’t even think we were working out anymore. Aidan’s hair was pulled up into a knot at the back of his head, his hoodie half zipped up, exposing his chest underneath. All hard-packed muscles.

I hated being fucking smaller than them. I ran for ten minutes, matching pace with them. Whenever I thought about slowing down, I pictured my brother and his angry glare across the Inferno Lounge and then at our pack’s home, fixed on me, every inch of hatred aimed at me. I

pictured Sasha walking away. *Hot hands finding my chest, fingers walking up my skin, ghosting the waistband of my jeans. Her mouth was hot on mine, my name pouring from her lips. A wrenched parting of our bodies. 'Leave, Conall'.*

I tripped on the treadmill, lost to my own thoughts.

Aidan chuckled. “Still trying to keep up with us, buddy? Maybe if you work hard enough, you can be the alpha of your own pack!” He said it excitedly, condescending as hell.

“Fuck you,” I snarled and got my pacing back.

“Don’t antagonize him,” Fenrys snapped. “I’m serious, Aidan. Our packs are... working together, somewhat. They don’t need to see an example from you and think it’s okay to start petty arguments or fights.”

“I’ll bust your ass again, Aidan,” I warned. “You may have shaken hands with Fenrys, but I’ll still go at you like I did in the woods the day you dumped Dak—”

“Say her name,” Aidan spat, slamming his treadmill to a stop. I hopped off mine, meeting him face-to-face, annoyed at his inches over me. Fenrys sighed, switching off his machine too. “I *dare* you to put my mate’s name in your mouth, beta.”

“Aidan,” Fenrys said sharply. Aidan dismissed him with ignorance, not taking his attention off me. I smiled slowly. I’d been itching for a fight ever since my brother had come back into my life and ignored me rather than fighting it out with me properly.

“You want to hit me, Aidan?” I taunted. “Go on. I’ll fight you right now.”

“Don’t push me, Conall.”

I shoved his shoulders back, smirking. “Oh, no. Looks like I did.”

“You never did grow out of that cocky mouth—”

“Stop,” Fenrys shouted. The other men in the gym halted, glancing our way and then back to their own machines. “Conall, stop picking a fight. Aidan, shut up.”

“Listen to your alpha like a good beta, Conall,” Aidan said.

“Do you speak to your own second like that, you condescending piece of sh—”

Fenrys bodily forced himself between us, shoving us back. “We cannot keep doing this every week. You want to hit the gym together? Fine. But take it out in the ring if you’re going to do it anywhere. Stop making a mockery of our packs trying to work together.” His voice dropped into a growl. “What’s the combined goal?”

He eyed me, then Aidan. God, this was idiotic. “Taking down Kato’s pack.”

“Yes, good. If you want to act like elementary kids picking fights in the yard, then I’ll talk to you both like one.”

“Now listen—” Aidan began to snarl, but Fenrys held up a hand.

“I’m working with you for the safety of our packs and towns, but you’re on my turf, Tyrone. Play nice.”

Aidan battled with wanting to defy the order as alpha and doing what was right. I dared to step closer, but Fenrys put his arm out to prevent me from going further. Thinking of Aidan’s taunt of keeping up with them and following orders, I tore away from the two alphas and retreated to the other side of the gym. I piled up forty kilos of weights on the bench press, gritted my teeth as I lay down, and began my reps.

Sasha walking away.

My brother coming back into my life.

Two alphas.

Two towns.

Our enemy’s pack returning.

Fuck. I wanted to *be* more, do more, prove my place. I was strong—Fenrys had had me at his side all these years for a reason, but I couldn’t change my DNA. I was a beta, through and through, even if I had the temper of an alpha as well as the desire to be one.

A horrible, nasty thought entered my mind: *would Sasha have walked away from me if I was an alpha? Someone more important?*

I’d spent the last couple of months telling myself that she hadn’t walked away out of a lack of interest but more so that she’d *held* herself

back, something personal, something I didn't yet know. But that nasty voice continued to talk: *it was because it's you.*

I grunted as I pushed the weight up and down, letting my biceps curl and stretch. My arms shook, having upped the weight from the last time I was here. I just wanted to do anything to ignore the sight behind my eyes of Sasha walking away from me, her lips swollen and bitten red from our clashing, passionate kiss.

I took a one-minute break and then got back to it.

If Kato's pack became a bigger threat—and Fenrys thought they would—I needed to be able to protect those I loved and cared about. My alpha, my Luna, their cub. The rest of my pack. Sasha. I didn't love her, not by any means, but I cared about her. She was a lost soul wandering around Silverlake Valley, the only leopard shifter, unable to join a wolf pack but unable to fit anywhere else.

Where would she even fit with you? I asked myself. I let the weighted bar clang down with a bang and sat up for a proper breather. Across the gym, Aidan was darting back and forth, his wrapped hands punching at a bag suspended from the ceiling. How had he done it? He was an asshole. Word on the street had it that he'd bullied his own mate. Fenrys had outright rejected his and became his mate's target. That rejection almost got us all killed over a year ago.

I respected him and would have defended him against Thalia during his Mating Games, but they'd come out on top, mated. Aidan and Dakota, mated. Betas didn't mate the way alphas did, but...

Fuck.

I still wanted someone. Someone as close as a mate would be. But Sasha wasn't a wolf, and leopards couldn't run with wolves.

I sighed. Aidan caught my eye and nodded, a silent peace offering. I shrugged, lay back down, and continued pressing.

It was nearing three in the morning. None of us had the best sleeping pattern ever, and over the last couple of weeks, since Dakota had returned to the Silverlake Valley pack with Aidan, and his pack in tow and the two alphas had announced this tentative alliance, these gym sessions

had become somewhat routine. Dakota mostly lived in Oak Hill with Aidan but often asked him to take her to visit Silverlake Valley and Thalia.

When she visited, they stayed in Aidan's old house, which he'd started to renovate with, rumor had it, Declan and Jason's help. Declan, my brother who had always flinched at DIY, not wanting to hurt his fingers, a wimp as a kid, was now knocking down walls and piecing a home back together.

At last night's gym session, Fenrys and Aidan had discussed the possibility of two packs in Silverlake Valley, but Aidan was adamant about remaining in Oak Hill. He just wanted to have a place for him and Dakota. Now, the house was empty save for the three men whenever they worked on it.

I still didn't trust Aidan Tyrone as far as I could throw him, but he'd been a friend once. I could see where his anger had come from and understood it. We had all been forced into silence when his family had been ousted from town when he was younger. Not speaking up for him was something we'd all quietly regretted.

Now he was back around and seemed hellbent on making me never forget how I betrayed him. Apparently, he could forgive Fenrys because of some alpha mutual respect, but he and I would never be friends again.

"What's the deal with you and Declan, Conall?"

"There's no deal," I muttered.

"No, seriously. He's part of my pack, and his attitude of being around you stinks up my house in Oak Hill. I want you two to sort it out. Fight it out like pack brothers."

"But we're not *pack* brothers," I snarled. In a quieter voice, I muttered, "He's my *actual* brother. We shouldn't... You know."

Aidan shrugged. "I'm not your therapist. Just sort it out."

I rolled my eyes and flipped him off, lying back down on the bench to finish my reps while Aidan went to pound the shit out of the punching bag again. Fenrys was doing leg day, but he caught my eye and beckoned me over.

"Leg day?" he asked.

“I was doing arm day, but sure, I can switch,” I said, dropping into the leg press beside him. We both got ourselves situated, he cranked my weight up to the same as his, not insulting me by lowering it, and began. We repped in tandem. Without Aidan in my periphery, it felt normal again, and I was reminded of who I was. I was Conall Vox, beta to Fenrys Randon, the most powerful alpha for miles. I wasn’t *just a second*, as my younger brother had claimed upon our first reunion.

He could go fuck himself for his disrespect.

“Break,” Fenrys grunted. I let the plate fall back into place and lowered my legs, stretching out the bend and the muscles. “So, it’s been a couple weeks. Has Sasha given up any information yet?”

I shrugged, wiping my forehead on the bottom of my gym tank. My dark hair, slightly overgrown, plastered to my skin, and I shoved it off. “Nothin’ yet.”

“I told you guys I’d let you handle it between yourselves, but... I mean, c’mon, Con. This is the pack’s future we’re talking about. My own—*our* town—and my kid. My mate.”

“It’s not just you who has things at stake,” I reminded him. “You’re my best friend, Fen, and I’m not afraid to stand up to you, but don’t forget that Kato once threatened us all in that warehouse.”

I still have nightmares about that day sometimes. I’d wake up hearing that damn gunshot, see Fenrys bleeding out, hear Thalia’s screams at the thought of losing her mate. I shook it off, shoved my feet up on the plate again, and started without him.

“She’s giving nothing up,” I told him abruptly. “I mean, fuck, man, I don’t even *know*—” I grunted, slamming the plate too far back too quickly. “How do you expect me to work with her? She’s a stubborn asshole who only thinks of her pretty little self. She’s a self-centered, obnoxious little b—”

“Conall.”

“*What?*” I snapped.

Fenrys’s eyes were on me when I dropped my legs from the plate, breathing heavily. I scrunched my eyes closed, pinching the bridge of my nose. I’d been on edge for weeks; ever since that day, Sasha had walked

away, leaving me guessing. We'd avoided the topic ever since. We'd avoided *each other* ever since, and it had been slowly unraveling my mind the longer our distance went on.

"What's going on with you lately?" Fenrys asked. "You've been pissy ever since..." He narrowed his eyes. "Is it your brother?"

"No."

"Is it Aidan?"

"Yes, but not fully."

"The packs combining?"

"Fen, leave it."

"Is it Sasha?"

I wasn't quick enough to lie my way out of it. He saw the admittance I held back flash across my face before I could cover it up. *Yes, I thought. Yes, and I want to get her the fuck off my mind and out of my system.*

She rejected me in a way that left me questioning so much and made it impossible to feel comfortable approaching her to work together. But I needed to. I needed to get my act together and just bite the bullet whether she liked it or not.

"Honestly, Fen, she knows enough about Kato's pack. She won't even answer my texts. Thalia's been trying to get her to meet with me, but no game. She's stubborn. Fiercely independent, and I get it, I do. She has no stakes in this except for her best friend. She's not a wolf; she has no loyalty to us. Sasha doesn't give a shit about what Kato's pack could do to Silverlake Valley."

"I don't think she's that selfish," Fenrys said. I rolled my eyes. Of course, he'd speak up for his mate's best friend.

"She was complicit in the initial assassination attempt against you," I said. "Have you forgotten that?"

"No," he snapped. "I don't trust her a lot, but I trust her knowledge. I trust Thalia's forgiveness of her."

"Yeah but—"

“Figure something out with her,” Fenrys ordered. I wilted under that commanding tone, gritting my teeth. What did that sort of power feel like? I’d had a taste of it while Fenrys was off on his self-assigned paternity leave, letting me take charge of the training regime he’d put together. Those months had given me a taste of everything I was missing out on by being born with the DNA of a beta.

“I’ve been gracious in letting you both figure it out together, but I’m getting impatient, and Thalia’s not sleeping because of her worrying. I’m trusting you, Con. Whatever’s happened between you and Sasha, deal with it or put it to bed.” He met my gaze flatly. “Take that however you want to, but don’t let it get messy. You need to conduct business with her, that’s all.”

“Got it, boss,” I muttered, flicking him my mock salute as I rolled my eyes.

“Good,” he said, ignoring my sass. “Another rep?”

I went to answer but glanced up at another person coming into the gym at this hour. Only a handful of us were in here—not only Fenrys’s pack but some of Aidan’s, too, and some general insomniacs making use of the small-town facilities.

A buzzed head, once full of dark hair like mine, was the first thing I saw, and my stomach dropped.

Across the gym, Declan saw me. A scowl crawled along his face. He turned on his heel and walked back out.

“Dec—” I called, but he’d already gone.

Fine.

Declan, Sasha—they wanted to give me the cold shoulder? Fine. I could make them both talk to me under direct orders from my alpha and Declan’s.

Chapter 3 - Sasha

I sighed and tossed my purse onto the sofa in my studio apartment above the town's bookshop. I worked a few hours there every weekend in exchange for cheaper rent. I collapsed into a pink armchair in the shape of a heart, hugging my knees to my chest, sighing.

Despite the good day, I felt burnt out.

I felt like...

I wasn't sure. But like a thin thread, fraying, like I needed something to ground myself with.

A message popped up on my phone.

From C: We need to talk. Fenrys's orders.

I quickly shot a message back: **I don't take orders from alpha wolves.**

He sent back the middle finger emoji, and I smiled, momentarily smug and victorious. I half considered messaging back, saying he knew where my apartment was, he could very well visit me any time he wanted. But Conall didn't. Conall never showed up here again after I'd told him to leave, and I had too much pride to retract my statement.

Leave, Conall.

The command had been sharp, hard enough to make him take his hands off me, retreat, pull his shirt back on, and walk out the door without another glance. I had meant to say *Not yet, I'm not ready. Or, this level of intimacy scares the shit out of me.* But instead, I'd pushed him away without meaning to. My fear had overwhelmed me.

Ever since Fenrys had called the meeting between the two packs, I'd felt drained. In front of them, I could put on a languid smile, act like the pretty, indifferent leopard who loved to be adored by different men, and talk about my ex-boyfriend like it was nothing. I'd done it with Thalia when I'd first introduced her to Kato.

I had gotten good at repressing things, shoving it all down.

And yet the night following that first double pack meeting, Conall and I had gone for a drink, and I'd invited him to my place afterward, he

had dragged all that repressed fear and emotion that I had been running from, and terrified me. *Why you?* I wanted to ask.

I didn't particularly want to talk about my ex-boyfriend, I didn't want to be associated with him, or remember the girl I'd been when I had dated him, but I knew I owed Thalia that. I was only doing this to try to find a way to alleviate my guilt of dragging into Kato's business in the first place.

Now Kato was dead, killed by Thalia's mate, and while I didn't bow down to Fenrys, I knew I needed to do my part to help the town. I was doing it for my best friend.

But then Conall's handsome face came into my mind, and the thought came unbidden. *Will you do it for him too?*

Groaning, I pushed to my feet, going to the fridge for the opened bottle of wine. I picked up a wine glass from the open cabinet above my kitchen counter. The good thing about living in a small studio was that the wine was never too far out of reach.

Pouring a large glass, I sipped, before steadily drinking, finally finding what had a chance at grounding me that afternoon. The more the wine settled, the better I felt, the more *me* I felt. I had worked hard to not be vulnerable or codependent.

I was independent; I was Sasha McColl, and nobody got to take that away from me ever again. Not like he had.

If I had to dredge up the memories of my past relationship—the very thing that had almost made me emotionally disappear altogether, leaving me trapped with a pack of wolves whom I had thought of as brothers once upon a time—then I would do it on *my* terms. Not with Conall, not even Thalia.

No, I had to crack open my Pandora's box of memories alone.

In a maroon-colored hoodie that fell to my mid-thigh, and nothing else, I sat cross-legged in my spacious closet. It was almost as big as my

kitchen, which said more about my kitchen's small size rather than my closet being big.

After Thalia moved in with Fenrys after her Mating Games, her family politely suggested I move out, too. There hadn't been many options for a leopard shifter in a town of wolf shifters, but I'd found this dinky place and took it as the first option.

I didn't think of the open-plan house I'd lived in with Kato's pack. I didn't think of the expensive rooms and furniture, with space abound, my own room to myself at the age of seventeen, after sharing a tiny bedroom with three siblings in my family home. That place had been beautiful, nothing more than a memory now. A missed home, a place I had thought was my future.

Now I eyed the faded paint on the walls, the worn wooden floor, the furniture that hadn't cost me a lot at all, and shoved aside thoughts of that open plan house. *It had been a pretty prison*, I reminded myself. *A pretty prison, it's keeper, your boyfriend.*

I pushed aside my romanticized thoughts of the past, knowing that was exactly what they were. Deep down, I knew I had only taken Thalia to Kato, hoping that I would be loved by the pack again. I was a leopard girl playing in a wolf's den, a dangerous game, when it had concerned *that* den. Somehow, Fenrys's pack—even Aidan's pack, as volatile as he was—felt different.

Another message making my phone chime with a *ping* startled me.
From C: Don't ignore me.

Maybe it was the racing thoughts I was struggling to keep at bay, maybe it was cruelty to protect myself, maybe it was a multitude of reasons, but I answered simply. **Is the big bad beta playing at being an alpha again?**

I knew it would hurt. I actually *smiled* as I wrote it, but the minute I sent it, a stab of guilt pierced me, wanting to take it back.

But the *woosh* signified it had been sent already, and I knew he'd react. I just...

Maybe one day, he'd react by showing up at my door, and I'd get a chance to talk to him.

I wanted him to come to *me*. I had told myself a long time ago I'd never crawl back to a man, never chase, never want more. Why was Conall already that exception?

I considered apologizing, but before I could do so, my phone rang. Conall. Of course. I answered the phone. "Hello?" I asked, feigning sweet innocence.

"Are you finally going to talk to me?" he asked, all arrogant expectations as if I had an obligation to.

"One almost hook-up doesn't make me yours to command, Conall," I answered. "I don't follow that wolf pack loyalty ingrained in your DNA. So, no, I'm not going to talk to you. Not until—" I stopped myself, not wanting to give him the scenario I yearned for on a silver plate.

"Until what?"

"Nothing," I snapped. "Until *nothing*." *Until you come get me yourself. Until you finally show up at my door again, letting me have a second chance.* I had pushed him away; maybe I didn't deserve that scenario. Maybe he thought he was doing good by giving me space, being respectful, but I wanted to see some of that demanding anger come through even more.

I *wanted* it. I wanted *him*, and I hated that.

"You might not follow orders, but I have to," he bit out. I could picture the scowl on his face, the narrowed glare, the thick, dark brows pulled together. That curl to his lip in displeasure. I'd kissed that curling snarl into smoothness once, coaxing groans of pleasure from him before I'd cut all physical intimacy off.

"Fenrys is on my back," he told me. "Don't tell me Thalia isn't on yours about us working together."

She was, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

I bit my lip, staying silent.

"You have information I could use to help us anticipate Kato's pack being a threat," Conall went on.

I looked down at the box on the floor I'd gotten out—my physical Pandora's box. "Mmhmm," I answered, non-committal.

I nudged the lid off my box and steeled myself. Conall was talking in my ear about the plans he needed to start making, the action he wanted to take, some ideas he'd come up with to help Fenrys and the others, but that he needed me to help him to help them.

I didn't fully listen to what he said, but I listened to the tone of his voice, letting it settle me, keeping my mind distracted as I sifted through the box's contents. It was a box of mementos from my past relationship, something I should have thrown away a long time ago but couldn't bring myself to do so.

There was a picture that I held up: Jackson and I in front of the Golden Gate Bridge on my eighteenth birthday. It was the first vacation we'd taken together, a couple days' trip to San Francisco.

While I was grateful that he'd gotten me out of my family home—Kato's whole pack helping to get me out—I couldn't forgive him for everything else.

“Sasha?” Conall's voice prompted me from my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“You there?” His voice was softer now, quieter. I swallowed, remembering his voice that night of our almost hook-up. *I want you*, he'd said, the first time he'd kissed me. I wanted to be wanted—to be *needed*. But at the same time, I despised anybody, making me become dependent on them too.

I didn't want to want or need anyone.

And I didn't need a beta wolf putting me in that position.

Jackson's number was still in my phone. Kato had always told me to keep hold of it and I just hadn't deleted it even since Kato's death.

I had to get in touch with him. If not for the pack's safety then at least for Thalia's.

I could do this alone. Not with Conall. Not with anyone else.

“Yeah,” I said, as fear broke my voice. “I'm here.”

Chapter 4 - Conall

I never expected Sasha to even answer my texts, never mind pick up my phone call. But she had, and I'd tried to plead Fenrys's case—*my* case—to her, hoping it was enough to sway her into working with me.

In the end, she ended up going more distant, and when we hung up, I wasn't quite able to focus. I was drawing up notes and maps of the old warehouse Kato had holed up in. It had been empty ever since the fight, but there was a chance that if the rest of the pack had stayed low to regroup, then they'd return to their old base. They weren't after a full incognito mode, so they wouldn't need to hide their meetings; they just would want to keep us in suspense.

A pack like Kato's—or whoever had become their leader now—enjoyed holding their presence over our heads like a threat. They would want to keep us in suspense, always awaiting an attack, as we watched them go about their day, never settling, never relaxing.

I wrote down as much information as I could remember from the warehouse, but Sasha's inside knowledge would be invaluable. She'd *lived* with the very pack Fenrys wanted us to take down once and for all. She knew the people we'd fight.

A thought occurred to me: she'd known Kato; had she mourned for him after Fenrys had killed him? Would she mourn the other wolves we killed?

I sighed, pushing my thoughts away. She had no loyalty to me or, Fenrys, or even Silverlake Valley. She could betray us, double-cross us, flit between packs as she pleased. She served nobody but herself.

I text Fenrys: **Are we sure Sasha isn't a liability? She's not a wolf. She won't care about pack politics or territory wars.**

Fenrys shot back a response minutes later: **That's also your job to find out. I trust you. Find out if she would completely give her loyalty to us, no matter how deep she gets in this investigation.**

I still hadn't told Fenrys that Thalia refused to meet with me. I was one ignored phone call away from battering down her door. The shame of reliving her rejection kept me from going there sooner.

Instead, I made my way back to the gym. I wasn't with Fenrys or Aidan this time, and it wasn't two in the morning. It was barely even four in the afternoon, but I knew that was when Declan mostly hit the weights.

Silverlake Valley gym was mostly empty when I got there, with only a handful of users around the machine. Dakota was in there, training with a state-of-the-art imported sparring dummy, blocking hits it punched out. Different parts of the dummy lit up, and she threw her blows carefully.

According to Aidan, she was getting stronger, better. Apparently, his methods were *far* more effective, but judging by the bruises I'd seen on her neck and wrists that she wore proudly, his methods weren't ones I could invest in. I didn't need to know about their bedroom life. I only needed to know that Dakota was safe, and she'd assured me she was.

"Hey," I said to her, preparing to do my warmup on the stair machine.

"Hi," she answered, throwing me a quick smile before she dropped to a crouch, avoiding a robotic arm that jabbed out.

"Should you be doing that... in your condition?" I winced.

"Condition," Dakota snorted. "Thalia went through half of her Mating Games while pregnant. I can handle a training dummy."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, fine," I said. "If you can handle that, how about a little sparring with me, then?" I lifted a brow in a challenge, smirking, forgoing the warm-up in the end. Dakota's grin turned fierce as we headed over to the mats.

Aidan would likely kill me for challenging his pregnant mate, but he wasn't there, and Dakota could make her own decisions. I trusted her.

She raised her fists to her face, and we began the dance of jabbing out, ducking, swinging fists, and side-stepping blows. Dakota was fast, her ginger curls behind the only thing I hit. In a cropped vest and sports leggings, she looked determined and ready, headstrong. Once upon a time, I'd underestimated her. Now, she was Aidan Tyrone's mate and had held her own in plenty of fights since. I'd even seen the two of them fight as humans and wolves, which was *fierce*.

We'd all had to quickly leave the room after their wolf fights once they'd shifted, the two magnetized to each other, wrapped up in passionate

adrenaline, which was only heightened by the hormones Dakota gave off as his pregnant mate.

Her fist slammed into my cheek, and I staggered, distracted by a man coming into the gym. The very man I'd been aiming to see.

"Wait," I said to Dakota. We stepped back from each other.

She noticed my attention on Declan. I stepped towards my brother.

He eyed me up before saluting Dakota, who gave him a wave. I forgot how well those two knew each other. She'd lived with Declan for weeks during her capture. The fact that my brother had participated in something so cowardly as to steal a female wolf from her pack still angered me.

But when he saw me, Declan had his own anger for a lot more personal reasons.

"Declan," Dakota called. "Come spar with us. You can verse the loser." She jerked her head towards me.

"I'm not losing," I snapped. But my glare remained on my brother. Declan just stared at me before putting headphones on, starting up the treadmill, and ignoring me.

"So, word has it he doesn't actually intend on speaking to you," Dakota said, stepping away to return to her training dummy.

"At least he didn't leave this time," I muttered. Sighing, I went over the machine next to Declan's, holding up my hands as if in surrender. His gaze flicked to me and then away, unbothered, as he continued running, keeping a good pace.

I started my treadmill up, putting it higher than his.

He didn't start the competition of pacing with me. I was glad.

Yet we were brothers, running next to each other, never once saying *hello*.

My run was broken by my phone ringing. Across the gym, Dakota's phone chimed. Next to me, Declan pulled his phone out, too and stopped his treadmill. He was already out the door before I could answer Fenrys.

"Dinner at our pack house," he said, voice tight. "Both packs are required to be there. I'm tired of this bullshit of everyone avoiding each other and not cooperating. Be there in half an hour."

Declan and Dakota must have had the same message from Aidan. Dakota smiled, sauntering out of the gym. My brother disappeared into the locker room, a silent ghost that I couldn't be around. I ignored him, quickly changed into clean clothes, and headed to the house.

When the two packs got together, the house was suddenly very full. Aidan and Jason took up one whole sofa; Dakota sprawled over Aidan's lap, his hand caressing the small of her back under her jacket.

Fenrys and Thalia sat around the coffee table on a mound of cushions, unboxing pizza. Everyone else filed in around them. Declan hovered near Jason's other side, draped over the back of the couch.

I took my place at Fenrys's side. Sasha, Lyna, and Theo all filed in, the rest of the Silverlake Valley pack slowly coming in after them.

It was the first time I'd been in a room with Sasha since the night in her apartment. Dressed in a white, cropped t-shirt and high-waisted pants, I saw enough of her figure that my mouth went dry. She wasn't wearing anything beneath her t-shirt, and the see-through material left little to the imagination.

"Con, it's weird to see you so quiet, man," Theo said, laughing. I felt Sasha's eyes on me. "Somethin' on your mind?"

I looked Sasha up and down pointedly, letting her know *I* was witnessing her. I answered Theo in a tight voice. "Not one thing."

He shrugged. The room had a buzz of noise as we all talked among ourselves. Watching Declan come alive with Jason, the two of them laughing between themselves as they argued over what pizza topping was better, was weird to see. I hadn't heard my brother laugh in years.

“Fuck off, meat feast is better,” Declan declared, swiping a slice layered with pepperoni, extra cheese, and beef.

“Nah, barbeque chicken is better,” Jason claimed. He saw me watching them. “What about you, beta? What topping is best?”

“Meat,” I muttered, grabbing a slice of what Declan had. He rolled his eyes. I hated this. I was usually in control, the loudest voice in the room after Fenrys. But I fucking hated Aidan’s pack being here, I hated my brother putting me on edge and refusing to speak to me, and I hated the weird energy going on with Sasha.

I didn’t like feeling out of control.

I *wanted* control. I needed an outlet, some way of finding it again.

Fenrys cleared his throat. The room fell silent, save for Declan and Jason, still bickering.

“You want to shut your pack up?” I asked Aidan, titling my head. “Declan always was a talkative little shit.”

I wanted a rise out of him, but Dec didn’t give it. He fixed me with a stony glare.

“Be disrespectful to anyone in my pack again, and I’ll cram my fist so hard down your throat it’ll come out of your—”

“Aidan,” Dakota giggled. “No need for that.” She pecked the side of his jaw, tugging his attention back to her. I was surprised he wasn’t up there with Fenrys, but I supposed Kato had brought the war to Silverlake Valley first.

“All right,” Fenrys sighed. “Honestly, I’ve called you all here because I’m sick of this. You’re *all* exhausting.” His eyes flickered over me, over Sasha, over the other pack. “Stop these petty little pissing competitions. We’re two different packs, we’re bound to fight, but we’re not children. Either punch it out outside or shut the hell up and act like adults. That goes for the women, too.”

“Yeah, let’s see those spots, leopard,” Jason called, laughing.

Sasha threw Jason a grin. “Oh, baby, you couldn’t even afford to *think* about any part of me,” she cooed, blowing him a kiss. I fought the urge to roll my eyes at her performance. Thalia sniggered, though.

“All right,” Fenrys called. “Jokes aside, I want us to cooperate properly. There’s too much unrest out there, with the threat of Kato’s pack regrouping under a new alpha, for us to be too busy arguing among ourselves. That means—” He jabbed a finger at Declan, then at Conall. “You two, sort your shit out. You’re brothers with bad blood, fine. But Con, you’re better than these petty—”

“I’ve been trying to talk to you,” I said to Declan, my voice lowered, angry but composed. “Stop walking out on me.”

“Hurts, doesn’t it, brother? Being walked on out. Ignored. Backs turned.”

“Declan,” Aidan warned. “We’re here for a reason.”

“*He’s* the problem,” Declan shouted, flinging a hand towards me. “I will work with him, but I don’t have to talk to him.”

“I see, in our time apart, you haven’t grown up,” I muttered.

“Say that louder,” Declan challenged. “I fucking dare you, Conall. Don’t play high and mighty because—”

“Stop!” Thalia called. “All of you, *stop*.” Her hands slammed down on the coffee table. Her golden eyes brightened in anger as she surveyed the room. “You’re two packs, stronger together. The last time Fenrys faced Kato’s pack, he nearly lost his life. The pack only just made it out alive. This time, we *need* the forces together.” Her eyes found Sasha’s. “I’m begging you to put whatever’s going on between you and him—” my Luna jerked her head at me. “Aside and work together. I’m not giving you both more time to play at avoiding one another.”

“Nothing’s going on,” Sasha argued while I said, “There isn’t anything between us.”

I looked at Sasha, her burnished orange eyes blinking back at me. Dark lashes framed the orange, making her look dangerous.

The denial of anything made Thalia laugh, breaking the tension in the room. “Oh, yeah. You two are *definitely* working things out.”

Next to her, Fenrys nodded, although his eyes lingered on me, concerned. Betas didn’t mate the way alphas did, but I still wanted to find my Thalia or Dakota. Lyna was like a sister to me, and there were no other female shifters I was interested in. Only...

No, I told myself, refusing to think about it.

“You two are working on a proper strategy,” Fenrys told them. “And you’ll *both* report to Thalia and me afterward, so we know you’ve actually put your heads together for once.” He jerked his head at Sasha. “You know things about that pack that could help keep your best friend alive,” he snarled, his protective alpha side coming to the surface to support his mate’s wellbeing. “Do her a favor and use it.”

Sasha blinked at the command in his voice, and I half expected her to defy him. She’d told me she didn’t need to take orders from an alpha wolf. But now, in the face of that order, she nodded, biting her tongue.

Aidan watched the whole exchange as if he was delighted at the tension between our own pack. He grinned at me across the room. I flipped him off. I’d find an excuse one day to punch him again.

“Theo, Lyna, I want you doing more perimeter searches,” Fenrys ordered. “We need to expand, cover more ground. Aidan, your pack is working on Oak Hill’s side, yes?”

“Right,” he said. “Some of my pack are from other towns, so they’re keeping an eye out for anything amiss.”

“Good,” Fenrys said. If he was nervous, then he didn’t show it. It didn’t crack his voice like it might crack mine. I was fuelled by anger, I could help hold off that, but being in total command of a room? It was where I lacked that alpha personality. I could talk, but it didn’t mean people would respect or listen.

I hated that the most. That one *look* from Fenrys could hold so much more weight than an order from me. I bit my tongue.

Fenrys called the meeting to a close before switching from an alpha in charge, into just himself, and started taking movie suggestions. Aidan tossed the remote control to Lyna. As the room burst into activity of people moving, talking, reseating themselves, and Aidan and Dakota unable to keep their hands off each other, I approached Sasha.

She eyed me as I walked up to her, a perfectly shaped brow raised at me.

“Yes?” she asked. The thing I’d noticed about Sasha was that she was different in a room full of people than when she was alone. She was

sharper, smugger when she had an audience, more discreetly mocking. In private, she was softer. I enjoyed seeing the switch, actually.

“Me, you, breakfast tomorrow at Jack’s diner.”

“No,” she answered.

“Yes.”

I met her gaze, staring her down. I was aware some of the others had looked our way, but I refused to back down. Sasha’s gaze turned into a glare as she stood up. “No.”

“Yes,” I answered. “Did you *not* just hear Fenrys? Jack’s diner, tomorrow at nine in the morning. Be there, or I’ll come to your apartment to drag you out if I have to.”

That got her startled. Her lips parted, glossy and full, and I remembered how that gloss had tasted on my tongue.

I smirked. “What’s got you so scared, kitty? Afraid of the big bad wolf boyfriend?”

Sasha’s glare turned purely venomous. “Fine. Nine am. I’ll be there.”

Chapter 5 - Sasha

I told myself I didn't care about dressing up—least for Conall. Least of all, for goddamn *breakfast* at Jack's diner. But I left the house in a fitted, thick maroon jumper with a high collar tucked into black leather pants. I pulled on some heeled ankle boots with a black fur trim, grabbed my purse and leather jacket, and headed out.

I didn't want to work with him, but I'd already decided on a plan. Conall wanted to be near me? I'd make myself insufferable to be around. I'd be nasty, prickly. I knew how to put up that front—to be cold and indifferent. He might not deserve it, but I refused to have him involved in my past so intimately. Nobody could see that side of me. Not even Thalia knew the truth. She didn't even know I was still a virgin.

My heels clacked on the tiled floor of Jack's diner as I strode towards an empty booth. Conall wasn't here yet. I had purposefully left fifteen minutes early *just* to beat him. Conall was pointedly punctual, never a moment early or late. I could use that against him as well.

A waiter came over, and I batted my eyelashes at him, smiling prettily. The thing about being me was that I enjoyed using my looks to get attention. I enjoyed showing off my body for *myself*, knowing I was being admired, but I was comfortable in my own skin to not take it further.

I saw his eyes linger on my figure. Most of the women here with lithe, well-built wolf shifters, but I had a feline gait, shapely legs, a thin body that men seemed to want to hold. I'd let them... for a while. Maybe I actually just enjoyed playing the tease.

“What can I get for you?” he asked, eyes not on mine but lowered.

“I'll have two maple syrup pancakes with extra whipped cream and two banana milkshakes,” I ordered for Conall as well, knowing he'd hate that power being taken from him. It was about small wins.

The waiter glanced at the empty seat across from me. “Coming right up.” Then he left, and I watched the door for Conall. He soon arrived, wearing a plain black sports shirt and thin gray jogging pants that gave me a fantastic glimpse of his thighs.

Clearly, he didn't skip leg day.

I dragged up that nonchalant mask of arrogance as he sat down across from me.

“Morning,” I chirped. He looked bleary-eyed as if he hadn’t slept.

“Hi,” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. His thick dark hair, falling over his forehead and curling down his neck, looked messy, as though he’d only run his hands through it before leaving the house.

My stomach jumped nervously. Too much of where he came from reminded me of Jackson. The wolf pack, the wanting more power, more command, the dominance that I craved in a man, if only to put up a fight before willingly submitting.

He tried to flag down a waiter, but I pressed a hand to his arm, making him pause. Conall flicked his gaze down to my hand, where my nails were long and painted a glossy burgundy.

“I ordered already,” I purred. “No need to trouble yourself.” I smiled, all feline wickedness. “I know you must be tired after running around after Fenrys all day, picking up his slack.”

A low rumble came from his chest. “Says the leopard playing at being part of the wolf pack.” He cocked his head at me. “You *did* join Kato’s pack, briefly, right?”

I tried not to let his comment affect me. I smiled tightly. “Careful with your assumptions.”

“*You* be careful with *yours*.” He folded his arms over his chest and I couldn’t help myself from looking down at his flexing biceps. “Correct me, then. What exactly *was* your involvement with Kato’s pack?”

I stayed silent, only smiling a little at him, knowing I held my secrets that he wanted to know. The waiter returning interrupted us, placing down both plates and returning with the milkshakes several moments later.

After the waiter left, Conall muttered under his breath, pushing the banana drink away.

“Problem?” I asked.

His gaze narrowed. He grabbed the drink again and slurped noisily. “None.” He *just* managed to keep the grimace off his face as he swallowed it.

I locked eyes with him, pursing my lips against the straw, and sucked languidly, moaning dramatically at the taste. “I love banana milkshakes,” I said, knowing a drop had collected on the corner of my mouth. Conall watched me lick it away. “Don’t you?”

“I prefer cherry,” he answered with a smirk.

My heart stuttered, despite my willing it not to. I always wore cherry-flavored lip gloss, and he damn well knew it. He was reminding me of our night together, trying to throw me off-guard.

My hands sliding down his toned stomach, grasping at his belt buckle desperately, my skirt already pushed up my hips...

I bit down on the inside of my cheek to stop my thoughts of him, of that night.

“If you don’t want to correct me on my assumptions, then I’m only left to assume, aren’t I?” he asked. “I might not be an alpha, but I can still bend you to my whim, Sasha.”

I remembered how my name sounded in a groan from his voice, deep and gravelly, buried in my neck as he’d rolled his hips against mine, seeking friction.

I was fraying, trying to cling onto a shred of composure. I busied myself with digging into my pancakes instead, *just* so I didn’t have to look into those green eyes of his, so bright with words he didn’t always say aloud.

“Sasha,” he said again, his voice deepening. I repressed any physical reaction to it even though it did something for me. “We can work together, can’t we?” His voice was sultry, a lilt to it that I swooned with.

“No,” I breathed, trying to compose myself. “No, we can’t. I work alone. I work alone or not at all.”

Conall laughed, as if he knew a joke I didn’t yet have the punchline to. “See, you don’t have much of a choice.”

“I do,” I said. “Don’t try to use Thalia against me. I can help her without working with you.”

He shrugged. “I can’t dispute that.”

“Then what *are* you disputing?”

Silence fell over the table. The sound of the diner's kitchen rushed around us, and I held onto my milkshake glass for the cold, grounding sensation. It didn't last for long, that grounding peace.

Not when Conall's voice lowered. "Do you remember that night, Sasha?"

"I don't know which night you're talking about," I answered, but my voice betrayed me, shaking.

"I think you do." His gaze was fierce, pinning me in place.

I tried to gather myself. "You mean that drunken, unfortunate incident after the Inferno Lounge?"

"Only unfortunate because it came to an end," he murmured, lifting a brow.

My hands shook. I clenched the glass harder, feigning a high laugh. It was *too* high, too false. "We were drunk," I said. "That night is a mere blip in my life. Barely memorable." *That night burns through my memories, haunting my dreams. It's all I've thought of since.* "There was a reason I stopped it going further."

"What? Because it wasn't memorable."

I forced a smirk at him. "Your words, wolf. Maybe I knew I was only in for disappointment."

That accusation cut something deep within him, striking true. Like with the cruel text I'd sent, my victory was short-lived. I forced my guilt back, away, so I could remain clinging onto my triumph.

He can't know, I told myself. He can't know that of all the fears in the world, commitment terrifies me. Pinning myself to one man terrifies me. I cannot give myself to him so easily.

I finished off my pancakes, Conall's gaze weighing heavily on me. When my plate was empty, I smiled. "I'll let you grab the bill. Thanks for the breakfast but just to reiterate, I *will* be working alone. Thalia and Fenrys will receive their information, but it won't be the cutesy double act they're thinking of."

"Do not move from this table." Conall's voice rang dominantly, halting me from moving an inch. I thought of him saying those words in

another situation. *Hands on the counter. Do not move them, or I'll stop.*

After everything, it had been *me* to stop that night.

“Conall,” I drawled. Something in his face flickered at my voice changing, that bravado that always saved me, the one I even gave Thalia. “I appreciate what you need to do for Fenrys, I do. I appreciate your loyalty to your pack, I admire it, even. But everything I have in my life, I’ve achieved it alone, and I won’t stop that now to save a pack who would turn their backs on me in a heartbeat if anything ever happened. Your loyalty is to each other, not with me, so mine cannot belong to your pack, either.”

Fingers grasped my wrist, stopping me once again from leaving. His eyes bore into mine.

“What if I gave you *my* loyalty?” he asked quietly. His thumb glided over my wrist.

I laughed. “You’re part of a pack. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Yes, I am,” he agreed. “But I’m still just a man. A man who’s offering you himself.”

To what end? I wanted to ask. But the words weren’t on my tongue, they didn’t come the way I hoped or wanted.

“Darren Garth,” I told him, finally. “There’s a lead.”

He looked at me as if he was unsure whether to trust me or not.

“Is he your—”

“No,” I said, unwilling to give his name to anyone but myself. “He was one of Kato’s confidantes, high up in rank.”

“His beta?”

“No,” I said, avoiding his eyes.

With that, I walked away, but Conall grasped my wrist and pulled me back. “Don’t go,” he said. “I asked you here for a reason. A... proposal, of sorts.”

That got me intrigued enough to sit back down. I eyed him.

“I’m going to need coffee for it,” he said. “And you might want a milkshake refill.”

Without breaking his gaze, I grabbed his milkshake and started on it. Conall rolled his eyes and flagged down a waiter carrying a coffee pot. He got a cup of black coffee—a choice I wrinkled my nose at—and tapped it as he chewed over what to say.

“Whether you like it or not, we’re working together,” he said. I went to argue, but he carried on talking. “You cannot mess up my obligation and loyalty to Fenrys.” He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I want you to be my girlfriend.”

The world halted. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

He smirked.

“*Fake* girlfriend.”

“Conall—”

“No, no, think about it for a minute,” he said. “We need to go snooping while we work together. You need to meet with me a lot, we might need to explore a little. People might start talking; it could look suspicious. They know you’re connected from their past, I’m connected to Fenrys. They even know you’re the Luna’s best friend, of course. But if we appear to be dating, it’s less obvious that we’re onto Kato’s pack. Things can be passed off as dates rather than snooping and spying.”

I stared at him. Was he insane? It was a damn good idea, one I really ought to agree with him on, but I didn’t date, never mind *faking it*.

“So you’ve just decided all this for me, huh?” I asked.

Conall shrugged, sipping his coffee like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Yeah, but I don’t think you’re opposed.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because deep down, I think you *want* a reason to trust me. You want to believe this could work.”

“This as in us?” My question was said tightly, my breath held.

“*Fake* us,” he reminded me.

Oh. “Right. Of course.” I was too late; he’d already gotten a reaction from me. “I don’t trust easily,” I warned him.

“I know,” he said, surprising me. “But you’ll grow to trust me.”

“You can guarantee that?”

“I think I can.”

There was something else about this fake arrangement that he wasn't saying. A smile toyed on his face, something smug and arrogant.

“Sasha,” he drawled. “Do you like playing games?” He linked his fingers beneath his chin, cocking his head at me.

I gave him a full smile. “Only when I win them.”

“Want to bet?”

“Fuck. Yes.”

“Then you can buy the next milkshakes,” he said. “I'll have the cherry one, please.”

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Chapter 6 - Conall

I was going to play her like a fucking instrument, strum every string she had, tune every note, and torment Sasha just as much as she had tortured me these past weeks. This fake dating *was* a genuine reason to be seen without suspicion, but it would give me a chance to get closer to her without risking proper feelings being in the way.

We'd parted ways at the diner. I'd told her I'd keep her posted on what happened next. I already knew. I wanted to check out their old warehouse and then follow up on the name she'd given me. Darren Garth. The name wasn't familiar, but Kato's pack had never been a threat up until halfway through Fenrys's Mating Games. As he'd wooed the women and ran with them the way he would with his Luna, the rest of the pack had...

Well, we'd worked our normal day jobs, but we'd been waiting for him to return, ready for anything at any time. I'd kept them all in line and in our usual training scheme, but without Fenrys around, there had been very few threats.

Aidan, of course, had proven that all wrong after taking Dakota under our noses. It still made me want to kill him that he'd originally been after Thalia. She was my pack's Luna, and I'd die to protect her, too, as we all would.

I only hoped it never came to that again.

"Con," Fenrys called as soon as I went through the door of the pack's house. "Get your ass in here for a second."

I jogged up to his office, next to his and Thalia's bedroom. The door was open, and Fenrys sat behind a desk of rich mahogany. His mother intended to step down as mayor in the new year and was already preparing him to take over. He had clippings of Kato's pack pinned to a corkboard. Kato himself, the old warehouse, another rumored space in Silverlake Valley they'd found the pack had been in by tracking scents. He'd pinned a map full of every town that stories had placed them in, including Oak Hill and the woods between here and there.

"What did Sasha tell you?" he asked, scooting his leather chair back and heading over to the pinboard, a marker pen at the ready to start writing

on the pieces of whiteboard he had to pin.

“Nothing much—”

“Con.”

“Can you just give me a sec—”

“If she didn’t tell you much, why aren’t you demanding answers from her back there?” Before I could even speak, he was talking over me again, and the irritation burned hot in my gut. “Con, I don’t know what’s gotten into you recently, but I need you to stop being so immature and pussyfooting around this situation with Sasha. She’s not even a wolf, one of your own kind, so either fuck her and get it out of your system or—”

Seeing red immediately, I shoved Fenrys. As he staggered back, I raised my voice. “I have it covered! Stop fucking underestimating me, Fen.”

Before he could come back at me, I grabbed one of his whiteboard pieces and snatched the marker from his hands, scrawling Darren’s name on it. “*There*, you asshole. If you’d given me a minute to tell you while acknowledging she didn’t give up *a lot*, then you’d have known I got the name of Kato’s beta.”

Fenrys stared at me, half in shock, half in anger at being defied.

My fists trembled at my sides. “Stop trying to micromanage my life!” I yelled. “Sasha isn’t just a *fuck her and move on* sort of person. Stop forcing me into something with her that isn’t even happening.”

“If it isn’t happening, then just *do what I damn well tell you!*” Fenrys roared, snapping back at me, every inch of his alpha dominance pouring out, forcing me to submit to him as his beta. I snarled, fighting against the commanding tone. *Weak*, I told myself. *He’s your best friend and can do this. Have this power over you. Fight back. Fight back.*

The Conall, Fenrys’s best friend, wanted to fight back; the beta wanted to submit to his alpha and leader.

I threw the first punch, forcing Fenrys back against the floor-to-ceiling window of his office.

I saw a flash of white blonde hair outside in my periphery, but Fenrys was already coming back at me, his hand reaching out to grab my

collar and keep me back. I knocked his arm aside and growled at him, lunging for him. He tried to buck me off, but I fought with anger where he didn't really want to fight at all.

“Stand the fuck *down*, Conall,” he shouted, elbows jabbing me back, keeping me at a distance but all I saw was red, over and over.

Either fuck her and get it out of your system...

She's not even a wolf...

I punched Fenrys again. We'd had many tussles over the years, but we'd never *fought*. Yet now my wolf ached to be let free and snap, let the beta and alpha fight it out. I heard Sasha's venom in my head, telling me I was just a beta, heard Aidan's taunts of keeping up with the alphas.

I was so *damn* tired of everyone belittling me, underestimating me, not letting me speak.

“I had—a *fucking name*—for you, man,” I shouted, struggling to gain on Fenrys. Thalia's voice called up to us, footsteps thundering up the stairs. Her hands scrabbled over my shoulder, trying to pull me off her mate.

Without thinking, I whirled on her. Before I made contact, I was thrown forward and pinned to the floor.

Fenrys's arm lay across my neck. I snarled, hating defying him, but hating that he was the source of my anger. He *wasn't*, that wasn't fair. He was the catalyst.

“Touch her, Conall, and you'll see how brothers can properly fight,” he warned me in a low voice. That took all the fight out of me. *Brothers*. Not Declan. Not anymore. But Fenrys, the man who'd accepted me as his best friend and second. The man who had never once before put me down for DNA that I hadn't chosen. The thing was, I *could* become an alpha. If anything ever happened to Fenrys, I was next in line. I could start my own damn pack if I wanted.

I didn't dare say that to him.

I held up my hands in surrender, the way I had with Declan at the gym the day before. “I'm done,” I snapped. Then I slumped as he got off me. “I'm done.”

Annoyed and feeling that bite of humiliation, I got to my feet, straightening my clothes. Fenrys's jaw was red where I'd punched him, and as much as it curled shame through me that I'd done that, I felt a sliver of pride.

"My daughter could have been around," he said with lethal quietness. "If she had heard anything, found her way in here, or if you had hurt Thalia..." He shook his head.

I met Fenrys's disappointed gaze. "I miss when you left for your paternity year."

Fenrys looked skyward, as if looking for an answer. "Get out, Con. Cool down. Go run laps on border patrol."

"That's—"

"Beneath you? Yeah, so is punching me."

I resisted the urge to snarl at him again. I wanted anger and adrenaline. "I wanted to come in here and give you that name and tell you I'd formed a plan with Sasha. She *didn't* tell me much, but that didn't mean I'd done nothing all morning." I looked between Fenrys and Thalia. "We're pretending to be a couple. We have a stakeout planned, and we'll pretend we're on a date if we're caught or people suspect anything. From there, we'll disguise any snooping as just dating."

With that, I walked out, slamming the door after myself.

I thought about finding Aidan and picking a fight with him. He'd get the adrenaline out of my system. Then I paused, scrolling through my contacts to Declan's number. After that meeting, we'd all been ordered to swap numbers. It had been years since I'd had any reason to put my brother's number into my phone.

Me: Want to fight it out like we used to?

My offer got silence in response. Anger burned through me. Maybe I should have texted Sasha, perhaps offered to start our stakeout immediately, but the shift was already coming through me when I saw my brother's read receipt on my message from five minutes ago. No typing, no call, no simply 'sure,' even. Just silence.

I shifted and lost myself in the trees and the mind of a wolf, trying to ignore the scent of leopard in the depths of the woods. I should have

wanted her as predator wanted prey, but for what *I* wanted, Sasha was a different kind of prey.

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Chapter 7 - Sasha

A knock on my door had me rushing to apply my cherry lip gloss and hurrying over to open it.

Standing in the doorway was Conall, leaning against the doorway, holding two takeout coffees. One smelled distinctly strong, the other with hints of hazelnut. Conall's eyes dropped to my lips, freshly glossed, and his nostrils flared, likely smelling the scent of cherry.

I enjoyed knowing it affected him after we'd kissed, the scent likely lingering on his skin where I'd kissed him everywhere I could with our clothes still on.

"Morning, babe," he greeted.

"Yeah, no," I answered. He stepped back, glancing around.

"Right, no neighbors," he muttered to himself. "I forgot about that."

"And yet you remembered where I lived."

He smirked, pointing behind me at my kitchen. "Well, considering I was ready to go down on you right against that kitchen counter, I remember this place pretty well. Even if we were a little drunk."

My cheeks burned, and I bit down on my tongue, holding back any witty response. I wanted to say *good, you'll remember your way home then*, before closing the door on him. But I couldn't. Thalia had told me about Conall's and Fenrys's fight the day before. I knew I had caused some of that trouble for Conall, and I needed to work with him seriously now. It wasn't about loyalty to an alpha or a pack; it was just about...

I frowned.

Well, I supposed it came down to caring about Conall and helping him follow orders, even if they didn't extend to me in quite the same way.

"I'm glad I'm not a wolf," I muttered aloud to myself.

"What?"

"Nothing," I answered. "Let's just go."

"Can't bear to see me in your apartment again after last time, kitty?"

Annoyed, I walked past him, snatching one coffee cup out of his hands, hissing at the heat. I slammed the door shut behind me and stalked down the stairs leading to the back of the bookshop.

“The coffee you took was mine,” Conall said, laughing. Glaring at him, I met his eyes and drank the bitter, strong shit he called coffee. I forced the wince out of my face, gulping down a burning hot sip before handing it back.

“Enjoy the cherry flavor,” I snapped. “It’s the last time you’ll taste it.”

I grabbed the other cup and started drinking it, walking away from him and to the front of the store.

“Oh, Sasha! I forgot to ask when you next wanted to pick up a shift,” the owner said as I passed by the cashier, Leah. She was the owner, in her forties, her kids moved to Atlanta for college, hence her studio for rent since she’d moved in with her partner. Her face lit up when Conall approached me, lingering at my side. I heard him sniff the cherry gloss before he took a sip of his drink. “Hi again!”

“Hey Leah,” he said, as if they were friends.

“This weekend,” I told her with a brighter smile than I gave Conall. “Six hours each day good?”

“Can you make it eight? I need the lunch shift covered.”

“Sure thing,” I told her before Conall and I headed out. Once on the sidewalk, I asked, “How do you know Leah?”

“I don’t,” he answered simply. “I got talking to her before I came upstairs to you. I asked her if she had any books on leopard mating behaviors.”

I stopped short. “Conall, I *swear* to God, I will dump this coffee over your head—”

“Hey now,” he said, in a falsely soothing voice. “No need to be hostile. She didn’t give up your shifter secrets. She didn’t have any. She had *plenty* on wolf mating, if you were interested.”

I seethed. “Good thing I’m not a wolf.”

I stalked away from him.

“Sasha!” he called.

“What?” I yelled.

“My car’s the other way.”

He jabbed a finger behind him, all casual coolness that I hated.

“You have three strikes of getting on my last nerve today, and then I promise I *will* dump something over you,” I hissed. “I’m talking, like—” I fumbled. “Like, Rizzo and Kenickie in *Grease*-style milkshake dumping.”

“Like *who* and *who* in *what*?”

“You’ve never seen *Grease*?” I asked as we approached his car. He popped his coffee cup on the roof of his car and gripped his keys between his teeth, tugging on a hoodie over his t-shirt. Today’s color was white, tight around his biceps.

“Unless you’re talking about Aidan’s hair, then no,” he said around the keyring between his teeth. I didn’t know why, but there was something attractive about the angle of his mouth doing that, the ease with which he had just moved. The swagger and confidence of knowing he could be looked at and admired.

I couldn’t help but snigger. “You’re trying to snub him, but Dakota said he uses shampoo *and* conditioner.”

Conall rolled his eyes. “Get in the car.”

It was bad enough that I was opening up the barely healed wounds of my ex-boyfriend; now I was searching through his pack that he wasn’t even a part of anymore, to my knowledge, *and* pretending to be Conall’s girlfriend. Not only that, but he’d already started planting the seeds of our fake relationship around town. Now, my sort-of landlord thought he was my boyfriend, and who knew who else.

It irked me as we drove through the main part of town. Conall didn’t turn on the music in his car, but I wanted him to. Part of me wanted to know what he listened to as he drove around. I was so used to seeing him walk

everywhere that the sight of him behind the wheel was unnerving as it was attractive.

“So I figure we’ll start—”

I cut him off. “*I’ll* start in Kato’s office. You should go down to the basement where the fight was.”

“Why? There’ll be nothing left. Any scent traces will be long faded by now.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, they may have left something. It’s been a long time, but it’s not like anyone uses that warehouse.”

The building in question rose up on the horizon quickly, an abandoned behemoth of a factory, the windows blacked out, the bricks crumbling, and the grass around it overgrown. Conall’s energy dropped the closer we got. He grew more serious than the man who’d knocked on my door with coffee, intent on riling me up.

A stab of guilt hit me when I realized how much I had prevented him from doing his duty to Fenrys. Although it wasn’t enough to agree on searching the same place.

“Look, we don’t have to be stuck together,” I said tersely. “We can cover more ground if we split up. And, really, nobody will be in there, so we don’t need to pretend to be a couple, right? I know this place well. I know where they hid things, where they stashed cash and other papers. Plans. Contracts. Everything.”

“Which is why we should stick together.” We pulled up outside the warehouse. He tapped the steering wheel, as if anxious, stalling.

“Conall—”

“Let’s get it over with,” he bit out, getting out of the car and slamming the door shut. Anxiety crawled down my spine as I followed him. Then it hit me: of course, he’d be nervous about coming here. He’d nearly lost the alpha and Luna of his pack, his best friend, and his goddaughter. Aside from that threat, Thalia had told me this was the place where all her secrets had spilled out, and she’d argued with Conall over double-crossing Fenrys and putting all their lives in danger.

I sidled up to him, keeping close. I hadn’t been there that night, unaware of anything gone wrong until Thalia had called me from the

hospital, telling me what had happened.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “It’s okay. Kato’s gone.”

He gave me a tight, unconvincing smile. “I just want to keep everyone safe.” It was a muttered thing, said as if he didn’t care *much, but I could tell* he did. Above us, the sky was bright and blue, making me feel much better about exploring an abandoned warehouse I’d spent a lot of time in.

Conall tried the door. I thought it would be locked, but it swung open beneath his hand with a creak. Inside, broken glass and wood scattered over the long hallway, the smell of rust and damp permeating the air. I coughed, tugging my jumper up and over my mouth and nose. Dust hung thickly in the air, and bits of sunlight just about broke through foggy, uncleaned windows from inside rooms with open doors.

“Creepy,” I commented.

Conall was looking down at the hallway to the single, industrial door on the other end, which I knew led to the basement. I swallowed. I’d avoided that door at all costs. Kato was dangerous, I’d known that when I’d been involved, when *Thalia* had been involved. But I had always thought his dangerous side came out when he was ridding the world of bad diplomats and town officials. Naively, I hadn’t considered that those who were taken down to the basement to be tormented by Kato’s awful pack had been good people making the wrong enemies.

I had believed so dumbly, and the more I realized the reality of Kato’s pack, the more I cursed my past self for not seeing any of it sooner. But they hadn’t hurt me. Maybe it was because I wasn’t a wolf that they’d kept me safe, had roughed up my father, ambushed my mother, and gotten me out of my home to go shack up with Jackson and the rest of the pack in Silverlake Valley.

Befriending *Thalia* had been easy, making it look like I’d been a starving, feral thing needing shelter. I *had*, technically, after Jackson left the pack. I’d needed a place to stay after losing mine and his room together. She’d taken me in, and I’d seen my chance to impress Kato, and seen her opportunity for revenge. That was why and how I had gotten the two connected.

That confession was on my tongue to Conall but I knew he was the last person I should admit anything to.

“Conall,” I said quietly. He glanced at me but said nothing. “After Fenrys killed Kato, they *did* remove the body, right?”

A twitch spasmed in his cheek. “I’m sure they did. Surely his pack would have wanted to bury his body, his family would have wanted peace for...” He trailed off, seeing my expression. “He had no family?”

I shook my head. “He’d been a lone wolf until he formed his pack. That was why he wanted to take over Silverlake Valley, to have a proper place to call his without shifter discrimination.”

Conall rolled his eyes. “You’re not a wolf. Do you feel welcome in this town?”

“Yes, but—”

“His views are good, but he achieved them through dangerous, awful means.”

I fell silent, knowing he was right. Blood would have spilled in the basement.

“Did you ever hear anything?” he asked. “Anything suspicious?”

Screams, I didn’t let myself confess. *Pleas of mercy*.

I shook myself off, shaking my head. I didn’t yet trust Conall. We walked deeper into the warehouse. I hesitated just before Kato’s old office, where I’d walked Thalia in once, proud of myself for bringing him someone to help the cause, not knowing he was dangerous.

“You never *once* heard anything that might seem... I don’t know, psychopathic criminal?”

“He wasn’t a criminal—” I cut myself off at Conall’s flat expression. Okay, maybe he was. He’d tried to overtake the town from the Randons, whom he’d never had any respect for, and he’d trapped Thalia in an assassination contract, taking advantage of her vulnerability and heartbreak.

But he’d never done anything to *me*.

But that didn’t excuse him for anything else he’d done, either.

“I’ll look in the office,” I muttered. I was doing this because, as terrifying as it was to head right into the wolves’ den, it was still easier than messaging Jackson.

“I’ll check out the basement and a few other rooms,” Conall said. “If I’m not back here in an hour, meet me at the car.”

I laughed. “What do you think you’ll find in here that’ll take you more than an hour?”

He shrugged. “Who knows?”

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Chapter 8 - Conall

The old warehouse smelled of mold and was damp. The walls were blackened at the tops, where the ceiling joined the wall, and the damp had soaked into the carpet beneath my feet. The last time I'd been here, I'd been blazing through, ready to flay Fenrys alive for risking his life for a woman who had betrayed him. A woman who'd become his mate and my Luna, now.

But he'd thrown himself headfirst into a dangerous situation for his mate and unborn child at the time, forgoing the strength and support of his pack.

I inched down the hallway, listening to Sasha's careful sifting of papers in the office behind me. Being here made me feel on edge and anxious, not able to repress the memories of that night.

I looked in the hallway, spotting the stains nobody had cleaned up. That was where I'd broken the neck of one of Kato's pack members. There was where I'd knocked another out. I hadn't been able to kill that one; his eyes had reminded me of Declan's, weakening me, even back then. I should have killed them all, one by one. Piled them up, set this place on fire, to save any further threats.

That's what a good beta would have done.

Aidan would have done that for Dakota, Fenrys would have done it for Thalia. What would I do for—

I didn't let that thought finish.

The red carpet was darkened by old blood stains, and the walls were streaked with dirt and more red splashes from the spray. It smelt so bad, like the entire building had gone off. I didn't know what I expected to find. Not one of Kato's pack, they would all be long gone. But maybe a trace of their whereabouts. If the rest of his pack had scrambled apart so quickly after Kato's death that they'd left all this blood everywhere, then they had to have left *some* other clues. They hadn't been careful, and I was banking on that helping me out.

Finally, I came to the industrial door. I placed my hand on it, pushing it open. It swung easily on broken hinges. The stairs were bent and

dented, evidence of wolves pounding up the steel frame. I inhaled sharply, looking at the swinging lightbulb, smashed, leaving the room in relative darkness.

Again, the basement hadn't been cleaned up, only Kato's body had been taken, but not the blood stains or even the bullet casings cleaned up. I supposed a pack as powerful as Kato's could buy their way out of anything with expensive lawyers. They'd only needed to escape before Fenrys's pack killed them all.

That was the first time I'd properly realized I owed Fenrys my life and loyalty. It was the first time I'd been tested to risk my life truly for him, to fight with him, and for him. After coming so close to losing my best friend at the hands of Kato and his pack, I'd been glad for his brief recovery time away. He hadn't had a chance to see my nightmares, how I'd dreamed about his blood on my hands, the wet and sticky feeling of it, of hoisting him up onto the stretcher when the paramedics came.

How I'd still felt blood and smelt it weeks later, waking up to wash my hands ten times at least to convince myself.

"Come on, come on," I muttered. "You would have left *something*."

Sasha was likely having better luck upstairs with documents or plans they may have put down on paper, but I checked out the basement further, kicking the bullet casings to one side. There were blood stains where Fenrys had been shot, and the darkness that got deeper the more I wandered made me see all too clearly the events of that night behind my eyes.

Thalia's bound hands, Fenrys and the gun, Kato aiming at them both, the confessions and betrayals, the *crack* of the gun, me screaming for Fenrys as if that would save him.

I needed to apologize to him for yesterday. I needed to make amends and fix the mess I'd caused with my careless, angry words. The anger came and went, but Fenrys had always picked me up off the ground. High school, college, our football team, every win and loss, every high and low. My pride kept me from doing that, and I needed to find a way to fight it.

A flash of a keyring caught my eye, nestled among rubble in the far right corner. Fayetteville. That was a city just over an hour away. I wondered if one of the pack had lived there, the keyring dropped in their

haste to scatter. Had they already regrouped, or were they slowly pairing back up over time, growing in threat and size?

I grabbed hold of the keyring just as I heard a crash from upstairs. I jerked upright, immediately launching myself up the steel steps, crying out when the staircase swung off its hinges at the top, forcing me to leap across to the doorway. Shuddering at the place, I sprinted down the hallway to where I'd left Sasha outside Kato's office.

The place was a mess. Every desk drawer had been yanked out, the sofa had massive slashes through, causing the stuffing inside to poke out. The desk itself was overturned, and the chair had been rammed into the wall. Papers were scattered everywhere, stationary littering the carpet, and spilled ink filling crevices and staining white pages.

At first, I panicked, looking for the person who had broken in, trying to find Sasha. At first, I couldn't see her head of curls that she'd pinned back today, letting a few stray curls drape loosely around her face, but then I spotted her, crouched behind the overturned desk. I rushed to her side.

"Where's the..." I trailed off on *danger*, realizing she wasn't cowering but rummaging. It was Sasha who'd trashed the office. On her face was something I recognized: anger. Shiny tear tracks smeared her makeup, and I resisted the urge to gently wipe them away.

"What's wrong, Sasha?"

Her lips dug into her plush lower lip, holding back another sob. I raised my hand to cup her face, but she batted it out of the air, her sobs now turning into a snarl.

"Get away from me," she snapped. "The office is a bust; nothing's here. The basement was clear?" She was already walking out the door. "Let's go. We can find better leads." Her voice disappeared as she stormed away, leaving me to pick through the rubble of the Sasha tornado she'd torn through the room.

Chapter 9 - Sasha

Conall didn't follow me out. Not after two minutes, or five. When it reached ten minutes, and he still hadn't come out, I rammed an elbow into the hood of his car, muffling a scream into my jumper sleeve. I needed to shift. I needed to run. I needed to hunt every single man from that pack down and make them admit everything I'd just read.

Tears as hot as my anger burned slid down my face as I choked on a sob. I closed my eyes, crouching down into a ball on the sidewalk. There was nobody for miles. Nobody would see my breakdown, but there was nobody except Conall, who would offer me a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen.

And Conall was not the man whom I wanted to share *any* part of my discovery with.

And yet...

Hurt crowded into my heart, whispering that if he cared the way he kept showing me glimpses of then he would have raced out after me after seeing evidence of my crying. But I could still see his shadow moving around the room, poking through the damage I had wrought.

My lip curled; I hoped he found everything he was looking for.

I whipped out my phone and texted Thalia: **I told you I did not want to do this.**

She wasn't the object of my true anger, but if she hadn't pushed, if she'd just found some way for me to work alone and relay the information to Conall, or if she'd picked a different person to work with him, I wouldn't have opened up a web of lies.

My breath came in short pants. I closed my eyes, my fingers sliding into my hair. I was distantly aware of hands on my wrists, tugging my hands away.

"Hey, hey." Conall's voice, deep and concerned, broke through my haze. I opened my eyes, meeting his bright green, his eyebrows narrowed in worry. "What did you see in there?"

"Leave me alone," I mumbled. "Take me home. Please."

“What did you see?”

“Nothing!” I snapped. “Nothing of worth to your pack.”

“Anything in that office could be useful. I think I know at least one of their other locations.”

Fear gripped me. “Where?”

“I’ll tell Fenrys.” He shrugged, nonchalantly, holding back on me as a petty payback for doing the same to him. Except it wasn’t the same. It *wasn’t*.

“Fuck you, Conall,” I spat, baring my teeth. He blinked at me, barely contained anger moving in his expression: the tightening of his mouth at the corner, the twitch of his eyes, the muscle ticking in his cheek. I smiled slowly, too wide, not genuine at all. “You want to unleash it all, don’t you? Your anger is. Just. Like. Mine.” I cocked my head. “We both want more than the positions we’re forced to uphold, the roles we need to play for others. What about the shit we do for ourselves? Who cares about *that*?”

Before I could go on, Conall pinned my wrists behind my back, crowding me against the car. I got my feet under me, collapsing us both onto the floor. His eyes bore into mine. For a second, I couldn’t think, not as he let me feel the full weight of him. He let go of my hands, bracing himself over me.

“You feel that?” He asked me quietly. “I’m not weak, I’m not *less*. I serve an alpha, but I was picked for that because of everything I have worked for *alone*. He’s my best friend, and no matter how much you try to throw me off, I won’t fail him.”

The unspoken words lingered: *like I’ve done before*.

Ignoring how my hand shook, I dragged one fingertip down his chest, feeling every hard muscle and ridge of definition through his thin shirt. His pulse picked up speed, fluttering away in his neck.

“And what about the dominance you have over your own life?” I purred. “What does it take out of you to submit to him every day?” He grabbed my hand, linking it through his, and I reminded myself how, when he took over the pack for Fenrys throughout the year, we had been trying to make something of whatever was happening between us.

He pulled my hand up to his mouth, biting gently around my fingertip. I hissed and pulled away.

“Take me home,” I demanded again.

“Tell me what you found in that office,” he told me again. “No deflections this time.”

I gritted my teeth. When I blinked, I saw the words on the paper behind my eyes.

Jackson Trent, indebted to Kato Montolli...

... Hereby agrees to get Sasha Harlow, a leopard species, into the pack as a companion...

... Whatever means necessary...

“Sasha.” Conall’s voice nearly brought me back again but I was lost, spiraling through those words.

... Earn the leopard’s trust. She will learn part of our plan for the town...

... Jackson will stage their breakup, leaving the pack Sasha’s only place to go...

... The plan will commence...

... A new species: leopard and wolf. Speed and strength. Agility and build...

Nausea rolled through me as I thought about Jackson’s name at the bottom of the contract, agreeing to it all. Except it was no longer just sadness and anger that weighed me down. It was betrayal, a need for revenge.

“Soon,” I whispered to Conall. “Not yet. I need to process it first.”

He blinked, as if surprised at my offer of trust. He nodded, pulling back from me. My skin was alight where he’d pressed his lips and teeth to my fingertip.

Conall offered me his hand to tug me off the floor. I let him help me, and I dropped into the passenger side of the car, sighing. We drove back into Silverlake Valley, and I wondered what *he’d* found that was of use in that office.

After Conall dropped me off home, I had my box of mementos open, the contents tipped into the sink, my sobs hiccupping past my lips as I gathered it all to burn.

I was finally letting go. Seeing that contract had finally unlocked the need in me to trash every memory I had of Jackson and my relationship, now knowing it was all fake.

He'd used me, targeted me personally, became the hero who'd saved me from my home, took me away from there, ruined my life. He got me surrounded by the wolves, right at the heart of their pack. The whole time he'd been planning to leave me, to make sure that when the heartbreak happened, I would only have the pack to turn to. And I would have, had Kato not assigned me to find Thalia and take advantage of her heartbreak, until we'd genuinely become friends. Kato had made me bring Thalia in to be an assassin, someone to get rid of Fenrys; Jackson had brought me in to be the pack's eventual toy, to make a new shifter species combining my DNA and theirs.

My stomach lurched at the thought. Who would have done it? Fathered a wolf-leopard cub in me? Kato himself? I let out a snarl as I flicked the lighter on and held it to the picture of Jackson and I in San Francisco. I was a virgin, and Jackson had never gone the whole way with me. We'd fooled around, but I'd always thought he respected my decision to wait. Now I realized he hadn't done it out of respect.

He just hadn't been contracted to my bodily rights the whole way. No, I'd been saved for Kato's use.

A slimy sort of violation crawled through my skin as I thought of how close to danger I'd come. But then another thought hit me: if Jackson left due to our fake breakup, what had he been doing all this time? He'd told me it was due to us not working out as he wanted to leave the pack and would find it hard if I didn't go with him, but now I knew his full motives. So where was Jackson, and what, exactly, had he been doing since leaving the pack and me?

As the last memories of a relationship that had been fake from the start began to burn in my bathroom sink, I grabbed my phone, typing

furiously. I wasn't upset anymore; I was fucking furious. For the first time in months, I opened Jackson's message thread. I still hadn't deleted our messages. I did that now and began anew, wanting him to know exactly how I felt in person.

I want to meet with you. I know you've not gone far, Jackson. Meet me in Jack's diner, Silverlake Valley, as soon as you can.

A reply came not even ten minutes later. **I see you've finally found your fire again. I'm available on Sunday morning. I'll be there at 10:30.**

That was two days away. I'd have to let my landlord and sort of employer know I would have to cancel the shift she'd asked me to do but I couldn't risk Jackson not offering another meeting.

I didn't tell Conall or Thalia. I'd agreed to fake date Conall for the sake of his leads, but this was one to do on my own. I poured a glass of wine before grabbing the whole bottle and retreating to my bathroom, filling the bath.

I'll be there.

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Chapter 10 - Conall

I was heading out of Silverlake Valley and towards the highway when my phone pinged.

Sasha: My lead is going well.

That was all she said. No name, no indication, nothing specific. I rolled my eyes, throwing my phone on the dash. On second thoughts, I pulled over onto the side of the road, throwing my car into park.

I grabbed my phone again.

Are you still not going to tell me what made you snap and trash Kato's office?

Her reply came back curtly. **What do you think?**

Then another: **Maybe if you ask me nicely, I'll tell you.**

An annoyed hiss passed my lips. She wanted a reaction out of me, and she wouldn't get it. Something in that office had made her look wrecked when I'd finally come out to find her. I'd given her a while to cool off, collect her thoughts, and took advantage of her absence to root through the office.

Don't forget she knew this pack. She's got history with them. That had been Thalia's advice before I'd set off that morning, armed with coffee. Something had spooked her. Something that had made her expression so vacant even I hadn't been able to get through to her at one point.

She won't ever talk to you about this. She won't answer your questions. Not about the office, the rejection that night, or her ex-boyfriend. Nothing.

Sasha was a closed-off, proud woman. I wasn't going to change that.

Maybe an alpha could, a nasty voice in my head taunted. But I shoved that thought down, clenching the steering wheel with one hand, considering just heading back and turning up early for my shift at the bar where I worked.

Sasha had clearly been betrayed by wolf shifters. Her past relationship had been with a wolf. She had no reason to trust me, and her getting involved in pack politics had clearly affected her life already. It was

foolish of me to hope she'd risk that again for the sake of me proving my loyalty.

Instead of answering her, I keyed in the general area of Fayetteville.

After a second, I sighed.

I'm headed onto another lead. Come with me, I text her.

Sasha: Nope. Thanks, though xo.

I snarled and threw my phone aside, slamming the car back into drive. The tires screeched as I raced for Fayetteville. There was something there to do with Kato's pack, and I'd figure that out alone if I had to, even if it meant defying Fenrys. Sasha would never get it, and I had to stop expecting her to.

"Aidan," I said as a greeting when my phone rang. I'd asked him for what he'd had on sightings in Fayetteville. As I'd suspected, there had been activity here, but I needed to confirm it was Kato's pack.

"Hey," he said, all business now. I could always count on an alpha to be serious when it came to the safety of his pack. "So there's a high school in the city, further south, past the center of, well, pretty much everything. At the back of the school, there's a massive expanse of woods. That's where a lot of the headlines have come from. There's been general unrest, a few wolf sightings. I'd say that's your best bet."

"Thanks, A," I said.

He didn't say anything for a few long moments, the silence heavy. "Conall—" He cut himself off.

"What?" I snapped.

"Just be careful, yeah?"

I paused. "Yeah. 'Course."

"Fenrys told me what happened between the two of you."

"Not talkin' about that with you, A," I muttered. "If you want me to have backup, then send me Declan. For now, this isn't an approach. Just

checking up a lead.”

Aidan barked a laugh. “Good fucking luck there.”

“Do you think he’ll talk to me, like, at all?”

“I’m not your go-between,” Aidan said. “I told you my thoughts, as I’ve told Declan. Fight it out, or just stop being little bitches.”

“Great talk. Thanks for the info.”

“Gotcha.”

He paused again.

“Aidan, you can hang up now.”

“Yeah.”

And still, he didn’t. “Anything on your mind?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Bye, then.”

I went to hang up. “Wait—” Aidan said. I waited. “Feels good to be back on your side of things.” Before I could answer, he said, “I’ll still drag your ass through the mud though.”

“Course you will,” I muttered. “I missed you, A.”

We’d been just as close as I was with Fenrys once upon a time, and I missed my friend. I hung up after that, not willing to waste more time. I snuck around the back of the high school grounds, looking out at the empty yard and benches. In the windows, figures walked around in the building. I bypassed any notice, slinking into the trees, and stripped quickly, folding my clothes away under a brush, and then shifted.

As I did, I felt my mind slip away.

All the worries and anger went away, leaving me as a beast with one goal: find the enemy. I was *made* for that. My paws pounded the ground as I ran until I picked a trail of wolves. The woods were expansive but popular for locals' walking routes, according to the internet. I’d have to be careful.

I slowed my prowl when I caught wind of a scent in the air, my nose flaring as I swiveled my head, looking for the direction. Two scents, I noticed, both of them masculine, twined together. I lowered my face to the ground, letting my senses take over. I hadn’t shifted in a while, wanting to

be human with Sasha more than be a wolf and highlight the undeniable difference between us.

The scents led me deeper into the wood, where I had to slow down to avoid detection. Some voices came from the main trail to my left, but the scents were purely human. My hackles rose. They could have hired external help to throw off our suspicions.

No. I was overthinking, and the hiking couple bypassed, talking about the species of birds they'd seen. The male planned to write an essay about the falcon they'd spotted. If I was human, I'd have laughed. Yeah, I couldn't see them joining a wolf pack.

I followed the scents further until I spotted a log cabin in the depths of the woods. Far away from the school enough to avoid any notice, and off the trail enough that hikers and campers might not seek it out for shelter. It was barely bigger than a shed, but I stayed back, my wolf's senses heightening my sight and hearing. If they were wolves, I'd have been screwed. But to my luck, two men paced back and forth.

I wished the basement would have held at least one trace, but I'd clasped the keyring the whole journey here. Whoever owned the chain wasn't either of these two. That meant my suspicions could be true: the pack had dispersed and was slowly coming back together.

I eyed the two men, and my wolf's paws remembered the swipe of skin beneath my claws. For a second, I was back in that basement, a gun aimed at my best friend, blood spraying. My Luna holding her swollen stomach, her unborn cub drawing Fenrys to them no matter what danger it had put him in.

I saw two faces in the background of my memory, two men tackling Lyna. She'd caught one of them across the face. When a skinned-headed man turned around, his neck as thick as my paw, I saw the scars across his face, twisting his features.

A growl built in my throat.

It was two of them from that day.

Were any of them Sasha's ex-boyfriend or even Darren Garth? She had said her ex-boyfriend had left the pack, but *why*? And could he have gone back to it?

I listened to their conversation. Another location was mentioned, some sort of office building, they mentioned. It must be their new headquarters, in Palmetto, Georgia. I heard Silverlake Valley mentioned a scout being placed there as well.

I ran back through the woods, shifted, and redressed, sprinting back to my car.

I headed back onto the highway, typing on my phone with one hand. My other message to my brother was left unanswered, but I still offered the damn olive branch.

Want to go on a stakeout this weekend?

My phone pinged less than a minute as I headed back to Silverlake Valley.

Declan: GFY.

“Nice,” I sighed. “Real fuckin’ nice.”

I dialed another number. Sasha answered immediately, her voice bright. “Ya?”

I squinted at the time. God, how was it not later than three in the afternoon?

“Have dinner with me tonight,” I said. “No ifs or buts. I’m booking us a table for six at the Starlight.”

She giggled. “I’d *love* to, boyfriend.”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “We’re doing some scouting, so try not to drink any more, yeah?”

“You got it, alpha.”

I growled down the phone before hanging up. I floored the gas and raced back to Silverlake Valley. The Starlight was an up-end restaurant in town; if we’d hear anything secretive, it would be there.

Sasha walked into the restaurant, and my stomach dropped to the floor.

Her hair was parted, one side of her curls tumbling down her shoulder, and the other side pinned back with an elegant clasp. She wore a deep navy strapless bodycon dress, the neckline clinging to the contours of her chest. The center of the dress dipped right down to her navel in a small V-shape, showing off more skin than I was prepared for. The waist pulled in to frame her gorgeous body, and a slit in the tight skirt showed a sliver of her tanned thigh as she stalked to our table.

Sasha's eyes were on me, made up in dark, dramatic colors. In my own dress shirt and smart pants, a Rolex on my wrist, I wasn't underdressed, but it was clear Sasha was the center of attention at that moment. My pants were suddenly too tight, and I swallowed.

It's fake, I told myself. Don't be stupid, Conall.

I stood for her, taking her coat to drape over the chair next to me while she lowered herself into the chair opposite me. She drew herself in, propping her chin on her open palm as she blinked at me. Her eyes were bright, inquisitive.

"You look gorgeous," I told her, not one to forgo a compliment to a beautiful woman.

"So do you," she replied.

I half smirked at her. "I look gorgeous?"

Her smile was playful. "I'd say you're more sexy."

I blinked at her and then realized we had eyes on us, and she was just doing an incredible job at playing the role of my fake girlfriend. Suddenly, I regretted my entire proposal. A silver bracelet complemented her tanned wrist, an elegant ring on her middle finger as she reached over to toy with the stem of the wine glass. I gestured for a waiter to fill it up for her. I nodded for my own to be refilled.

Sasha's eyes remained on me when the waiter left. Her fingers brushed up and down the stem of her glass. I tried not to notice. I scanned the restaurant, trying to find a familiar face. I'd never dined here before, but Sasha seemed at home.

"Have you been here before?" I asked.

"I have," she answered. "My ex-boyfriend used to bring me here often. I met Kato for the first time here, as well. He brought me here on my

birthdays.”

I flicked my gaze back to her as she told me this gem of information, waiting for it to affect her. If it did, she did a good job at covering it up. God, she was gorgeous. I wanted to take her over the table, to sit next to her, bend my face close to hers, slide my hand up that slit in her dress, and tease her.

Focus, I told myself.

Honestly, while this cover was good to scout the restaurant, it almost served to just enjoy Sasha’s company away from both of our anger earlier. It was like she was a different woman to before.

“Well,” I said, “Thank you for agreeing to this meeting here.”

“Meeting?” she laughed. “Conall, baby, this is a date, isn’t it?”

I bit down on my snarl. “Of course it is—*baby*.”

She bared her teeth in a grin, knowing she’d gotten under my skin with that name.

You’re smiling, but I could have you on your knees, dripping wet, calling you that.

I smiled my own smug smile in response, sipping my wine glass. The front of her heel grazed my ankle under the table.

“So Kato was known to frequent here?” I asked. “What about the rest of the pack?”

Sasha leaned into me. My gaze flickered down to her generous cleavage and then followed her gaze, where she nodded. “There’s another room through the back over there,” she told me. “It’s all velvet and vinyl. A mood room for wealthy patrons who want a little privacy when dinners get...” Her eyes met mine. “Heated.”

She’s drunk, I told myself. She’s acting. Don’t lean too into her playing this role. She rejected you, remember? She doesn’t want you.

I leaned back, nodding.

“Kato would book that room out at least once a week,” she said. “He would meet a woman, usually. They’d come back when we’d long gone home.”

“What did he do in there?”

Her smile was wicked. “We all bet that he fucked her real good. What do *you* think?”

The brazen word coming from her mouth did things to me that I wasn’t prepared for. I gritted my teeth, clenching my fork. Like she had done for me in the diner, I’d ordered ahead for us, and I was saved from her filthy tongue by our food arriving.

“I know the host,” Sasha mentioned halfway through our meal. “Of the private room.” She shot me a knowing look. “In the *exact* way, you’re thinking.”

I knew how a lie looked on Sasha’s tongue; I was learning to know. And there was some truth there, but it wasn’t the full story she wanted me to think.

I’ll open you, Sasha, I thought. I’ve known you long enough to start figuring you out. Drop the act.

“Good,” I said. “Maybe you can work some of that magic to get intel on if the pack has checked into the room lately.”

“Want to watch?” she teased.

“Sure,” I lied off-handedly, surprising her. “I want to see what you look like *not* rejecting someone.”

Sasha’s made-up eyes narrowed. “Ass,” she muttered. “Fine. After dinner, I’ll get that information. I’ll give you a nod to come watch.”

Chapter 11 - Sasha

Conall couldn't stop staring at me no matter how hard he tried to look away. I had always seen him as attractive. I knew my rejection that day hadn't been anything to do with him but with me, and now I half questioned what I was even saving myself for.

I slid into the role of a sultry, sensual woman so easily, assisted by the half a bottle of wine from earlier that day in the tub, and the dinner wine. My dress hugged every part of my body, knowing its grace and shape were on tantalizing display for everyone to look at.

But aside from my comment about the meeting room host, I made sure Conall felt as though I only had eyes for him.

His muscled chest was half exposed in a button-down white linen shirt, the caps emphasizing strong biceps. Thalia told me he, Fenrys, and Aidan all worked out together, and if I knew Conall, as I was starting to, I knew he'd keep up with the grueling alphas' workout regime. Part of me wanted to offer myself to him here and now; the other part wanted to run, to hide as best as I could, to never be sniffed out by another wolf ever again.

I was a virgin; I should be keeping it that way.

And yet the way he looked at me, as if he could undress me with just his gaze, made me flush inside out.

We finished our meals, and I smirked at him, pushing up from the table. Like everyone else, Conall assumed that my sensual characteristics were paired with an openness with sex itself. He likely thought I was doing sexual favors for the host in exchange for information.

Let him think that. I didn't care. If anything, I enjoyed seeing how that thought got under his skin.

In reality, I sidled over to the host, Vinny, an old friend I'd made since becoming Jackson's girlfriend, and smiled at him. I slipped him some bills I'd prepared upon being invited to the Starlight.

"Walk with me," I murmured. "I have a friend at my table who needs to see me head out of view with you."

He nodded immediately, taking the bills discreetly, and offered his arm to guide me away. I smiled smugly at Conall, tossing my curls over my shoulder, and followed Vinny.

When we got near the kitchens, out of sight, I laughed and hugged him. “How have you been? It’s been so long!”

“It has!” he exclaimed. “God, you look beautiful, Sash. Jackson doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

My blood went cold. I’d gotten so used to being the only one around my friends who knew Jackson’s name and just how close he’d been to Kato. I’d portrayed him as one of the lower-ranked wolves, but he was far closer, one of Kato’s most trusted two.

I faked a laugh. “He’s long gone!”

Vinny grimaced. “I’m assuming you want to see the records,” he said. “Word is you left Kato’s pack after he—died.” His eyes flickered away, almost nervously. “I’m sorry for your loss. I know he was like a father to you. I thought you would have gone with them.”

The word *father* would have once felt fitting despite there only being just over a decade between Kato and me, but now the word rolled through me sickly. Nobody would ever know about the contract, what I was seduced into the pack for.

I plastered a smile on my face. “Thank you.” I shrugged. “And, ah, no. The pack left little old me in the dust.”

Vinny shook his head. “They may not have left you as much as you thought.”

I held my breath, trying to still the tremble in my hands. “What do you mean?”

Glancing around, he tapped his tablet screen and showed me the screen. Two instances: *Jackson Trent, party of 5* from two weeks ago; *Darren Garth, party of two*.

My heart pounded in my chest. Jackson had come back to Silverlake Valley before I had ever texted him. I had thought my message was bringing him back, but no.

“Jackson booked the room for eleven,” Vinny told me. “But they didn’t arrive at the restaurant until late but he said they’d had to drive a while and got caught in traffic.”

“Who were the five?” I asked.

“Four of the pack, including Jackson and Darren,” Vinny said, curling his fingers in a silently asking gesture. I slipped more bills into his waiting hand. “The other was a girl. I didn’t recognize her. Tall, shapely. Great legs.”

I shut down immediately. “Thanks, Vin. If they come again, report it to Fenrys Randon discreetly.”

“Will do,” he replied. “Take care of yourself, Sash.”

I walked back to Conall, a shaky smile on my face. This time, he didn’t buy my façade as I sat down and finished the last of my wine in one gulp.

“It seems the pack is closing in closer than we anticipated,” I told him.

On Saturday morning, I was in a long hoodie falling to my thighs, cycle shorts clinging to my legs, and sat cross-legged in Fenrys’s room, relaying the information. Fenrys was stressed out, pacing, his eyes red as though he hadn’t slept.

“Fen,” Thalia said quietly. She reached for him. While everything was happening, Reina had been put in the care of her grandmother, and I could see the strain it had on both of them to be parted from their baby girl. “Fen, you need rest.”

“What I need is to make sure that pack doesn’t threaten my town.”

“Actually, it’s still Mama Randon’s for now,” Aidan drawled unhelpfully. Dakota elbowed him in the ribs. It felt strange to be in the room with both alphas, their betas, and their mates, unsure of where I fit in.

I sat closest to Conall. His whole body was tightly wired as he glared at Jason.

“Declan got these pictures off social media,” Fenrys said, ignoring both Thalia and Aidan. “So we have Jackson Trent, unknown rank.” I swallowed as he stabbed a pin through Jackson’s picture on the pinboard. “And Darren Garth, assumed beta.”

“I already said—” I began but then bit my lip, waving his questioning look off. “Never mind. I have to head out, but I sent Thalia all the info.”

I was due to meet Jackson himself at the diner.

I stared into his eyes on the picture, piercing blue eyes that held so much love in them once. Now I only saw threat in them. Nausea swept over me.

Conall brushed against me. “Where are you headed?”

He was trying to see if I was following a lead without him again. I smiled. “Work. You were there when I agreed with my landlord that I’d work the weekend shifts, right?” I wasn’t, but it was an easy alibi. I didn’t want anyone jeopardizing my meeting. I’d get more out of Jackson if he thought I wasn’t associated with them, unless he’d seen me around with Conall. It would be easy to feign not wanting to get involved with another pack the way I had with Kato’s.

Thalia eyed me across the room, lifting a brow. Conall shrugged. There was still a tense energy in the air, but he’d told me the night before that he and Fenrys were sorting things out *the wolf way*, whatever the hell that meant. Knowing them, they would shift and snarl a little at each and call it a day. *Pack politics*, I thought, amused.

“Wait,” Fenrys said when I stood to leave. “This friend of yours, Vinny. Is he on the pack’s payroll? Is he likely to report your questions to them?”

I shrugged. “He goes with whoever pays him most.”

But I hadn’t even asked anything. Vinny had offered the information up himself. If he snitched, he would have to confess his own loose tongue first.

I grabbed my bag and headed out, but Thalia caught me on the way out.

“Where are you really going?” she whispered, pulling me away from the pack.

I hesitated. “I’m going to meet Jackson.”

“No,” she said. “Sasha, *no*.”

“Lia, he’s not dangerous,” I told her flippantly. “I need information from him, is all. He’s been skulking around, as I’ve just mentioned. I need to know if he’s back in the pack.”

I didn’t mention the contract; I’d kept that to myself.

“Take Conall,” she said. “He’ll prot—”

“Protect me?” I cut her off sharply. “No, Lia. I’m going alone. It’s easier if he thinks I’m not affiliated with you all. I just—need to talk to him.”

She gave me a softened look. “Will you be okay?”

I’d gotten her through her rejection but had never quite let her into the details of my heartbreak. I’d been a mess, she’d known that, but she hadn’t known quite how messy I’d been, attempting to detach my co-dependency issues. I’d wholly turned to Kato’s pack, throwing myself on their willing arms, attending every dinner out of town, every gala and party they went to. I was their prize leopard shifter. A lot more of a prize than I’d ever realized.

“I’ll be okay,” I said.

“If he confirms he’s involved with them, I want you out of there immediately, in case he isn’t alone,” Thalia warned. “I don’t think any of Kato’s pack will spare you.”

Except they would.

I wondered if their goal written in the contract was still in progress or if this new woman they’d met with was their new focal point.

“I know them, Lia,” I told her. Softly, I added, “They were my home once.”

Chapter 12 - Conall

After Sasha left the meeting, we finalized every bit of detail we'd gotten.

Printed social media posts and headlines littered the pinboard. Like Fenrys, Kato had always valued looking good in public, being part of a community, being a benefactor, getting people on his side until he reeled them into his darker criminal games. No doubt he'd passed that onto his pack.

I looked at the picture of Jackson, cocking my head. There was something ingenuine about his eyes, the way he looked like a starved dog who might bite for food or roll over and ask properly, never knowing which it would be. After mulling over it, I didn't tell Fenrys about Sasha being spooked in the office. I should have—I'd crowed about my loyalty to Fenrys the entire time we spent together, but I couldn't bring myself to share it. It could have personal, nothing to do with us. Her reaction had definitely been personal. No, whatever she'd found was hers to keep for now. She still hadn't told me any details.

We wrapped up the meeting. I was thinking of heading out to wait Sasha's shift out to propose another stakeout but Thalia pulled me aside first.

"If I were you, I'd clear my day to go to Jack's diner instead," she told me quietly. "Sasha's headed there to meet with Jackson."

My stomach dropped. No. No way. The man was proving himself to be dangerous. Why would she be so *stupid*? And she'd lied!

"She'd never ask you for help, nor me, for that matter," Thalia continued. "She says she knows the pack, and Jackson, but I'm worried for her safety. She's... Headstrong, and keeps refusing any help, even just backup. Please go with her. Argue with her if you need to in order to stay but just don't let her be alone with him."

Even if Thalia hadn't asked me I'd have gone.

I nodded dutifully. I would never direct order from my Luna either way. I left the house and raced to Jack's diner.

It was ten minutes until ten-thirty. True to Thalia's tip-off, Sasha was sitting in the booth we'd sat in days ago. Anger rose up in me at being lied to, but I tampered it down as I pushed my way into the diner. Sasha's back was to me but I saw her flinch, clearly anticipating someone else.

A couple filed in behind me. The bell above the door rang again, Sasha flinched a second time. The diner was busy; clearly, she wasn't relaxing at all while waiting.

I approached her booth. "Well, well, this *is* a funny-looking bookstore shift."

Eyes flicked to us. In a small town, everyone was everywhere in everyone's business. Rumors of the wolf and the leopard dating spread like wildfire. At my glares, they quickly looked away. Sasha stiffened before she slowly turned to look at me.

"Conall."

"Sasha."

I took a seat opposite her.

"You can't stay," she said.

"And why's that? Meeting someone?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You dined me once; that doesn't entail you knowing the ins and outs of my life and meeting."

"I do if it concerns the safety of my pack."

"*Fenrys's* pack," she corrected. I grimaced, pulling away, to lean into the booth. "Sorry."

"I'll dine you again if it means I can keep you safe from whoever you're meeting."

"I don't need you to keep me safe." Her response came through gritted teeth.

I didn't challenge her flinching whenever the diner bell rang. I let her have that moment without worrying about being seen.

“I think you might do,” I said. “Sasha, do you even know who you’re dealing with? You may have turned up alone, but how can you guarantee Jackson—”

“Stop,” she snapped. “Just stop it, Conall. You do not have a claim over me just because we kissed once. Stop acting as though you are obligated to me and treat me as though I can’t handle myself.” Her fists clenched before she hid them under the table. “New flash: I *can*.” Sasha’s shoulders pulled in. “I lived with them before. They’re not some stranger enemy pack to me. They were—they were my family.”

The harsh question was out of my mouth before I could stop it. “It must have really killed you to grieve Kato, huh?” Her eyes flashed in warning, but I couldn’t stop. “What was it that drew you to him? Daddy issues?”

Her face tightened, screwing up, and I knew I’d hit my mark. “Fuck. Off.”

Her words were bitten out, full of venom, but I had a particular love for her brand of poison.

“How did you grieve him, hm? You didn’t seem particularly sad about his passing. But is that why you trashed his office, Sasha? Poor wolf Daddy is dead, and now your life isn’t funded anymore?”

“Conall—”

But I couldn’t stop. “Do you miss the sex?”

“What?” she shouted. Eyes found our table before sliding away.

“He must have done something to keep you with him. Why else would you pledge your loyalty?”

“Shut up,” she snapped. “You don’t know anything.”

“Maybe the busboy was more your type,” I mused. “You *did* disappear with him for a while. He gave those names up pretty easily. Maybe you blew him better than he remembered.”

“I could *kill* you,” she snarled. “You know nothing, Conall. *Nothing*, about my life.”

“Then correct me,” I said. She didn’t. Sasha stewed in her own silence, her eyes meeting mine boldly. I shook my head. “No, it’s not the

busboy. That was probably a cash bribe, but you *want* me to think it was a sexual arrangement. Want to make me jealous, Sasha? It won't work. I'm not an envious, territorial alpha like Kato, if that's what you're hoping for.

"No, see, I think the bus boy is too *weak* for you. Sure, you'd have power and dominance over him, but I don't think you like that, do you? Deep down, I think you enjoy being told how to be a good girl."

Sasha looked like she would truly kill me, but for all her taunts and putting me down after Fenrys, reminding me of my place, always behind him, I was enjoying this. Better her to think me cruel than weak.

"A leopard like you... You're attractive, good-looking. Did they pass you around in the pack, but Kato always got his fill first and last? Made sure you knew you were his property?"

"I'm not anybody's property," Sasha hissed, but there was something in her voice, some nerve I'd touched. But I needed her to crack. I needed her to stop goddamn clamming up, and often being nasty was the way to go. I didn't think she'd been the pack's plaything; Sasha was pretty and liked to drape herself on any man's arms, Thalia had told me that much, but I didn't think she'd let herself be the run train for a wolf pack.

If I kept throwing wrong accusations, she would finally snap enough and tell me what was going on.

She was hiding things. Something about her ex-boyfriend, something about Kato and the pack.

"He's dead, Sasha," I said. "He can't control you now."

Her fist slammed down on the table. I grinned, knowing I was getting so close.

"He *never* controlled me."

"Did he get you to sign a contract, too?" I asked her.

Her eyes widened. *Bingo*.

But before she could answer, I saw two men enter the diner. I recognized them both. One was the thick-headed man from the cabin in Fayetteville, the other Jackson, those blue eyes piercing me from across the diner as he searched for Sasha.

“He’s not alone,” I murmured to her, barely moving my mouth, averting my gaze. The two men walked further into the diner. “Was he meant to be?”

“Yes,” she whispered. Her eyes were wide, something scared in them, anger mixing with fear, and I watched as she fought her instincts to make herself small. Why would he have brought a second man with him to meet Sasha? If it was just two exes meeting they wouldn’t need backup. Thalia had told me to go because she believed Jackson wasn’t safe. But why would *he* bring someone else if not to hurt her or manipulate her? Maybe she’d been friends with the other man, and it would be an emotional angle to get her back.

“Sasha,” I said, hushed. “What do you know about your involvement with them that you’re not saying?”

But there was no time to answer. Just before Jackson’s eyes fell on us, I leaned over the sticky diner table, reached for her mass of curls behind her head, and pulled her face to mine.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, and then I kissed her.

Chapter 13 - Sasha

I didn't think being as angry as I was with Conall was possible. The things he was suggesting were disgusting, especially knowing *he* thought that being the wolves' whore would be my idea. He had no clue about the truth. That was exactly what they'd planned for me, contracted, had my boyfriend trick me into false comfort to work up to that.

By the time he told me Jackson wasn't alone I'd thought of ten different ways to kill him.

Deep down, I think you enjoy being told how to be a good girl.

The words humiliated me even as they'd aroused me. The whole damn argument had aroused me *and* angered me, and then Conall's mouth was on mine. I felt the weight of people's attention, of a pair of eyes on me from the back, burning my neck, making me shudder.

Conall's hand gripped my hair tighter as he kissed me slowly, a concentrated, purposeful kiss. Nothing at all like the breathy, open-mouthed kisses that night in my apartment.

I got lost in the feel of his lips against mine, and before I could stop it, a soft moan slipped out.

The noise made him freeze, which made me stop and think. My anger took back over—*he'd kissed me*—and I shoved him back, turning around. But to my worry, Jackson had fled. I saw his retreating figure hurrying into the front of a car, the flash of a shaved head on the other side of the car. It screeched off. They thought I'd set up a trap. Either that, or Jackson realized I'd not come alone and thought I'd be harder to...

I didn't want to think about why he'd have brought another man with him.

If I hadn't seen them with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed Conall in his claim of Jackson being with someone.

"Don't enjoy it too much, it was a one-time thing," he teased.

"Why did you kiss me?" I asked, incredulous.

Conall had the audacity to shrug. "We're supposed to be dating. Couples kiss in public all the time." He shrugged. Then he leaned into me,

his dark hair falling handsomely in his face. “Any of these people in this diner could be watching us for that pack and whoever their new leader is. *Any* of them. I can sniff out shifters, but we can suppress our scents to remain undetected.”

I nodded. I knew about that from Thalia’s Mating Game trial that she’d once told me about. Fenrys had suppressed his scent, and she’d had to track him.

“You still didn’t need to kiss me,” I muttered.

“Your ex-boyfriend needed to see that you had someone there for you.” He looked utterly nonchalant, even with his flushed cheeks. “Besides, you liked it.”

“I hated every second,” I said.

“So that was a moan of anger?”

I stood up angrily. “When we return to Fenrys and Thalia with no information because *that’s what Jackson was supposed to give me today*, then you can explain.”

I jabbed a finger into his chest, trying not to notice the definition beneath my touch.

Conall gazed up at me. God, did nothing phase him? Was that what betas did? Learned not to flinch at things so they remained permanently impassive?

“I was going to find out the pack’s new location for sure,” I told him. “Find out their new leader. I was going to pretend to go with him to find out and then escape.”

“Sasha—Sasha, God, you’re fucking nuts. Do you think you’d escape a pack of wolves?”

“I did once,” I muttered.

He shook his head. Annoyance twisted through me. This was why I worked alone—nobody to judge me, nobody for me to rely on or ask for help. Nobody else ever needed. I could rely on myself.

“Are you really that stupid—”

“Call me *one more name*, Conall, I dare you. How can you expect me to think about working with you when all you do is call me names?” I

sounded immature, I knew, but I was done with being belittled. Conall was taunting me to get under my skin, but it was exhausting.

“Have a nice day. Seeing as you ruined the meeting I psyched myself up to even arrange I’ll actually go to work and see if I can get my mind off things.”

“Wait,” he said, leaning over the booth to block my exit. I glared at him. “I have another idea.”

I was hesitant.

“Come on, let me make it up to you. I didn’t know he was... A problem like that. You’re confident, and I didn’t think it’d be an issue. I just wanted you to have backup.”

“I don’t need backup,” I muttered. Then I thought about his offer. “But fine. Okay. I’ll come with you.”

“Yeah?” He grinned.

“Yeah.”

We left the diner, and I couldn’t ignore how shaken up I was, both from Jackson and all the thoughts I’d had recently. Anger and regret, of wasting so much time on him, hatred for finding out about that contract and his plans for me the whole time...

But now I had the kiss to think about. I hadn’t thought I’d Conall like that again but... He’d kissed me with purpose, not just a fleeting, fake thing. Any brief kiss could have covered us up, but he’d kissed me properly, slowly, and I didn’t know what to make of that. I just couldn’t stop thinking about it.

But his plan had worked. Now, we weren’t suspicious of being seen together. More rumors would spread about us, hopefully making our ‘relationship’ the only reason we’d be seen together in different places around town.

“Did you not bring your car?” I asked, frowning, when he walked off past the diner, and not to the parking lot outside.

“Nope.” His hands slid into his jeans, the image of casual arrogance.

“So where the hell are we going that requires no car?”

“You’ll see,” he said.

But I was through with surprises. “Just tell me, Con.”

“Oh, I’m *Con* now? We’re familiar like that, Sash?”

I scowled at him. “In your dreams.”

He stopped abruptly, turning to me with a smirk. “Oh, Sasha, if you knew what my dreams looked like, you’d see how they’re far more explicit than familiar nicknames.”

I decided to challenge him. “Yeah? What happens to them?” I stepped closer to him, his hands going around my wrist to make sure I didn’t back off again. “You get off on calling me a good girl?”

He was taller than me, and this close, I could scent the cologne he’d put on that morning. It was something deliciously expensive and masculine, making me want to bury my face in his neck.

“More like I get off on calling you *my* good girl,” he teased in a low voice. “Can’t help what makes me hard, kitty. What does it for you, then?”

I ignored his question. “You like calling me that.”

“What?”

“Kitty.” I smiled widely, tilting my head to the side, widening my eyes innocently in the way that men like Conall liked to see because it made them feel powerful. “You want me to wear a tail and a bell on a collar to go with that?”

He stepped close to me, his hard chest flat against mine. “It was your suggestion, not mine.”

Suddenly, I could imagine it. Him, flicking a damn bell on a collar, pushing me to my knees. *Good girl—my good girl.*

I flushed stupidly, hating myself.

Conall smiled. “I could even get it engraved for you. Property of—”

“I’m no one’s property,” I snapped and walked past him, shoving him backward. He was a thick wall of muscle, so I ended up side-stepping him. Then I paused. “Where the hell are we going?”

“I was going to take you to Fayetteville,” he told me. I stilled. He noticed, of course, he did. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing to do with this, at least. I spent some summers there because it was where my dad grew up. My grandparents lived there.” I cringed at the next part, unsure of why I confessed it. “I went to summer school at Fayette High School for one year. It was *the worst* summer of my life.”

“That sounds rough,” he said. “Want to know what my worst summer was?”

I rolled my eyes. “Something tragic, I suppose?”

“Actually, it was the summer I hit puberty. Balls dropped, voice cracked, my dick wouldn’t go down, like, ever. It chafed like a bastard but the hard-ons never—”

“Okay,” I shouted, half snorting with laughter. “What was it really?”

He hesitated. “Honestly, it was probably the summer after Fen’s dad died. He got trashed every night, swore me in as his beta, made me clean up the parties to prove that I’d be there for him. I always told Dakota those stories of how you gotta sort the shit before you rule the house.” He scrunched his face up. “Or whatever, you know. But anyway, we all struggled to be there for him. He was lost.” He cocked his head. “What was your actual worst summer?”

The summer, my dad realized I had a boyfriend and started commenting.

The summer, Jackson broke up with me.

The summer, my mom stopped answering my calls.

“My summers have been great,” I lied. “I’m a beach girl. Obviously. What’s not to love about the beach?”

“Best summer, then?” He didn’t look at all convinced by my lie but I wouldn’t tell him the truth. He could be vulnerable, but I didn’t have to be.

“I went to San Francisco for my eighteenth birthday,” I told him as I led the way to the woods. “That was probably it. I celebrated on the beach around a campfire with a ton of people I didn’t know.”

“Sounds great,” he muttered sarcastically. “An important birthday with no friends.”

“I had Jackson.”

“Ah. So you had sex all night on the beach and passed out from cocktails?”

I grinned. “Pretty much.” Again, the lie to keep up my façade went smoothly off my tongue.

He picked up on what he was saying before. “I was going to take you to Fayetteville, but I changed my plans.”

“What sort of change?”

“*Your* change,” he said simply.

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Chapter 14 - Conall

The more time I spent around Sasha, the more I noticed things like her tells that gave her away. I still didn't know when she was lying entirely, but I could see the seeds of pretense she planted to a degree. I never gave a shit about opening up; my life had happened, I didn't care. Talking about it didn't take it away or belittle it, so I gave information out whenever I wanted to.

It never really occurred to me to lie about things unless they were my feelings about Sasha.

"You know, it's just as fun to kiss you as it is to argue with you," I told her with a smirk. I initially had wanted to take her to Fayetteville, as I'd said, but there was a vacant look in her eyes whenever she stopped talking, and I feared that I'd lose her for a while if I talked about the pack too much.

"Don't come at me, Conall," she sighed. "You get under my skin, I'll get under yours."

That much was true. I hadn't expected her to flush at my kitten comment or suggest a tail and collar. But now that I'd pictured her body moving with my fucking her, the jingle of a bell on a collar, I couldn't get it out of my head.

Or maybe on her knees, her throat exposed, the collar at the base of her neck, tight, as I—

"Conall?"

"What?"

"Don't walk into the main road now."

We were at the edge of the sidewalk. Cars passed by slowly, and I stepped back.

I'd been walking, lost in my thoughts. "You know," I began. "I've never actually seen you in your leopard form. I bet you'd make a hell of a nasty fighter."

She grinned, all canines and wickedness. "Oh, baby, you couldn't handle me in my leopard form."

I laughed. “You think? What about you, do you think you could handle my wolf form? I’m big.”

I didn’t miss the way her eyes dropped and averted quickly. “I’ll bet you are.”

“Want to find out?” I meant showing her my wolf form, but her face turned pink; I thought otherwise. I liked knowing I’d caused that. I wanted to thumb down those blushing cheeks, kiss them, drag my teeth over her flushed skin.

“Try me,” she challenged.

“Let’s go.”

“What did your boyfriend think of your leopard form?” I asked her when we were at the treeline. I was already unbuttoning my jeans, letting them hang open as I talked, just to tease her.

“*Ex*-boyfriend,” she corrected. “And he liked it. Said I was different.”

“Figures,” I muttered. “Do you ever wish you were a different shifter species?”

“What, like a wolf, so I can be mounted and mated? Forced to mate forever with an alpha?” I didn’t like her taunting tone and rolled my eyes.

“I’d only mount another female if she was willing,” I said. “And... Not really in wolf form. Human Conall fucks best.”

“Does he now?” she asked, raising a brow. “Have you... ever... *in* wolf form?”

I laughed. “Yeah, once or twice. It was enjoyable, but I do prefer the use of my voice when I have sex.”

She looked away again. For a woman who was so confident with her sexual nature, she sure got nervous whenever I brought up sex. Maybe it was because I was a wolf; she’d already been down that road. Leopards were known for their liveness and sharp tongues but wolves were pure strong bulk. Maybe she was over that sort of thing.

I didn't think she'd ever slept with Kato; all that in the diner had been to bait her but now I couldn't help wondering how much—or how *little*—it would take to have Sasha bent to my whim.

“What do you prefer?” I asked.

“For what?”

“Sex,” I clarified. “Human or shifted?”

“Oh,” she said, swallowing. “Um, human, I guess.”

I was about to ask why she sounded so uncertain when she pulled off her hoodie, leaving herself fully bare on the top half of her body. Her breasts were smaller than female wolf shifters tended to have, but I thought that was because of her thinner, more graceful body.

Her nipples pebbled in the cold air, and she shivered. Goosebumps raced over her tanned skin, and all I could think about was pulling her to me, how her skin might feel, desiring the sensation of her breasts pressed to me.

Any questions I had died on my tongue, and I swallowed. I needed to shift soon or she'd smell my pheromones once she shifted.

I pulled my t-shirt over my head and felt some sort of pride when she slowed, her fingers on the waistband of her shorts, when she saw my muscles. I took care of my body, and I'd upped my gym regime lately to match Fenrys and Aidan. Sasha's eyes went wide, her lips parting slightly.

She blinked at me before she slipped off her shorts, tossing them onto the pile we had both made. My brain short-circuited at the hot pink thong she wore that tucked right between her ass cheeks.

Fuck.

My cock twitched in interest, and I hastily tugged off my jeans.

“Fuck,” she hissed. I heard the quiet curse and glanced back at her. Her eyes were on me—on my semi-hard cock. “No boxer shorts or anything?”

“No need,” I said, shrugging. “It's just another layer to waste time stripping or then replacing.”

My eyes fell to the trimmed mound of curls visible between her legs around the V of her thong. When she turned to fold her clothes, bending

over, I bit back a groan at the visible slit, barely covered by the thin strip of material.

I told myself it was okay to desire her. She knew I wanted her—whether we were fake dating or not—and had wanted her ever since I'd officially met her at the Mating Games ceremony. I'd been suspicious of her at first and her involvement with Kato and Thalia, but now...

I looked at her round, tight ass cheeks.

Now, I couldn't hide my desire. I half wanted to leave, shifting and pressing her into the nearest tree, sliding my cock into her, and taking her as my own. But I swallowed, held back, and piled my clothes next to hers.

When I came up behind her, I brushed my hand over her waist.

"It'd be a shame to rip those panties during your shift," I murmured, my face lowered to her neck.

Sasha arched slightly, a soft whimper leaving her lips. Her nipples had peaked beautifully, little hard nubs practically begging to be lavished.

Without touching her, I hovered my hand near the waistband of the hot pink garment. "Want me to help?"

Sasha turned to me. My arms loosely came up by her sides, still not yet touching her, but there if she wanted to be in them. Her face tipped to mine.

"No," she whispered, and then stood back, away from the circle of my arms, another pace, then another. Standing before me, she hooked her fingers into the sides of her thong, and slipped them down her slim, toned thighs.

Before I could properly look at her sex, Sasha shifted.

Chapter 15 - Sasha

This wasn't fake. None of it was fake—we were only meant to be faking interest in each other, but Conall was so real, he was so goddamn real next to me, behind me. His hands didn't touch my skin but I swear I could feel him anyway.

I was already turned on watching him undress, knowing he'd watched *me* undress. I'd underestimated Conall. He wasn't an alpha but he had the physique of one. *God*, he did. He was tall, broad, packed with muscle and all I could think about was how his biceps were so thick. His pecs were hard and smooth, giving way to rippled abdomen muscles that I wanted to scratch my claws down.

My breath was short by the time I stepped away from him.

“Want me to help?”

Yes.

No.

You scare me.

I want you to take me.

I want to be yours.

*Claim me in the way only wolves can be claimed by one another.
Can we pretend?*

Conall having this affect on me terrified me. I didn't want to just give my body away to him if he *only* wanted my body, but the desire was getting harder and harder to ignore. As the shift rippled through me, my human skin giving way to fur and spots, my fingers elongating into paws ending in sharp claws, and my leopard's muzzle pulling back into a bared snarl, I felt myself calibrate again.

He was still a human, watching me with...

No, that couldn't be true.

He seemed almost in awe. This wasn't just desire but something more. Something that hurts to look at. I snarled, took a step back. Conall

relaxed, and I tried, even through my leopard's eyes, not to look at his body in its entirety. I'd tried not noticing before but it was useless.

Not knowing how else to deal with my feelings, I put enough space between us that felt safe.

And then I launched myself at him, paws outstretched, aiming for his breakable human skin. Just before I could reach, Conall shifted on a leap, easy as anything, without thought. Soon, a light brown wolf towered over me, stalking me. My teeth bared, I slunk back.

Conall pressed low and then sprung, leaping right over my whole body, and tore off into the woods, kicking up leaves and stray twigs behind him. I gave a yowl of displeasure at being left behind and caught sight of his tail streaming behind him as he disappeared.

The woods whizzed past me, branches breaking beneath my paws, leaves fluttering in my wake as I thundered through. Every sound, sight, and smell attacked my senses blissfully in a way I always loved. There was the rough bark of the trees as I darted around them, the crunch of the leaves, the whisper of a bubbling lake nearby.

The earth was crisp and strong-smelling, the winter frost coating the tips and edges, and yet I didn't feel cold, at least not yet.

Conall's scent drifted to me on the wind from somewhere to my left, out of sight. I wanted to catch up. I could sense that he wasn't ahead of me, but I wanted to match him, pace for pace, overtake him when he least expected it.

So I climbed. I dug my claws into the tree trunk, shimmying my way up the nearest tree precariously. They were perfect for climbing, and I knew I had this grappling advantage over Conall. I gave a loud mewl into the air, letting the sound carry until I heard the whisper of paws in the distance stop.

I lunged, tree to tree, gripping onto branches and tree trunks, until the brown wolf came back into my eyesight. Conall turned, his nostrils flaring as he scented me, not able to see me. Did he not think to look up?

I could hear his growl sash as he searched for me, unable to find me.

I leaped soundlessly to the tree he hulked next to. With a spring, I dived from the tree, my legs and paws outstretched, and gave a loud cry as I tackled him to the floor. My victory was short-lived. Conall had me flipped, his wolf's body massive and pure bulk. His maw snapped in my face, and I bared my teeth. Teeth and claws swiped and clashed, and soon, I bucked him off, swiftly slipping out from beneath his huge form and raced deeper into the woods. I forgot why we were out here, what his original goal was for.

All I could scent were his pheromones and how I couldn't stop thinking about him stating he'd had sex as a wolf. I knew wolves knotted; Jackson had warned me about that. It had been part of my fear of us eventually having sex.

Of course, thanks to the discovered contract, I knew why he'd not resisted my wishes to wait.

I raced ahead and neared a river. I overlooked the bank, slowing enough that I felt a warm body tackle me from behind with a vicious snarl. We tumbled over and over, sliding down the riverbank, until we hit the shore. Part of me was elated at this, the playful growling and yapping, the swiping claws and playful attack. We half-rolled, and the icy water shocked me into shifting.

I sprawled on the marshy shore, my eyes on the huge wolf before me. One of Conall's paws was bigger than my head, and I swallowed, realizing I was naked and completely at his mercy if he chose not to shift.

Conall bounced, claws digging into the ground around my shoulders. I felt so small and *weak* under his form, but I gazed up into the green eyes that remained so humanlike, reminding me that it was Conall in there.

Without him talking, I could picture the man in the wolf's skin. I could pretend I wasn't attracted to another wolf, which had gotten me shunned out of my family home. I reached up, stroking my knuckles down the side of his face. His eyes closed, and a low rumble started in his throat.

I closed my eyes, grasping fur between my fingers.

But soon, that feeling slipped away and when I opened my eyes, Conall was a human again. His eyes gazed into mine. My legs parted, accepting his body's warmth, his closeness, and, for once, I didn't fight the urge to be close to him.

I wanted him. Since the diner kiss, since the Starlight dinner, since breakfast, since every ignored text message and attempt of working things out, and every denial of anything being between us.

I'd spent months denying it. One night of rejecting him had led to so much messiness and confusion and now it was building inside of me. My resistance was a damn, blocking my desire, and I was ready to break the fucking wall down and let the desire explode.

With a snarl, I grabbed a fistful of his hair, and pulled him down to kiss me.

This wasn't the slow deliberation of the diner kiss from that morning. It was the clashing, passionate kind, like the night in my apartment when I'd asked him to leave, when I'd walked away, trembling with desire and anxiety.

Now, my mouth parted and Conall's breath came harshly, as he worked his mouth over mine, his tongue pushing into my mouth. He pushed me down, into the riverbank, and I didn't care that I was getting soaked, or that there was no protective barrier to cover me. I didn't want to be covered. I wanted him to feel me, to know exactly what he did to me.

Our noises were groans and grunts, harsh pants, as we fought to get hold of each other enough. His hand cupped my face in a tight grip, and I moaned at the submissive urges rising through me.

My good girl.

How did I even ask for that?

Nerves ran through me. I'd fooled around with Jackson, with a couple other men since, but I'd never done more than over-the-clothing fondling or orgasming by grinding my clothed sex over their concealed cocks.

Conall was hard against my hip, his erection trapped between us. The base nestled right between my legs, the gap almost made to accommodate him taking up that space.

“I want to ruin you,” he groaned, biting my cheek, kissing down the side of my face, wet and messy, and I fell into it, loved the heat and the passion, and how the force of his kisses made me forget about my nerves. I would not have sex for the first time here, but I needed *something*.

“Do it,” I whispered.

Conall growled, slipping two fingers into my mouth, letting me suck on them, and I was secretly glad. I didn’t trust myself not to say anything humiliating. I viciously bit and suckled his fingers as he kissed his way down my body. Everything was quick, harsh, pure instinct. His teeth closed around my peaked nipple, sucking hard, shallowly seeking friction for his cock against the dip of my hip. I moaned as his fingers pushed on my tongue, parting in my mouth.

He rocked against me, pushing my body up and down with his rhythm, as he dragged his fingers out of my mouth, pressing his palm to the base of my throat. I swallowed, my hips lifting to seek friction.

What would a collar feel like? I wondered to myself.

“You said you were nobody’s property,” Conall hissed, kneeling up over me, his hand reaching out to grab my breasts. They were smaller than the wolf females I’d seen, but I didn’t have a chance to feel self-conscious. Conall lifted a hand and slapped my nipple, a quick whip of movement that had me crying out. “But you sure look ready to be mine.”

His eyes fell onto the heat between my legs, aroused, and I could only hope the river had soaked me enough that my wet arousal might blend as that.

But it was his cock that my eyes fell on. He was a god kneeling over me, and I couldn’t help but scrabble onto my hands and knees. Finally, as I’d wanted to, I let my nails settle against his chest, and light clawed my way down his chest, leaving pink marks in my wake. Conall’s breath hitched, and I smiled. Again, I scratched down his body, making sure to catch his nipple. He hissed, sensitive.

His cock twitched, the length and girth impressively big. My throat dried, and all my bravado from a moment ago was gone.

I swallowed.

Conall grasped the base of his cock. “Scared, kitty?”

“No,” I murmured. *Yes.*

“Do you want it?”

I wanted to tease, to play hard to get. I wanted to say no, and giggle, and see if he’d snap again. But I was too eager and parted my lips, letting my tongue push out, waiting.

“I want to hear you say it,” he told me, dominance taking over. All wolves loved that, I’d learned, but there was something different about the way Conall spoke to me. He didn’t speak in closed-off, sharp ways. It was a softer sort of aggression and dominance. As if he was aware that I could pull away at any minute like last time.

“I want—” I hesitated, embarrassed. “I want your cock.”

“Where do you want it, kitty?”

Arousal hotly ran through me. I wriggled from where I sat back on my heels now. I opened my mouth wider.

“Words, Sasha,” he told me. “I want your *words.*”

“In my mouth,” I gasped, aroused simply at how he spoke to me. I shouldn’t do this. I should shift, run away, hide out in my apartment, and text Thalia that I was done, my involvement with the pack was over.

Yet I couldn’t. Not with how he looked at me, not with how his hard cock came so near, and I couldn’t help but close my eyes and push my tongue out further.

He lay the tip of his cock on my tongue.

“Now, say, please?”

“*Please,*” I sighed lustily around the head, and then he was pushing into me with a long exhale.

Immediately, I moaned, unable to focus properly. His girth filled my mouth completely, and I choked as I tried to take it all to the back of my throat. Conall moaned at the constrictions around the head, but my eyes screwed shut, tears forming in the corner of my eyes, as I desperately tried to breathe through my nose.

I’d never done this before.

I didn’t want him to suspect that.

I shed the anxious Sasha and pulled on the confident one. I wanted this and didn't want him to pull back because I seemed too nervous. I thought of everything Thalia had giggled to me about in the dark hours, everything I'd seen and read, and thought of myself.

My fingers dug into the side of his hips, bracing myself on him. With my eyes closed, I focused on the sensations. The length was hard and veiny, but the tip was soft, and I enjoyed circling my tongue over the tip, delighting in his encouraging noises.

His hands slid into my hair, gripping the curls with a groan.

"Did you like the name I suggested?" he asked quietly. "I meant what I said. I could show you how to be a good girl."

My eyes flew open tearfully, looking up through my lashes as he stood over me.

"You want that?"

Did I?

An image flashed through my mind: be, bringing Conall to the throes of passion, the height of his climax, *good girl*. His hand placed on my throat as I swallowed for the first time.

I moaned, the sound muffled.

"Tap my hip for yes, flatten your hand for no."

He pushed deeper into my mouth, and I finally tapped on his hip for *yes*.

"I'll get you a damn collar," he muttered, pulling out and running the head of his length over my lips, smearing precum. It was messy, and I was barely aware of anything properly, lost to the haze of the moment blissfully. An unbearable ache gathered between my legs, the heat wanting to reach its own climax, but I didn't. Not for now. I wanted to focus on Conall for my own desire to touch him but also to avoid being touched for now.

I still didn't know how much I trusted him with my own body.

"You know what collared kitty-cats call the men who give them?" Conall asked, smirking.

I knew exactly what he was rooting for. He wanted to claim me, and I *wanted* to be claimed, but I was nobody's property. I said it, and I meant it. I was independent, yet I did this like I practically waited to be marked up by his scent.

That thought stayed, though, and dug into my mind, wiping out every other worry.

I wanted his seed coating me. If not down my throat then on my skin, seeped in so I would remember this even if I didn't have the courage to make it happen again.

Conall didn't make me answer but also never gave me the satisfaction of hearing him say it. Some sort of dominant name—a title, something for him to be called to help his own power needs. Part of me wanted to happily obey; the other part of me stubbornly refused.

Take me, I wanted to beg.

He pushed further into my mouth, his chest rising and falling quickly with labored breaths as he got closer to his orgasm.

I hollowed my cheeks, and Conall cupped my face, feeling his own length in my mouth. He thrust fast and hard, and I choked, trying to keep up. I sucked hard.

"Sasha," he moaned deeply, his fingers gripping my face. Everything hurt; my jaw hurt, my tongue hurt from exploring his length and every part of him that was in me, but it was blissful. I laughed, a huff of breath through my nose, and swallowed around the tip.

"Fuck—*there*," he shouted. I did it again, hollowing my cheeks, as he thrust shallowly, in and out, chasing the friction until he was pushing me, pulling my head closer. My nose pressed to the hair between his legs, and I made a choked sound. Desire washed through me as Conall held me there, finding the last few thrusts of friction, before he came with a loud groan of my name.

His seed shot into me, and I closed my eyes, going limp as he let me go. I opened my eyes drowsily, meeting his gaze, and smiled. Swallowed. Open my mouth while Conall pressed two fingers to my tongue again.

"Every drop," he instructed.

I stuck my tongue out for him.

“Good girl,” he murmured. He drew a line down my throat as I swallowed the last of his come, shuddering at the name.

But as I did, the realization of what I’d done—what this might possibly start—hit me.

My eyes met his, and it was as if he snapped out of the haze.

“Sasha,” he said quietly, a warning. “Sasha, no. No, don’t walk away—Sasha!”

I had already scrambled away like a frightened animal. Except I wasn’t frightened. I was fiercely protective of myself, and I didn’t want him to think one blowjob would permit me to him.

I looked at him.

“Come catch me, then,” I whispered, shifted, and launched myself up the bank, and into the woods.

I got to our clothes pile first, picking my way to them by the scent. I always doused my clothes in perfume to be able to track them down. I’d learned the hard way what happened when I didn’t leave my clothes easily findable to myself.

I shifted just as Conall entered the clearing. Between one step and the next, he was back in his human form. I felt his gaze on me as I tugged on my hoodie and pulled up my pink thong.

Before I could snatch up my shorts, Conall pressed up against my back, clad only in his jeans, the top of them undone. His crotch brushed my ass, his chest to my back, as he crowded me against the tree trunk I dressed next to.

“I can smell myself on you,” he murmured, nosing into the back of my neck.

His fingers danced over the thin waistband of my thong. I made a soft noise at how close he was to where I was still pitifully wet. If he were to only slip his hand further, run his fingers through my folds, he’d see how much I wanted him.

And yet I clammed up, clung onto my pride, my independence, because I could not let him get attached.

“I want to tear these off you with my fucking teeth,” he said, snapping the thin band against my skin. I moaned quietly, pressing my forehead to my arm, braced on the tree trunk. “One day, will you let me?”

“Yes.” The breathy answer was out of me before I could stop it.

“Not today,” he said.

I shook my head. Not today.

His hand slid to fondle my ass, grabbing hold of one cheek. “This ass will be mine one day, Sasha, when you’re ready.”

His teeth grazed the back of my leg. God, I wanted him. I wanted him to push my legs apart, sheath himself in me, fuck me until I was trembling and screaming for him. But I couldn’t do it. Not yet.

So I slammed up every wall and defense I had against Conall.

I turned in his arms and smiled up at him. “Do you only want me because I’m the only thing you *can* make yours?”

He frowned. “What?”

He went to pull back, but I snagged his wrist, dug his fingers harder into my ass cheek, letting him feel everything he wanted to claim. My body burned and ached with desire.

I hated it. I hated how I wanted him. I hated how my heart and body waged war against each other. I hated that I wanted to push him away, that my past codependency had forced such a firm need for independence and self-reliance on me.

Take me, make me yours, I wanted to beg. Make me forget my own foolish pride.

Claim me. Collar me. Mark me. Scent me.

And yet the worst thing ever came from my mouth as my face twisted into a nasty smirk. “Well, it must hurt to watch the other two alphas claim their mate and no longer need you as much. They have their mates, their Lunas, their *support*. What do you have, Conall? Nothing.”

His confused expression shattered into anger.

I patted his face condescendingly. “Thanks for—back there. I had a great time.” The words tasted like acid on my tongue, false, pretentious, everything that I didn’t feel. *Stop it, stop it, Sasha. Stop sabotaging what could be something genuinely good.*

But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t let myself want another wolf shifter. I couldn’t do that to myself.

“Oh, and Conall?” I said, walking past him. “At least this time, you got to come before I walked away. You should be thankful.”

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Chapter 16 - Conall

I didn't know what the fuck had happened. One minute I'd had my dick down Sasha's throat, her eyes heavy with desire, and the next, she'd pushed me away.

Again.

I hadn't gone near her physically, and I hadn't tried to cross the boundaries she hadn't put in place, either. I'd only been mindful of her potential to walk away. And she had. I hadn't even gotten to make her orgasm. I could smell her arousal; I still could, even as Sasha yanked on her shorts and disappeared.

I pulled on my shirt, buttoned up my jeans, and followed her, but when I left the woods, she'd already gone.

It felt like I always got one step closer and two steps back with her.

Groaning, I knew I could ask both Aidan *and* Fenrys what it was like to like a woman who wanted you one minute and hated you the next, but something about Sasha's comment had dug steeled-tipped claws into my heart.

I knew I wouldn't have a mate like Aidan or Fenrys did. I could still breed another female, but it wouldn't ever be what they both had with Dakota and Thalia. I'd never make my female a Luna, either. She'd always know she got second best. And hadn't Sasha already confirmed that?

Instead of pursuing her, I went back to Fenrys. I needed to be useful. I needed to give into my role as his second, his beta, and do a damn good job at it. I was already risking enough by going on stakeouts and investigating with Sasha and alone but I needed my information to carry through.

I made my way back towards the house, but before I did, I texted my brother once again. Third chance. I was only willing to give him this last one, and then I was giving up.

I'm going to call you; you better pick up, asshole.

When I dialed my brother's number, he picked up. "I only answered to tell you that *you're* the asshole, Conall. All right, bye."

“No,” I said quickly. “Don’t fucking hang up, idiot. I need your help.”

“I’m not in the business of giving help. To you, specifically.”

“It’s for the pack,” I said.

Silence.

“All right, fine, but if anything happens to Aidan or any of your friends, or the Luna I hear you’ve come to like, then don’t whine to me. Bye, Dec.”

“Wait.”

I smiled to myself.

“What is it you want?”

“An hour of your time. No talking about us, I promise. Do you still draw?”

“Sort of,” he answered. “What do you need?”

“If I described a guy to you, would you sketch him out for me? I’m trying to help find all the pack members, or at least people some of the pack are associated with. Some aren’t coming up on social media, but the drawing could be something.”

After a moment’s pause, Declan hummed down the phone. “Fine,” he conceded. It was the most I’d talked to my brother in almost a decade. “But, Conall, you know that half of my issue is that we never got to talk about us? About what hurt me years ago? You never came back for me to talk to.”

“You’re the one who moved towns,” I stated.

“Only to get back at you harder. Look—I’ll meet you. For now, we’ll keep brother talk off the table. Pack stuff only, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Also, I won’t meet with you alone. We need a buffer.”

“You’re my damn brother, Dec.”

“I need a buffer, then.”

That stung, but I could understand where he came from. I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Fine.”

“Bring Sasha. I like her. I’ll meet you tomorrow at Fenrys’s house. I’m busy tonight.” I heard a girl’s voice in the background. Before I could say anything, he hung up.

As I walked back to Fenrys’s house, I started typing a description of the man Jackson had been with as well as the other man from Fayetteville’s cabin.

Instead of sulking, I rerouted to Sasha’s apartment. I nodded to the bookseller and made my way upstairs to the studio flat. It wasn’t anything special, a small area that Sasha had made her own, full of hot pink furnishings and appliances that felt so very her.

When she opened the door, she cocked her head at me. “I didn’t expect you to show up.”

“I need you,” I told her. Her words from before had been buried deep where I didn’t have to look at them and they would stay that way. “Well, we need you, me and Declan.”

She met my gaze, her head tipping back to look up at me. I stood half a foot taller than her. “I think *I* need you.” Her eyes flickered over mine. “And that confuses the hell out of me, and I don’t really know what to make of my attraction to you, but I’m sorry for what I said before. It was uncalled for and—”

I cut her off, kissing her. I pushed her back into her apartment, my hands on her waist. I kicked the door shut behind me as I backed her up against the kitchen counter. This was dangerous territory; she could push me away again, say something that was barbed and nasty but she kissed me back and that was all I cared about.

Her arms wrapped around my shoulders, and she jumped, easily wrapping her legs around my waist. I half held her, half sat her on the counter.

“Are you going to run away from me again?” I murmured, kissing just below her ear. My hands ran up and down her sides, delighting in the shivers she gave.

“One day, you’ll get tired of the chase,” she murmured, gasping when I sucked a mark where I’d kissed.

“Never,” I told her. I pulled back, kissing her once, twice, and thumbed her lip. Not too long ago, those lips had been around me, bringing me to an orgasm that had been more powerful than I’d anticipated. “I want to touch you.”

Her eyes went wide, a hint of fear and anxiety in them.

“What’s stopping you?” I whispered. “Is it me?”

She shook her head slowly, as if she wasn’t committed to her answer.

“Then what is it?”

Whatever battle she fought in her head seemed to come to a conclusion. She slipped off the counter, turned in my embrace, and arched her back. Her ass stuck out, those thin shorts providing an annoying barrier.

“Touch me,” she whispered.

The dip of her body was gorgeous, and I wasted no time. A little growl escaped my lips as I pushed her hoodie up her back, kissing my way down her back.

“Whatever has you scared, Sasha,” I began, my fingers trailing teasing lines over the thick of her ass. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll protect you from whatever it is.”

“I don’t need protecting,” she whined, pushing herself into my touch.

“Then what do you need?”

“You,” she groaned. “I need you to touch me. I need you to leave. I need you to satisfy both my fear and my desire.”

I kissed my way past the waistband of her shorts, laughing softly into her cheeks. I went further and further, letting my face hover right between her legs.

“You can only have one.”

I ran a finger down the seam of her shorts, stilling when I felt a damp spot. I snarled in my throat. When she didn't push me away, I made the choice for her. I grabbed a handful of the shorts and *ripped*. The seam burst open without much of a thought, and Sasha cried out. I'd made a hole big enough to expose her ass and that pussy I'd already glimpsed.

But here it was before me now, all glistening folds and slick arousal sliding out of her.

No thong anymore.

I laughed, unable to help biting down on the full globe of her ass.

“No thong anymore?”

“No,” she moaned, when I rested my fingers against her opening. “I—I touched myself when I got home. Underwear just got in the way. *Ah—*”

I spread her folds with two fingers on one hand, using the index finger of my other hand to push a finger into her. I pictured her, sprawled on her bed, burying her fingers in her own heat, maybe my name on her lips.

“Should have let me take care of you in the damn woods,” I growled, finding her loose and ready, wet and wanting. Her heat clenched around my fingers, gasping moans punching from her. She shuddered, her thighs trembling.

“Sensitive, kitty?” I asked, smoothing a hand down her ass. She looked heavenly like this: her ass and pussy spread, thighs parted, her back dipped as she pushed herself back into me, seeking more pleasure.

My head spun thinking of burying my cock in that heat, swallowing. But the pleased noises, her mewls spilling from her lip, her head pressed to the counter.

“Don't stop,” she pleaded, the moans making her voice quiver.

“Wouldn't dream of it,” I promised, smacking her ass. She cried out. I stood up from my crouch and fucked her with my fingers harder, feeling her wet arousal coating my hand. I pressed up against her, my erection pressed to the zip of my jeans.

Chapter 17 - Sasha

I couldn't stop the sounds spilling from my lips as Conall leaned over me, one hand next to my head, the other between my legs as he languidly fucked me over my kitchen counter as if he had all day to do it.

He never touched enough to bring me to climax, not yet. It was purposeful edging, letting me unravel like this for him. My legs trembled, threatening to give out. I arched back against him, my fingers forming claws on the old countertop.

"Do you think you could come like this?" Conall asked, laughing darkly, his mouth right by my ear. I shook my head. But maybe I could. I'd done this to myself before, but him doing it felt so much different. I jerked, spasming against his body. I whined, pressing my face into his thick forearm.

I could feel his hard length against my ass, and I wanted it. The lusty haze wanted him as close as possible.

"You're so responsive, kitty," Conall murmured, kissing the back of my neck. It was a slow, deliberate trail of soft kisses, at odds with the way his fingers thrust in and out of me, hard and fast movements that had me on the edge. His teeth scraped my skin. My hips were pulled flush to his as he angled his hand so his fingers slid deeper.

I cried out so loud that the bookshop below would hear me.

"Conall—*Conall*," I cried, my chest heaving on a choked plea. Pleasure spasmed through my body, drenching me in waves. I was so wet I could feel it dripping out of my parted legs, no doubt soaking his hand.

"I'm going to keep you here, like this," he told me. "*Mine*. Mine to touch, to play with, to own your climax."

The words sent shocks of desire through me, and my eyes rolled back, gasping at the words, at the way he hit my spot inside. He curled his fingers in me, and I panted, begging, not even sure what noises were coming from my mouth anymore.

Nobody had ever done this for me before.

I craved it; I craved *him*.

“Take me,” I gasped, the words I had been thinking finally coming out. “Take me, Conall.”

He pushed one of my knees up on the counter, spreading me further. He slid his fingers out, tucking his hand around my front instead. I heard his jeans zip and braced myself to have to stop it, to tell him I wasn't ready for the full thing yet.

But Conall just turned my head, kissed me, and slid his fingers into me again. I heard his own grunts of pleasure, realizing he was getting himself off at the same time as me. My ass flushed to his crotch, he wrung my pleasure with his fingers and stroked himself in time to the thrusting in me.

His mouth devoured mine. Between the kissing and the stimulation of his palm against my clit, I couldn't stay quiet, couldn't hold my moans in any longer.

“Please,” I whispered, crying. “Please, please, please.”

His hand sped up on himself as my own orgasm crested. I scrambled to grasp his cock, but he stopped me. His smile curved against my mouth. “Ladies first.”

Then his hand went back and forth so fast that my pussy made the sort of wet noises seen in porn, and before I knew it, I was screaming his name, my whole body trembling and jerking into his grasp as I gushed around his hand, coming on his fingers.

Conall groaned, a growl making me whimper as he buried his face in my neck, his teeth snagging skin as he stroked himself. Then he was coming, his cock sliding between my thighs, and I felt the warmth of his orgasm hit my skin, mingling with the mess between my legs already.

My thighs shook uncontrollably, and I gave out, sliding down from the counter's edge. Before I could hit the floor, Conall scooped me up.

“Bed?” he asked.

I sat upright in his arms.

Maybe he saw my panic and was tired, but he only smiled and shook his head. “Not for that. I want to get you comfortable.”

“Maybe a bath,” I mumbled. I was dizzy and flushed from my climax. Jackson had touched my heat before, mostly oral, but nobody had ever been inside me so intimately, exploring my heat as if it was something to be wanted. Nobody sought out my climax so deliberately before. I was boneless in Conall’s gaze, sweat prickling my skin, dampening my curls to the back of my neck.

Conall headed to my bathroom and gently placed me on the plush rug. I slumped against him, tracing over his chest through his t-shirt.

“Nobody’s watching,” I muttered.

“What do you mean?”

“This is meant to be fake,” I told him. I gestured between us. “It doesn’t feel so fake anymore, does it?”

“We just... Need to get each other out of our systems, right?”

There was uncertainty in the way he said it, as if he didn’t quite believe it myself but he was trying to guess at my motives, too. It stung, but I’d said far worse to him before after we’d been passionate in the woods.

So I nodded, lolled my head on his shoulder, and before I could think about what I was doing, I had my lips on his neck, licking and kissing to bring myself down from the orgasm’s high. He smelt so good; I wanted to sink into his skin.

When the bath was finally ready, full of soapy bubbles, and a bottle of wine was on the side, Conall helped me in.

“Should I go?” he asked.

I propped my arm on the side of the bath, moaning at the heat of the water. I shook my head slowly. “Stay.” He leaned back, took off his shirt, and rebuttoned his jeans. He stayed like that, on the other side of the tub, respectful of my space as if he knew I needed it.

He grinned. “Shall I wash your back?”

I handed him the loofa as I poured myself a glass of wine.

Conall’s touches were slow and luxurious, and I was turned on again by the time he was finished and had me turn around. He circled the sponge around my neck and collarbones, his eyes fixed there.

“Would you wear a collar?” he asked. “Let me claim you like that?”

I said nothing, only smiled coyly. That voice in me begged *yes, do it, make me yours*. The other fought defiantly.

Conall's cheeks flushed. "We'll talk about it another time, okay?"

His hand lowered, taking care of my breasts. When he washed one, he thumbed over my other sensitive nipple, and vice versa. He leaned in to kiss the wet peaks, flattening his tongue over them. I slid my fingers in his hair, sighing.

This felt like bliss.

It just couldn't last.

But while it did, I enjoyed myself.

After my bath, I dressed in a short bathrobe. Conall wandered off, rooting through the fridge. I smirked to myself as I slid onto my bed, waiting...

"Takeout?" he asked. "You have no food."

"I have food," I insisted.

"I'm all up for healthy eating but, Sasha, you have a bag of spinach and a bunch of granola desserts in there."

I grinned. "Cheat days are Saturday."

"Well, you enjoy the bowl of spinach, I'm going out to get a burger from Jack's." He paused. "Can I come back here with dinner?"

I met his gaze, biting my lip. He was distracting, stood there in my bedroom, *staying* when I thought he would make me orgasm, and then leave. Now, he wanted to bring me dinner. He glanced down, laughing, as he bent to pick something up. When he straightened up, he held my pink thong in his hand.

Keep a hold of yourself, I chided.

"Scratch that," he said, tossing the underwear behind him. "I want fried rice." He settled on my bed without asking first, and I laughed.

“Make yourself at home,” I muttered as he scrolled on his phone. Silverlake Valley didn’t have many options, but there was a delivery place not far from here. I watched in amazement as he ordered two meals and then handed me his phone. I picked orange chicken and steak skewers with a side of fried rice. As I gave it back, Declan texted him.

I’ll be at Fenrys’s house at midday tomorrow with my art stuff.

“Declan’s texting you, finally?” I asked. Conall had first filled me in on the fact that he and his brother no longer spoke back when Fenrys and Aidan held the first pack meeting.

“Yeah,” Conall said. “I’ve asked him to draw the man that was with Jackson. It’ll bring the picture a little more, I suppose. It’ll help the rest of the pack keep an eye out for those we need to monitor.”

I nodded slowly. “Good thinking.”

“It’s why I originally came over,” he laughed. “Until I saw you being all distracting.”

“I was just opening the door!”

“In those fucking shorts.”

He shook his head. There was some space between us, as if he was aware to keep that distance. I didn’t know how he knew not to interrupt me, but maybe he didn’t want to push his luck.

I’d walked away from him twice now, but the third time I’d positively melted, let him take care of me afterward, and lost myself in my own thoughts even if they were scary. Even if they looked like they genuinely wanted Conall in more than a *fake boyfriend* sort of way.

It terrified me.

He ordered the food, and I didn’t know what to say.

“Sasha,” Conall spoke up.

“Yes?”

He paused. I turned to look at him, but he was looking at his own clasped hands. “Can I share your orange chicken?”

I knew it wasn’t what he originally wanted to ask, but he’d let me off with plenty of false truths so I let him off too. I kissed him softly,

moaning softly when he cupped my face.

“You can share any of it.”

He smiled, pulling back. “Will you come with me tomorrow to see Declan? He wants a buffer, and I trust you. He seems to trust you as well.”

I barely knew Declan, so to think he felt that made me feel a little honored.

“Of course,” I said. Everything felt so domesticated, too fluffy and couple-like, so I slid off the bed before I could do something stupid like sit in his lap, seduce him, let myself take things one step further each time.

After we ate, Conall gathered himself and stood up.

“I should head out and let you get some sleep.”

“Wait,” I murmured, reaching out. His hair was slicked back, wet from the shower he’d taken after we ate dinner. He’d changed into the same clothes but he no longer smelt like sex and the woods. I actually found myself missing his scent from before. “Well... What if you stayed? People think we’re a couple, and the bookshop is still open. It might look strange if you leave now.”

It wouldn’t, but it was the first excuse I could think of when I couldn’t outright say: *I want you to stay*.

Conall paused, his face lifted in hope. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Since the pack, I hadn’t slept with anyone else around since Jackson, and I was apprehensive now but nodded.

“I’ll take the couch,” he told me.

I bit my lip, nodding. My bed was plenty big enough, but I didn’t trust myself not to want more if he lay down next to me.

“Let me get you some spare pillows and a blanket,” I murmured, sliding off the bed. My robe slid up my leg, exposing that I hadn’t worn underwear since the bath. I waited for Conall to look disappointed at the

lack of an offer to stay in my bed with me, but he didn't. Maybe it was because we were in the same room.

Either way, my eyes went to the counter, where, before, I'd cleaned up after us, blushing the whole time. If that was how that felt, I never wanted to go without. Glancing at Conall as I brought him my extra winter blanket and pillow, I thought he might be the kind of man I could get addicted to.

Which was the exact reason why I couldn't get close.

Conall set up his makeshift bed.

"Won't Fenrys miss you?"

He shrugged. "Nope. Never does."

"You stay out a lot, huh?"

He smiled at me. "Sort of."

With other women, I told myself.

"Sometimes, I just head into the woods, shift, and stay out there for the night. It's peaceful. Reminds me who I am in my whole capacity, you know." He gazed at me. "It helps me not feel as... Lonely." He scrunched his face up at that, as if he despised the word but had no substitute.

I nodded. I didn't do what he did, but I usually partied a lot, hung out in clubs, sat on the laps of men before heading home in the early hours just so my time spent alone wasn't too long.

"Well," I said. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Sasha."

The air was thick with everything we weren't talking about: us, what we were now, what had changed, my secrets, his thoughts. Everything. Instead of risking those topics, I slunk back into bed. I crawled towards my pillow, feeling Conall's eyes on my ass. I covered myself with the duvet and turned off the light.

"Goodnight, Conall," I whispered again, into the dark.

"Night, Sasha," he echoed once more.

I fell into a fitful sleep full of dreams of kissing Conall, his arms around me as we fell through a lake. I was pulled apart from him, only to

land back on the riverbank, him behind me once again. A cycle: coming apart, finding our way back. I hated it.

When I woke up, it was five in the morning. Conall lay on his back, the blanket around his waist, his t-shirt thrown somewhere across the room. He slept in his jeans, which couldn't have been comfy but I remembered he'd forgone underwear that day.

I slipped across the room on silent feet before clambering on top of him, tucking myself beneath his warm arm, lying against his hot skin. I tugged the blanket up, wrapping myself around him before snuggling in.

It was just to feel less lonely. Just a body to distract my racing thoughts with. Nothing to do with it being Conall himself.

His arm came around me, his face tucking into mine. He turned, pushing me into the back of the couch, cocooning me in his embrace.

It was the first time I'd felt secure in a long time.

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Chapter 18 - Conall

At Fenrys's house the next day, I met my brother's eyes, and saw my dad in them. I saw myself in them, and it made me feel uneasy every time he looked at me, reminding me of the life I no longer had.

Sasha lounged next to me, so different to the girl who had curled up on top of me like a cat in the early hours of this morning, humming happily as I stroked her hair, falling back asleep for another couple of hours.

We all sat in the living room where Fenrys held the meetings. The staircase was open plan behind Declan, all the walls white with art hanging on the walls, or decorated with pictures of the pack or Fenrys's elders in the Randon generation. Thalia and Fenrys had gone out with Mayor Randon with Reina for some duties of watching how the role of mayor was fulfilled. The day was getting closer for Fenrys to take over.

I knew he wanted this enemy pack threat eliminated by then.

"You two smell like each other," Declan commented, wrinkling his nose. "It's disgusting."

"We showered afterward," I taunted, grinning at him. He rolled his eyes.

"What's so disgusting about it?" Sasha huffed.

"Ask him," Declan muttered.

So she did.

A thought flashed in my head. My father coming home at least once a month, reeking of alcohol, and another woman, drenched in the smell of sex. The first time I'd come home smelling the same, Declan had wrinkled his nose at me, like he just had done. I knew the smell only reminded him of dirty affairs, but this was anything but.

"Drama queen," I muttered.

"Yeah, well, you didn't deal with the drama for long, did you, Conall?"

I dismissed him, shaking my head, already done with him.

"Let's just focus on the task, yeah?" I asked.

“Sure. Go ahead. What are we working with?”

“Sasha went to meet with her ex-boyfriend yesterday,” I explained, feeling her glare on me. “And we know who he is. Jackson Trent. But he turned up with another man who I saw with him in the diner yesterday, but the same man was holed up in a cabin in the woods of Fayetteville with someone else I recognized from the fight when Kato died.”

“And he’s not on social media? I’ve been scouring for anyone I can based on what Fenrys gives me.”

“Not to any of our knowledge. But if he’s in Silverlake Valley, it’ll be helpful to know what he looks like on paper so we can keep an eye out for him. He’s never been seen with more than one other person. He could be important.”

Declan nodded. He reached for his sketchbook and pencil, spinning the charcoal around his fingers. It was a sight so familiar from my childhood that my chest ached to look at it. I missed my brother. I missed him looking at me with anything but anger in his eyes.

I’d nursed this damn kid to health when he caught pneumonia when he was ten years old after his first shift, getting lost in the woods and unable to find his way home. I’d sniffed him out, dragged him back, shivering, into our house. Our dad had loved us, just not our mother, the way parents could. He’d dumped Dec in the bath to warm up while I’d then nursed him properly with soup, blankets, and stayed with him to check his temperature every hour.

“Con?” Sasha murmured when I didn’t say anything.

Declan only glared at me. In the years we’d not talked, he’d grown up. I had missed it all. I was three years older than him, yet the distance felt much bigger.

I started to describe the man from the pack. I tried to remember everything, from his shaved head to his stature and broadness. I remembered he had some scars on his face, slashes through his eyebrow and lip, that would make him pretty recognizable.

“All right, what eye color?” Declan asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I wasn’t that close.”

“How can you not see someone’s eye color?”

“I just said, I wasn’t close enough,” I snapped. “That’ll hardly make a difference.”

“You have enhanced eyesight! Don’t fucking waste my time here, Conall.”

“Don’t fucking swear at me, asshole.”

Declan dropped his supplies to the floor and stood towards me. He’d shot up tall, looming down over me. But I was still taller. I stood up, my height gaining on him by two inches.

“You finally want that fight?” Declan asked through gritted teeth.

“No,” Sasha shouted, standing up and trying to shove between us. She only got in because I wouldn’t resist her. “No fighting. *Please.*” She shrugged. “This sweater is new, I don’t want any blood sprayed on it if you two actually injure each other.”

I met Declan’s hard stare. “Rain check, then, if you stop ignoring me.”

“Fuck you.”

“Find a new comeback, that’s getting a little boring.”

“Because you *always* knew what was better, right? What Conall says goes. What about now, big brother? Where do you get your power from now?” His eyes flitted to Sasha. “From her?” A cruel smile slid over his mouth. “Do you get her to roleplay at calling you alpha? Does it make you feel powerful, Conall?”

I saw red, not thinking, until I punched my brother in the mouth. He stumbled back, falling over the coffee table, and collapsing to the floor. He scrambled back, glaring up at me.

“Watch your mouth,” I spat. “Do *not* speak about her that way.”

But Declan only laughed and wiped the blood on the back of his hand. “Bet you call her your mate. Pretend she’s a wolf, so you can be like the *actual* alphas. But you’re not, Conall. You never will be. You’re just a b —”

I went to launch at him, but Sasha clung to me instead, holding me back. She was small and less strong than me, but just her scent made me

still, made me remember her being there, and how I wanted to keep her away from violence.

I stared down at Declan. “You’re a little bastard, you know.”

“I’d rather be that than whatever the fuck you are.”

“Cut it out,” Sasha yelled. “Both of you. Con, sit down. Declan, get up. Stop antagonizing him.” Declan stared at her, but she stood over him, and despite her smaller frame, she was still menacing. She glared him down until Declan stood up and slumped back in the chair. His lip was split where I’d punched him. It looked like it hurt. *Good.*

“And for your information, if you’re *really* so curious,” Sasha said, “He does not make me call him alpha and never would do that.”

Declan only laughed. I wanted to tell her that didn’t entirely help things, but it didn’t make it worse, either.

“Whatever.” Declan shook his head.

Sasha sat down next to me. “Seriously, what’s your deal with each other?”

Silence settled in the room, neither of us willing to answer.

I couldn’t help but think of his question. *Did* Sasha give me the power I sought? The thought made my mind want to spiral. I glanced at her. She slightly shook her head as if she knew what he questioned.

“All right, let’s continue,” she said, ever the mediator. Declan had been right; we did need a buffer.

“When the fuck did you stop speaking to me?” Declan asked suddenly. “Like, what the hell did I do wrong, Conall?”

“You’re the one who’s ignored me all these weeks,” I spat. “You’re the one who wanted a buffer. With *me*, your own damn brother.”

“You stopped being my brother the day you chose Fenrys over me. The day you chose him over everyone.”

That was it; I was done. The picture was almost finished anyway. It was a rough sketch, but it would do. I recognized the man enough. I stood up, shaking my head. I didn’t look back as I stormed out of the house before I hit him again.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Declan called. “Walk away as you always do!”

I snarled, clenching my fists, but kept on walking. I heard footsteps running after me down the driveway. I opened my car door but Sasha slipped around me.

“Don’t leave me with the angry little wolf,” she said, half laughing. “Please.”

“I need to be productive,” I told her. “Want to come with me to do some investigating?”

“Sure,” she said, getting into the passenger side. “Where to?”

“Fayetteville. It’s where I was going to take you yesterday.”

I had scent suppressants in the car, and I took some, as well as encouraged Sasha to take some. By the time we approached the cabin, still in our human forms, she was trembling. I thought of taunting her over Kato’s death and realized how insensitive this whole ordeal could be for her.

This pack had been like a family to her once, and now she was working against them.

Was she happy about it? Did they scare her? Was she angry?

I could only hope that if she was angry, then she would use it against them.

I’d stationed some of the lower-ranked wolves in Fenrys’s pack to keep an eye on the cabin, finding intervals of free time. They’d reported it was usually empty for about two hours, eleven in the morning until one in the afternoon.

It was twelve-twenty now. We might have been cutting it close to the mark but it was better than nothing. There *had* to be something in that cabin that was useful.

“Is everything okay?” I asked Sasha quietly. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m fine,” she answered in that quickfire way that meant she was likely not fine.

“He’s not here,” I told her. “I’d be able to smell him. The cabin’s empty.” As I approached the window, I grinned at her, trying to lighten the mood. “Which is why we’re breaking in.”

I slid the window open and slung one leg over the sill. “Coming?”

She blinked. “How did you—”

“I had some rookies patrolling these woods. I told one of them to pick the window lock as soon as the pack left.”

“I don’t know whether to be turned on or horrified.”

“Turned on,” I suggested, laughing. She did, too, but then clamped a hand over her mouth. Truthfully, going into an enemy den like this also set me on edge, but it was something I had to do. I was more on edge because if they came back, there were at least two of them. I wouldn’t have backup; if they knew Sasha, they could sway her back to their side.

“I don’t know about this,” she muttered as I slipped through entirely. “The office was different... This is... I don’t know. It reeks of them. It’s making me nervous. A little angry, too.”

“Then use that anger,” I told her. “Use it to help us—to help *me*, right now. They fucked you over, right? Don’t you want revenge? You could be there to help us take them down eventually.”

At that, her eyes went bright.

I grinned. “You can claw that fucker’s face off. Jackson.”

“Okay, now I’m definitely turned on,” she laughed. “That’s an appealing thought—ruining that guy’s life.”

I held out a hand to help her through the window. She slipped through, and we landed in the cabin. I immediately felt off-kilter, that sort of pressurized feeling of being somewhere I knew could be dangerous. The likes of Aidan lived for danger; Fenrys embraced it, and while I tended to seek it out myself, I didn’t always enjoy the lack of certainty that came with it.

Sasha’s hand flattened on my chest. I had a brief thought of asking to pleasure her right there, over the desk, leaving the scent for the wolves to

go crazy over, knowing she'd been back here, but I quickly dismissed it. It was a stupid, aroused thought.

"Last time I was here, they mentioned Palmetto," I told her as I headed for the desk, opening every drawer I could find.

Sasha's head whipped around to face me. "Palmetto?"

"Does that mean anything to you?"

"It's where Jackson grew up. It's where I met him, originally. We had a mutual friend who knew someone throwing a party, so I went with some of them from Atlanta to Palmetto and met Jackson. It turned out it was actually his party. His twentieth."

"You were seventeen?"

She nodded, biting her lip. "Only just. Age wasn't a big deal."

"No, but the way he treated you was."

Sasha ignored that, as she started scrutinizing her side of the office.

"So, how do you tell a pack's alpha in shifter terms?" she asked me. There were a bunch of pictures on the wall. Some had Kato in. I noticed Jackson in some older ones, Sasha too. She reached out and touched a hand to the glass frame of herself from a few years ago, smiling, tucked into Jackson.

Kato had a possessive hand on her shoulder.

I suddenly felt guilty for baiting her that day in the diner about Kato sharing her around the pack, ultimately saving her for himself.

"When we're shifted, it's usually the wolf at the front," I told her. "Generally, the biggest wolf, bigger than me by a few centimeters. As humans, from what I know, the leader will always be upfront and center, the first one you notice. He might be the tallest, but he's often the largest in general. More muscled, wider, just gives off a bigger presence."

"Like Jackson?"

"Well, we don't know his rank—"

"No, I mean *like* Jackson."

There was a hollow tone to her voice that made me turn, raising a brow. She stood staring at a screen with a slideshow of pack pictures. On

some occasions, Kato was in the center, and everyone else was arranged around him, Jackson always to his left.

Now Kato's spot had been filled by Jackson himself, with Darren Garth to his left, and the man I'd seen on his right. A woman with dark curls was at his side in one of them, Jackson's arms around her.

"He looks different in these," Sasha said. "He was always overly charming, but these pictures make them look arrogant."

"Sasha, what rank did Jackson have in the pack when you knew him?"

She avoided my gaze but the word came out in a whisper. "His beta."

"And you didn't think to tell me that before?" I demanded. "You said no, Darren being it but I thought you were lying, trying to mislead me."

Her eyes were shining with angry tears. "No! I didn't lie to you, Conall."

"No, but you withheld the truth."

"Conall—"

"No, no, don't worry. I just... I wish I'd have known. We'd have had surveillance on him more, probably."

She seemed to grow small, nodding. I crossed the cabin and wrapped her up in my arms, pulling her to me. She all but went lax in my hold, burying her face in my t-shirt.

"Do you need to get out of here?" I asked her quietly.

She nodded, making a small noise against me. I held her tightly. "Give me five minutes, yeah?"

Again, Sasha nodded. It was so strange, still, to see how she flipped from so confident to a shell. The dependence versus independence that she battled with. Wanting to be held but so stubbornly thinking she needed to hold herself apart from everyone. She was more transparent than she realized. I wanted to protect her—*needed* to protect her.

I text Fenrys as Sasha slumped against the wall.

Jackson Trent, we're looking at him to be the new alpha of Kato's pack. Can we use resources to track him, find out if it's true?

He answered swiftly. **We will as long as you're doing something too, Con. And with Sasha, I hope.**

"Smile for the camera," I told her, holding up my phone to snap a picture of her in the cabin. She looked startled as the shutter noise went off before snorting a laugh.

"You're silly," she said.

"Believe it or not, you're the only one to bring it out in me," I told her. "Everyone else just thinks I'm an asshole. Declan, Aidan, Fenrys at times, Thalia."

"Thalia likes you."

"Now, mostly since Reina was born. Before that, we used to make the house pretty unpleasant with our arguments. I respected her as Fenrys's mate and the pack's Luna, but I didn't trust her. No offense."

"None taken," Sasha laughed. "I'm guessing they want evidence we're working together." I nodded, and she sidled over to me, running her hands down my chest, standing behind me. She was short, so had to prop her head up on my shoulder. She smiled, turning her face into mine, and kissed my cheek.

"Kiss for the camera," she said. "We're a couple to Silverlake Valley, right?"

"Right," I echoed, my thoughts racing. *People might see us come up on Fenrys's phone.* That's what I told myself the reason for her doing that was. To keep up the act. But she tugged on my ear with her teeth even when the camera left.

"Wait, what's that?" she asked, lowering herself back down from her tiptoes. She reached over me, picking up a scrap of paper I hadn't yet noticed. It was from a diary page.

Meeting w/T – Inferno Lounge @ 10pm. It was dated today.

"Who's T?" I wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Sasha answered. "None of the guys I knew had a name beginning with T. But that's not Jackson's handwriting."

“Maybe his beta?” I questioned. Before we could ponder further, I caught the time. We had less than five minutes to right the office, get out, and head far enough that, even with the suppressants, our scents wouldn’t track us.

“We have to go,” I said quickly. “Put the desk chair back under. Was that screen on sleep mode?”

“Yes,” she answered. I hurried over and clicked it off, hoping it would suffice. She tucked the chair back in, and we placed the diary paperback under the pile.

“Nothing else moved?” I checked.

She looked around, biting her lip. “Nope.”

“Great, let’s get the hell out of here.”

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Chapter 19 - Sasha

The Inferno Lounge that evening was packed both upstairs and down. I always loved coming here. I always did with Thalia, and a few times with Conall, Thalia, and Fenrys, and then there was that first night we'd almost had sex.

Downstairs, the club was writhing, a ton of people from such a small town all packed in the nightclub together. I recognized some faces who went to the steel staircase that descended into the club below, but Conall and I were sitting at one of the couches, at the far back, watching who came in, who left.

"Want to know something nasty?" I asked Conall, leaning into him. We were in public, eyes, were on us, and we were playing up the couple act. I'd been hanging off his arm all night, and my leg practically draped over his in my champagne, shimmering mini dress that hung in ruches across my chest. It was a strappy thing, far too mainstream for a small-town club, but I loved it.

"Go on."

"Thalia and Fenrys had sex in one of the VIP booths," I whispered, my mouth at his ear. He stilled next to me, his hand on my thigh, just above my knee. "I'm pretty sure Dakota and Aidan did after they all reconciled. Apparently, their mating bond snapped, and they went in there. That's what Thalia said."

"God," Conall muttered.

I looked at him pointedly. "We could."

He half laughed. "You want to have sex in the VIP booths?"

I shrugged a dainty shoulder at him. "Why not? It's fun, isn't it? Public sex." Honestly, I didn't know. I only had to hope I was doing a good enough job of not appearing like a virgin.

He brushed his mouth close to my jaw, his voice low enough for only me to hear. "Sasha, when I fuck you properly, I want you splayed out on fucking silk sheets like you deserve, not some booth where anyone might hear us."

His words made my brain go blank. His thumb circled my knee distractingly, and I had to work to catch my breath back.

Focus, I told myself. *He's teasing.*

Except when I pulled back to look at him, his eyes held dark intent.

He pushed further into me, his hand sliding up my leg. The cool steel of his watch kissed my heated skin.

"I'll have you spread for me on a bed," he told me. "I'll have you collared and mine for the taking. I'll have you begging for mercy, Sasha." He smiled at me, promises coming through the wicked, easy grin. "I can't quite have that if we're in one of those rooms now, can I?"

"They're soundproof," I whispered lamely.

"And a bed?"

"No bed."

He tutted. "That's not good enough for me. Not when it comes to pleasing you."

My cheeks flushed hot. Conall's eyes remained on me as he leaned over to pick up his whisky tumbler with his thumb and middle finger, looking effortlessly masculine and handsome. His eyes dropped to my chest, where my dress dipped low, and a hanging sparkling necklace fell into the gap of my cleavage. I drew attention there, of course, I did. Better anyone see that than the flickers of nerves in my eyes.

"Sasha," he whispered, making me want to lick the whisky from his lips. "Are you wearing underwear tonight?"

"Why don't you find out?" I teased. This was always my game: bold with words, meeker with actions. But with Conall, I found myself less and less timid. I only remained stubborn to not give up my virginity yet. I couldn't trust that he wasn't just interested in me for the information I came with. I hadn't given him a lot to go on. If anything, I'd kept more from him than I'd revealed. I couldn't entirely trust he wasn't just sleeping with me to get information out of me.

His hand slid higher up my thigh, almost at the hem of my dress, but two men who walked in caught my eye. I grabbed Conall's wrist.

"It's him," I said. "The man Jackson was with at the diner."

Conall's eyes snapped to the two men who headed downstairs in the club.

"Dance with me," Conall proposed. I giggled and finished my fruity cocktail before I let him pull me up and over to the staircase, after the men, as if we were merely a giddy couple on a date.

The shaved-headed man was there, but the other man was unrecognizable, his blonde hair slicked back, falling to his neck. He wasn't part of the pack, but Conall stilled.

"That's the son of the Head Councillor," he said. "He's working with the enemy's pack?"

The two men had their heads bent together, lingering on the outskirts of the dancefloor, while Conall led me into the fray of dancers. The music boomed around every corner, bounced off the walls, enveloping everyone under its thrall. Lights flashed, people knocked into each other, drinks spilled, and dancers grinded on each other like they were two seconds from tearing each other's clothes off. Conall spun me into place on the dancefloor, tugging me flush against his hips.

His chest pressed to my back, and I leaned against him in a way that let me keep an eye on the two men. I wondered why they didn't just head to a booth but also seemed to be looking for someone down there.

"Graham, the Head Councillor, led the Mating Games," Conall explained to me, even as he grasped my hips, his hands sliding down the sides of my thighs. I bit back a pleased noise as I nodded, trying to stay focused on his words despite the pounding music and his touch that set my skin alight.

"He's pretty tight with Fenrys's mom. At one point, the pack thought they might date, after her husband passed. His son has always itched to take over Graham's position on the council. It could be bad if they've gotten him involved with their plans."

"Bad," I echoed distantly, barely listening, as Conall nosed into my neck, his breath quiet in my ear.

"Sasha," he whispered, kissing the side of my neck.

Just an act, I told myself. Just an act.

But it hadn't been in the woods, nor my kitchen.

“Is that invitation still open?” he asked, his fingers trailing the hem of my dress purposefully. There was only so much we could do to blend in, but only so far we could go with our intimacy like this. I kept my eyes on our target, losing myself to the sway and energy of the dancers around us. I swayed my hips over Conall’s crotch, felt him harden against my ass.

“Yes,” I breathed.

His hands slid higher before moving to cup my ass, feeling over my dress. It fell to mid-thigh, long enough to just about cover the fact that I’d dressed provocatively under the outfit.

Conall’s breath halted when he found what he was looking for.

I wore underwear, but it was the barest thing.

I had on a diamond lattice thong, barely covering anything. It was purely a line of chain covering my heat, tucked between my ass cheeks, totally worn to tease Conall rather than serve proper coverage. A tiny triangle of lattice chainwork covered my mound of trimmed hair, but that was all. His fingers danced over the chain links, tugging on it through my dress.

He laughed lowly in my ear. “Sasha, Sasha, Sasha,” he repeated, a condescending mantra that made me whimper. “Face of an angel, the body of a whore.”

The word should have been derogatory, but instead, they sent a full-body shudder through me. Oh, if only he knew. I had the body of an angel, too. But I liked to tease, I liked to display myself, like tantalizing fruit hanging in the sight of any man who wanted to look.

I got off on it, the attention more than enough to make me heated.

But I’d let Conall close in a way nobody else had been allowed. I was slowly cracking off my hard, outer shell for him.

Despite us being in public, he groped over the front of my heat, dragging nails over the chain thong, just to elicit a shuddering exhale from me.

His cock was hard in his jeans, grinding against me. It was as if he hadn’t realized what he was doing and pulled away, but I gripped his hips, grinded back against him.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, giggling, as I let my arms raise and drape around his neck. “It’s all part of the act.”

Conall exhaled against my shoulder, kissing the freckles there. The back of his knuckles brushed down my arms, sliding down the side of my body as if he could never get enough of touching me.

We’d both lost track of our two men, and Conall swore under his breath. I felt the stutter of rejection for a second before he danced me across the room, gliding in and out of other groups and couples, until we came to the fire exit door that people slipped out of to smoke and talk. A ringing in my ears made me feel off-kilter as we left the club.

I watched the streets, looking for any racing cars speeding away or anything suspicious. Whether the two men were meeting another, or that *had* been the meeting, between the two of them, I didn’t know. But before I could, Conall had me pushed aside, backing me up into an alleyway behind the club. My back scraped the brick walls of the club, and I moaned in surprise when his mouth slotted over mine, demanding and heavy.

He took my hand, placing it over his crotch, letting me feel exactly what I was doing to him.

“You think that’s part of my act?” he growled, pushing his erection further into my touch. He was right. It wasn’t, and I was dripping wet as well. The chain would do nothing to conceal that, and it was cold against my heated folds. The sensation was delicious.

“I want to take you home,” Conall said, his voice a low rasp in my ear. “And I want to rip that dress off of you and look at these pretty panties of yours, and have you spread out before like a goddamn feast, Sasha.”

His hands gripped the back of my thighs, pulling me to grind against him. The friction of the chain had me gasping with the way it provided stimulation to my clit. I ached, my hips circling, trying to find *something* to relieve the aroused ache.

“I’d go to my knees for you right here if I could,” Conall muttered.

“Even better,” I said softly in his ear, dragging my teeth down his neck. “I could go to my knees for *you*.”

He cursed under his breath, his hands slipping up my thighs to grab hold of my ass cheeks. He gripped them, spreading me apart.

My head spun. I needed to pull away. I needed to press closer. I needed to distance myself and isolate, but I also *needed* him. This man who was so intent on making sure I was safe and comfortable, who had bought me coffee without asking, noticing the flavored syrups I liked. He'd learned my favorite breakfast order and how he always checked in. Conall *cared*.

“My apartment,” I gasped. “Take me back. I need you, Conall. Fuck —”

I didn't have to say more. He'd already pulled away, grasping my wrist, and getting me to his car parked alongside the club. He tugged me to his side. The smokers had gone back inside, but there was no sign of our targets.

Then, an arm hooked around my neck, and I screamed. My nails swiped at my attacker's face. A familiar scent enveloped me—not strong enough to be Jackson himself but enough to know this man had been around him.

Conall turned, a growl in his throat, and launched himself at my attacker, the shaved-headed man we'd been watching. I stumbled away, my eyes wide when I saw him drop the cloth he'd raised and ready.

“Conall!” I shouted.

Conall knocked him to the floor, his fist raised in a punch. He cracked it across the man's face, whipping it sideways. Blood sprayed from his busted lip. Conall got another blow in before the second attacker came at me.

“Sasha, run!” Conall yelled.

But I snarled and prepared myself to attack. I could fight for myself in my stupid, strappy stilettos if they kept that cloth away from me. It was some sort of chemical to knock me out, I was sure.

But the second man went down with a swipe of Conall's leg. Soon, both men were on the floor, and I was robbed of my chance to fight for myself.

Conall grabbed me and ushered me to his car.

He pushed me into the passenger seat, fumbling with the seatbelt.

“I fucking have it!” I snapped at him. He winced, backing off sharply. The second attacker, the councilor’s son, sprang up, going for Conall again, but he landed another blow to his jaw, sending him back to the floor. Before the first man could recover, Conall wrenched his door open, threw himself into the car, and peeled off the sidewalk with a screech.

Conall’s angry silence was setting my nerves on edge. We raced past the street for Fenrys’s house, and then past my own street.

“Where are we going?” I demanded.

We passed the town hall and the college on the outskirts. We passed the building where I’d hung out with Kato’s pack, where the office lay in ruins after I’d found the contract.

“Conall!” I shouted.

“Just—stop for a second,” he said through gritted teeth. “Give me a minute.” He pulled over, the tires screeching on the road. “I’m taking you to a safe house. It’s a cabin by the lake just outside of town. You’ve been spotted twice now, Sasha. I’m not risking you being in the center of town. We’re not being trailed, but I need to get you there.”

“Conall, I need my things, I need clothes, I need—”

“I’ve already stocked things up,” he said. “Chargers, food, cash, anything you’d need. I grabbed some of your clothes for you before we left this morning.”

“You have no right!” I yelled. This felt more unsafe than sex. This was... this was him controlling my situation. This was him deciding my next course of action, the specific thing I had worked to avoid anyone doing to me again. I was not a puppet on a string, dangling from somebody else’s fingers, moving to their dictation.

But Conall slammed the gas pedal and sped towards the lake, giving me no choice.

Chapter 20 - Conall

Sasha's anger rolled off her in waves. I didn't know if she felt them more acutely due to her shifter species, but it was suffocating. Still, there was nothing I could do. I *needed* to keep her safe.

"Are you at least staying with me?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I will."

I needed to. I wouldn't rest unless I knew she was safe; the best way I could do that was by staying at her side.

We drove up to the cabin, the pebbles crackling beneath my tires on the driveway. In the dark, without my headlights on, it was hard to see, but the outline of the cabin and the dark lake beyond were eerie.

I opened my door, not wanting to waste a moment. This had been one of the investments Fenrys had made after mating with Thalia, and then Aidan had made after making Dakota his Luna. Several safehouses across different towns for different pack members. Reinforced, soundproof walls, lights that went off and on with voice commands to avoid the need to move when trying to remain incognito. All of them stayed stocked up with the basics, and every so often, we cleaned up, made it fresh, made sure nothing had gone to waste in the freezers.

"Let's go," I told her. Sasha stubbornly remained in the car. I'd damn well pick her up and carry her in there if she didn't move. "Sasha, come *on*."

"I'm not a dog," she snapped. She glared at me from her seat, looking gorgeously dark and wicked with her heavy makeup and styled curls, her tanned skin on show, and her dress still perfectly composed. Finally, she unclipped her seatbelt and got out of the car. I led her down the pathway to the cabin's front door.

Inside was beautiful, a rustic log cabin with an electric fireplace, a large bed, small kitchenette, all contained within one room.

"One bed," Sasha muttered.

"Problem?" I questioned.

“Half an hour ago, it wouldn’t have been,” she hissed, stalking ahead of me. She collapsed on the end of the bed, starting to take her heels off. Her feet stretched and arched, and I wanted to ask to take off the other one for her, but her prickliness kept me at a distance.

“So what the hell do we do now?”

“Now we lay low.”

Her eyes flicked to me. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” I couldn’t risk her being attacked again. They’d gotten too close. “After this, for a day or two, maybe more, we can go straight to Palmetto and check out what seems to be their headquarters. Aidan checked in earlier to say they’d had another sighting in Oak Hill. The pack are now identifiable by tattoos of the old Silverlake Valley crest from before the Randons took over the town.”

Sasha’s eyes were still narrowed.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sighing. “I know you hate this. I just—I saw that cloth that he held. They would have put it over you and taken you from me.”

“From *myself*,” she snapped. “Not from you, Conall, I’m not yours!”

The words died in my throat, *but you could be*.

“I know they’d have taken me,” she said, sighing, falling back onto the bed. “It’s what Aidan’s pack did to Dakota. It’s a certain chemical that prevents people like us from shifting to overpower the attackers while also knocking us out. It’s dangerous, but it works for what they want. You don’t think I can protect myself?”

“Not if he’d gotten that cloth near you, no,” I said. “It’s not about your skill set. I’d go down like a fucking ton of bricks if they did it to me, too. You needed me, Sasha. Why can’t you just admit that? They did the same trick to Thalia, too. It’s a coward’s way of kidnapping because they know the shifters always fight. She needed Fenrys.”

“Yes but I don’t *need* you, Conall,” Sasha said. I walked over to lie next to her, just wanting to be near her, even if her words carved through me like acid.

“Don’t you?” I asked softly.

“No.” It was the shot of a gun, that one word, that admittance.

“Without me, you’d be unconscious in the back of one of their cars, hightailed right to whatever base Jackson is in. Not because you can’t *fight* for yourself, Sasha, but because they had something to knock you out with before you could even raise your fists.”

The fight drained out of her, but she still looked as though she fought a war in her head.

“What’s going on in your head?” I asked her. “The truth.”

“I don’t want to lie to you,” she mumbled to me. “But I can’t give you the truth right now.”

I actually respected that. I nodded. She turned on her side, propping herself up on a fist. She shuffled closer to me, anger still coming from her, but it was softer now, as if she had shifted back into being that false version of herself who thought she needed bravado.

“I thought you weren’t going to lie to me,” I whispered.

“I’m not,” she answered.

“Then drop the mask, Sasha. I want to know the real you.”

“The *real me* is right here,” she muttered. “The real me was compromised by two men I don’t even know. The real me is *terrified* but wants to fight back. The real me wants to be known. But—but I’m scared, Conall. I am so damn scared.”

“Why?” I asked, reaching up to wrap a curl around my finger. “Tell me why.”

A rage simmered away in me, controlled but strong. I needed to go back there and pound those two men into nothing for risking her safety. I didn’t know what they would still want with Sasha, but the thought of them even laying one finger on her had me seeing red.

“I can’t,” she whispered. “Not yet. Soon, but... not yet.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Then I was up, moving away from her to give her space. Her anger was only fuelling mine. I paced the cabin, thinking about how I could both protect her and give into that need to hunt those men down myself.

“Conall.”

I barely even heard her, losing myself to that rage.

“*Conall.*”

I half looked up, but my vision was blurry. She’d sat up, her legs parted, but I couldn’t see anything. The champagne color of her dress blended in with her skin. Had she lifted her dress up? Was she trying to distract me? Was I filling in the blanks that were not there?

Then she was in front of me, stopping my furious pacing, holding my clenched fists in one hand. The other carded through my hair, grasping the dark strands. She pulled tightly on my hair. I groaned, closing my eyes, as she pressed my head back against the wall.

“Now,” she purred. “Stay still and listen.”

Her lips pressed to my taut, exposed neck, and she bit hard.

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Chapter 21 - Sasha

I watched Conall's eyelids flutter at how I touched him like this. Tugged his hair, commanded *him*.

I kissed up his neck, sucking marks beneath his collar, flicking the top button of his shirt open. All my anger was still there, but I was so, so turned on. Watching *his* anger, as much as it enraged me to think he thought me unable to take care of myself, I couldn't help but consider something else. The fact that he cared for me this much, to such an aggressive level, thinking I was worth keeping safe and fighting for...

My pride took a backseat, but I let it take hold for just one more minute.

I scratched a nail down his neck, feeling him swallow. "You do not need to protect me," I purred.

"No?" He laughed breathily.

"No," I answered, kissing his Adam's apple. It felt good to be powerful for a minute.

"Oh, kitty," he sighed, and I knew the tables were turning. He slid his hands up my wrist, linking his fingers through mine. Then he flipped up, pushing me against the wall, his face leaning into mine. "When will you stop being so stubborn?"

One of his thighs slotted between mine, pressing the chain string of my panties right against my heat. A whimper left my lips.

"I know you want to be powerful," he whispered. "You want your control and your stubborn pride. But deep down, I was right with what I said that first time, wasn't I? That you want someone to take control, let your mind wander, and not have to be in fight mode all the time." He kissed my neck, slowly, languidly, and I stuttered a shaky breath as I arched for him, letting him have better access. He was knocking down every defense I had with his words. "Let it go, Sasha. Let me take care of you."

"You still want to collar me? Trap the helpless leopard? Be the big bad wolf?" I half teased, but he sucked a bite into my collarbone, and I couldn't help moaning.

“Yes,” he said. “If you’ll let me.”

I stilled. “What do you mean?”

He pulled back, smirking. “I got you a collar.” His eyes were on mine, utterly serious. “I said I could take you, *claim* you. And this is my way of doing that, which you know. Didn’t you agree?”

I thought of his hands on my neck, the pressure a collar would bring, the way my pride raged against it but the part of me that hadn’t been damaged by Jackson utterly melted at the thought.

“I want to try it,” I whispered.

He still didn’t know I was a virgin.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Wait here.”

I stared in shock as Conall left the cabin, ducking outside before coming back moments later with a square black box. He lifted the lid, and inside was a studded silver collar, a thick band, and a bell that hung off it, jingling when I flicked it.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“Still want to try?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. I gathered my hair up in my hands as Conall turned me around, picking up the collar. It pressed on my throat as he clasped it at the back. My breath caught at how gently he touched me. His fingers glided down my back afterward, stopping at the curve of my ass.

“Will you finally let me see these pretty panties of yours?”

I pushed my ass out, and Conall snarled as he sucked a bruise into my ass cheek. One, then the other, pushing my dress up and over my hips.

He exposed the panties, the thin chain barely covering my folds, the way it emphasized the shape of my thighs and ass.

“Shit,” he whispered. “*Shit*. Sasha—fuck—I need you. I need you so bad it hurts. Get on the bed for me.”

I did, walking over on trembling legs, languishing on the sheets, crawling up to the headboard, giving him one last view from that angle before I turned back around to face him.

“You wanted me spread out, right?” I purred.

“Menace,” he hissed, his pupils blown, his hair in disarray. He stalked towards me, reached out, and flicked the bell on my collar. He tore off his shirt, ripping buttons as he did. Conall’s body was incredible, muscled, and I wanted my hands all over him as much as he wanted his all over me. His forearms were tight as he tugged off his jeans and a light smattering of dark chest hair across his pecs caught my attention. It was flat and straight, short. I grabbed for him, whining.

He smirked and leaned right over me, enveloping himself across my body.

“You’re beautiful, Sasha,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to mine.

Don’t trust him, don’t trust him, my mind begged, but my heart was falling, soaring towards him and the look in his eyes. I wouldn’t have to fight anymore. I could give in.

But if I lost my fight for myself and my independence, then I lost everything. I didn’t know how I was able to have both Conall and my fierce need for independence.

“Let go of your thoughts, kitty,” Conall murmured, thumbing my lower lip. “Let me please you.”

I should have warned him, told him I was a virgin, but the words weren’t on my tongue. I couldn’t say them. They clogged in my throat, and then Conall’s hands were on my thighs, pushing my dress up and over my body, baring me for him except for the thong and the collar.

He settled between my legs, looking at me down the length of my body. He smoothed his hands over my jutting hip bones and my ribs, reaching up to twist and pinch my nipples playfully.

Then his tongue flattened over my folds, and I cried out. The heat of his tongue contrasting with the cool chain of the underwear made me writhe.

“Conall,” I moaned, my back bowing as I sought more. Nobody had ever done this. Never tasted me like I was a damn feast. But Conall’s eyes closed, and his tongue worked over me, and inside me like I was his last ever meal. His fingers spread me open, perfect for dipping his tongue in and out. He moaned into me, grasping my thighs and tugging me closer to him. The bell jingled as I was pulled down the bed.

He alternated between devouring me and kissing the insides of my thigh, biting bruises into my skin. He nuzzled into the crease between my pussy and thighs, biting wherever he could before licking a path back to I was open and spread for him.

When he came back up to kiss me, I wrapped my legs around him, clawing down his back as if I might grapple him, as if that would make him never pull away.

“Can I fuck you?” he whispered. “I don’t want to assume you still want to go all the way. I can stop right now, put my clothes back on, bring some comfier clothes for you, and—”

I kissed him quiet. I didn’t need him putting doubts in my mind. I had made up my mind.

I wanted him. I didn’t have to confess my virginity. It was *mine* to decide how and when it was taken. He didn’t need to have any feelings about it.

“Sasha,” he murmured. His cock slid against my opening, wetting the length and tip in my own arousal. I whimpered, lifting my hips as I might just push him in that way. “Sasha, I’m not a damn alpha. I can’t bring power or amazing things to you. I don’t—I don’t have what the likes of Fenrys or Aidan have that your friends do. I’m just me. I’m the beta. I’m Conall, and I hope that’s good enough for you right now.”

I didn’t know if it was a declaration of his feelings, but I couldn’t consider my own in that moment without unraveling. I brought him closer, tilting his head up. His lips parted, sweat dampening his hair to his forehead boyishly. I bit his jaw playfully.

“Just Conall is perfect,” I told him, kissing him. “I don’t care about power here. I don’t care about your wolf politics or dynamics. Beta, alpha, whatever. It doesn’t matter *to me*.”

Conall groaned as if relieved but also aroused by that statement, and then his cock was there, the head of him sliding into me. I expected it to hurt more, and it *did*, but the pleasure and the way he held me was overwhelming enough that I didn't focus on the pain or the stretch. He was big, and I gasped at the size, as he kept inching in until he was fully inside me.

He tugged on the back of the collar, groaning as my walls fluttered around him, constricting. "I'm sorry," I gasped, unsure if that would hurt, but I couldn't stop clenching.

"It's good," he groaned brokenly. He dropped his forehead against mine. "God, you feel good. You're fucking tight, Sasha."

I moaned on a laugh as he pulsed inside me. All men said that, right? But I likely *was*. I'd never had a man's cock in me before.

"Move," I begged, needing that friction, that stimulation. The closeness. The thrusting and the speed. "Let go in me, Conall. Let go of it all."

And he did. Conall began to thrust into me with abandon, his guttural moans ricocheting around the cabin, mingling with mine. Pleasure burst through me in waves, dragging me under every time I thought I had a grasp on it. When he yanked my hips up, I gasped and cried out, clawing at the bedsheets. I didn't think it would feel this *good*.

My clit pulsed, and Conall thumbed it, making me shout, the stimulation almost painful because of how aroused I was. His brows were pinched, his mouth open as he fucked me into the sheets. It was animalistic yet careful; rough but attentive. He never stopped touching me. A handful of my ass, or my breasts, toying with the nipples, brushing my hip bones, flattening his hand over my stomach.

My legs wrapped tighter around him, my heels digging into his back as if I could keep him with him like that. As I gazed up at him, so fully connected and full of him like I had never been with another person, I realized the horrifying truth that I *wanted* this. Not just the sex but him. It sank fear into my skin, and I buried my face in his neck, pulling him down to me.

His own moans pressed into my skin, and a whine built in my throat. I didn't want it to ever stop, but my orgasm was fast rising. My pussy

tightened around his cock and Conall short, aborted breaths had me growing ever closer to that edge.

I had a momentary panic of not knowing if he should pull out or not. I stuttered out a gasping moan when Conall grabbed a fistful of my hair and exposed my neck, growling as he licked a certain spot. *Mating mark*. It wouldn't ever be the same for us, but there was something about him trying to imitate it that had me hurtling into my orgasm.

His cock swelled in me, pulsing, as he chased his own climax.

"Conall," I keened, my hips rising to meet his short, fast thrusts. They were wild, uncontrolled now, frantic, as we chased our highs.

Conall's hand settled on my throat, his fingers wrapped around my neck. My eyelashes fluttered as I moaned.

"Come for me, kitty," he told me, his voice so deep and rough, that I shivered. His other hand clasped my clit, and I screamed his name as I flew off that edge, right into an earth-shattering orgasm.

I sobbed through it, the pleasure overwhelming. I couldn't control my body nor my expression, but Conall watched everything, smiling, he pulled out when I came, gushing the way I had in my kitchen the other day, and without hesitation, he pushed back in. A few more thrusts and he was in the throes of his own pleasure.

My name was a delicious sound, falling from his lips as he finished in me.

But the arousal still built in me, and I was still wet and aching, exhausted but still aroused. I giggled as I pushed Conall back, straddling him.

He gave me a tired, satisfied grin. "You want to know the good thing about wolf shifters, Sasha?" I nodded as I leaned in to kiss him. He returned the kiss lightly, still smiling. "We have virtually no refractory period."

I giggled as I began to rock my hips. His cock was soft in me now, a strange sensation,

but I didn't stop. And Conall didn't stop me, either, not even as he was worked into oversensitivity.

Within a minute, he was getting hard again, and I found out that I quite liked riding him into more orgasms as well.

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Chapter 22 - Conall

I lay in the double bed in the safe house, the sheets tucked around my hips, and Sasha's body curled into mine. Her thigh slung around my own, teasing my skin that was still sensitive. Her head was on my chest, and I stroked her hair idly.

I couldn't compromise the safe house being what it was or updating Fenrys with what had happened, so I sent a quick text, typing with one hand so I didn't have to move from Sasha.

Lovers' getaway.

I hoped he'd understand. It would at least let him and Thalia know why I'd be quiet for a while. The signal by the lake was spotty anyway. I threw my phone back onto the bedside table.

Sasha hummed, turning to face me. Her breasts pressed against my chest, and I smiled down at her, tucking hair behind her ear. Her skin was warm from sex and the bed, and I brushed down her neck and shoulder.

"Lovers, hm?" she asked mischievously.

"Well, that's what we are, sort of, right?"

She leaned in to plant a light kiss against my neck. "I suppose," she said. "It's just sex."

I tried not to show the way that comment affected me. Yes, I'd slept with women as a hookup, but never more than once. I never went back to seek more pleasure. Once I'd slept with them, I left them alone. Sasha wasn't a conquest; I wouldn't ditch her after today. What we'd done had meant a little more to me than *just sex*.

Still, I agreed, nodding. Her eyes twitched. *Stop hoping I'll contradict your inconsiderate comments*, I wanted to say but held my tongue.

She was independent and stubborn, I understood that. I was starting to understand why she was like that and what it meant to her to hold it so closely to her chest. It was a preventative to me opening up. I wasn't the sort of man to hide his feelings—I gained more from talking about them but with Sasha it was different.

I was afraid to poke too close to her truths and risk the closeness that we worked on.

I *knew* what we had was more than sex.

Do you think we'd be good together? I wanted to ask. *Do you think we could make something of this?* But I kept the questions to myself. I didn't think she was ready to be asked those questions, and I couldn't risk her pulling away, especially not so soon after what we'd done.

"It's just sex," I agreed softly, kissing her. The kiss tasted like more than sex. The way she reached for me *felt* like more than sex. The way she kept coming back for more touches, more of *me*, made me think it was more than sex. She wanted *me*. If it was just about sex, she'd pursue the men she flirted with but I knew she didn't. Her apartment smelt of her and only her. No trace anywhere of another man. I'd noticed that.

I thumbed over the bruise on her neck where her mating mark would be if she was a wolf, if I were an alpha and she would be my Luna. She'd let me do that, let me have that stupid fantasy.

She hummed in soft pleasure at my touch.

"I can't imagine what a mate feels like," she says. "As a wolf. For the likes of Fenrys or Aidan."

"Like heaven, apparently," I mumbled. "It's like, finding that one person you're meant to be with, meant to have forever... It's hard to comprehend how that feels beyond normal romantic feelings."

Sasha sighed. "Was it hard when they mated?"

"It was when Thalia came," I admitted. "It sounds dumb, but we were brothers, best friends, and the human part of me had the jealousy that Fenrys had a mate. The wolf part of me understood and yearned for the same, even if, as a beta, it wouldn't ever be in a similar way for me. Then, to see someone like Aidan mating... and with *Dakota*, of all people, it makes me think, like..." I sighed. Sasha kissed the expanse of my left pectoral muscle. "He's an asshole. But if someone like him even has a mate and I don't... I don't know, it's a hard pill to swallow, I suppose, especially when it all comes down to DNA."

Sasha nodded. "I can imagine. Aidan's a dick. Thalia and I tried to talk Dakota out of being with him when she first returned to Silverlake

Valley. I'd seen her at a gala in Oak Hill, following him around like a dumb puppy, not even yet mated. But she was just... spiraling, I guess, without him. She needed him. Her mate."

Sasha's eyes averted from mine.

"It made me feel a little apart from them," I told her. "Especially when we all do things together. You know, we're not like the three alphas. We're the two alphas and the beta. And it would probably help if Jason, Aidan's beta, did more with us, but he keeps to himself when he's not with his own pack. My brother's glued to his side. They remind me a little of Fenrys and me."

"Will you ever talk about what happened with Declan?"

I laughed. "What'll it cost me?"

She grinned, suckling my skin before kissing me. "A few kisses and definitely that thing you do with your tongue."

I tackled her playfully into the bed, turning her onto her back. Her dark hair fanned around her head, a brunette halo. Her bright eyes gazed up at me. *It's not just sex, it's not just sex.*

"Fine," I conceded easily. I kissed her deeply, cupping her face, basking in the responsive moan she always gave whenever our lips met. I slowly worked her mouth open beneath mine, kissing her deeply as I trailed my fingers down her body, touching everywhere I could reach again.

I went to brush my hand between her legs again when she batted my head away.

"No getting distracted," she chided me.

I made an annoyed sound and collapsed back onto my back. Sasha straddled me, circling her finger over my chest. Her hair fell in a curtain around her.

"So much for no distractions," I muttered. She reached back and picked up my shirt from the bottom of the bed. I took the chance to palm my way up her body, looking at the light hair between her legs, leading up to her sharp hips, her slim waist, her pert nipples set into her smaller breasts.

She tugged my shirt on.

“Take it off,” I suggested, pulling on the hem.

“No distractions,” she scolded. “You agreed to tell me the deal with Declan.”

“Why would I talk about my brother when I could have more sex with you?”

“Because I’m curious, and I’ll give you a story afterward if you’d like.”

That piqued my interest. “Deal. But don't squirm.”

I lifted my hips to indicate our groins, flush against one another. She blushed, laughing, and clambered off me so I could focus. Seeing her in my shirt did a hell of a lot for me.

“I was always passive growing up,” I told her. “I did what I was told to do by my father. Even Declan sometimes got a little pushy, realizing how easy it was for me to do something. My mom often didn’t take that approach, though. She would phrase things for me to do as questions, let me pretend I had a choice. All I had to do was perceive that she wanted it done so I’d say yes. That was me starting to present as a beta naturally. I was born to carry the burden of others and I think my father realized that pretty quickly. He was a tough man’s man. He wanted a son who was an alpha.”

I shrugged. “He called me a few names here and there—pussy, coward, inferior, no-good, that sort of thing—but I always brushed it off. Then, his affairs began when I was a teenager. I’d just gone into sophomore year, I was almost sixteen, still going through puberty, so my sort of ‘label’ as a beta didn’t manifest until then. I was friends with Fenrys, Lyna, and Aidan, although Aidan had not long left Silverlake Valley.” Sasha gazed at me like she was listening intently. She played with my hair as I spoke up, and I realized everyone usually waited for me to say something angry or defensive. Nobody *truly* listened to a beta when an alpha was in the room, and I’d harbored bitterness for that, but Sasha looked engaged.

“My loyalty to Fenrys manifested strongly,” I continued. “We’d always talked about forming a pack like his father’s, but I hadn’t realized my place below him until it happened. His pack formed, I became his beta. His second. I was honored and coveted my role and place to him.” I swallowed. Sasha brushed my face with the back of her knuckles, and I leaned into it. “The more time I spent with Fenrys, the less I had to deal

with watching my mom and dad fall apart. The less I had to deal with my brother's anger about it. The arguments were crazy violent; my mom fought, my dad fought, Dec fought. I was weak; I got out of there as quickly as I could."

I shifted onto my back, tucking an arm behind my head. Sasha leaned in, still listening, and kissed the underside of my bicep, nosing along my skin. I could smell her arousal spiking as she nosed.

"I left my house when I turned eighteen," I told her. "Dec was still only fifteen. He saw it as abandonment. I didn't consider him, I just... left. Fenrys had a place for his pack to go when he officially formed it after his dad passed. I was always there at his side, and never my brother's. I never visited, not after seeing how Fenrys needed me after his dad's death, not when I felt *home*, truly home. But things got lonely at times. My other best friend was gone, Declan was back at my house, and before I knew it, he'd left for Oak Hill. I don't know if Declan went there in search of Aidan. He knew of him, knew of the town's views of the Tyrone family, and ditched for his pack. As I did, he found himself a new home, but it resulted in us both icing each other out."

Sasha nodded, humming in acknowledgment, letting me know she was still listening.

"Now, there's been too much time and distance between us. I don't even know what I left him to deal with in that house. All I know is that my parents are divorced, and Declan hasn't been back to visit either one of them since he left for Oak Hill. I still visit them, but it's tense. My mom was tough, but even she said I walked out on them."

Sasha let out a soft laugh. "I can relate to that," she muttered. "Do you ever think the others are right, telling you to fight it out?"

"Probably," I said. "But Dec has words he wants to say, and he won't let himself be that vulnerable." I cast her a raised-brow look. "A little like someone else. He hides behind a wall."

Her cheeks colored, and she kissed me, as if to distract me. She hooked a leg over mine again, parting her legs, letting me feel that she was aroused and ready for me again. Did it mean something that we were both so magnetized to each other?

We couldn't mate cross-species, but what if it was some other base instinct, attracted to each other?

I kissed her, pulling her back onto my lap properly.

"I believe I owe you *that thing* I do with my tongue?" I asked, mimicking her words from before.

She grinned at me, wicked and feline, and licked into my mouth. "Mmhmm. Thank you for being open with me."

"Thank you for asking," I said, my hands already on her ass, exposing her, to slide the length of my cock through her folds. She ground her hips languidly over me. "I hope it sated the curiosity."

"It makes sense why he's angry," she said. "And it explains why you're so defensive about it. I hope he crosses the distance between you both *with* you."

"I'm just tired of arguing," I said. "I miss my brother. Especially now, working with him on this, it makes me realize what I've missed out on with him growing up. I've reached out a damned lot, but every time he pushes me away. The art session we had was the first time he's spent more than one minute talking to me, and I ended up punching him."

"You fought for me twice," Sasha murmured. Her hips stilled. "He was being shitty about our... Intimate life just to get under your skin. But you fought for respect. You don't have to always fight for me, you know."

I smiled at her, snagging her lower lip between my teeth as I slipped my hand down her body. "No, but I would like to, if you'll let me."

She swallowed, and instead of answering, she inched further down my body, grasping my cock and stroked it until it was hard. I was meant to be pleasuring her so I knew this was to distract me. But when her lips wrapped around the tip, my mind went blank and all I could think about was thrusting up into her tight heat.

Chapter 23 - Sasha

I couldn't keep Conall distracted for long, but it was enough to clear my mind and prepare myself.

It's just sex. That had been a foolish comment to make. I raged against my desires, but even I knew it wasn't only that. I just couldn't accept the alternative: I had feelings for Conall. Actual feelings—the sort that made me want to be taken on dates and have flowers bought for me, and to see his stupid grin whenever I opened my apartment door or have him there or when I woke up in the morning.

After he climaxed, I hummed into the top of his thigh, nestling, biting lightly at the skin. The feline in me preened whenever he called me that nickname in the heat of the moment, loved the collar, the *ownership* it could hint at. That part of me gave into it all while the girl who'd had her heart broken and swore to only ever rely on herself fought against it wildly.

"I'm sorry I hurt you before," I muttered, not able to look him in the eye. My pride told me to look away, to not see what my stubbornness did to people when they wanted to help me. "It was a stupid comment to make."

"What, the sex thing?"

I kissed his hip before climbing back up his body. "Yeah, the sex thing. Intimacy scares me. It was why I pushed you away that first time, and told you to leave. *You* scare me. I don't like how you make me feel."

"And how's that?"

"Safe," I confessed. "Wanted."

"Is that so bad?"

I nodded. "It's... It's hard to think that the safety you let me feel could go away at any moment. You would say it won't, or you're there to stay, but I've heard all those things before, and it was a lie."

"I'm sure Jackson meant it—"

I shook my head. "No, Conall, it was a literal lie," I whispered, my eyes welling up. I wasn't ready to talk about this, but I had to be. I inhaled, lay next to him, and wrapped the sheets tighter around myself. I had to be

open and honest. I was vulnerable once, and it had hurt, but I couldn't always keep looking backward.

“Sasha, you don't have to—”

“Stop,” I whispered. “Please, just—let me. I need to. Stop trying to protect me from things I need to be able to handle.” My voice took on a hard edge at the scold, but he only nodded, taking it in stride. I didn't want to be like everyone else who took advantage of his loyal nature to be helpful. He was hard-edged when he had to be, and people took advantage of his willingness, but with me, he could have that control. I wasn't ready to physically give it up to him fully just yet, but I would get there.

I sighed shakily. “Wait, I need wine for this. I don't suppose...”

“In the fridge door. Let me get it.”

“I can get it myself,” I laughed. “I've spent a long time being my own woman, Conall. You didn't rock my world *that* much.”

Except when I stood up, my legs did actually tremble.

“Keep telling yourself that, kitty,” Conall said, slapping my ass lightly as I left the bed. I was aware I hadn't pulled on any underwear, but I didn't care to. I was comfortable, surprisingly. As I poured the wine, I whispered the reality of my night to myself.

“I lost my virginity to a wolf shifter.” It sounded amusing to my ears. “I'm not a virgin.”

When I turned back to Conall, looking at everything he was, a whole muscled, gorgeous man who waited for me in bed, I thought, *oh, I'm definitely not a virgin*. A silly, girlish thought. But he was beautiful, watching me expectantly as I brought over two glasses of wine, tucking the bottle into the crook of my arm.

Now that I'd broken that barrier, I didn't think I'd ever get enough of Conall worshipping me the way he tended to do.

“You're stunning,” he murmured, his eyes tracking the length of my body. “Come here.”

And as much as I wanted to, I knew I'd need space to get through this next part, so I climbed into bed, handed him the glass, and put the bottle on my bedside table. I sipped from my own glass deeply.

“Jackson was part of Kato’s pack, which you know,” I told him. He nodded. “A little like yourself, I chose his pack over my family. When the two lives couldn’t coincide, I left. My dad had learned about my relationship with Jackson because—well, you know what small-town gossip is like. He got cruel, called me some names—”

Sarcastically, Conall knocked his glass against mine in a mocking *cheers* gesture.

“He called me a wolf’s whore,” I told him, swallowing. Conall’s face went pale.

“Sasha, God, I—”

I pressed a finger to his lips. “It’s okay,” I said. “My dad was trying to embarrass me, make me crawl back to my family, see through an engagement they’d set up for me. He said I lay on my back and took it. And if that was how I wanted to live, then I couldn’t do it under his roof.

“My mom told me that if I left *to do that, then I wouldn’t ever be* welcome to return. I was only seventeen; I was in love, and Jackson had all these cool people he knew that he wanted to introduce me to.”

Conall stilled next to me. “Sasha, did he ever... hurt you? Physically? Did the pack?”

Tears stung my eyes as I shook my head. “It was the opposite,” I whispered. “We fooled around a little, but he never properly went near me. I always thought he was being respectful because he knew how awful my dad had been.”

“It wasn’t out of respect?” Conall asked, confused.

I shook my head. “When he broke up with me, I was devastated. He told me that he wanted to leave Kato’s pack, was done with their life and goals, and wanted out. He broke up with me because he knew it would be too hard to keep seeing me around them if we stayed together. I’d grown close to the pack; they were like a new family. One that stayed together no matter what.”

“Sasha, what happened?”

“The breakup was planned,” I told him, tears slipping down my cheeks. I’d never talked about my breakup, even with Thalia. Now, I was tearing open every wound and letting it bleed out. But Conall was a

bandage, staunching the painful flow, holding me close to him. “It was intended to get me closer to the pack so I’d grow dependent on them, grow to *need* them.” I sniffed. “You asked me what was in the office and why I trashed it that day.” I met his eyes. “I found Jackson’s contract in the desk. He had gambling debts, and Kato paid them off. He became indebted. In return, Jackson signed to say he’d be Kato’s new beta. But he also signed to say that he would find a female shifter, someone to bring in to...” The words got stuck, but I forced them out. “Someone to mate with.”

Conall cursed, his entire body going tight with tension. “That fucking—”

I cut his angry comment off. “He never wanted *me*, he wanted the species I had in me. It was all a ploy. That was why he never pushed me for sex. He’d literally signed my body away to Kato when he deemed it time.”

“Sasha,” Conall murmured. “Sasha, can I hold you?”

I hesitated but eventually caved, letting myself accept that I wanted to be held up at that moment. Sadness overwhelmed me, the anger, the weight of what Jackson had done—why *me*—blazed through me murderously. I would see him pay for it. For every second I spent naively wasting on him, he would pay.

And in his eyes, I saw that Conall wanted to do the same thing.

I finished my wine and let myself fall into his embrace, pressing my face to his chest, just breathing in his scent.

“I swore I’d never let myself trust another male wolf shifter,” I told him. “Let alone... get close to one.”

“I’m honored,” he said lightly, opting to break the hard tension in the room from the topics. “But Sasha... I really can’t apologize enough for those comments I made. I didn’t know how—”

“True they were? Or almost were?”

I lifted my head to look at him. He nodded, but I only shook my head and kissed him deeply. Conall was not Jackson, and Fenrys’s pack was not Kato’s pack. Or whoever the pack belonged to now.

“Relying on myself has been so much easier,” I whispered. Conall nodded again, like he now finally understood properly. “He was my first

boyfriend and he broke my trust. It's hard to think about letting myself... what?"

I cut myself off when I saw his expression change into a slightly stricken look.

"Your first boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"And you never slept with him?"

Fuck.

I shook my head, biting my lip.

"Have you slept with... anyone?"

I let my silence do the talking for me. I breathed deeply—in and out, in and out, focusing only on the lungs expanding, like I had taught myself.

"Why me?" he whispered, taking my hand. "Why let me do that and not tell me it was your first time? Why let me do *any* of it? Fuck, Sasha, I would have been more gentle. I would have made it more damn special."

I shushed him, my fingers cupping his face, shaking my head. "No, no, Conall, I didn't *want* all that. Yes, I wanted to wait until I was ready. It was why I rejected you that night. I scared myself, I didn't want to give my virginity away to you when I thought you just wanted to hook up and part ways. I *wanted* to wait until it meant something."

Conall looked worried. "And did it?"

I smiled, leaning in to kiss him again. "What do you think? I don't trust men often, but I've trusted this. I've let myself have *this*." As I talked, I spread my legs either side of his thigh, feeling the thick, hard muscle pressing delicious pressure against my entrance.

"I would have saved the collar until you were ready," he muttered, thumbing over the bell, flicking it again. It had jingled with every thrust he'd made, deep in me, before.

"I *was* ready," I told him. "It took me a lot of thought to get to that point. Don't make me doubt it now." My voice was soft as Conall tugged me closer to him. He held me to his chest. "Thank you."

"What for?"

“For making it everything I’d hoped for. For caring about me and wanting to keep me safe.”

He didn’t answer me but his arms wrapped tighter around my body and I fell into a peaceful lull of his fingertips trailing up and down my spine.

What would it be like to love again? *Did* I feel love already? Could I let myself feel it unapologetically, figure out how to love while maintaining my own morals? How did I stand alone but let Conall stand beside me? How did I ever ask him to take a step back when he had such a fierce need to protect me?

As he read my thoughts, Conall murmured, “Having someone close to you doesn’t mean you’re no longer independent, you know. The two can go hand-in-hand.”

I hummed a reply.

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you again,” he promised. And I didn’t believe him, but I bit my tongue. Soon, sleep caught up to me, and I let myself drift off in his arms without resistance.

Chapter 24 - Conall

The following day, I woke up before Sasha and ordered a breakfast that would have served a small family. I didn't know how to feel knowing I had taken her virginity. I wasn't angry at her for keeping it a secret but more regretful that I hadn't known.

I would have treated her with more softness.

But I told myself she was outspoken enough to ask for that if she wanted it. A small voice whispered in my head that she'd stopped caring if sex meant something and had just wanted to know what it was like.

I tried to shove that part of me down.

The longer she slept, the more I spiraled into anger at the enemy pack, at Jackson, at her pride at not telling me any of this. She was so wrapped up in her own head and distrustful that she wouldn't let me help take it away or do anything for her.

Why wouldn't she just let me protect her?

Soon, breakfast was ordered, and I ducked around the cabin door, still undressed, planning to shower soon, and grabbed the food. The smell of waffles, bacon, eggs, toast, and spicy sausage woke Sasha up. She'd removed the collar last night but still wore my shirt with no underwear.

From where I stood, I had a great view as she stretched her legs out of the sheets. In turn, she gave me an appraising eye, taking in my naked body as I stood at the foot of the bed. Her eyes lingered south and I smirked, meeting her gaze when she finally looked back up.

"Enjoying the view?" I asked her.

She grinned. "I'd enjoy it more if you came over here."

"Well, breakfast is served," I told her, laughing. "You want it, come get it."

"It's not food I'm hungry for," she replied.

"You can have that later," I teased. "For now, have breakfast with me. We need to keep up our stamina, we're going to Palmetto tomorrow to check out those headquarters. I want to stay low in here another day and then—"

“Why not go today?” she asked, crawling to the end of the bed to snatch the piece of crispy bacon I had pinched between my fingers. She licked around my fingers as I blinked at her, grabbing another piece for myself.

“Because it could be dangerous,” I said. “They could still be out there, waiting to take you. Now I know the true reason they’re still pursuing you, I want to keep you safe even more.”

I watched the displeasure pull over her face and waited for her angry words. They didn’t arrive. Instead, she slipped off the bed, yanked on a pair of shorts in the bureau next to the bed, and walked to the other side of the cabin after swiping some toast.

“What?” I asked, groaning.

“Nothing,” she answered, shortly. “I’m just going to sit here like a fucking damsel waiting to be saved. Poor, weak Sasha, can’t do anything for herself.” Her eyes narrowed on me, nothing like the soft woman who’d all but purred against me as she melted the night before. I’d hit a nerve.

“I’m a shifter, too,” she snapped. “Why do you think I can’t be out there in danger? Why are you *always* trying to fight my battles for me?”

“It’s called *keeping you safe*.”

“Yes, well, I’ve done a damn good job of it so far on my own, Conall. Am I dead? No. Mauled? No. What is it about me that makes you think I can’t fucking protect myself?”

“It’s not about you, it’s about *me*, my need to keep you safe because I care about you.” My responding frustration to her insistence flared, and I tried to keep myself calm. The last thing she needed was another wolf going territorial on her. But I knew that’s what it was.

“Conall, I’m not *yours* to keep safe,” she shouted.

“Yes, I’m fucking aware!” I yelled back, unable to control my temper anymore. I saw her and did not underestimate her, but why wouldn’t she let me keep her safe? She’d been involved with some of the most dangerous shifters, men who would think nothing of hurting her. She *wasn’t* weak, no, but she was reckless and prideful, which could get her in the wrong situation.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Eat up and we’ll go.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’ll need your energy.”

“Stop *coddling* me!” she snapped. “Just stop it. Stop smothering me, Conall, because you’ll regret it. I pull away, I don’t rely on others, it is just *me*. Me, Sasha, a leopard, in her own world because it’s been kinder that way.”

“Because it has had to be,” I hissed. “But now it doesn’t. I know your family hurt you, and Jackson hurt you, and Kato betrayed your trust in him but not everyone is a piece of shit. Sometimes others want to be there with you.”

“But you want to be in front of me,” she countered. “Fighting *for* me instead of letting me hold my own. What pride do I get to keep if I step back and let you fight my battles for me, Conall?”

“God, you’re fucking stubborn.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a pain in my ass.”

The lame comment silenced me. And then I couldn’t help it: I sniggered. “I can’t lie, I expected *far* worse.”

Her eyes were still blaring with anger, but she softened at the sound of my laughter. “Oh, I have plenty of worse things to call you. Prick, territorial asshole, bastard, all of the above in one sentence.”

Her temperament was slowly simmering. I sank back into the kitchen table where the food was set out.

“C’mere,” I said softly, extending a hand to her.

She glared at me. But after a minute, like an angry cat, she sidled over and sat in the wooden chair next to me.

“Can I tell you something?” I asked, smirking.

“Is it sexy?” she teased. I forgot how damn sexual she was. Always speaking so suggestively, even before losing her virginity, as if she knew the effect she had on men and loved to toy with them by dangling herself within reach of them before pulling away.

“A little,” I told her.

“Then tell me,” she purred.

“Part of me wants to tell you to kneel at my feet while I feed you, and then you can have the breakfast you wanted before.”

Sasha’s eyelashes fluttered.

“Then why don’t you?” she murmured, slipping from her chair to go gracefully to her knees. She parted her legs, and with the way my shirt hung open, I got a view right down her body. I parted my own legs around her body. Sasha leaned in to nuzzle at my inner thigh before I tore off a piece of waffle soaked in syrup.

“Open,” I told her.

She took her tongue out, and I placed the bite on it. She was to eat it before capturing my fingers between her lips, licking up the digits and collecting the syrup on her tongue, moaning around my fingers. I slid them over her tongue, inching towards the back of her throat. She hummed, her throat working to swallow. Her eyelashes were thick and long, beautiful, as she looked up at me.

I barely made it through one waffle before cursing and tugging my shorts down.

“We’ll go tomorrow, like you said,” Sasha eventually said as we emerged from the bathroom. She heated up some leftover fried toast while I tidied around the cabin. “If anything, the extra time gives us a chance to... Enjoy each other before we’re forced back into reality and all the questions that your pack comes with.”

I took a chance. “It could be your pack, too.”

She turned to me, still holding the towel tucked around her body. She blinked. “I’m not a wolf.”

“No, but it could be your home anyway. If you want one. One that would be there for you but one to understand when you needed to be alone.”

She snorted. “Like you’d be okay with that. You don’t even like me putting my own damn seatbelt on.”

I grinned, as if it was a joke, but I knew she took it personally.

Sasha hesitated. "I'll think about it. I don't know what I'm doing, or if I even want to stay in Silverlake Valley after I help you take down the pack."

"You won't be doing any taking down," I growled, ignoring the way her consideration of leaving town hurt me.

"So I'm here for the information only?"

"Yes."

Her eyes turned hard. Once again, I'd crossed a line. "I'll see what Thalia says."

"Sasha—"

"If I'm to stay with the pack, her rule goes above yours, doesn't it?"

"Don't get nasty because you're upset," I warned her.

She huffed and stalked back into the bathroom, slamming the door shut. I rolled my eyes and walked towards the bed to get dressed.

We left the following day, having reconciled and reached an impasse. That mostly consisted of seducing each other at different points in arguments when we realized we'd butt heads once again on different opinions.

The thought of her sucking on my fingers at that breakfast table had spurred me on all day and night, drawing me insatiably back to her body. I couldn't get enough of her. Her scent, her body, her noises, her responses.

I forced myself to not even grasp her thigh as I drove towards the highway. I let Fenrys know we'd left the safe house, and Thalia had checked in with Sasha. Sasha kept giggling as she checked her phone.

"What is it?" I asked, feeling like I was being watched.

"Girl talk," she answered with a kiss blown through the air.

"I swear, if you're—"

“We’re comparing—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” I growled. Then I grabbed her thigh and tightened my grip, listening to her breathy gasp. She laughed through it.

“Jealous?” she giggled.

“No,” I answered. I definitely wasn’t. My knuckles tightened on the wheel as I drove us toward Palmetto, Georgia. I’d had Theo and Lyna scope out the office two days before, when I’d been at the cabin in Fayetteville. We needed to check out that office. Ideally, I should have been doing it with Fenrys but we’d already lost another day and he was trying to find out where Jackson himself was now based residentially.

Where I was now concerned for Sasha’s safety, involving the pack’s return and protecting my leader and pack, Fenrys’s concerns were more directed at the town and getting revenge for Thalia.

He needed to find out if the new leader of that pack was in Silverlake Valley and how much of a threat he was posing, especially now that we knew Graham’s son was involved somewhere. What was he doing for them, exactly? Fenrys had set up a meeting with the council that afternoon to discuss potential safety backups in case the pack had any larger-scale attacks and to see who would back Fenrys in a fight and gain protection if it ever came down to it.

“According to Lyna, their makeshift base is right up here,” I told Sasha as we drove through Palmetto, coming to the heart of an industrial estate. Many office buildings surrounded a parking lot. I went around the building, staying far back enough that we wouldn’t be seen. I just needed to get close enough to—

A crackle came through my car.

There.

“What is that?” Sasha asked.

“A bug,” I told her. “I got Theo and Lyna to bug around the office. The microphones are

around the window, so it won’t catch much, but it’ll be something. I just needed to get within a certain radius, and then we get the intel.”

Sasha shook her head, half smiling. “Insane.”

“According to Lyna, this office is where the whole pack meets. It’s the new version of the abandoned warehouse. The cabin in Fayetteville was one of the stations after they dispersed, waiting for the call to regroup after we attacked them in Silverlake Valley last year. My guess is that they’re meeting here and probably plan to take over the warehouse once... Well...” I couldn’t find it in me to finish that sentence, to consider the possibility of being eliminated and letting the pack have the run of Silverlake Valley.

“That’s Jackson,” Sasha whispered, making me focus again. My head whipped around to the window. I could see that it gave us a glimpse of at least five people in there. Darren Garth, along with the shaved-headed man, stood next to Jackson, who must have been high-ranked. Then there was Graham’s son, which was a good sign that he was here and not with his father, interfering with the meeting Fenrys was calling today.

I recognized a few other faces, and I fought not to let the memories from that night drag me back. Sasha’s eyes were glazed wide, as she looked at the pack. They were hulking men, all of them. Some had tattoos on their faces, others were double my size. Their arms were as big as damn tree trunks.

I could only imagine how imposing they’d look when they shifted.

Part of me actually felt worried, but I steeled myself. I wasn’t there to fight. Not that day. I didn’t have backup, and I wouldn’t let any harm come to Sasha.

Their voices crackled in and out. The meeting was... Surprisingly boring. Sasha flinched every time Jackson spoke. Her fists clenched on her leg, and I placed my hand over them, trying to ease her.

She pulled away. “Don’t need you to do that.” Her voice was clipped.

“Will you ever let me support you?”

“We’ll see.”

But then her name was mentioned, and she reached out to grip my hand then.

“Rumor has it she’s dating one of Fenrys’s bastards. The beta.”

A snarl built in my throat. *The beta.* I was damn well more than that. They said it with such scorn, wounding my pride.

“Don’t listen to them,” Sasha said hurriedly. “I know you need more control and power, more protection for others because of being belittled, but you’re *more* than a beta.”

“You didn’t think so once upon a time,” I muttered.

“Hey,” she said sharply. “I didn’t hold your comments against you. Do not hold mine against me. We both tried to get reactions out of each other.”

She was right, and I wilted, ashamed for a minute.

She sighed. “At least the rumors have taken well.”

“If we take Sasha back, then we’ll get ourselves into another situation like last time with the leader and his mate.”

“Sasha’s just a leopard. They’re not mated.”

I stilled, hating the twist in my stomach.

Sasha’s hands trembled, a snarl coming from her as she listened.

“We take her back and see who comes after. A wolf will protect their own pack, not an outsider shifter.”

Hadn’t that been a worry she’d expressed to me? That we would abandon her in favor of loyalty to ourselves?

I kissed her knuckles. “Don’t listen to them,” I whispered.

“Kiss me,” she hissed. “Kiss me and make me forget about all of that. I need a distraction from—from hearing Jackson’s voice. My anger is going to make me do something that will jeopardize our eavesdropping, and I can’t risk that. But I sacrificed *everything* for that man in there, *everything*. My family wants nothing to do with me, my pride is overwhelming, I’m isolated, and I got so damn co-dependent on them all, Conall. I can’t—I can’t, I—”

I kissed her with every inch of built-up fury I couldn’t let be unleashed.

I pulled her over to me. This time, she let me unbuckle her seatbelt to drag her across the center console. It wasn’t the place to do this, but the plea in her voice had me weak.

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Chapter 25 - Sasha

I fell into Conall's kiss, letting it take away that burning fury in my head that threatened to drag me under. All I could hear was Jackson's voice.

Sasha. Sasha. Sasha. Just a leopard.

I snarled into Conall's mouth, my fingers curled into claws, digging into his hair, his neck, anywhere I could find, never settling my hands anywhere on him for long. I was a ball of energy, pent-up, and he was someone with whom I could take that rage and make it into passion. He growled a responding sound into my mouth, my tongue fighting him for dominance.

Jackson's voice still droned on, and I had no doubt Conall was listening out, but I dropped my hand to his crotch, palming his length, waiting for it to harden beneath my hand. I needed to do *something*. His own hand followed suit, cupping me through the gym leggings I'd pulled on that morning.

I rolled my hips against his hand. Conall didn't even break away to shove his seat back. I clambered onto his lap, my groin flush against his. His hands went to my hips as he glided me back and forth over his lap. I moaned passionately into his mouth, our kisses full of teeth and biting and blood sliding between our tongues from bitten lips.

The friction of his erection against my pussy was heaven, and I chased that feeling. With every glide, Jackson's voice faded further, letting me give into my lust haze.

"Fuck," I groaned, panting as Conall brought me back to devour my mouth. "Fuck, I need this."

I *wanted* it. Need and desire burned through me. *Just a distraction*, I still told myself. *Just release*.

We kissed like we argued: snapping, sharp-edged.

It wasn't until I heard Conall's name that I stopped.

I pulled back abruptly. He was still hard against me, and my heat was aching and aroused, but I tuned back into the feed. Slowly, I took my seat again, enjoying how flushed and disheveled Conall looked. It looked

like it took effort for him to recenter himself. He adjusted his erection in his shorts.

“Christ,” he muttered, pushing his hair off his forehead. “You’re going to be the death of me. Still can’t get enough?”

I tried to muster a grin, but it slipped off my face. I pointed to the speaker.

“We have Charlotte, the lynx. Forget Sasha.”

“I want Sasha.” That was Jackson’s snarled voice. *“Nobody else is to touch her, she’s mine. Kato’s dead, he has no right to her anymore. He can’t hold my fucking contract over me or force me to leave for his own gain.”*

A snigger went around the pack. Jackson’s responding growl silenced them all. I watched in horror as I realized they *still* wanted me so they could create leopard-wolf shifters. They would... They would go through with Kato’s original contract.

My breath came shorter.

“So we get Sasha, and then what?”

“Mayoress Randon’s retirement celebration is coming up just before the holidays.” That was Graham’s son, from what Conall had pointed out. *“We attack then?”*

“Exactly. We get the town while it’s passed between hands. Fenrys doesn’t take over until the new year. Everyone will be distracted by the party and the holidays. It’s the perfect time.”

Hums of approval went around the room, picked up in crackles.

“In Oak Hill, we have five more stationed, and more coming in from towns past Atlanta. Kato didn’t have the vision to expand the pack like I do. He didn’t trust enough to give his secrets and ambitions away to more people. But with our ranks doubled, we’ll take Oak Hill and Silverlake Valley at the same time.”

“But the alpha—”

“Will be dead by the week’s end. As will the Silverlake Valley golden bastard and his pack. Then we take the women and we start a new reign in

the towns of Oak Hill and Silverlake Valley. We'll get the vision Kato always saw, at last. For Kato."

"*For Kato,*" the rest of the pack agreed.

"If Kato was alive, I'd kill him again," I cursed. "For Kato my damn ass."

"Sasha, I need to get you out of here."

I went to protest that we could do with hearing more but Conall was already slamming the gas to the floor. The tires screeched as he backed away.

"Conall!" I yelled. "Slow down, you'll alert—"

A bullet exploded the glass on Conall's driver's side window. Shards rained everywhere, and I screamed, ducking. Conall's seat was still pushed back, and I realized that he would have been hit directly if it hadn't been. Blood sprayed, and I screamed, trying to get to him. Conall slumped over the wheel, his chest rising and falling.

Then another explosion from in front of me, and more glass. A bullet whizzed over my head, smashing through the back windscreen of the car. I sobbed, trying to get to Conall, but my hands shook too hard, and I tried to get out of the car to shift and protect myself.

Hands grabbed my shoulders, digging in painfully, and I screamed, kicking out. I began to be pulled up and through the smashed window. Broken glass sliced my arms and sides, and I whimpered, crying out as someone dragged my body through the window and let go of me.

With a cry, I crumpled to the floor, my head smacking off a black combat boot. Groaning, I rolled onto my back.

I stared up at Jackson.

He propped his boot on the center of my chest. Greasy red hair hung in his eyes as he looked down at me.

"Hello, Sasha."

Three more faces grinned around him. Hands reached for me. Distantly, I heard *just put the fucking cloth over his face*, and then I was being pulled up. I screamed and kicked, spitting and gnashing my teeth at

any of them who came near me. They all carried me away from the car and I bucked, hard.

“You smell of him,” Jackson said, spitting. “No matter. We’ll fuck his seed right out of you soon enough so he doesn’t mess with our experiments.”

My throat tore as I yelled to be let go of, trying to fight my way out of their grasp.

“Don’t fight, Sasha, you’ll only hurt yourself more,” Jackson drawled. “And I want you looking pretty at my side when I take over Silverlake Valley.”

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Chapter 26 - Conall

The stench of chemicals made me gag as I bolted upright, gasping.

What had happened?

I dug through the brain fog in my head, frantic as I stood up, enduring the dizziness. Pain lanced through my shoulder, and I groaned, reaching around to press a hand to the pain site. My palm came away with blood on it. *Fuck.*

The gunshot, the broken window—Sasha’s screams. Fuck. Sasha. Where was Sasha?

Whatever I’d been drugged with left a thick taste in my throat, and I gagged, clutching my stomach as the pain and drugs sent my vision into a swirling abyss of darkness. I stumbled forward before my legs buckled. I caught myself, reaching out for the nearest thing. I expected to be met with the office building, but I was dumped on the dock behind an old cargo container. I gasped for breath, trying to regain my breath.

Sweat slicked my body, and I groaned as the world spun.

“Sasha,” I mumbled, trying to find her scent on the wind. They’d taken her. Drugged me to get me out of the equation, and they’d *taken her*. Every part of me understood the frantic urgency Fenrys had had that day when Thalia had been taken from the Mating Ceremony. I finally understood Aidan’s need to attack me when I wouldn’t let him see Dakota.

Sasha was not my mate—*couldn’t* ever be—and I felt this level of panic and distress. How had they done it? How had they endured it? My mind whirled with every possibility, especially knowing their plan for her, but I had to force myself to stop.

I couldn’t go in there raging, as much as I wanted to. No, Fenrys had done that once and nearly got himself killed without the backup the pack had.

But Sasha was with them now. Her scent would lead back to the office building, where they’d likely have a trap set up for me to lure Fenrys to them. I couldn’t let them. God, I’d promised Sasha nobody would hurt her ever again, least of all Jackson Trent.

I let out a roar of anger before I shifted, howling at the pain in my shoulder. I wouldn't be able to keep up my wolf form for long, but it would do to put some distance between me and the office. Being smart would be the best option. Every instinct in me raged to go in there and slaughter the pack that was there and then hunt down the rest, torch the place, and take Sasha away. But I couldn't be one man against them all. That would be the surefire way to get her and myself killed.

As much as it killed me to put distance between us, I knew I had to trust Sasha's insistence of protecting herself. Of all the times she needed to believe in that statement about her abilities, it was now.

Stay strong, I willed to her in my head.

I wouldn't be able to live with myself if anything happened to her while I chose to get my pack. I reminded myself that I wasn't choosing them over her. I was getting them because we needed to fight together to save her.

I pounded through the forest adjacent to the highway. I had a long fucking journey ahead of me, and no way to get my phone. I didn't even know if it still worked. They'd blown my car to bits. I returned to my base instincts for this one. Halfway back to Silverlake Valley, I howled, deep and urgent, into the air.

I raced for my town, for my pack, waiting, waiting, waiting—

An answering howl came back. Fenrys.

I tracked their scents on the wind. Soon, another answering howl went up. Aidan.

I howled back to them. Fenrys knew where I'd gone today; I could only hope he was heading towards me prepared. We couldn't wait any longer for Jackson's pack to bring the fight to us; we needed to bring it to them and get Sasha back.

The sound of paws thundering my way had me on high alert, and when I looked for the source, Fenrys's and Thalia's scents hit me, the two of them intertwined. One black, one white, the two of them leading the rest of the pack. And then Aidan's pack filed in, the gray wolf leading with the smaller russet wolf alongside him.

The sight brought a pang and I almost whined in need. They had their mates, their wolves. I needed to go save a shifter who was neither my mate nor wolf but mattered to me just as much.

I lowered my head in submission to Fenrys and Thalia. I spotted my brother's form among Aidan's pack. Soon, the two packs merged, and I huffed in the direction I'd just come from. Fenrys nodded, his hulking form pausing. He nosed Thalia's ruff and then launched forward. Thalia followed, then I did. Next to us, Aidan and Dakota kept pace with Fenrys and Thalia, Jason keeping pace with me.

Thalia whined, knowing it was Sasha in trouble. My shoulder healed with every pound of my paws through the woods as we all raced to face our enemies once again, stronger together.

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Chapter 27 - Sasha

My tears had dried sticky on my face. They'd gone from fearful tears to one of pure hatred and anger as I'd been shoved into a chair and tied up.

I stared around the room at men who used to be my brothers. A man who had once protected me from my family, took me away to a new town where I'd started a new life full of hope. He had dashed that hope, left me floundering, and then the other men had picked me back up and let me remain as family.

Now, they were nothing to me.

They were power-hungry men who had their own gains in mind without regard for my life. It had all been a sham.

"I hope you're fucking happy with yourself," I spat at Jackson. "You're a prick. I hope Fenrys rips your head off."

"Oh, you grew quite the tongue!" Jackson said, leaning into me. He grasped my hair, exposing my neck painfully. He buried his nose in my skin, sniffing. "I always wondered what that anger would taste like. Oh, Sasha, darlin', I had to stop myself from taking you so many times. But you were promised to Kato, weren't you? Never to *me*, the one that found you. The one that *saved you*."

"You didn't do shit," I snapped, jerking my head to get him away. "You took advantage of me. You brought me to the pack, knowing exactly what they wanted from me."

He pulled back, his gaze hungry, roving his eyes over my body. I bared my teeth at him. He wore a ratty t-shirt with his college name on it, a leather jacket, and torn jeans. I laughed at him.

"You're not quite the king that Kato was, are you?" I asked, cocking my head. "He got respect just from what he looked like. What do you have, Jackson? What did it take for you to get the pack's loyalty after Kato was killed?"

His expression shut down, anger rolling through him. "Watch your mouth, Sasha. I don't want to hurt you."

I snorted. “Okay.”

“I’m serious. All I ever wanted was to show you how loved you were. You were wanted by this pack, don’t you see that?”

“Wanted as their *toy*,” I seethed. “I wanted a home, Jackson. A *family*. And I thought I had that until I realized who Kato truly was. What you *all*—” My eyes assessed all of them. “Truly were. Vile little cowards playing at being big, tough wolves.”

Jackson kicked the chair, sending me backward. He caught me by the collar of my jumper. “I should have let you rot in that house with your father. He’d have sorted you out eventually.”

My blood boiled. I spat in his face. He yanked me back so the chair was flat. “And I should have asked Fenrys’s pack to kill you all last year. It’s a shame he only got to take out the true leader of this pack.” Snarls answered me, a threatening noise rippling through the shifters. The office I was in was spacious, big enough for them to shift if I pushed my luck too far.

“I’m sorry you never got to fuck me,” I told Jackson, smiling up at him sweetly. “Maybe Kato would have been the better dick for me to have first, anyway. Shame you won’t live up to it.”

A hand came across my face, slapping me so hard my head snapped to the side.

“Bitch,” he hissed.

“Coward,” I snapped.

I didn’t indignify myself by asking if anything we had was ever real. I knew it wasn’t. Any shred of reality that the relationship held was gone along with the burned pictures. I would never be able to unlearn everything I now knew about this pack and their intentions.

“I’ll never be your pack’s little pet,” I told him. “Never. No matter how much you threaten me or hurt me, I’ll never give in. I’ll fight you every second of my life if that’s what it takes, Jackson.”

“I’m glad you’re at least warming to the idea that I’ll survive long enough to *make* you the pack pet. Don’t worry, we’ll pass you around often enough that you won’t get bored.”

I screamed, kicking up at him, and slammed my boot into his stomach.

He'd only tied my hands, leaving my feet unbound. I was already loosening the rope around my wrists.

Jackson laughed, picking himself up off the floor. "Don't think I can't smell that beta on you, you reek of him. Are you still playing at thinking you'll be enough for a wolf, Sasha? You're not one of us." He cocked his head, utterly sardonic when he smiled. "How does it feel knowing you left your family home for nothing? Remind me, it was good before you met me, right? They only shunned you for liking someone not of your shifter species."

My whole body trembled with rage. I was not some weak female. I was my own woman, reliant on *nobody*. I had fought for everything I had and given myself everything in life without waiting for anyone else. It was *my* life.

A shadow fell across the window. I smiled.

"You know, Jackson," I said, "Kato always had eyes for me when you weren't looking. I suppose getting rid of you back then *was* planned because he knew he'd have access to me without you being in the way. I'd have gone to him willingly." The lies tasted sour on my tongue, like burning acid. "But you never noticed how he looked at me. How he kissed me the first time I met him in the restaurant while you ordered our food. You just had a habit of always turning your back to the real threats."

Jackson looked confused for a minute before rage settled in. It made me realize he *had* felt some sort of possession over me, whether it was sexual or romantic. He'd wanted me purely because he'd found me and didn't like that he was contracted to share his plaything.

Then, realization dawned on him at my meaning.

A light brown wolf leaped towards him, smashing through the office window. Glass shards flew everywhere. More wolves fanned out around the office and building. Howls echoed in the distance.

Jackson screamed as he went down under Conall's huge form, shifting on instinct. He let out a howl as Conall pinned him. An answering

one came from a distance. Darren, Jackson's new beta, grabbed a fistful of my hair. He'd always been a sly prick.

"The rest of our pack is here, Sasha. Say goodbye to your friends."

The ropes slipped off my wrists, and I laughed in Darren's face a second before I shifted, my claws swiping out at his face. He went down in a rain of red, dead.

Men were dragged out of the window, tossed into the pack of wolves outside, led by Fenrys or Aidan. I was the leopard among them. For a second, Conall pulled away from the snapping jaws of the alpha he battled to simply look at me, worry in those human-like eyes set into the head of a wolf.

Then Jackson pounced for him, and the two roared as they went through the window of the office, rolling around each other outside. I leaped through after them. Conall got to his feet first and backed up to be in line with me. Together, we stalked toward Jackson.

Around us, wolves and men went down. To our right, Fenrys and Thalia both pawed at the shaved-headed man who'd fired the gun at Conall. Fenrys pinned his human form down, and I watched as Thalia nosed at his neck before snapping her jaws around his throat. Fenrys licked her face after they were done before they launched after someone else.

I swung my head around, much smaller than Jackson, as he pounced for us with a growl. Not knowing who to target first, he aimed for the middle of us; Conall swiped with a paw while I darted out of the way. It was awkward, trying to figure out our respective fighting patterns. His bulk strength, combined with my quick agility, worked out how the two combined to make us equals. Roars and howls of pain filled the air as wolf fought wolf.

I launched myself at Jackson, thinking only of my sweet revenge.

I got his attention away from Conall. I snarled at him, snapping my tail as I darted back and forth, toying with him. He couldn't zigzag like I could to cover ground or track me precisely, but I disoriented him enough that he growled at me, low and threatening. His muzzle pulled back, exposing canines. I brought him closer to me before running full speed at him. He was so busy anticipating my attack that he didn't see Conall barreling into him from the left, sending their bodies sprawling. A whine

left my throat as I bounded over there, leaping on top of Jackson. His paws tried to swipe out at me, but I extended my own claws and taunted him. My sharp canines bared, I lowered my face to his neck.

The first time I saw Jackson in his wolf form was on my birthday in San Francisco. He'd told me Palmetto wasn't the place for shifters, that he yearned for the small town of Oak Hill or Silverlake Valley. I hadn't known either of those places at that point. I'd taken him to Fayetteville instead, but he'd always had his sights set on another place.

I remembered running through the woods, rolling around in creeks, splashing each other. We'd hunted, he'd shown me a wolf burrow, and I'd shown him how I climbed trees.

We'd been happy.

It was a lie.

I was not a wolf and did not belong with the wolves. But as I looked into Conall's eyes, he nodded, letting out a huff. I thought I could belong with at least one wolf. Even if it didn't work, even if it was wrong, even if neither of us would ever be able to have cubs that would be fully accepted into a wolf pack or a leopard leap.

Silverlake Valley was my home, and I wasn't leaving it, despite some desire a while ago.

I was there to stay. Jackson couldn't take that away from me. None of that miserable pack could.

I took a step back. Jackson growled but two more wolves joined Conall in keeping him pinned. I wondered if it was Theo and Lyna. I sprung forward, a yowl piercing the air, as I killed Jackson. His blood coated my paws, my maw, but he was gone.

Chapter 28 - Conall

As soon as Sasha killed Jackson, ripped out his throat with her teeth in a blood vengeance that she deserved to have, I shifted and told her to.

She shifted and collapsed into my arm, her whole body quivering as she stared wide-eyed at Jackson's prone wolf form.

"He's dead," she whispered. "Oh, God, he's dead. I killed him, I—"

"You eliminated the biggest threat to your own life and many lives around you."

I pulled her face up to mine, thumbing over her cheekbones. I kissed her brow. "I've enjoyed fighting with you, Sasha."

She mustered a smile, still not fully able to take her eyes off the bloody mess that was Jackson's body.

"Let's finish off the rest of them," I whispered.

Before I could shift, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me to her, kissing me deeply. "I thought you were..." She couldn't finish the thought, tears welling in her eyes. "I thought—"

I smiled, kissing her again. "Even if I was, I'd crawl through whatever other life waited there and find you again."

She blinked at me, the weight of my words settling in her.

Then I smirked. "But, hey, you said you didn't need protection."

"I don't."

"Then I suggest you shift and watch your back."

I shifted a second before she did, every instinct in me screaming for me to cover her, protect her, but Sasha spun into a shift, her beautiful animal's grace and elegance twisting her body, as she tackled a smaller wolf in mid-air. They both crashed to the floor together, rolling and snapping each other. Only Sasha got back up again. God, she was fierce and gorgeous. I went over to her and licked her neck, nosing my muzzle into her.

A rumbling purr sounded from her throat, and I growled back softly in response.

I was pulled back when I heard a pained yelp. I searched the throng of clashing wolves and watched as a small wolf slightly darker than me went down, blood pooling beneath him.

Declan.

I let out a howl and raced for the white wolf who had attacked him. I forced my body into the wolf, sending them off my brother. I got up while Aidan snarled and took over. He jerked his head in the direction of Declan. I paused, then bowed my head in gratitude. Dakota rose up to share the new opponent with her mate while I went to my brother's side.

I snatched the scruff of his neck and dragged him out of the fray, to where Sasha waited. She sat on her hind legs, bowing her head low as I brought my brother's injured body over. His chest stuttered with labored breaths. I nosed at his neck, whining.

Not my brother. My kid brother always ran headfirst into fights, trying to prove himself. Not my brother, who I'd never reconciled with. My brother, who last shed blood because of me punching him.

I nudged him on his back. Sasha leaped up and went to the broken office window. She came back with two blankets, dropping them at my feet. I shifted back, wrapping the blanket around myself. My hands grazed my brother's face, feeling fur matted with blood.

"Dec," I said. "Dec, c'mon. Wake up. You gotta shift, Dec." He didn't open his eyes. Blood continued pouring from him, but his chest continued to rise and fall in jerks. His back leg spasmed.

I went to my knees, grabbing fur and shaking him gently. "Dec, wake up. Wake up so you can call me an asshole or punch me. Come on, brother. Open those eyes, kid."

You stopped being my brother the day you chose Fenrys over me. No, that couldn't be the last words we parted on.

Slowly, Declan cracked open one eye, and his gaze found me. I laughed through my tears. "Come on, kid. There we go. Keep 'em open, no, no, no, Declan, keep them open."

Declan whined.

"I know," I told him. "I know it hurts like a bastard right now. But it'll be okay, Dec, yeah? Just keep your eyes open. Can you shift?"

Declan snarled at me when I tried to touch him again. I cringed back, raising my hands. His eyes rolled back, closing again.

I inhaled sharply, blinking back more tears. Not my brother. *Not my brother.*

“You’re my brother, Dec,” I said. “My brother. You asked what you did wrong. You did nothing wrong, kid. So keep those eyes open so I can apologize properly and tell you that you did everything right. Keep them open so you can punch me for how shitty I was.”

His eyes slipped open. Then, his body shrunk as he shifted. Sasha dragged the blanket over him, and I fixed it for him.

Declan coughed wetly. “Hey, asshole.”

I grabbed him and embraced my brother for the first time in almost a decade. “I’m getting you some help, okay?”

“The only help I need is for you to fuck off,” he muttered, but it was weak, no longer bitter.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Soon, two forms loomed over us. Aidan and Dakota dropped to Declan’s side, Dakota fussing over him like a mom. I realized they were probably closer to him than I was. I couldn’t help but stare in rejection as I sat back on my heels.

“I’ve called emergency services,” Aidan told me. “Fenrys has a buddy in the nearby hospital who has worked on shifters before. He’ll fix him up real good, okay, Conall?”

I was dizzy as I watched my brother bleed even more, groaning. A hand clamped on my shoulder. Then another. Aidan and Fenrys both stood either side of me.

“He’s going to be grand, Con,” Fenrys assured me.

“He’s my little brother,” I mumbled. It was then that I realized the sounds around us had gone quiet. I turned to look at the massacre. Wolves and humans were scattered around the office, and my stomach turned. I was no stranger to violence and death, but this seemed so wasteful.

I snarled at the display.

“We eliminated them,” Fenrys sighed. He looked exhausted. Soon, Thalia came up behind him. Everyone was wrapped in blankets or mismatched clothes. The good thing about shifting by a pack’s headquarters, I supposed, was that they had spare clothes ready.

Thalia offered Sasha a T-shirt and shorts that wouldn’t be warm enough for her, but she shifted and dressed quickly. I snarled at anyone seeing her between the shift and reclothing.

“We’re going to talk about *that*,” Fenrys murmured, looking between Sasha and me. “I know the look you’re giving her.”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“Take her back to the safe house. Go there, rest up, and recover without the rest of the pack. We’ll handle everything else.”

“I’ll call you when we have Declan stable,” Aidan promised. He stood with his arm around Dakota. I glanced at her stomach.

“Is everything—”

“All good!” she cried excitedly. “And we’ll box that off before Aidan tailspins into his fretting.”

Aidan kissed the side of her face, grinning.

My chest caved in as I backed up, Sasha joining me.

“Hey,” she murmured, nuzzling my neck. “We made a pretty good team, right?”

I bit my tongue, nodding. We *were*, and it killed me to know she would never be my mate in the way Thalia or Dakota was to the other men.

But she’s still there, still wants you. You’re holding yourself back now.

I pulled her to me and kissed her, ignoring my own dumbass thoughts. “Yeah, we damn well do.”

Chapter 29 - Sasha

Tension crackled between us on the run back to the safe house. Conall's hair had been destroyed, and we glanced at each other before grinning. We both shifted in mid-air as we disappeared into the woods. We jumped over one another, chasing each other through creeks and around trees. I yipped happily as Conall tackled me playfully.

My resistance to everything we could have ebbled away, getting quieter by my need for Conall. By the time we reached Silverlake Valley and the cabin by the lake, I was ready to pounce on him. We shifted in tandem, not bothering with clothes this time.

We crashed through the cabin together, grabbing for each other hungrily. Conall growled into my mouth as he devoured me through kisses. I jumped at him, wrapping my legs around his hips, pressing myself into him.

"Take me," I panted. "Just—claim me, Conall. Claim me, I'm yours. I'm yours." He pulled away, panting, his eyes searching my face.

"Sasha—"

"Please," I begged. Beneath me, he was already growing hard. I rubbed myself against him, his hands cupping my ass cheeks as he kicked the door shut. I tried to angle my heat to have him slide right in. "I don't want to belong to anyone else. I'm yours."

He slammed me against the wall. I gasped, laughing, as I arched against the wall to grind my arousal over his hard cock. His expression was slowly turning wild, losing himself to his resistance, as I had.

I lowered my mouth to his ear, sucking beneath the lobe. "I'll even call you *alpha*."

Before I could take another breath, he had my wrists pinned above my head. His eyes burned into mine, and then his mouth was mine, his cock sinking into me. I yearned for this: the pain, the ache as I adjusted to him without preamble. My moans spilled out of me, climbing in volume.

"Mine," Conall growled. He kept one hand on my wrists, keeping me up with his other. I was dizzy at the show of strength. His muscles

bunched and flexed. Waves and waves of pleasure drowned me, making me gasp and cry out, fighting his hold on my wrists so I could grasp him.

He gazed at me, a silent warning to stop fighting.

But I arched against him, smiling demurely, even as he unraveled me entirely with his cock steadily fucking into me.

“There’s some binds,” I gasped. “I want you to use them on me.”

Conall slowed to a stop, pausing, lowering his hands from my wrists. “What?”

My eyes flicked to the headboard. “I want you to tie me up.”

“Sasha—”

“I want to give up my control to you, Conall,” she said. “I want to feel claimed by you, and I need you to *take* control. I want you to have the power you need. *Have* me, Conall.” I kissed the shell of his ear, scraping my teeth over the thin skin to feel him shudder. “I know you want to lose control. I can feel it. You’re restraining yourself.”

I offered my wrists up to him. “Let it all go.”

I didn’t even blink before I was pulled away from the wall. Conall threw me onto the bed.

“Where are the binds?” he growled.

Excitement jumped in my gut as I nodded to the bedside drawer. It was delicate black silk, four rolls. Conall only grabbed two.

“Are you sure?” His voice was low, soft, but rough at the same time. Aroused but caring.

“I’m positive,” I promised.

He wasted no time in taking my wrist in one hand, tying it to the headboard, and then the other. When he leaned back to admire his work, I parted my legs enticingly.

“Come back to me,” I purred.

Conall kept his eyes on mine as he lowered his head to my sex. The flat of his tongue pressed to my clit and wet folds. He licked his way up my body, kissing and sucking marks into my skin. Claiming every part of me

that he could. His cock entered me again as he stayed at that place where my mating mark would be if I was a wolf with an alpha.

Then he unleashed himself on me, and I was dizzy, lost in his enthrall, as his lust took over. But it wasn't just lust, I realized, as he blocked out anything but his powerful body, filling my vision. My lithe body was dwarfed by his muscular one, and I moaned at the size difference. How easily he picked up my legs and threw them around his waist.

His hands braced either side of my breasts, his hips snapping. My breath punched out of me as I gasped for him.

“Conall—*God*—”

His hand lightly rested against my throat again.

“Swallow,” he told me. I struggled as he applied pressure, my vision swimming, but I giggled, losing myself to the building lust.

He gave into his instincts, mounting me, and I tried to keep up. I was soaked, ever wetter to accommodate his thick length.

No, it wasn't just lust. Conall's face tightened as he pressed his forehead to mine, swallowing hard as he let out snarls and growls of pleasure. Of *need*. Sheer, unhidden need. Power being taken, power being given so freely.

No, this was safety. Security. Rough possession, yes, but I *wanted* that. I had spent so long as a lone island, floating on a vast, empty sea. Now Conall was here, and he wanted to be anchored to me. He'd saved my life many times, supported and protected me.

Even now, he kept my gaze, searching for any flicker of discomfort that he wouldn't find.

He closed his fingers around my clit as he groaned, thrusting roughly, his hips keeping a brutal pace. I didn't want sweet, tender lovemaking. Not right now. I wanted this primal thing, this unleashed version of Conall.

“Come for me,” he hissed, sealing his palm over that sensitive nub. I cried out in pleasure as my first orgasm shook through me. With the speed it hurtled through me, I knew it wasn't the only one. My walls fluttered around him, my eyes rolling back as we came together. My mouth opened in a silent scream as the high crashed through me with a powerful intensity.

Conall buried his face in my neck while I tried to kiss his temple. He let out a muffled noise, almost like a keen as his cock pulsed in me.

“So good,” I sighed. “So fucking good.” I giggled. “Don’t give up on me now.”

He let out a rough noise as he pulled back. His eyes darkened as he went soft in me, only to keep rocking into me. Slowly, he got harder again. I grinned, wincing in oversensitivity.

“Give me everything you have,” I told him, lifting my chin in pride.

My platter of chocolate cake was half demolished several hours later as Conall ran us a bubble bath. He’d dug out scented candles, laughing as he showed me.

“Thalia?” he asked.

“Thalia,” I confirmed, my voice raspy. He’d made me lose my voice to the screams. I didn’t care how much time we’d lost to lust and sex, but I was finally sated, and he’d finally been able to tear himself away from me. Right after, I’d wrapped my legs around him, clinging to his back in a very domesticated couple way that came more naturally than I’d thought it would.

I’d requested the biggest chocolate cake he could find for me.

“Don’t tell me you’ll enjoy that thoroughly and then later tell me how you need to work it off,” Conall said, grinning, leaning against the bathroom doorway, still naked. I couldn’t take my eyes off his expanse of muscles.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “This is my guilt-free cake. Besides, shifting sort of keeps me active with all the running. It works everything off my human body anyway.”

After we bathed, Conall changed the sheets, and I wrapped myself in fuzzy pajamas that I found in the drawer. I was wrapped up in my wolf, burying my head in his neck, and it clicked.

“Ever since Jackson left, my defenses have been up,” I told him softly. “I know you know that, but... Just let me talk.”

Conall nodded.

“You’ve protected me, Conall,” I said. “And—well, at first I couldn’t accept that. I still

can’t fully. But today, I saw how you stepped back and let me have my pride. My space to fight my own battles as well as ones with you.”

I leaned in, nuzzling into him. “I didn’t think I could trust another man. I didn’t ever think I could *love* another man again.” Hesitantly, I met his eyes. “Until you. It’s not just sex, Conall, and I think we both know it. I’m sorry I said because I shouldn’t have. When I’m threatened, I pretend. I pretend like nothing matters to me; it’s my defense. But I want to learn how to lower them with you.”

Conall was quiet for a long, long time.

Then his arms were around me, his fingers slipping through mine as he turned me on my back, leaning over me.

“I’m not good with just standing back and letting things happen,” he said, and my stomach fluttered with nerves. “I never really know when to draw the line and let other people do what they need to do for themselves. I always want to step in; it’s like a need to protect. You spark that in me—this need to keep you safe. I know I struggle with that, but if you can be patient with me, Sasha, I swear I won’t let harm come to you, but I’ll stand beside you and watch you not let harm come to *yourself*.”

I couldn’t help my breathy laughter at that.

“It’s never just been sex,” he told me. “You were silly for saying that.”

“I know,” I mumbled.

“But I need to know when you want to take the lead, especially in your own dealings and fights. *But* I want you to know that it’s not weak to have someone fighting with you. For as long as you’ll have me, I want to be here fighting *with* you. Let me do my part to keep you safe.”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts,” he said. “If I have to learn things, then so do you, so we don’t clash.”

“Right,” I muttered.

He laughed and kissed me. “I love you, Sasha.”

I always thought I’d fear those words but when he said them they sank into me calmly, peacefully, and I felt like something that had been wound tightly in me, throwing up every defense, suddenly relaxed. It let go. I sighed as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders.

“I love you, Conall.”

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Chapter 30 - Conall

A week later, I sat down in a hospital chair at the side of my brother's bed.

His heart monitor beeped, showing a steady heartbeat. It was a noise that both set me on edge and comforted me.

His eyes cracked open at the sound of my arrival.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

"Sorry," I said, grinning. "They told me you had me on a list to not be allowed in, but here I am anyway, sucks for you."

Declan rolled his eyes.

"How are you?" I asked seriously.

"Not good," he said. "I feel like I got mauled by a wolf because my brother got involved with a girl who needed saving a little earlier than we planned. Oh, wait, that's exactly what happened."

"You didn't get *mauled*," I muttered. "You got... aggressively swiped."

"Get out, Con," Declan groaned. "I don't have the energy to taunt you back the way you deserve. *Or* punch you."

"I didn't say you could punch me," I lied.

"Yeah, you did. I was tired, not dead." He looked back at me, swallowing. "I heard you crying."

"What, you're going to chew me out over that one, too? You're my little brother, I was terrified at the thought of losing you."

Declan shook his head. "No, I'm not going to comment on it." He reached out and hesitated before grabbing my hand. "Thanks."

I nodded, unsure of what to say. "Yeah."

"So, I also heard you owed me an apology."

"Nah, that's the pain meds talkin'."

"Nope, I'm ready. All ears. I have nothing better to do, so I may as well hear you out."

“Do you want to stop pretending like you don’t care for a minute, then?” I challenged, raising a brow at him. “I’m still your older brother. Don’t disrespect me.”

Declan huffed, but I didn’t push it.

“But you’re right,” I said. “I do owe you an apology. A big one.” He pulled his hand back, his eyes closing, but I knew he was listening. “Dec, I should have done better all those years ago. I don’t know what I left you to deal with in that house, and you can tell me in awful detail any time you want to so I feel worse, but I never should have abandoned you the way I did.”

“Dad said you were entitled to your own life,” he said. I was surprised at that. I always thought my dad had disliked me secretly. “He called me a pussy for being upset about it.”

“Well, you’re not,” I muttered. “He always called me that too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. In reality, I suppose it was more him who was a coward.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Yes, Fenrys is my leader, my honorary brother, as such. But you’re my *true* brother. My own blood. And I’m here for you, no matter what now, in a way I wasn’t when you were growing up. I know I failed you, Dec, and I’m sorry. I can only hope that in time, you’ll forgive me.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Which bit?” I asked glumly.

“Just leave in the middle of the night without saying goodbye or explaining.”

I shrugged. “I just wanted out. I couldn’t stand the house anymore. I thought, in a way, I didn’t expect to *stay gone*, you know? I always thought I’d just go on a break to hang out with Fen and the others. I didn’t imagine what it would do for me, how good it made me feel to just be away from the house.”

“Away from me,” he muttered.

“Not intentionally,” I told him.

“Did you never think about asking Fenrys to let me join his pack with you?”

I shook my head. It was a harsh truth, but he deserved the truth, no matter what. “No. You were young, and I had gone through so much with Fenrys. It was why he asked me in the first place.”

Declan nodded, his eyes still closed.

“I was the one who egged your house on Halloween the year you moved in with Fenrys,” he muttered. “I thought you should know.”

“You little shit,” I said, laughing. “It took me ages to clean that up.”

Declan shrugged. “I was sixteen; it was the worst thing I could think of quickly where I wouldn’t get myself into too much trouble.”

I snorted and shook my head.

“When I’m better,” Declan said, “You know, after my wolf mauling —” I rolled my eyes. “I’m going to punch you so hard, and then we’ll be even.” He opened his eyes, tilting his head to look at me. “You messed me up good, big brother.”

They weren’t words a brother wanted to hear, but I accepted that I needed to hear them.

“I won’t even block the blow,” I promised.

“Damn right you won’t.” He paused. “Oh, I should probably warn you. Aidan’s going to chew you out. I finally told him what happened between us. He kept demanding to know, and I have never told him until now. He’s pretty big on family, so he’s sort of pissed, you know, as the leader of the pack I’m part of.”

“Yeah, yeah, stop rubbing it in what I did wrong.”

“Hey, can I ask you about Sasha? Are you two, like, *together* together? There’s talking going ‘round the packs. Some people keep saying you two are keeping up the *nothing between us* line. Others are saying you’re together.”

“Why’d you ask?”

“Just want to know if I should get you matching couple pajamas for Christmas or not.”

I couldn't help the burst of laughter at that. I patted the hospital sheet. "Yeah, why not? It'll make Sasha's day."

I could guarantee she'd both love and hate it, but I didn't tell him that.

Instead, I stood up. "Rest up, okay? We have a lot of ground to cover. I want to work to get us back to being proper brothers who don't want to kill each other. Kind of ironic we've been like that, and yet it was you nearly dying that's brought us back together."

Tiredly, he nodded. "And Conall? I'm sorry for what I said about you and Sasha. It really was out of order. And for the comments I made about you being a beta. You're not—you're not any of what I said."

I nodded, my jaw tight. "Yeah. Thanks."

"Now fuck off and let me rest, yeah?"

"Course."

It was still slow going and stilted, but at least we weren't launching threats at each other anymore. I ducked out of the hospital room and headed down the corridor, into the fresh air. I smiled, knowing everything was finally going to be okay. The threat of Kato's pack had been truly eliminated. Theo and Lyna had hunted down some stragglers of the pack who hadn't quite made it to Palmetto. Graham's son had been stripped of any title, inheritance, or respect in the town, shunned, and offered either a sacrifice of giving up his future seat on the council for good or leaving town altogether. He opted to leave town, carrying the weight of knowing he'd sided with a pack trying to take over Silverlake Valley.

As for Fenrys and his mom, Mayoress Randon was stepping down tonight.

My phone pinged with a picture of Sasha in a gorgeous green satin floor-length gown.

Guess what I'm wearing underneath ;)

I didn't guess. I drove like hell to her apartment instead.

Epilogue - Sasha

The holidays rolled around with a renewed sense of festivity now that the threat of the enemy pack had been eliminated. The scene in Palmetto had been cleared thanks to an arrangement between its mayor and Fenrys. Everything was done under the table, discreetly and quickly.

Two packs piled into Fenrys's house on Christmas, and we all sat around an obnoxious tree. The recently retired Mayoress Randon sat in an armchair, holding Reina on her lap, as she helped her granddaughter with a light-up book Conall and I had bought her.

In another week, Fenrys was set to make his first speech as Mayor of Silverlake Valley, with Thalia and Reina at his side.

It meant Conall would be stepping up to help with the pack a lot more, and I liked that for him. I snuggled further into his side.

"I think the red looks good on you," I whispered.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered. "I didn't think he'd *actually* do it."

Conall glared at his brother from across the room. Declan and Jason unwrapped more gifts, Declan sneaking glances at us and sniggering. He'd actually bought us the matching red festive-themed pajamas he'd apparently hinted to Conall about during his hospital recovery. I was on the fence about my thoughts on them. I hated that we matched—part of me still hadn't adjusted to that part of being a couple, constantly being linked—but the other part, the softer part of me, craved the sentimentality that I'd always longed for, until I buried my softer wants underneath so much stubborn need for pride.

Accepting my feelings for Conall—the reality of loving him—was still something I was working on. We clashed sometimes, of course, and there were still times he felt compelled to protect me over the most minor things, but we were slowly figuring out boundaries and where to draw lines, so we balanced each other out.

"Open ours next!" Thalia called to me when I looked around the room, at the different piles of presents. "It's the one with the pink bow."

"Wait, you bought us a *joint* gift?" I asked. I glanced at Conall, but he shrugged. "But we..."

“Just open it!” Thalia said, giggling. I grinned at her and picked up the gift she pointed at. We each took a side and tore through the paper, revealing a coffee machine.

“It’s to go in the safe house cabin,” Fenrys said. He had a smirk on his face that he tried to smooth out. “The others complained about the scent of you two in there, so now they don’t want to go in. That means that you both have a permanent getaway. Or home, if you want it. If that’s on the cards for you both.”

He pulled out a sheaf of papers and held them out to Conall. “And that’s *my* gift to you both. Rights to the land around the safehouse to extend it if you want to.” He looked between us. “You never know when you might need a couple extra rooms.”

At the implication, I stilled, not daring to look at Conall. We hadn’t discussed children, not when I still got lost in my head about that contract and the enemy pack’s use for me. Even if it hadn’t happened, the thought weighed on my mind, and I had to remind myself that all of them were gone. The threat was wiped out. I was safe; we were *all* safe.

As everyone burst into a flurry of activity, and Dakota started talking about pregnancy cravings, to which Thalia joined in about, and announced that she was pregnant with hers and Fenrys’s second child, I leaned into Conall.

“What do you think about the cabin?”

“I love it,” he answered simply. “It’s a gorgeous place. Simple now, but we could work on it together, make it pretty.”

“And the... Extension idea?”

His eyes searched my face. “I’m not completely having children off the table. It’s not a hard no, but it’s a *not yet*.”

I nodded, agreeing. He wrapped me up in his arms, and I turned my face into his neck, sniffing the cologne that I’d bought him for Christmas. I kissed the underside of his jaw.

“Thank you for always making me feel enough,” Conall whispered to me, for only me to hear. “I’ve spent too long feeling inadequate. But now I belong, and I’m content.”

I smiled up at him. “Of course, you’re enough. You always have been for me.”

He kissed me lightly, stroking down the length of my curls.

“Hey, would your cub have spots?” Jason asked aloud, looking at us.

“Oh, come on,” Conall groaned. “Stop with that.”

“No, seriously, I’m intrigued, actually,” Jason said.

“Me too,” Dakota piped up. “When they shift, would it be a leopard’s tail or a wolf’s, I wonder.”

“Well, considering there’s *no baby* yet, it’s pointless to wonder,” I muttered, but I still laughed, secretly wondering about it myself. I cringed, thinking of a strange baby with a mixture of Conall and me, the exact sort of child Kato wanted me to have for his new vision of Silverlake Valley.

Part wolf, part leopard.

I looked at Conall.

One day, when we were ready, I was sure I wouldn’t care.

The baby would be ours, and that’s all that would matter.

I slipped my hand into his.

He leaned into me, kissing the side of my face. “I love you,” he whispered. “You and whatever cubs we have in the future.”

“Far into the future,” I corrected.

“So far, it’s barely noticeable.”

I laughed and leaned back into him. As he held me, and I looked around at my friends, this unlikely group finally coming together, I knew I was so content. I was happy. And for the first time in years, I let people into my life and let them work *with* me.

I wasn’t alone anymore. I kissed Conall again, still not getting enough of him.

I was his leopard, and he was my wolf. That was all there was to it.

THE END

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About the Author

I have dreamed of writing books since I was a little girl. Always reading, always imagining fantastical worlds and characters, I finally decided to publish the crazy figments of my imagination. I write about shifters, dragons, magic, and hidden worlds that I would like to visit one day...

In my daily life, I love cooking, taking long walks with my wonderful husband, following courses on new topics that I know too little about, and visiting family and friends in faraway places.

Thanks for experiencing and sharing my imaginative world with me!

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