



WICKED
CRAVINGS

THE
PHOENIX PACK SERIES

SUZANNE WRIGHT

WICKED CRAVINGS

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Published by Montlake Romance

PO Box 400818

Las Vegas, NV 89140

ISBN-13: 9781611099362

ISBN-10: 1611099366

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012953340

In loving memory of baby Curtis

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CHAPTER ONE

Dante shot a fierce scowl over his coffee mug at Dominic, Tao, Trick, and Marcus. “She’s not my mate,” he repeated for the tenth time. He knew the enforcers were playing with him, but he was too agitated to see the funny side of things. Was there a funny side to a female maintaining you were her mate to her seven brothers who wanted your balls on a plate for “abandoning” her?

“All I’m saying is that you guys looked cute together,” teased Trick as he leaned back in his seat opposite Dante at the long oak table. No sooner had he set aside his empty cereal bowl than Grace, undeniably the world’s best cook, collected it. She gave Trick a reprimanding look for his teasing, but Dante could see that she was hiding a smile.

“Yeah, you matched well,” agreed Marcus, wearing his usual clown-wide grin, which made most females melt while it irritated the shit out of Dante.

He looked at Marcus incredulously. “I matched well with an agent of Satan?”

“Someone has to have that agent of Satan.” Dominic shrugged innocently before taking a swig of his coffee.

Trick gave Dante a kind, understanding smile that couldn't have been more false. “Don't worry, I'm sure that in time she'll forgive you for abandoning her.” The “abandoning” part aggravated Dante just as much as the false claim. He would never walk away from his mate, even though he wasn't yet ready to find her. It wasn't that he didn't feel the absence of that bond in his life. He did, and so did his wolf. But it wasn't as simple as that. When his mate came along, she would rightfully want all of him, she would demand to be at the center of his life, and she would expect his loyalty to be with her, first and foremost. For a Beta, that could be a problem. At present, Dante's loyalty rested with Trey and his life was dominated by his responsibilities to the pack.

A Beta was more than just an Alpha's right-hand man, responsible for giving advice on political matters. He was also responsible for the protection and safety of the entire pack, he was the mind behind the plans and strategies, and he acted as a go-between for his Alpha when negotiating matters with other packs. He also trained and commanded the enforcers. Betas got their hands dirty doing the jobs that no one else wanted—particularly interrogating and executing enemies. Dante was well known for his skills as an interrogator.

Every day, he spent time patrolling pack territory with whichever enforcers were on duty, milling through paperwork or making important calls to lessen Trey's workload, and being an ear for any member of the pack who had problems to address. He was just as responsible for the pack's emotional well-being as he was for its physical safety. Also, he was in constant contact with the enforcers, so that he was always aware of any activity near the borders of pack territory. But having such heavy responsibilities was okay, because Dante liked his position and he was honored to be Beta.

His mate, however, wasn't going to be content to share him. He'd seen it happen many times before. Sure, the females were often happy at first, because it meant that they held the position of Beta female in the pack. But once they realized the sacrifices that came with it, the ultimatum soon came:

“Your job or me.” It was the same one that his mother had given to his father.

And when his father had chosen his job...well, life became pretty shitty. If Dante's mate gave him that ultimatum, he could never make the same choice his father had made. He would have to give up his position as Beta. He wasn't ready to do that yet.

"You know, there's nothing wrong with a complicated woman," said Marcus, topping his plate with more food. It was amazing that he was in such good shape when all he ever seemed to do was eat.

Dante took a gulp of coffee. "Personally, I prefer females who, like me, are *un* complicated." Rhett snorted. "Someone like that would bore the hell out of you, and you know it. Just as you know that you're not so uncomplicated at all. You might be easygoing and laid-back, but underneath all that you're deep, complex."

"That's Ryan you're describing." Dante gestured to the frowning wolf beside him—the only enforcer who wasn't joining in on the whole "let's irritate Dante today" thing. Ryan, a man of very few words, merely grunted before returning his attention to the food in front of him.

"Ryan's certainly complex," allowed Rhett. "So are Trey and all the enforcers—it's part of why you all became friends in the first place. Like calls to like. But we're not talking about any of the others—we're talking about you. Since you took up the mantle of Beta when you were an adolescent, you've put yourself second to everything else—the pack, our Alpha, your responsibilities. You're a workaholic of the worst kind. You need to find that work/play balance. You need to be as protective of yourself as you are of everyone else."

Dante really wanted to punch Rhett. The guy was genuine, loyal, and he would give any of his packmates the shirt off his back, but he would also analyze their every move, take them apart, and find out what made them tick. It was the way his geeky, analytical mind operated. Annoyingly, he couldn't just allow people to have their problems. No, he wanted to "fix" everyone. It was why Taryn called him a "psychological mechanic." But Dante didn't need fixing; he was dedicated to his job, but he was *not* addicted to it. "Easy there, Dr. Freud. Are you also going to tell me I secretly wanted to have sex with my mom when I was growing up?"

Rhett started to say something else, but Grace shot him a sharp look. He sighed.

“Fine, shut down. It’s only because you know I’m right.”

“Now can we back get to the original subject? Why would Glory falsely claim I’m her mate?”

She has to know that it’s not going to make me mate with her.”

“Maybe her pride’s stung because she’d expected to be more than a one-night stand and she wants to cause trouble to get back at you,” suggested Tao, the Head Enforcer.

“But I told her before I even touched her that I didn’t want anything more than that.” Dante sighed. “Why would she expect more?”

“Some people won’t accept what they don’t want to hear or see.” Rhett’s expression was genuinely sympathetic.

“Yeah,” agreed Dominic. “She’ll probably be happy once her brothers are done with you.”

“See—agent of Satan.” It wouldn’t be the first time a gang of brothers had targeted Dante. At least this time they weren’t his own.

“They’re all big fuckers, you know.” Trick’s lips twitched into a smile. “I heard they’re a crazy bunch, too. And I don’t mean ‘eccentric’ crazy, I mean ‘*we, the jury, find...*’ crazy. If I were you, well, I’d definitely be a little nervous.”

“Nervous of what?” asked Shaya as she entered the room and took a seat at the table. The redheaded female, who had been a close friend of Taryn’s since childhood, had recently joined.

Ordinarily, Trey didn’t like adding newcomers to their relatively small pack of sixteen. In fact, with the exception of Taryn, it consisted of only those who had left their old one, the Bjorn Pack, with Trey when he was banished. But he had accepted Shaya at Taryn’s request, and he had also allowed two members of the Bjorn Pack to switch with Selma and Kirk when they left Phoenix.

Trick smiled at Shaya. “We’re just congratulating Dante on finding his mate.” Almost as if he sensed that Dante was close to strangling Trick—not through a loss of control, just because it would be fun—Tao quickly explained, “A one-

night stand of Dante's apparently doesn't like that she was simply a one-night stand and has decided to tell her brothers she's his mate and sic them on him."

Shaya winced. "Taryn's not going to like it when she finds out. Good luck to Trey with keeping her out of it."

Tao looked at Dante. "What are you going to do? If it was me, I'd want to go and confront her."

"That's probably what she's hoping I'll do. I'm not playing her games." Dante drained the last of his coffee. "We'll meet Nick Axton at Mo's Diner to discuss it like he asked. As her Alpha, it's his right to sort this mess before it goes any further. Refusing him that chance would mess up our alliance with his pack. No spoiled little princess is worth that."

"At least he was good enough to call and let us know what Glory's up to," said Ryan.

"Do we mention this to our Alphas before the meeting?" Tao asked.

"No." Naturally it wasn't good to keep things from your Alphas, but part of Dante's role as Beta was to protect them—even from themselves. As Shaya pointed out, Trey was going to have a hard time keeping Taryn, who was heavily pregnant, from getting involved. "It'll be better to have the meeting before telling them. That way, Taryn can't demand to go and Trey won't have to sedate her." Tao and the four enforcers nodded, satisfied with the plan.

"Has Jaime come down for breakfast yet?" Shaya was referring to one of the pack's other two new additions. Dante and Jaime had been in the same pack until he was fourteen, when he left with Trey and several others, but he hadn't seen her until recently.

As usual when Jaime was mentioned, Trick smirked devilishly at Dante, making the claw marks on his cheek darken. "Nope, not yet," Trick answered, though his gaze hadn't moved from Dante. "Who would've thought a slip of a girl could spook the normally unflappable you? It's so much fun to watch."

"She does not spook me."

"Yes she does, she always has."

Okay, that was true. When they were kids, Jaime had followed Dante around like a lost little kitten, trailed after him like he was the answer to all her problems. The guys had all thought it was hilarious that this short, plump little girl who was four years younger was crushing on him. She'd even played practical jokes on his girlfriends, and no amount of Trick's teasing back then had made her stop. Apparently, she was immune to Trick's nature. But Dante wasn't, and because of Jaime he'd been subjected to daily doses of it.

Dante had expected that her crush would have died by now. Apparently not. She hadn't flirted shamelessly with him or harassed him, but she had made her interest in him clear with bright smiles, subtle touches, and heated looks. Dante, however, had no intention of responding to her interest—

something that he had made perfectly clear to Trick last night.

It wasn't that Dante wasn't attracted to her. Although she didn't have the kind of face that made a guy halt in his tracks, within minutes of her company that guy would be wondering why he hadn't noticed how stunning she was. And her mouth...Dante often found himself wanting to bite it. Her honeysuckle-and-caramel scent that his wolf had always found...intriguing...now had the distinctive tang of a mature female, and it incited his wolf.

Before Jaime, his wolf had never been attracted to submissive females. For that matter, neither had Dante. He liked feisty females whose strength matched his own, and he absolutely loved seeing them submit to him. Not that Dante had any wish to see women bound, kneeling, and calling him Milord—although that one time in Barcelona had been kind of fun. No, he liked women who would challenge him, because it made their eventual surrender that much more gratifying, and it meant that his dominance over them was real. They weren't submitting because it was in their nature, they were submitting because he was in total control.

It wasn't that either he or his wolf had no respect for submissive wolves; they were as important to a pack as dominant wolves, in that without them, there would be no balance. A pack of purely dominant shifters would never work. Being a submissive wolf didn't mean they were passive, weak, soft-spoken, or quiet. Jaime sure as hell wasn't any of those things—in fact, she was quite the opposite. A submissive wolf could actually be mentally stronger than a dominant wolf. However, they would never be physically stronger than one. As such,

submissives never issued challenges on anyone of a higher rank. Most avoided confrontations at all cost and had an extremely difficult time saying no to anyone. Jaime had never suffered such problems because of her strength of character.

Despite such strength, he didn't believe that she—or any other submissive wolf, for that matter—

would be able to handle the full force of his personality.

But even if Jaime hadn't been a submissive wolf, Dante wouldn't have responded to those heated stares. He would never have even so much as a one-night stand with a female from his own pack. He didn't want his true mate feeling uncomfortable when he finally found her and brought her home. Dante had seen how awkward it had been for Taryn to be around Selma, and he didn't want to put his own mate through that. Taryn hadn't been heartbroken when Selma decided to leave the pack.

Dante didn't want a relationship anyway. Not just because his time was already in demand, but because past experience had shown him that a relationship between shifters was a dangerous thing. It could make things very difficult when one suddenly discovered a true mate. Dante had no intention of repeating that experience.

“You could learn a thing or two from Jaime,” said Trick. “She knows how to have fun.” Dante snickered. “She's also incredibly stubborn and a little crazy.” Feisty he liked, but crazy? Not so much.

Shaya held up her index finger. “She prefers ‘spirited.’”

“She definitely knows how to have fun,” chuckled Dominic. He turned to Dante. “The other night, I found her and Shaya drinking like there was no tomorrow while laughing at a bad porn film.” Marcus nearly choked on his coffee.

Shaya sighed dreamily, smiling. “Ah, good times.”

“Were they touching themselves, too? Or better still, touching each other?” Marcus looked as though he was genuinely trying to picture it.

“No,” replied Dominic, “but they were playing ‘catch’ with an unused butt plug.

The one you got Jaime for her birthday simply because you're odd like that." Marcus shrugged. "At least she's using it somehow."

Knowing Dominic as well as he did, Dante easily guessed, "You joined in, didn't you?" A smile crept onto Dominic's face. "Yeah, okay, I did. It was fun." Trick cocked his head as if listening to a distant noise. "Ah, I think that's her coming now." It was. There was no mistaking the source of that husky laugh. That was another thing about her that got the attention of both man and wolf. She had a voice that could liquefy rock. Didn't matter though, Dante told himself. Didn't matter how much of an appealing package she was. Didn't matter how much his wolf wanted her. Didn't matter how bitable her mouth was or how tantalizing man and wolf found her scent. Dante was not interested in having any type of relationship, no matter how casual, with Jaime Farrow.

Inhaling deeply, he braced himself for that beaming smile she always sent his way—a smile that he would never admit made his cock twitch. Marcus shuffled over, ensuring that there was an empty seat beside Dante, just as he did every morning. Traitor.

Arm in arm with her brother, Gabe—the other new addition to the pack—she entered the kitchen...and his jaw almost hit the floor. His wolf was pacing predatorily, made alert the moment he heard her laugh. In an outfit that emphasized delicious curves that Dante would never have guessed were hiding under the baggy clothes she usually wore, Jaime strode inside and greeted Grace before heading to the table.

Then she did something that she had never done before, something that had his wolf growling in irritation. She gave Dante the same brief, polite smile she gave to everyone else...and walked right on past him and sat between Dominic and Shaya.

Motherfucker.

Jaime pretended not to notice the surprised expressions directed her way. The pack shouldn't be so shocked that she was considering Dante a lost cause. Sure, Jaime had a major thing for Dante, but damn it, a female had her pride. He'd made it clear through his indifference that he had zero interest in her. Chasing after a guy who didn't want her was not Jaime's idea of fun, no matter how hot said guy was. She could try her hand at seduction and see if he caved...Snort.

She'd have more luck trying to nail jelly to a stone wall. Seduction wasn't her specialty.

Besides, she'd overheard him talking to Trick last night. He didn't think of her that way, he'd said. She wasn't his type, he'd said. He liked his women slim, he'd said. *Superficial asshole*. As if those comments weren't embarrassing enough, she hadn't been alone when she overheard him. No, Shaya had been there to witness her shame. Groan!

Well Jaime had *not* dressed in her skintight New York T-shirt and her slim-fitting blue jeans this morning to show him that she wasn't so chubby anymore thankyouverymuch. She had *not* put on a little more mascara, eye shadow, and lip gloss than she usually did. And she had *not* even once wondered if Dante would notice. Nope, not at all.

Seriously, though, who could blame her for wanting Dante as much as she did?

With his wide shoulders, broad chest, and solid arms, he had a build that screamed

“powerful,” “lethal,” “dangerous.” She had grown up around well-built males, had seen plenty of muscular bodies, but Dante was in a league of his own. His compelling, assertive personality made him seem as though he took up even more room than he actually did. He would have seemed unapproachable if it wasn't for his heart-stopping, crooked grin.

Given how gorgeous females tended to flock around him, Jaime wasn't exactly surprised by his aloofness. He wasn't in a position where he had to settle for plain Janes like herself. Then there were the differences in their personalities. He was a stickler for rules, whereas Jaime saw them as suggestions. He had a strict moral code, whereas she had her own sense of right and wrong that didn't always cohere with his—like something counted as cheating only if she was caught, and that vengeance was therapeutic. Dante was very much a planner, wanting to be prepared for every scenario so that he could be in total control. Jaime? She preferred to make things up as she went along, and she liked to take risks.

Unfortunately, neither her wolf nor her body saw these differences as important. Both reacted to him with an unhealthy amount of excitement that never failed to needle Jaime. Even when he was a kid—a small, scrawny, scowling, defensive

little boy—he had fascinated her. He'd been regarded as

“the runt” by all of his older brothers, which meant they had made his life miserable. Kind of ironic that he was now the biggest of all of his brothers, even bigger than Josh, who was an Alpha. Ha.

Even though they had been total bastards to him, he seemed to have this inner strength that meant no matter what they did or how much they did it, there were certain parts of him that they had never been able to touch or scar. Growing up, she'd watched in total admiration as Dante had worked to make himself physically strong and fit until he was someone who was confident, capable, and one hundred percent comfortable in his own skin.

All these years later, there was still something about him that enticed both her and her wolf.

Maybe it was his piercing brindle-brown eyes or his cocky grin or the way he radiated confidence.

Or maybe it was because he was amazingly and admirably always in total control of himself and of his wolf. She got the feeling that control was important to him on some level, though she couldn't figure why. In actuality, it was just as important to her. Not that Dante was even slightly aware of that.

The only person who knew of her problems was her brother, and that was the way she liked it.

Enticing though he was, there would be no more pining over Dante. No more wondering if his short, walnut-brown hair was as soft as she imagined. No more wondering if those big hands of his were as talented as she suspected. And no more wondering if he was as big in the downstairs department as he was everywhere else. But how could she not wonder about that? Come on, she was only human. Well, kind of.

Since the crush wasn't only physical, it wasn't going to be possible to make her craving for him simply disappear by force of will. Unfortunately. As Shaya had pointed out, though, Jaime could ensure that she hid it from him. She could fake indifference and lead him to believe she *was* over the craving, salvaging some self-respect. She could paste a smile on her face and appear to be the happiest she had ever been.

That was exactly what Jaime intended to do. She couldn't allow herself to be reduced to a blubbing idiot by some guy. That was all he was—just a guy. And guys, as all women knew, must not be granted power over women and be able to rob them of their self-respect. That would create a total imbalance in the universe and could not be allowed.

So, determined to keep up her act, Jaime took some toast from the table and continued to pay no attention to he-who-must-not-be-thought-about. She had much more important things to worry about anyway. Like the reason self-control was essential to her.

Given that, maybe it was a good thing that Dante wasn't interested in her. Although he was so easygoing that he could have been mistaken for nonchalant, he was, in fact, constantly alert and observant, absorbing every detail like a sponge. If he even slightly suspected that she was hiding something, he would harass her until he had answers.

“Sleep well?” Gabe, who was sitting opposite her, shoveled some watermelon in his mouth.

It sounded like such an innocent, casual question, but it went deeper than the others could imagine. “Fine, thanks.” Her smile seemed to satisfy her brother, as he returned his attention to his breakfast.

Shaya nudged her. “Are you doing anything this afternoon?”

“Nope, why?”

“Grace, Lydia, and I are planning to go shopping. We've decided to throw Taryn a surprise baby shower on Friday, so we need to get some stuff. Wanna come?”

“Sure.” Jaime liked their Alpha female. She had a wit that almost anyone would love, and Jaime admired her strength. The female had actually overcome her latency so that her wolf was no longer trapped within her—which had been unheard of until now.

In fact, Jaime liked every member of the pack...except for Trey's maladjusted grandmother, Greta, who was especially hostile to the unmated females. In her crazy little mind, if a female was unmated, she was intent on ensnaring one of “her boys”—those being Trey and the enforcers. And *no* female was good

enough for Greta's boys, hence why she was so hateful toward Taryn. With any luck, Jaime would be done with her breakfast before the old woman appeared.

As a ginger cat abruptly sprang onto her lap, Jaime smiled. He rubbed his head against her chest, hinting for a stroke. As usual, she happily obliged.

"I've never heard a cat purr that loud. Hey there, Hunk," Shaya cooed, giving his head a gentle scratch.

"What possessed you to call that ugly freaking thing Hunk?" Dominic grimaced. "I mean, he's pudgy and shaggy and full of scars."

"Hey!" Jaime dug her elbow into Dominic's ribs. "He's my chunky Hunk. Aren't you, baby?"

Ivy, one of the girls I work with at the dog sanctuary, found him about three years ago when he was practically on death's door. Even though he was a cat, she brought him to the sanctuary to heal.

Fortunately, he healed quickly and could be rehomed. He decided, however, that he was coming home with me. Maybe it was because I took care of him while he was in that place, I don't know." Dominic's smile was as flirtatious as always. "I'd have gone home with you, too. Would you have kept me?"

She rolled her eyes and turned back to Shaya while feeding Hunk slices of meat and tuna. "So where and when do you want to meet up?"

"I was thinking two p.m. at the mall. That good for you?"

"Great. I've never been to a baby shower before."

"Me neither," said Shaya, sounding excited, "but Lydia's great with decorations, so she'll know what to buy. Grace wants to stock up on cakes and other goodies. I'm in charge of picking the gifts and organizing the games, but I'll need help, so that's where you come in." She leaned in closer and said quietly, "I totally approve of the new look, by the way. You should always flaunt what you have."

"I'm not flaunting. I'm just making the point that because I don't dress slutty and leave nothing to the imagination doesn't mean I have a beer belly or something."

“You should have seen his face when you walked in. I was half expecting him to drool.”

“It’s just the breasts. My girls get everyone’s attention.”

“What’s with all the whispering?” Dominic asked Jaime.

“Can’t tell you or I’d have to kill you.”

He gave her a mock scowl, then peered down and frowned. “Are those space pants you’re wearing?”

“Huh?”

“Because your ass is out of this world.”

Shaya and Gabe groaned, but Jaime laughed. She liked the blond pervert who constantly dished out cheesy lines and was too good looking for his own good. Considering he could bag a woman with just his smile, she had no idea why he even bothered with his lines. It was almost as if he wanted to repel them. She might have thought that he was gay if she hadn’t heard from many females how talented he was in the bedroom.

“Want to see what I’ve got?” he asked.

“That depends, does it itch and is it contagious?”

He scowled again. “I’ll have you know that I’m not the slut you think I am.” Ignoring her snort, he tugged up his T-shirt, revealing an amazing set of abs and a gorgeous tattoo of a red Chinese dragon with its mouth open wide, just above his heart. The rest of the dragon’s body disappeared under the sleeve, and she guessed it was curled around the upper part of his bicep.

“That looks amazing.”

“It’s not done yet. I have to go for another sitting soon.”

“I love it. And it was a great excuse to get a look at that chest and those pecs.” His caramel-tanned skin was totally lickable.

“You don’t need an excuse, baby. Any time you want to see any part of this body, you only have to ask. Hey, did you hear about Dante’s little predicament?” Once Dominic had finished regaling her with his tale, Jaime gasped. “That bitch.” For a split second she forgot herself and was about to offer to personally deal with the dominant female.

A submissive wolf wouldn’t do that, a voice in her head reminded her.

Shaya nodded. “Yeah, well, payback’s a bitch, too. She’ll get what’s coming to her—

hopefully not as a result of our pregnant Alpha going crazy on her, though.” Having finished her toast, Jaime gently placed Hunk on the floor and rose from her seat. “I have to get to work. I’ll see you all later.” She was already late, which unfortunately seemed to be a personality trait of hers.

As she passed Dante, she couldn’t help but notice he was scowling at her. What the hell was his problem? It seemed that no matter what she said or did, he intended to be an ass. *Men*. She had long ago concluded that it was impossible to find guys who were considerate and sensitive as well as hot. Well, impossible to find some that didn’t already have boyfriends of their own anyway.

Not willing to allow Dante to take up any more of her thoughts, she shrugged off the matter.

Reaching Grace, who was cursing “shit, shit, shit” at the frying pan—the woman tended to say “shit” a lot—Jaime gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Thanks for breakfast. I’ll see you later.” As she walked through the network of tunnels to retrieve her backpack from her room, she again found herself marveling at how smooth the light sandstone walls were. The pack lived in caves that had been hollowed out and made into one giant home. Although the ancient dwellings had been modernized over the years, she’d still imagined that it would have a Stone Age appearance. She certainly hadn’t expected the contemporary look, the luxury carpeting, or the solid oak and pine modern furniture. Maybe she should have, though, considering that Lydia—who was a graphic designer—liked anything even remotely creative and she had insisted on decorating the interior.

Taryn liked to call it “Bedrock,” which was why she often called Trey “Flintstone.” Once she had her backpack, Jaime headed outside, descended the smooth stairways that were carved into the cliff face, and entered the concealed

parking lot. Finally in her Chevy, she left pack territory—waving to baby-faced Cam, Lydia’s mate, who was guarding the security gate—and drove to the dog sanctuary where she’d worked since she was sixteen.

All the dogs there had been rescued from abusive environments and were so traumatized they couldn’t be rehomed. In a lot of cases, dogs like these would be put down, particularly if they were too wild. This was one of the reasons Jaime worked there most mornings each week—she could relate to them in a way that she could never do with a shifter.

Twenty minutes later she arrived at the sanctuary. After swapping her jeans and T-shirt for navy coveralls in one of the changing rooms, she left her backpack in her locker and made her way over to the section of the sanctuary where she worked. There was a lot involved in the running and upkeep of the sanctuary, but Jaime’s role was to take care of twenty dogs—all of whom she had come to adore.

Squatting beside one of the outdoor dog cages and cooing over a group of German shepherd puppies were two of her coworkers and close friends. They were the only people other than her brother who knew of her secret.

“Have you ever seen anything so gorgeous?” exclaimed Riley, a white-lioness shifter, as she noticed Jaime approaching.

Yeah, Dante. Jaime quickly expelled that thought from her mind, thankful she hadn’t said it aloud.

“You’re late *again*,” chastised Ivy, but the witch’s tone was playful. “Thank you for finally joining us.”

“Yeah, well, promptness is a quality of the boring.”

In response to a series of beeps, Riley dug her cell from her pocket. Instantly her heart-shaped face reddened, making her white-blond hair look even lighter.

“A text from Aidan?” Ivy asked cautiously.

“Yes, it was the wild ox himself,” confirmed Riley bitterly.

“So you’re not letting him talk you into giving him another chance.” Ivy’s

comment wasn't so much a question as a suggestion.

"Hell no."

"Good. Want me to do a little magick and make him impotent?" Ivy's expression was hopeful.

"I was thinking more along the lines of giving him a sexually transmitted disease."

"That sounds good."

Riley nudged Ivy, smiling. "Did you tell Jaime what you did to *your* cheating ex?"

"What?" Jaime knew it would be good. Ivy was a great person, but she had a ruthless streak when it came to guys. It was no surprise really. Ivy was a unique type of witch—she was a Siren, but not the mythical version who sat on rocks and made sailors drown. Sirens like Ivy used their powerful singing voices to entrance and bewitch. Also, they oozed sex and sensuality, drawing males to them.

Ivy resented that guys were so mesmerized by her surface beauty that they didn't look any further. It wasn't often that she chanced having a relationship. If the guy repaid her by crossing her...it was never good.

Ivy's expression was all innocence. "I kind of put him into a deep sleep while I shaved him from head to toe, paying special attention to his back, sack, and crack." *Typical Ivy*, Jaime thought. "What did he do when he woke up?"

"He was pretty angry and did a lot of yelling, but it was hard to take him seriously when he looked like a mannequin. It was a shame, really. He was a cougar shifter and, well, you know that rumor that male feline shifters are extremely good at oral sex because of the slight roughness of their tongues? Those rumors have substance."

"I know that from experience, too." Riley shook her head, looking pained. "We need to stop all this talk about guys and sex, it's making me horny."

"Me too." Ivy flicked her raven-black hair over her shoulder, and Jaime again

found herself wishing her own hair was that glossy. Jaime had been told enough times that her hair was sleek and radiant, but Ivy's was something else altogether—it seemed to shimmer and reflect. Depending on how the light hit it, her hair could even appear violet. “It really is time that we did something about our hungry libidos.”

Jaime nodded. “Definitely, especially since I’ve given up on Dante.” Ivy and Riley both gasped. Although neither knew him, they’d heard Jaime talk about him often enough.

“You’re admitting defeat?” Ivy shook her head incredulously. “In all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you give up on anything.”

“There’s giving up, and there’s salvaging self-respect.” She told them about the conversation she’d overheard between him and Trick.

“What an ass,” said Ivy.

“Then we *definitely* need a night out,” declared Riley, “particularly since I’ve practically abused BOB.”

“BOB?” prodded Ivy.

“Battery-Operated Boyfriend. Don’t you have one?”

“Sure. I call mine Jack Hammer. What about you, Jaime?”

“I call mine my Funny Bone.”

Ivy burst out laughing. “I like that one. Anyway, poor Jack Hammer needs a break. How about we go to Enigma this weekend?”

Enigma was a local club that was exclusive to preternaturals. Humans were not admitted, because in this particular club, sexual contact wasn’t prohibited. Preternatural beings were casual—

although not flippant—about sex. In their culture, two people enjoying intimacy was a beautiful, natural, very basic thing and answered their primal need for touch—social and sexual. There was always an exchange of respect and pleasure. Humans didn’t always understand shifter culture and sometimes

became uncomfortable or offended when a shifter attempted to touch them intimately. It had caused a lot of problems in the past, so most shifter clubs didn't allow humans to enter.

"I say Operation Calm Libido should commence Saturday night." Riley turned to Jaime. "What do you think?"

"Saturday night at Enigma it is," drawled Jaime. "Until then, we wear out our vibrators and dream about rough tongues."

Ivy smiled. "Ooh, good plan."

With that agreed on, Jaime, Ivy, and Riley went inside the building to get to work. There were cages on both sides of a long aisle. The din was horrendous: dogs howling, barking, growling, and whining. Jaime couldn't help feeling sorry for the animals stuck there, confused and frightened. All workers were asked to wear ear protectors, which didn't drown out the noise or hinder conversations with coworkers, but made it so that the din didn't cause harm to their eardrums.

As was routine, Jaime spent the next few hours taking her dogs one-by-one from their cages to place them in the pen outside while she took out all the old, dirty newspaper from their cages, and rinsed and cleaned the floor. She then placed fresh newspaper, food, and water into the cages before bringing the dogs back inside.

She had a soft spot for all of them, but one in particular plucked at her heartstrings: Ben, a small, thin mongrel with sandy fur, who, as always, was curled up in the corner of his cage, shaking and shivering. He was, as her brother would have described his state, a nervous wreck. Once she was done cleaning all the cages, she sat on the fresh bedding beside the dog and stroked him lightly, talking softly about...well...nothing really. Within minutes he clambered onto her lap, curling up again, while she continued running her hand through his coarse fur.

"You spoil him." Hearing that familiar deep voice, she looked up to see one of the other workers, Shawn. Although he was dressed in an old, filthy tracksuit, he somehow made it work, looking as strikingly cute as always.

"Yeah, well, it breaks my heart seeing him like that." She carefully slid the sleeping, sandy dog onto the floor and got to her feet.

“Since your shift is over, I came to ask if you wanted to go for lunch.” God, this guy was tenacious. No matter how many times she had declined, he still asked her out at least once a week. Once upon a time—over five years ago—they’d had a brief fling. He was a nice guy, he was good looking, and her wolf happened to like him. As such, the brief fling might not have been so brief if it hadn’t been for one thing...Shawn was human.

She had nothing against humans, but having anything more than a fling with them wasn’t recommended. Their culture was totally different, so they couldn’t understand the draw or importance of a true mate bond, and as such they weren’t too good at stepping aside if the shifter with whom they’d been in a relationship suddenly discovered a mate. It had led to a lot of brawls in the past—no one should try getting in between mates. Then those “Die Demons” groups got involved, using the incidents as evidence that shifters were abominations and needed to be killed, blah, blah, blah.

Whatfreakingever.

At present, none of that was going to be a problem for Jaime, because even if she found the person who was the other half of her soul, she wouldn’t want to mate with him. Because of her problems with her wolf, there was simply no way Jaime could form that metaphysical link with her mate without risking his life, and that wasn’t something she was prepared to do.

But maybe a brief fling with someone wouldn’t be such a bad thing, she thought as she looked again at Shawn. It wasn’t like he would expect anything from her that she wasn’t able to give. He knew the score, and he certainly knew what he was doing in the bedroom. There was a problem, though. Shawn was on the rebound. Sure, it would only be a fling, so it wasn’t really a big deal, but would it be fair for them to have a fling while they both pined for others? That wasn’t to say she couldn’t spend a little time with him and see if nature eventually took its course, right? She wasn’t the type of girl to be put off by the itty-bitty fact that he was so boring a boomerang wouldn’t go back to him. It was actually kind of endearing.

“Sure, we can do lunch, but just as friends,” she insisted as she locked Ben’s cage. “For now.

You’re still on the rebound, and I’m barely in the process of moving on from

someone.” Someone she hadn’t even been dating—how pathetic was that?

Smiling, he nodded. “For now. Maybe what we both need most right now is an uncomplicated friendship anyway.” Twenty minutes later they were in Mo’s Diner. No sooner had Jaime and Shawn placed their orders than the door opened and in strode the object of her dirtiest—okay, most sinful—

fantasies. As usual, he looked dauntless, sharp, capable, and so freaking hot she hitched in a breath.

His dominant, confident, purposeful walk shouldn’t have been so damn attractive, considering it bordered on cocky, but it heated her blood and roused her wolf. Jaime would bet he was just as dominant and capable in bed, would bet —

No, no more pining!

The voice was right. Returning her focus to Shawn, Jaime smiled brightly at him and wished to God that her body was having this reaction to him instead of to the cocky jerk on the other side of the diner. Groan.



CHAPTER TWO

“I’m guessing by your amused smile that you haven’t called for this meeting to defend Glory’s honor,” Dante said to Nick after he, Tao, Trick, and Marcus had all exchanged respectful nods with Nick, his Beta, his bodyguard, and Head Enforcer.

“No,” said Nick once they were all seated at the long table. “Not only does Glory make a habit of telling tales, but I think I know you well enough to know that you wouldn’t walk away from your mate.” Although his posture was casual, Dante knew there was nothing relaxed about Nick Axton.

Power seemed to hum around him, coiled in his muscles as if ready to strike at the slightest signal.

Nick didn’t have Trey’s menacing air or unapproachability, but he had an indomitable look about him that could unnerve people. Darkness lurked in his

sharp green eyes, almost stained them. They were the eyes of someone who had seen many things he hadn't wanted to see.

Each of them ordered coffee, and Marcus—apparently still hungry—also ordered a burger.

“As you've probably guessed, I can't, and won't, let what she's done slide,” he told Nick. “A false claim is a serious thing, and no shifter would tolerate it. Having said that, I do acknowledge that, as her Alpha, you have a right to deal with her. So the question is, are you willing to order her to stop spouting this false claim, or do I need to get involved?”

Nick was quiet for a moment. “I've already spoken at length with Glory. She claims that she was mistaken, which we all know is a load of bullshit. She has been punished appropriately and ordered to cease making a claim on you. But I can't do anything about her brothers. They all mated into different packs, so I have no control over whether they come after you for supposedly abandoning her.”

“I don't suppose you have any idea why she'd lie about something like this, do you?” Tao asked the Alpha.

Nick puffed. “To answer that question, I'd have to understand how women operate. I'm still working on that one.”

“There's one thing you need to understand, Nick.” Dante's expression was grave. “I appreciate you contacting me about her claim and that you've taken her to task. But if she continues to make a false claim and spread any more lies about me, I will not ask you to interfere on my behalf.

I'll act on it myself, with or without your say-so.”

Nick shrugged. “I'd say the same if the situation was reversed. I take it Trey didn't let Taryn come to the meeting because of the pregnancy.”

“We're planning to tell them later,” explained Tao.

“Good decision.” Nick nodded approvingly. “She can't battle to come to a meeting that's already taken place. So how's she getting along with the pregnancy?” Dante smiled. “She's not impressed about the waddling or the

swollen belly, and she has a mood swing about every eight minutes, but other than that she's fine."

"Is she in touch with her dad, or has he disowned her again?"

"She's talked to him a few times over the past month, but that was mainly because she was negotiating Shaya moving to our pack."

"And, um, how's Shaya doing?" The casualness with which Nick had spoken was forced, Dante knew.

The guy was genuinely interested in Shaya, Dante was sure of that. Whenever Nick was in their territory, he watched her with the same naked voracity that he had at Taryn and Trey's mating ceremony. Oddly, though, he never spoke to her, and the bubbly female never made any attempts to speak to him—as if by mutual agreement they were each pretending the other didn't exist. It was weird, to say the least. "She's fine."

A tall, slim blonde suddenly passed by, wiggling her ass provocatively...which was most likely why the guys at his table were practically drooling. Dante probably would have reacted the same way if he hadn't felt...distracted. There was a trace of a familiar scent in the air that made his nerve endings come alive.

He scanned the diner slowly, confused and curious...and his mouth fixed into a hard line as his gaze landed on a particular table. *Motherfucker*. Dante's wolf leaped to attention as he recognized that plush mouth, long sable hair, and pair of smoky-blue eyes that had a mischievous twinkle. But even as his cock was jerking and hardening, his mood was swiftly changing from relaxed to agitated.

Because she wasn't alone. No, she was sitting opposite some guy, giving him that beaming smile that never failed to affect Dante. Whereas usually that smile shot straight to his groin, it was now twisting his gut, because it wasn't directed at him.

He'd felt the same way this morning after witnessing Jaime joking around with Dominic.

What, you'd expected her to sit with you even though you give her no encouragement whatsoever?

Well, yeah, he had, actually. It was what she normally did each morning.

He was conscious that conversation was continuing around him, and he was even occasionally contributing to it, but his attention was mainly on Jaime as he willed her to look at him. Willed her to move her focus from that asshole, whoever he was, for just one fucking minute. Then, suddenly, she did and her eyes found his. He could have sworn she shuddered slightly, but then she gave him a cool, polite smile and returned her attention to the guy at her table.

Dante's wolf growled at her aloofness, pushing at him to go to her. So *this* was the reason she was no longer interested in him. What was so damn special about that guy? He just looked like some pretty boy. Not that Dante truly cared or anything. His ego cared, but that was different—Jaime's abrupt indifference was a blow, and no dominant wolf reacted well to an ego blow. That was all it was.

Swallowing back a growl, Dante forced his gaze away from Jaime. He should be relieved that she had gotten the message that he wasn't interested. Instead, he was annoyed. And he was annoyed that he was annoyed. He hadn't realized until now that although her crush had made him feel uncomfortable, he'd liked it. He'd liked that there was someone around who wanted him that much, someone who would give him her undivided attention. His ego had liked it. And now he was battling the urge to go over there and drag her away from the other guy. With her attention suddenly gone, it felt...cold.

When the sound of her husky laugh met his ears, arousal shot through Dante in spite of his irritated state. Clearly, the guys had also heard it, because their heads all swerved around.

"Hey, it's Jaime," drawled Trick, smirking at Dante. "Looks really good today, doesn't she?" Tao strained to look. "Who's that guy she's with?"

"No idea," said Trick before turning back to Dante. "Well, it seems like you've been officially replaced."

Dante ground his teeth so hard that it was audible, which made Trick's smile widen.

Nick didn't even have the decency to hide his amusement. "I think that concludes the meeting."

If I hear any more about Glory’s brothers, I’ll let you know.” Dante nodded as they all stood and headed for the door. Behind him he heard that husky laugh again, and it took everything he had not to turn around. His wolf growled his disapproval, not understanding why Dante hadn’t gone over there to warn off the other male, which served to remind Dante exactly why he was staying clear of this female.

Only once before now had his wolf ever been so incited by a female. Naturally, Dante hadn’t had a problem with answering that craving—over and over again, in fact—because he hadn’t suspected that things would get as complicated and painful as they later did. Never would he chance that happening again. Never.

Gathered with the pack in the living area after dinner, Jaime pretended that she couldn’t feel Dante’s eyes on her. His gaze had been drilling into her since she came home—and not in a good way. It wasn’t the kind of look that would heat a girl’s blood; it was a piercing scowl that sent a shiver down her spine. He had shot Jaime the same look in the diner, but rather than making her nervous, a bolt of heat had lanced through her the second her gaze met his. But then, Jaime had never responded appropriately to danger. She didn’t seem to have a “flight” response. That had gotten her into all kinds of shit.

Unable to think of a reason Dante suddenly found her scowl-worthy, she paid no attention to him. Instead, she allowed herself to be distracted by the blond pervert beside her on the gigantic sectional sofa who could always make her laugh.

“Look at you,” drawled Greta from a black leather armchair. “One minute you’re chasing Dante, and the next minute you’re all over Dominic like a rash.” Hunk, who was snuggled on Jaime’s lap, hissed loudly, but Jaime simply smiled at the fuzzy-haired old woman. Her face was twisted into a scowl that wasn’t all that different from the decorative swirls carved into the sandstone of the main wall. Greta had always terrified Jaime as a kid, just as she’d terrified every kid other than Trey, Dante, Tao, Marcus, Trick, Ryan, and Dominic

—her boys.

“At one point, you practically stalked poor Dante.”

“Stalked?” echoed Jaime. “No, I just watched him. At night. From behind a bush. Using night-vision goggles.”

To her surprise, Dante's frown melted into a smile. No one ever stepped in to defend the old woman, because they all knew that the only way to deal with her was tit for tat. If the unmated females couldn't handle Greta, they'd never survive in the pack.

Greta sneered at her. "You shouldn't be surprised that he isn't interested. What would he want with a big-breasted, fat-assed slut like you?"

Jaime sighed dramatically. "I wish the wizard had lived up to his promise and given you a heart." In some ways, Jaime found her amusing. Her wolf didn't, however. The cranky animal wanted to lunge at Greta and take a bite out of her. No surprise there. Her wolf's answer to everything was, sadly, "attack." Once again, Jaime found herself grieving the patient, nurturing, playful wolf that had once lived within her until that fucked-up night all those years ago.

"I suppose you look a tiny bit better nowadays. You'd always been a fat child."

"I prefer the term 'charitably shaped.'"

"If you thought being thinner would bag you one of my boys, you're very wrong. They can see right through power-hungry sluts like you. You wanted to be Beta female, and when that didn't work you moved on to one of the enforcers, didn't you? I told them that that's the only reason you'd applied to switch packs. I told them not to accept you. But did they listen to me? *Nooooo*. Don't think that means you've won. I've got my eye on you. I always look out for my boys. Dante and Dominic are just as much my grandsons as Trey."

"That's nice. Maybe that means they'll help you out with this emotional crisis that you're going through."

Greta narrowed her eyes. "That's a terrible attitude you've got."

"Yep, and I know how to use it."

"You're no better than her." She nodded toward Taryn, who was laughing on the reclining end of the sectional sofa. Trey placed a possessive, protective hand on her pregnant belly. Their bond was so strong and solid it was almost visible. It had Jaime feeling a little jealous.

The tiny, blonde Alpha female gave the old woman a smile that dripped with

pity. “Greta, maybe you should take a Valium and have a nice nap. You’re only raising your blood pressure, and we don’t want that.”

Ignoring her, Greta curled her upper lip at Jaime. “Have you always been such an insufferable flirt?”

“‘Minx’ would be the word I’d use.”

She pointed hard at Jaime. “Just remember that I’m onto you. Your cards are marked. So I’d give up your little seduction plan if I were you, because it won’t get you far. As if any of my boys would go for a submissive tramp like you anyway—big boobs or not!” Jaime cocked her head and frowned. “You know... it sounded like English, but...”

“There’s that smart mouth again.”

“If you don’t want to listen to it, by all means, go back to Narnia. I’d imagine you’re missing your wand and crown anyway.”

Greta glanced around the room. “Have you all heard the way she speaks to me?!” Many of them looked like they were holding back a laugh at the look of outrage on Greta’s face. Taryn, unsurprisingly, didn’t.

When the old woman again sneered at her, Jaime gave her a beaming smile. “Be honest, Greta, you’ve missed me all these years, haven’t you?”

“Ignore her,” Taryn advised Jaime. “Don’t let the senile old crone wind you up. It’s what she lives for.”

“I heard that,” said Greta.

“Well, it wasn’t like I was whispering.” Taryn gave Jaime a pleading look. “Any tips on how to deal with Old Mother Hubbard here? You’ve known her longer than I have.” Jaime pursed her lips. “Don’t get light in her eyes, don’t get her wet, and never feed her after midnight.”

“I’ve had enough.” With a humph, Greta rose from her seat. “I don’t have to sit around here and be insulted.” She practically marched out of the room, mumbling to herself.

Lydia shook her head, chuckling. “That woman will outlive us all.” Tao smiled, running a hand through his tousled chocolate-brown hair. “She’s more strong-willed than all of us put together.”

Strangely, Jaime found herself wondering why though she favored the shade of chocolate-brown over walnut-brown, she preferred Dante’s hair to Tao’s. In fact, if any of the enforcers should be her type, it was Tao. All her past boyfriends had been similar to him: intense by nature, hair that was short but long enough to ruffle, and with a body that was muscular but more athletic than burly.

Dante didn’t fit into her type at all, and yet it was him she was drawn to. And didn’t that just chafe.

“So,” drawled Trey, turning to Dante. “Tell us more about this meeting you went to.” Once Dante was done telling the tale, Taryn cursed a blue streak that would have made any sailor proud. Oh, he’d definitely made the right decision by not telling her sooner.

“I never liked that bitch. She flirted with Trey when I went to that mating ceremony on Nick’s territory. I was five feet away at the time.”

“Yeah, but you scared her off.” Trey affectionately rubbed circles on her belly.

“Want me to kill her?” she asked Dante, sounding hopeful.

“No, I don’t,” he chuckled.

“Seriously, Trey can hold my hair back out of the way and I’ll—” Trey cupped his mate’s chin. “You will *not* get into any kind of confrontation with anyone.

Besides, Nick’s said he’s dealt with it. Let’s hope that’s the end of it.”

“There’s still the matter of her brothers,” Marcus pointed out, running a hand through his short, dark curls as if trying to straighten them.

Dante crossed his arms behind his head and sank farther into his chair. It was pissing him off that his eyes kept darting to Jaime of their own accord, but he managed to veil his irritation from the wolves around him. “It might be better to let Glory and her brothers sweat, leave them wondering what we’ll do or *if* we’ll do anything at all.”

Trey nodded. “According to Trick, her brothers are loons.”

“I don’t think they’re loony enough to turn up in pack territory looking for him, though,” said Trick. “That would be an act of suicide, and they’ll know that.”

“So you think it’s more likely that they’ll try to corner him somewhere?” asked Trey, to which Trick nodded. “The way I see it, then, is we can deal with this by going on the attack instead of waiting for her brothers to make their move, or we can deal with them when the time comes.”

“I have better things to do than hunt down a group of crazies.” Dante had to restrain himself from growling at Dominic for twirling a strand of Jaime’s long hair around his finger—something he had found himself wanting to do many times. Her hair was so shiny that it was kind of inviting. He wanted to know if it was as soft as it looked. “I wouldn’t give Glory the satisfaction of a reaction anyway.”

“You do realize you brought this on yourself, don’t you?” Dominic shook his head incredulously. “Out of all the girls out there, you picked her. Don’t get me wrong, I love women and I respect them, but *come on*, there are just some girls you make a point to stay away from. Glory’s like a bowling ball. She gets picked up, fingered, and thrown in the gutter, and yet she still comes back.” Trey laughed and looked about to say something, but his attention quickly went to the hand he had resting on Taryn’s belly. “Whoa, that was a big one.”

“How’s the little guy been today?” Marcus began giving Taryn one of his infamous shoulder massages.

“*She’s* still kicking the life out of me. It’s almost like she’s trying to kick her way out. I think she’s just as eager to get the birth over with as I am.”

“What, you don’t like being pregnant?” Trick frowned. “I thought females loved it.” Taryn pursed her lips. “Let’s see...I’m constantly tired, emotional, hungry, and horny. Most of my clothes don’t fit, my back always aches, and I can’t see my feet. It’s such a magical experience.

Oh, and I walk like a fat, deformed penguin.”

“Aw, don’t say things like that about yourself, Taryn,” begged Dominic. “You’re beautiful. If you were words on a page, you would be what they call ‘fine

print.” Everyone groaned, except for Jaime, who laughed.

There was no doubt that Trey would have hit his enforcer if he'd been within reach. “How many times do I need to tell you to stop using those lines on my mate?” Dominic placed his hand over his heart. “I try, I really do, but my love for her is like diarrhea

—I just can't hold it in.” Again there were groans.

Taryn looked unimpressed. “Getting compared to diarrhea—awesome.”

“Only eight weeks to go until the baby's here.” Dante's gaze again wandered to Jaime. As if she sensed it, she looked right at him. He guessed that he was wearing a pretty intense expression, because her eyes briefly widened. She didn't avert her gaze, though. Instead, she gave him an expectant look, one that dared him to speak his mind and explain what the hell his issue was. His wolf liked that.

“Maybe then you'll all stop smothering and coddling me.” Taryn flicked a disgruntled snarl at Trey.

“Now, Taryn, we just want you and the baby to be safe.” Trey gave her a soft, placating kiss. It didn't work.

“Safe or confined? Seriously, I'm surprised you haven't placed me in a sterilized room where everyone can wave to me through a window.”

“Sorry, Taryn, but I'm pretty sure that all this Glory crap will only make him worse,” Tao said with a cheeky smile and no sympathy whatsoever. Taryn gave an almost imperceptible nod to Ryan, who nodded back and then whacked Tao over the head obligingly.

“Hey, don't mess with the hair,” Tao whined. Although his chocolate-brown hair was tousled, it was purposely styled that way.

“Why don't we all go for a run?” suggested Dante. “We've all got a lot of frustration to burn off.” Everyone rose from their seat and went to leave the room with him. Well, almost everyone.

“Jaime, aren't you coming?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m heading to my room to take a shower.” It was only then that Dante realized something—he had never seen Jaime shift. She had never gone on a run with the pack. She must have gone for one with Gabe or someone, but she had never accompanied the entire pack. Wolves needed that kind of closeness, so why would she ignore it?

The confusing female rose from the sofa and, without meeting Dante’s eyes, gave him a polite smile as she walked past him. His wolf didn’t like her indifference, and a low growl escaped Dante before he could stop it. That damn ugly cat hissed at him over her shoulder. Dante saw her tense slightly, but she kept on walking. And he kept thinking about how she hadn’t been on a pack run.

Was it because she was holding herself back from the pack? Was it that she wasn’t relaxed and trustful enough? Was it that she didn’t feel as welcome and a part of the pack as the others? The whole thing bugged him. He was Beta; it was his role to see to the safety, well-being, and protection of his wolves. If for some reason Jaime wasn’t feeling settled here, he needed to know why and solve the issue.

So when he saw her the following day sitting on the patio near the lake, staring almost longingly into the mountains, he slowly approached her. “Hey.” Almost imperceptibly, she stiffened.

Had he not been so totally focused on her, he wouldn’t have noticed. So was it *him* that made her feel uncomfortable in the pack? Or was she just feeling awkward because he had, in a roundabout way, rejected her? Well, he was about to find out.

Silently cursing the universe for shoving this wicked temptation in her face, Jaime turned her head and forced a smile. The cocky ass was so magnificently masculine, so deliciously male, that it simply wasn’t fair. Instantly her wolf was alert and pacing. “Hi.” He nodded toward one of the chairs. “Can I sit?”

It wasn’t really a question, but Jaime nodded anyway. “Whatever it is, I didn’t do it.” Christ, that voice...It was like a throaty purr. It sent a sizzle down Dante’s spine and practically stroked his cock—which was now quickly hardening. “Don’t worry. You’re not in trouble.” He straddled one of the chairs. “What’re you doing out here all by yourself?” Jaime was feeling pretty jealous of that chair right now. “Just thinking,” she replied with a nonchalant shrug.

“About what?”

About things she had no intention of sharing. “Nothing interesting. What about you?”

“I was on patrol and I saw you sitting here looking all glum. I thought I’d check on you.”

“I do not look glum,” she countered, indignant but smiling.

Dante held her gaze with his own as he spoke. “Jaime, you know if there’s ever anything you need to talk about that you can come to me, don’t you?”

Having no clue what this was about, she frowned in confusion. “Sure.”

“I mean it. I know things have been a little...I don’t know...awkward between us because I—” He cut himself off, not sure how to phrase it. She did it for him, looking very amused.

“Because you don’t want me. It’s all right, you can say it. I’m a big girl.” He almost laughed. She had no idea how wrong she was; his cock roared to life at just the sound of her voice. Her scent—Christ, that fucking scent—made his mouth water. “Jaime, I’m not a good partner for a submissive wolf.” The last thing he had expected her to do was laugh. “What?”

“I’m not sure you’re a good partner for a dominant wolf either. No female likes to be controlled as much as you’d want to control them.” His controlling streak would undoubtedly be ten times worse with a female he was in a relationship with.

He shrugged unapologetically. “That’s just who I am. Besides, I don’t touch females in my pack, Jaime. I don’t do relationships either; it only ends up a mess when true mates come along.” She hadn’t asked him for a relationship, but whatever. “You sound like you’re speaking from personal experience.” When he didn’t respond, she added, “So you won’t commit to anyone but your true mate. That’s sweet.” And unfortunate. Sigh.

Not willing to touch that subject, he went back to his original point. “All I was trying to say is that although things have been awkward between us, I don’t want it getting in the way of anything. I don’t want you feeling like you can’t come to

me about stuff. I'm your Beta. If you're having any problems in the pack, come to me, so that I can help."

If she was having any problems she'd take care of them herself—dominant females took care of their own shit. But, as she needed him to continue believing that she was submissive, she simply said, "Thanks."

"Nice ring."

"Huh?" When he gestured at her hand, she looked down to see that she'd been absentmindedly fiddling with her ruby—something she always did when she was nervous. "It was my mom's engagement ring."

"I heard about what happened," he said in a gentle voice. He was about to say that it was lucky she and her brother hadn't been at home when the attack happened, but there was really nothing lucky about it. Lucky would have been for her parents to still be alive. "I'm sorry, I know it's hard." Yes, he did know, she thought. Well, sort of. He knew what it was like to lose his parents. She remembered how she used to watch him sitting near their graves, silent tears trailing down his cheeks.

She remembered wishing that she could help, that she could understand how he was feeling. She got her wish, just not the way she ever would have wanted.

"Is that what's got you so down? You've been thinking about them?" Not today, but if she said that he'd keep pressing her until she gave him an answer, so she nodded.

"It might help if you shift and let your wolf run." He could have sworn that anxiety flashed across her face, but if it had, it was gone as quick as it came. "I'll come with you." Jaime quickly got to her feet and backed up. "Um, I can't. I, um, have somewhere I need to be." She'd arranged to go to the movies with Riley tonight. But even if she hadn't, she knew better than to spend time alone with a person who made her entire body hum and melt for him—against her will, no less.

He stood and approached her slowly. "Where?"

"I'm meeting someone, and I don't want to be late."

Pretty Boy. Although Dante had told himself that he didn't particularly care about the whole thing, he couldn't let his questions go. He wanted to know who this male was that had replaced him in her thoughts, wanted to know what he was to Jaime. Or, more specifically, his bruised ego wanted to know.

Ordinarily, Dante wasn't much of a brooder—that was Trey's department—but he didn't like unanswered questions. He was very good at reading people and situations, had always had very good intuition. But for some reason, his intuition always failed him around Jaime. Sometimes he got the feeling that she was hiding something, that there was a lot more to her than what she allowed people to see, but his instincts didn't go off around her like they usually would around someone with secrets.

It made no sense.

“A date?” he bit out. Before she could reply, he asked, “With the guy I saw you with at the diner?”

Wondering at the strain in his voice, Jaime started to say no, but again, he didn't give her the chance to speak.

“Who is he?”

“Shawn's a guy I work with.”

“Just a work colleague, nothing more? Because it sure looked like more.” She might have corrected him about the whole “date” thing if he wasn't firing questions at her so abruptly. His accusatory tone had her totally confused. “I'm not sure I understand what this is all about.”

Dante wasn't sure he understood either, but he couldn't let it go yet. He wasn't going to get a break from his ego until his questions were answered. “What pack is he from?”

“He's not a shifter. He's human.”

“Human?” he repeated disbelievingly. “What are you doing dating a human? Are you stupid?” Bristling at the way he was talking to her, she straightened her posture and folded her arms across her chest. The natural and very potent *pull* in his voice to give him the answers that he wanted sent tingles down her spine.

Damn if she would let it faze or fluster her. “You do understand that this is none of your business, right?”

Dante wasn't sure why those words bothered him as much as they did, but he couldn't hold back a growl. His wolf growled angrily inside his head. “None of my business?” he echoed quietly as he invaded her personal space.

Jaime tensed. Although Dante was a very dominant, assertive wolf, he was quietly forceful.

He barely ever raised his voice, but he didn't have to. Even back when he was in his teens, the change in his mood could alter the emotional temperature in a room and put the fear of God in whoever was in his sights. This was partly why he was such a good interrogator. From what she'd heard, there wasn't anyone he had failed to break. In spite of all that—or maybe because of it—

people respected him. Or feared him, whichever. When he lowered his voice like this, well, that was always a bad thing. It meant he was totally and utterly pissed.

Fear didn't overtake her, though. She knew that despite the strength and the power that ran through that very muscular body, he would never hurt her. He would never hurt any female. Her instinct was to snap at him, to return his attitude with her own, but that wasn't how a submissive wolf would behave. So, although it killed her to do it, Jaime lowered her eyes and let the tension leave her body. That seemed to placate him, because although he growled again, it was a growl of approval. It shouldn't have been like a zap to her clit, but shockingly, it was. Her body was so damn weird sometimes.

“I shouldn't have snapped at you the way I did,” he allowed. “But you must know why dating a human isn't wise. You can't seriously be thinking about having a relationship with him.” It was hard to think past the way his scent—an alluring blend of pine needles, cinnamon spice, and sandalwood—caressed her senses. Looking up, she replied, “Shawn knows the score.” He snickered. “He would say that, wouldn't he.”

“He and I had a brief fling a long time ago and it ended fine.”

“Oh is that right?” Those quiet words dripped with a menace of which Dante didn't understand the source. Nor did she, if her expression was anything to go by. “You need to break it off with him, Jaime, before things go tits up.”

See, this was the thing about Betas—they often took their role as “protector” a little too literally. Jaime didn’t need this big-brother behavior, and she especially didn’t want it from a guy who she could never see in a fraternal sense.

“Seriously, Dante, you’re letting yourself get frazzled over nothing.”

“I mean it, Jaime. You need to break it off with him.”

Aw, the poor guy really thought she was going to comply. It was kind of cute.

“Not going to happen, Popeye. Sorry.” Giving him a slight wave, she turned and strolled away.

“Jaime?” he called after her. “Jaime, don’t ignore me!”

Without breaking stride, she glanced at him over her shoulder. “It’s not that I’m ignoring you.

I’ve just lost interest in the conversation.”

He growled at the smart-ass comment. The female was too obstinate for her own good. His wolf was raging within him, wanting Dante to stop her from meeting this other male. In truth, Dante didn’t like it either. He gritted his teeth against the urge to march over there and grab her. He didn’t want her leaving pack territory knowing that she’d be out somewhere with Pretty Boy; he didn’t want the human touching her or kissing her. He wanted to hoist her over his shoulder and lock her in her room—or maybe his. That irrational response was exactly why he let her go.

His mind, however, didn’t let it go—not even when he was back in his office with paperwork in front of him needing his attention. His wolf was severely irate. Not that his wolf’s sense of possessiveness surprised Dante. His wolf had wanted her badly since she arrived, had felt slightly possessive of her on sight. What did surprise Dante was that *he* felt a sliver of possessiveness, too.

Being protective and controlling with Jaime were two things he could easily rationalize. Of course Dante was protective, since she was one of his wolves. Of course he was being a little too controlling with her—or, at least, attempting to—as that was who he was. But the hint of possessiveness that was suddenly making itself known...well that was new. He wasn’t, by nature, a possessive person. He’d never been much of a jealous person either, yet that very emotion was circulating through him, curdling in his stomach.

It had to be all tangled up with the blow to his ego, Dante deduced. Plus telling himself that he would not, *could* not, have her made him want her more. Naturally, that was messing with his head.

Naturally.

No matter how hard he tried to focus on the paperwork in front of him, his wolf and his ego tormented Dante until he found himself taking his cell phone from his pocket. Before he knew it, he was typing a text message. He wasn't sure where exactly the compulsion came from to type those particular words, but he didn't fight it.

Remember one thing, Jaime: A human can't satisfy you the way you need him to.

Not like I could, he thought only a second after he'd sent the message. Thank God he hadn't typed it.

Interrupting the silent berating he was giving himself for letting his frustrations get the better of him, his cell phone beeped. Immediately he read the incoming message.

He's always managed just fine in the past, no need to worry. ;) Dante ground his teeth so hard it hurt. *Motherfucker*. He'd originally intended to shove his cell back into his pocket and sling the whole thing from his mind now that he'd given his anger a small outlet.

No fucking way would he ignore that taunting response.

"Fine" is enough for you, is it? Never had you down as someone who settled for second best.

He waited impatiently for a response. It came a minute later, though it felt like much longer.

Beta or not, my sex life isn't any of your business.

A fierce growl rumbled its way up his chest. Those words got to him again for a reason he had yet to understand. She'd wanted to provoke him, and she'd succeeded.



Everything about you is my business. Don't ever forget that.

A voice in his head pointed out that wasn't entirely accurate, but it was merely background noise to Dante right now. Her response made both him and his wolf bare their teeth.

Whatfreakingever.

Growling at her dismissiveness, he typed a reply.

Don't blow me off, Jaime. You need to end this thing with the human before it gets complicated. If things mess up between you and him, it could be bad enough that those idiotic religious groups leap on it and start hanging around outside pack territory again. That's the last thing we need right now.

He wouldn't have thought that anything could have made him more pissed than he already was. He was so wrong.

Whoa there, Popeye, that had a hint of paranoia to it. Maybe you should quit the crack pipes. Gotta go.

He so wanted to spank that female's ass—and hard. Maybe spanking that little attitude out of her would make her finally stop baiting him and rebelling against his every order. Maybe he should also kick his wolf's ass for being unreasonably possessive of a female to whom he had no rights. His wolf growled at that. He was just as stubborn as she was.

Acknowledging, albeit rather begrudgingly, that she'd won that round, Dante fixed his attention on the work that awaited him, intending to ignore his wolf's foul mood and the unfamiliar feelings needling his ego. He was *not* going to think about Jaime Farrow again tonight. Not even once.

The second she had sent her final message, Jaime switched off her cell phone and returned it to her purse, since the movie would be starting any minute now. What was wrong with that guy? She hadn't realized he had such a hard-on for humans. Recalling that he had a few friends who were humans, she shook off the bigot theory. No, apparently there was another reason Dante had switched from being distant to poking his nose into her business and even attempting to

interfere with her sex life.

“What do you make of it?” she asked Riley, who had read every message and had even tried advising Jaime on how to respond.

Riley swallowed the popcorn she’d been munching on before speaking. “The whole thing stinks of jealousy to me.”

“But that makes no sense.”

“He’s a guy, it doesn’t have to make sense.”

She had a point. In Jaime’s experience, when it came to male shifters it was often a case of

“logic optional.” Still, if Dante had had any interest in her, there would have been no reason to hide it. And then, there were the things he’d said to Trick about her. “It can’t be jealousy.”

“I find that hard to believe, but I’ve never even spoken to the guy, so I can only speculate. If you’re sure he’s not jealous, then maybe he just doesn’t like it that you’re not chasing after him anymore.”

“Objection, I never chased him.”

“Okay, maybe he doesn’t like that you’re not gazing dreamily at him anymore.”

“I did not gaze dreamily.”

Riley patted her hand. “Sure you didn’t, sweetie.”

“Patronizing bitch.”

“Giant-loving skank. Now shush, the movie’s starting.”

With a playful harrumph, Jaime turned her attention to the movie screen, ready to let it distract her from thoughts of his peculiar behavior. A minute into the movie, she groaned. The hero just had to be named “Dante,” didn’t he?



CHAPTER THREE

Black wolf. Mom screaming. Growls. Blood. Black wolf. Dad shifting. More wolves. Teeth. Claws.

Mom screaming. Black wolf. Black wolf. Black wolf. Black wolf. Teeth. More wolves. Dad roaring.

Growls. Blood. Blood. Blood.

Jaime sprang upright in her bed, panting, shaking, and sweating. Her heartbeat was loud and pumping aggressively. Snippets of her dream sailed across her mind, and grief ripped through her.

Her wolf was also distressed by this trip-down-memory-lane dream and was vigorously attacking the cage Jaime had confined her to, growling and howling and body-slammng the walls until the bars began to give. Jaime doubled over and cried out as cramps assailed her body and an ache pounded through her head. She fought the change, fought it with every bit of strength she had, fought to quickly repair the cage. She sent calming images to her wolf, hoping to reassure the animal that they weren't in danger anymore, that it was over.

It was minutes later before her wolf began to settle and the bars finally straightened. Nausea suddenly struck Jaime, and in an agony that was becoming too familiar, she rushed to the bathroom where she vomited violently into the toilet. Even when there was nothing left in her stomach, she was racked by dry heaves.

Nothing Jaime had ever done had been able to heal her wolf. Nothing. She was still as traumatized as she had been at just twelve, when she had witnessed her parents' murder. Her wolf—

frightened, anxious, angry—had surfaced to protect her. It hadn't been until three weeks later that Jaime had been able to shift back into her human form. Her wolf had been too distressed and defensive to ease back or understand that the attack was over.

That night had left her wolf damaged. She acted like an abused animal—she was distrustful, easily provoked, and quick to anger. Coexisting with such a prickly, unpredictable wolf weighed hard on Jaime. When she was angry, it fed her

wolf's temperamental streak. When she was anxious, it increased her wolf's restlessness. Such strong emotions gave her wolf strength, and that strength could easily be used to surface in spite of Jaime's protests.

Whenever Jaime had shifted, she'd done it alone, because when her wolf came in contact with another she wanted to do only one thing—attack. Her wolf thought she was protecting Jaime from a potential threat. So Jaime had always run alone in her wolf form and had never encountered a problem, until four years ago when she came across another wolf while on a run. The consequences had been bad enough that Jaime had seen no choice but to never let her wolf free again.

As such, she had formed a cage around her wolf. A cage that separated them so completely that Jaime's emotions could no longer feed her wolf. A cage so impenetrable that it prevented her wolf from surfacing. Yeah that was unnatural, and yeah it meant she didn't feel whole, but it was the only way to ensure that her wolf was constantly in the backseat.

She had known her wolf would fight her, had known she would want the freedom that any wild animal wanted, but Jaime hadn't expected her to fight so hard and so relentlessly. And what was the worst thing that could happen if Jaime let down her guard and her wolf became so strong that she managed to get free again? She might never let Jaime come back. She could turn rogue, might lose her human half completely, and then she'd have to be killed.

Dante didn't realize he was tapping his fingers impatiently on the table until Trick spoke.

"It's not like you to be edgy. Or to pick at your breakfast. Or to keep looking at the door every minute or so."

Dante's eyes slammed on him. His voice was low. "I'm really not in the mood today, Trick." Wisely sensing that pushing Dante would only earn him a black eye, Trick sighed and dropped his smirk. "I'll take pity on you. She didn't stay out the entire night. She was home by eleven thirty."

"Who?" His casual act might have worked if his fingers hadn't stopped drumming. Both his ego and his wolf had been having a crisis all night long, wondering just how far Pretty Boy would get with Jaime. He'd wanted to ask someone if she'd returned last night, but that would have been revealing too

much. Apparently, his body language gave his thoughts away anyway. Great. Trick might resist pushing now, but he'd certainly tease Dante mercilessly about it later.

He scented her before he saw her; that caramel-and-honeysuckle scent made his wolf growl and the knot in Dante's chest ease—a knot he hadn't even known was there until then. But as he looked at her face, it wasn't lust that shot through him. It was concern. She was pale, there were circles under her eyes, and her usual enthusiasm wasn't there. Immediately Dante's hackles were up and his wolf was pacing.

She didn't look at him at all as she took a seat at the far end of the table near Gabe and Hope

—who, he had noticed, spent a lot of time together. Now that Selma was gone and Hope no longer had someone trying to dominate her into working against the pack, Hope was a much more pleasant member.

Dante watched as surprise, concern, and then realization flashed on Gabe's face as he took in Jaime's pallor. He also noticed that Jaime widened her eyes slightly at her brother. Whatever was wrong with her, Gabe knew exactly what it was, and he was worried.

Glancing around the room, Dante noticed that the rest of the pack seemed confused by her appearance and the lack of her usual sparkle. So it was a family secret. Huh. Well it wouldn't be a secret for much longer. Dante would make sure of that. He had no doubt that she wouldn't want to tell him, but he was Beta; he was responsible for his wolves' well-being, and that meant he had every intention of finding out what was wrong.

“Bad night?” Gabe quietly asked Jaime.

Knowing what he meant, Jaime nodded. “I've had worse.” Okay, that was a lie, but she didn't want him worrying too much.

“You've never been able to lie to me, so why are you trying?” When she didn't answer, he sighed, but he didn't push her. He never pushed her, and she adored him for that. “Maybe you should take the day off work, catch up on your sleep.”

“I'll be fine.”

“How long has it been since your wolf last tried to take over? A month?”

“Shh. Keep your voice down.”

He flushed, looking a little sheepish. “You know, you could tell them all the truth.”

“And risk being cast out? No thanks. Having no pack or territory...I’m pretty sure that would knock my wolf over the edge. But if I wasn’t convinced that you’d follow me instead of staying here, I’d chance it.”

“They might not cast you out, they might—”

“Gabe, you’ve seen how overprotective Trey is of Taryn. He will not want an unstable wolf in his pack, especially since his mom turned rogue and he had to kill her. No, the best thing for me to do is keep my wolf buried.” That meant that people couldn’t sense her wolf’s dominant vibes, but they simply thought she was submissive. “I’ll be fine. I can keep a handle on her.” Gabe gave her a gentle smile. “If you think I don’t know that you’re planning to run off once you think I’m properly settled here, you’re dumb, sis.”

Jaime would have denied it, but Gabe was right, she could never get a lie past him. Although she would continue fighting her wolf every step of the way, she had every intention of leaving the pack if her wolf was close to gaining the upper hand. She wouldn’t risk turning rogue and hurting her packmates, not ever.

Ignoring Gabe’s further attempts to talk her into staying at pack territory, she went to work as usual. Caring for the dogs was therapeutic, in a sense. Not only because she could relate to them in a way that she couldn’t to any of her own kind, but because caring for them was such an important job that it allowed her to forget her problems for a while. It allowed her to forget just how worried she was.

She hadn’t corrected Gabe’s assumption that it had been a month since the last time her wolf fought for supremacy. In truth, it had been just eighteen days. In the beginning, she had been able to go without such an incident for up to nine months at a time. But her wolf had gotten stronger and stronger

—most likely fueled by her anger at being confined. Now it had become a battle of wills between them. A battle that Jaime had to win.

When it came to the end of her shift, Jaime sat with Ben for a while as she always did. As usual, it was a few minutes before he relaxed enough around her to lie on her lap. It took even more minutes before he finally fell asleep. Even asleep he was restless, and she wondered if he had nightmares just as she did, wondered if they were flashbacks to a time that had changed him on such a fundamental level that he was no longer the animal he once was.

“What’re you doing?” asked a confused voice.

Oh, Dante had to come along when she stank of dog muck, didn’t he?

Jaime slowly raised her head, finding him standing there, looking as gorgeous as ever. Just like always, her wolf immediately stirred at his presence and his amazing scent. The ear protectors should have made him look at least a little stupid, but no. He arched an eyebrow, waiting for her answer.

“Ben always shakes like crazy when he’s nervous and anxious. I’m just trying to settle him a bit.”

Dante felt his brow arch even higher. “You’re sitting in a cage...because he’s nervous?”

“You’re watching me sitting in a cage...because, what?” For that matter, why was he even there at all? He’d never visited her at work before. He’d always purposely avoided her in general.

The sound of someone approaching snatched both their attention.

“Oh h-hi,” stammered Riley, staring at Dante with lust-filled eyes. Did she want Jaime to bitch slap her, was that it? Not that Jaime blamed her. Because of his size, females tended to have a conflicting reaction to him, feeling both intimidated and captivated. Who wouldn’t be intimidated by someone who looked as though nothing in the world could faze or scare him? Dante simply gave Riley a nod.

Carefully Jaime returned Ben to his little spot on the floor. When she turned back, it was to see that Dante was holding out his hand to her. She slipped her hand into his, and he helped her stand upright. “Thanks,” she uttered, wondering if he felt the surge of heat that she did when their hands touched. Going by his frown, probably not.

“I just wanted to ask if you were able to give Neo his shot?” asked Riley, referring to the Neapolitan mastiff that had recently arrived at the sanctuary. Blushing an unattractive beet-red color, she repeatedly glanced nervously at Dante.

“Yeah, he was fine.” Jaime locked Ben’s cage before placing the keys on the hook. “Pissed, but fine.”

“Great. That’s all, so I’ll, um, see you tomorrow, I guess.” With that, she scuttled away. No doubt her inner lioness was nervous around Dante, too.

“So, is there a problem or something?” Jaime asked him as they walked toward the exit, her body very much aware of him.

“I came to take you to lunch.” *And interrogate the hell out of you*, he wisely didn’t add.

Although he’d be lying if he said that he wouldn’t enjoy spending time with her.

Okay, that had been totally unexpected, in which case she couldn’t help feeling both suspicious and anxious. “Why?” He gave her one of his crooked grins that never failed to do interesting things to her body.

“That’s not usually the reaction I get when I offer to take a female to lunch.”

“Well, we both know you aren’t offering to take me on some kind of date. So what’s this really about?”

“I want to talk to you.”

Uh-oh. That did not sound good. “About...?” she prodded as they reached the exit. She took both sets of ear protectors and placed them on the shelf beside the doors.

“I’ll tell you when we get to the restaurant.” He opened the main door but held up his hand, gesturing for her to remain where she was.

Jaime almost laughed at the way he scanned his surroundings, checking for any signs of a threat. Very Beta behavior. Once he stepped aside, she headed to the main building. “I would have thought you were too busy for this.”

He was, but this was important. She was important. “I have to eat like everyone else.”

“Fine. I just need to go change and grab my backpack.” He gave her a short nod.

The entire time she washed and changed, she wondered how she could get out of this pickle.

Spending time with the guy she was trying to get over was counterproductive. It would be like a recovering alcoholic sitting in a bar. Also, she was a little nervous about whatever it was he wanted to discuss. Not that she thought he could break her. Jaime was used to keeping secrets; she’d been doing it for a long time. But she wasn’t feeling great today. The last thing she needed was an interrogation.

As she exited the building, Dante’s eyes perused her body and a devilish smile surfaced. He knew that he should wipe it off his face, but it didn’t seem to be going anywhere. She looked both surprised and confused, and may have been about to comment when they were both distracted by the sound of someone calling her name. Turning his head, he saw the guy from the diner jogging toward them. A low growl poured out of Dante. “Oh look, it’s your human,” he said with fake delight.

Jaime gave him a look that said “behave,” but she knew there was no getting Dante to do anything he didn’t want to. “Hi,” she said when Shawn was up close.

“Hi. Um, who’s your friend?” Shawn glanced nervously at him—which was understandable, since Dante was looking at him like he wanted to peel off his flesh like an onion.

“Yes, introduce us,” drawled Dante.

She had to resist releasing a cautioning growl as Dante entered her personal space like he had every right to. “Dante, this is Shawn. Shawn, this is my Beta.” They exchanged stiff nods. To Shawn’s credit, he tried not to falter under Dante’s unblinking stare. He *tried*.

Finally, Shawn returned his attention to her. “I wanted to check if we’re still on for tonight.” They’d agreed to meet up at one of the local bars. “Yeah, sure.”

Another low growl from Dante, who was suddenly even closer. She gave him a reproachful elbow-nudge, but the big lug didn't even seem to feel it.

“Great. Oh and—”

“This conversation will have to wait,” interrupted Dante, knowing that if he didn't move away from Pretty Boy soon, it was highly likely that he'd punch him. Not that it would be so bad, but he was quite sure that Jaime wouldn't like him bringing trouble to her place of work. “We don't want to be late for lunch, do we, Jaime?” He smirked at Pretty Boy, ignoring the voice in his head that told him his reaction was a little irrational. He didn't want Jaime dating a human and risking the trouble that came with it. Okay, so he didn't want her dating anyone. Or, more accurately, his ego didn't. But that wasn't the point.

Shawn cleared his throat. “I, um, I guess I'll see you later.” Jaime waited until Shawn was out of hearing distance before speaking. “You know, there's really no need to bully him.”

Dante shackled her wrist with his hand. “Come on.” Ignoring the sizzle of heat that traveled up his arm, he led her to his SUV and opened the passenger door.

“What about my car? I can't just leave it here.”

Dante snorted. “That is not a car. That is an accident waiting to happen. There is no chance I'm letting you drive that. Give me your keys, and I'll have Ryan pick it up later. Once it's in a better condition, you can have it back.” He hated the idea of her driving that rusty old thing.

Immediately Jaime's hackles were up. Even her wolf didn't like the orders, despite being such a huge fan of Dante's. “There's nothing wrong with my car. I'll drive it and follow—”

“No, you will not put yourself in danger. Give me your keys, and I'll have Ryan pick it up later,” he repeated, making it an order this time.

The fucking shit-stain. No woman, submissive or not, would appreciate being spoken to like that, but a submissive female would follow an order from her Beta when it was related to her safety.

So, gritting her teeth, Jaime dug her hand into her bag, took out her keys, handed

them over, and then hopped into the SUV without a word.

Inside her head, she cursed him repeatedly as indignation surged through her. Not only because of his high-handed behavior, but because she didn't want to be in such close proximity with someone her body reacted to as if it thought it belonged to him. "So where are we going?" she asked when he reversed out of the parking space.

"The Steakhouse. Okay with you?"

"Fine," she grumbled. The cocky jerk seemed to find her mood amusing. "What is it you want to talk about anyway?"

"Like I said before, we'll talk at the restaurant." He wanted to be looking at her when he quizzed her. Wanted to be able to observe her posture and see right into those mischievous eyes while he tried to solve her secret.

Earlier, as he'd been pondering Jaime's current state, he'd realized that this hadn't been the first time he had seen her looking like that. Although on the outside she always seemed strong, bright, and lively, there was an undercurrent of melancholy about her. Some days she seemed...tired. Not physically, but mentally, as if there was something weighing hard on her that ate at her natural enthusiasm. He didn't like it, and neither did his wolf.

He had tried asking Gabe about it, but the male had played dumb. Dante hadn't been surprised, and he didn't blame Gabe—his loyalty to his older sister was admirable. That had left Dante only one option: he'd have to go straight to the source. He was determined to solve the mystery that was Jaime Farrow.

Twenty minutes later, he pulled up outside the restaurant. "Wait, I'll get the door for you." She gave him a look that said she could do it herself. "I know, but I *want* to do it, so wait." When he opened the passenger door, he took her hand and helped her slide from the SUV. Rather than release her, he kept her hand in his as he led her inside the restaurant. He probably should have released her purely for the reason that he *liked* touching her. Liked it a little too much. He'd give himself a hard time about it later.

He wasn't oblivious to the number of eyes that tracked her as she followed the waitress to their table. He couldn't blame the guys, especially since she was sexy as hell in those jeans that looked as though they'd been painted on. Still, he shot

them glares that had them quickly averting their eyes. His wolf settled a little, satisfied that they had been warned off.

As she sat in the seat opposite Dante, Jaime barely refrained from snarling at the waitress for ogling him like she wasn't even there—even though she wished she wasn't. Her body was already heating at the close contact with him, and she just hoped to God that he didn't sense it. As they placed their orders, he didn't return the waitress's flirtatious smile or give her any kind of encouragement.

That earned him some points. He earned even more points for not paying any attention to the waitress when she accidentally-on-purpose dropped her pen, offering him a view of her ass. Instead, he looked only at Jaime.

“So,” he finally began after a minute of silence, “how are things going with you and that damn human?”

Oh this was getting tedious. “Fine. Although it would be better if you'd lay off.”

“I'm looking out for you—it's my job.”

It hurt that that was all she was to him—a duty. “I've told you once before, what happens between Shawn and me is really none of your business.”

Those words made his blood boil, though he wasn't sure why. His wolf reacted just as strongly. “Don't ever say that to me, Jaime. Don't,” he rumbled.

“Then back off and give me some space. I'm serious, Dante, if you don't stop butting in, I'm gonna...I'm gonna...” Damn, she'd nearly threatened to kick his ass—something no submissive wolf would ever do.

He smiled crookedly. “You're going to what?”

“I'm going to sulk.”

He chuckled but quickly sobered as he said, “You look kind of stressed out today. Care to tell me why that is?”

“I'm just having an off day,” she said with a shrug.

Her shrug involuntarily drew Dante's gaze to those breasts that he'd been

fantasizing over since she joined the pack. Damn, her nipples were hard. His entire body clenched at the sight of them poking slightly through her aqua-blue T-shirt. It was a struggle to tear his eyes away. “Why?” She was looking down at the table, doodling circles on the mahogany wood and worrying her lower lip. “I didn’t have a great sleep last night, that’s all.” He had been interrogating people long enough to know when someone was lying to him. He cupped her chin and raised her head so that he could seize her gaze. He didn’t drop his hand as he probably should’ve. “I told you yesterday that if there was anything wrong, you should come to me.”

“And I should come to you about sleep deprivation?”

“There’s more to it than that, Jaime.”

She lounged back into her seat, moving out of his hold before she did something dumb, like lick his hand to find out if he tasted as good as he smelled. “I can assure you, there isn’t.”

“Why am I not convinced?”

“Because you’re paranoid from all the crack pipes?”

He leaned forward, still holding her gaze. “Tell me.”

“Look, even if there was anything to tell, I’m not the kind of person who likes to share, okay.” Like him, he mused. That should have been enough for him to drop it, but he couldn’t. Even if he’d wanted to, his protective instincts wouldn’t have let him—not when it came to Jaime. Even when she was a cutely plump, annoying little kid who’d followed him around, he’d been protective of her; seeing her being constantly targeted by bullies had reminded him of exactly what he was forced to deal with at home with his brothers. “If you don’t tell me what the problem is, I can’t help.”

“I don’t want your help.”

“Well you’re getting it, baby.”

That endearment shouldn’t have made something clench low in her stomach, but it did. “Come on, Dante, you must know the drill by now. You pester me, and I ignore you.” His mouth curved into a grin. “You really think I’ll be put off that

easily? Oh, Jaime, Jaime, Jaime. What you have to understand is that I am vigilant in protecting my wolves. If I think one of them needs protecting—even from themselves—then I’ll see to that. It’s what I do and it’s who I am.

You can lie to me as much as you want, but I’ll know, and I’ll just keep on asking until you talk.” She put her hand over her heart. “Wow, I almost gave a fuck.” His grin widened. “You are one stubborn little shit.”

“Not stubborn, just determined.” The waitress returned then with their drinks, once again eyeing Dante like he was a snack. Again, he paid her no attention, which Jaime quite liked.

“No, you’re stubborn,” he insisted when the waitress was gone. “But guess what? I’m more stubborn. Now, tell me what’s got you so stressed.” When she said nothing, he pressed. “Jaime.” Just like yesterday, the *pull* in his voice to answer him, to give him what he wanted, sent pleasant tingles down her spine. There was that dominance and assertiveness that had females flocking around him. As much as she wished it wasn’t a turn-on, it damn well was. She liked dominance in a male as long as they understood and accepted that she had a rebellious streak a mile long. She imagined that Dante would know just how to handle it in the bedroom. Quickly she shut the door on that thought.

“Tell me.”

“Why?”

“You’re upset. I don’t like it. I want to fix it.” He wanted to see her bright and lively again, wanted whatever weight she was carrying gone from her shoulders.

“I’ve just had a rough day. People have them all the time, you know.”

“Maybe if you went on a run later it would help. I noticed you didn’t go on the pack run. Your wolf has to be going crazy.”

Crazy? Well, yeah, she was definitely that. Had been for a while. “Maybe I will later.” Without thought, he reached out and wound a strand of her hair around his finger like he’d often imagined doing. “So soft.” The smell of her vanilla shampoo tickled his senses. “I like your hair long. You used to always have it short.”

“Thanks,” mumbled Jaime, a little thrown. Uncomfortable by the intensity in his gaze, she looked away, casually scanning the restaurant. She almost growled as her attention fell upon a particular female—a female who was glaring at her with utter hatred in her eyes as Dante fiddled with her hair. “Well, well, well, look who’s here.”

Following her gaze, Dante growled. Glory. He was tempted to confront her—not harm her, he would never harm a female. But he was interested in ensuring that she understood just how pissed he was.

“Don’t,” said Jaime gently, earning his attention. “All you’ll gain from it is losing our pack’s alliance with Nick. Let him deal with her.” In truth, Jaime wasn’t convinced that Nick would be able to do much. The fact was that Glory was a law unto herself.

Jaime wasn’t a person who looked down on others, but with Glory it was impossible not to.

The girl was kind of like a doorknob—everyone got a turn. That, combined with her penchant for spreading false gossip and her love of stealing other people’s boyfriends, made for a very toxic person.

“How come you never did that whole ‘I told you so’?” She *had* told him so, had warned him that Glory was poisonous and he’d do better to avoid her. His own instincts had told him that, too.

But he’d been so hot and hard for the female sitting opposite him, and he’d needed a reprieve. Glory had happened to be there when he most needed it.

“I figure you’ve learned your lesson without me rubbing salt in the wound. Besides, it wasn’t a surprise that you didn’t listen. You’ve always thought with your dick.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“In that case, do you wanna blow my mind?”

Jaime smiled. “You got that from Dominic, didn’t you?”

“Maybe.” He laughed.

That gruff laugh was like a caress. God, how pitiful was she to be lusting after someone who didn't want her! Maybe she could have gotten past it if it wasn't more like a craving than a lusting. It reminded her of that feeling she got when she was unbelievably hungry and all she could think about eating was chocolate; that always made no sense to her, as it wasn't like chocolate would ease the hunger or was good for her, and yet still she couldn't stop thinking about it. Only instead of the hunger being in her belly, it was somewhere much lower, and instead of chocolate, it was Dante.

Thankfully, he seemed to accept that she wasn't going to answer his questions and simply drove her back to pack territory. Or, at least, he seemed to accept it *for now*. No doubt he'd do as he said and pester her. While she was confident that she wouldn't let anything slip, she still couldn't help but worry that he would catch her at an extremely weak moment—like when she was so damn aroused that he'd be able to smell it and all she'd be able to think about was jumping on him. Her objective would have to be to spend as little time with him as possible, she decided. That and address her hungry libido this weekend before she broke down and assaulted him.

After three days of nothing more than polite smiles and having Jaime expertly avoid his company and questions, Dante was at a point where he wanted nothing more than to strap Jaime to a chair and torture her secret out of her. He could liken his experiences with Jaime to the act of holding a fish—it was smaller and weaker and therefore should be easy to grab and restrain, but it had a way of slipping out of his grip and going on its merry way.

Whereas in the beginning his motive to uncover her secret had been concern, the whole thing was now more of an obsession. It hadn't been long before his frustrations had overridden his males-shouldn't-intimidate-females ethic. And what had she done in response when he demanded that she tell him? Patted him on the head and sang, “Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” The female was killing him.

Her attempts to avoid him were helped along by how demanding his job was. Still, each afternoon over the past three days he'd turned up at the dog sanctuary to take her to lunch. Each time she had avoided him. The first day he had arrived to find out that she had left early and gone to lunch with Pretty Boy. The second

day she had eaten an hour before and was working the afternoon to cover someone else's shift. Today she had arranged to go for lunch with her female coworkers for one of their birthdays. What could he say to that? It was only later that he wondered whether it truly had been anyone's birthday. Taking into account Jaime's sly streak, probably not.

His patience was wearing thin. Too damn thin. Making it worse, he had to watch Dominic flirt like crazy with her all the time. He knew they were just playing and that nothing would come of it, but it pissed off his battered ego just the same. Marcus had picked up on how annoying Dante found it, and his response had been to begin flirting with Jaime, too. And Marcus was *good* at flirting. He could make even the mated females blush. Jaime was unfortunately no exception. Although she didn't give Marcus any encouragement, she didn't *dis*courage him either. Dante's ego was having a real bad time with it—not to mention his wolf, who had serious issues with both Dominic and Marcus right now.

Increasing Dante's agitation, she was still driving that tin can of a car every day. Each morning he had instructed her not to take it, she had given him a "whatever you say" look, and then she'd gone and done what the hell she wanted to anyway. In short, there was simply no controlling her. As a person who was used to being obeyed and having his orders respected, Dante didn't know how to deal with this female.

Likewise, he didn't know how to deal with the raw cravings he was experiencing or the unfamiliar twinges of possessiveness and jealousy. Furthermore, he was beginning to find her intriguing on a nonsexual level. Dante didn't *do* nonsexual levels. He was pissed with both himself and her about the whole thing. So when he saw her unlocking the tin can later that evening, something in him snapped. "Didn't I tell you not to drive that thing?" Surprised, Jaime jumped, and slowly turned to face the pain in the ass stalking toward her. She sighed tiredly. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"I told you, it's not safe," he insisted, coming close. "It'll be better if someone takes you wherever you're going and picks you up afterward. In fact, I'll do it myself." He gestured to the SUV

beside her car. "Come on. Where are you going?"

“It’s really not necessary.”

“Where are you going?”

Shit, that voice. It pulled at her, demanded compliance. As usual, Jaime’s body immediately responded to the dominance that coated it—her pulse went into overdrive and her clit decided *hey, what the hell, I will, too*. Her need for him beat at her insides, at every defense she had against his raw masculinity. “I’m meeting up with Shawn.” She almost jumped again at his growl. “Dante, you really do need to get over your problem with him.”

She was probably right, but Dante couldn’t. The thought of her with the human had anger ripping through him. Images of Pretty Boy kissing her, touching her, being inside her, were flicking around his head and threatening his legendary self-control—control which had been tested by this female too many times over the past few days.

Making it worse, his wolf was clawing at him, raging at the idea of her and Pretty Boy together. As far as his wolf was concerned, no one else had a right to touch her. Feeling the extent of his wolf’s possessiveness only infuriated Dante more. When it came to Jaime Farrow, he was no more in control of his wolf than he was of her. Currently his fingers were tingling with the need to touch her. He wanted to take that mouth, to plunder it with his tongue just as he wanted to plunder her body with his cock.

Shaking off those thoughts as best he could, Dante scrubbed a hand down his face and switched his focus back to their conversation. “You need to break it off with him.” She sighed. “This is getting real old and real boring.”

“You can do better than a human anyway.”

“For God’s sake, will you just let it go!”

“You can’t tell me he satisfies you, Jaime. A human can’t give you what you need.”

“He satisfies me just fine. Not that it’s any of your business!” Suddenly everything seemed deadly quiet.

Again, those words did something to him and his wolf. Dante stepped closer and

arched a brow. “What was that?” His tone dared her to repeat it.

She should have felt claustrophobic having his big build towering over her, but it strangely sent her horniness level rocketing, which made her even more pissed off. “It’s. None. Of. Your.

Business.”

That was when Dante lost all control.

Jaime gasped as strong hands threaded through her hair and a demanding mouth was suddenly taking hers. Dante ate at it, possessed it, and devastated it. She groaned into his mouth, and he swallowed it before releasing a groan of his own. The kiss quickly became so hungry and carnal it was animalistic: lips smacking, tongues twining, teeth biting.

She grunted as suddenly her back met the SUV. Then her hands were being held above her head by one of his, and she struggled against his strong, possessive grip. He growled warningly into her mouth and dug his hips into hers, pinning her lower body still. She got the message; he’d let her go when he was ready, not before.

Inserting his thigh between her legs, Dante used his free hand to cup her ass—and what a luscious ass it was—and make her ride his thigh, grinding her clit against it. Moaning into his mouth, she didn’t fight him as he rocked her hips. He loved how responsive she was, how he was controlling every single movement she made. A growl of masculine satisfaction rumbled out of him and into that plush mouth.

He’d wanted this mouth, been obsessed with it, since the second she appeared on pack territory a few months ago. He’d wanted to taste it and bite it and leave prints from his teeth on it.

Right now, what he most wanted was to leave a print of himself on Jaime; he wanted to be the one she thought of when she needed to come. If lust hadn’t been blurring his thoughts, he might have questioned his motivation. But this second, he was preoccupied by the need to feel, hear, and watch her come.

Any other time Jaime might have been happy to let him overwhelm her mouth and body like she’d always wanted him to...but it was all wrong. There was

anger in the way he was kissing her and touching her. He was punishing her for what she'd said, for daring to defy him.

Her wolf, too, could sense his anger and suddenly saw him as a threat. She charged at her confines, battling to surface. But the effort to fight was as hopeless for her wolf as it was for Jaime.

While raw, primal lust was crushing her defenses, Jaime could do no more than feel as he completely took her over. She sucked his tongue into her mouth, and a growl of approval rumbled its way up his chest, making her already-beaded nipples tighten even more. The friction to her clit was driving her insane, keeping her climax just out of reach.

In an urgent movement, Dante tore open the buttons of her jeans, and his hand dove inside her panties, cupping her. He growled at how wet she was, at how wet she was *for him*. Without any preamble, he sank two fingers inside her. So tight and hot. With every hard thrust, he sought out her sweet spot, making her squirm and buck, determined to show her just what she was missing by settling for a human. Determined to show her that Pretty Boy could never give her what she needed.

Determined to make her come harder than Pretty Boy ever had.

His wolf was urging him on, wanting more, wanting something that Dante might have ignored if feverish need and bubbling anger weren't driving him. So when he sensed her orgasm was close, he tore his mouth from hers and ordered, "Come for me, Jaime. Right on my fingers." Then he licked the crook of her neck and bit down hard. Satisfaction filled both him and his wolf as her pussy clamped and rippled around his fingers and she came with a loud, husky cry.

It took at least ten seconds for Jaime to collect her thoughts. When she did, rage like she'd never before experienced shot through her. She'd just had one of the best orgasms of her life from a guy who didn't even want her—the bastard had not only used her lust for him against her to punish her for rebelling, he'd done something worse. *He fucking bit me!*

Dante forced himself to withdraw his fingers, but he couldn't quite move away from her, couldn't quite remember why he shouldn't be doing this. He was thinking of dropping to his knees and tasting her when he suddenly found himself flat on his back on the ground and the breath gushed out of him. More

shocking than that, a loud growl was coming from the female who was sneering down at him, her eyes flashing wolf. Even more shocking, dominant vibes were coming off her in waves, smothering him. What. The. Fuck?

“You marked me, you son of a bitch! Maybe you didn’t hear me before, Popeye, but I’m none of your goddamn business! Being my Beta doesn’t give you the right to mark me! I *could* have been your business, *could* have been yours to mark, but you don’t want me! Well someone else does, and if I want to fuck him, I goddamn motherfucking will!” With that, she got into her car and slammed the door shut on a gaping Dante. Jerk.



CHAPTER FOUR

During the baby shower, Dante observed Jaime through narrowed eyes. All night he had thought about the way she had yelled at him in the parking lot, the way her eyes had flashed wolf, and the way she’d managed to put him on his ass. Now sure, submissive wolves experienced anger just like everyone else; they had tantrums and brawls, they slammed doors, and they could do some seriously good combat moves. But they did *not* stare a pissed dominant wolf in the eye. They did *not* feel challenged by a dominant wolf’s anger or behavior. What they definitely, definitely, definitely didn’t do was release dominant vibes.

So he could form only one logical conclusion: Jaime wasn’t a submissive wolf at all, she was a dominant. And a very strong one at that. He wasn’t just a dominant wolf. He was her Beta. And yet Jaime had borne the weight of that and disabled him.

There was really no other explanation. But what he couldn’t understand was why she was hiding the truth. If it had been anyone else, Dante would probably have solved the puzzle by now, but his intuition gave him no help where Jaime was concerned. Maybe her magnetic scent messed with his mental processes, or maybe his need to be inside her was too great for him to pick up much else.

He didn’t know, in which case he was highly frustrated with this female for whom he had a lot of questions. At the same time, he was feeling rather smug. He’d been right; there was much more to Jaime Farrow than she let anyone see. He would soon find out what exactly “much more” was.

Also irking him was that Jaime was pretty much ignoring his existence. She had to know that he was now more than suspicious of her, and yet she didn't appear to be the slightest bit nervous. Nor was she showing any signs that their little encounter last night had affected her. No, she was standing by the table with Dominic, laughing about God-knows-what. The clown was basking in the attention, though, surprisingly, he wasn't being flirtatious today, as if he suspected that Dante wouldn't handle it well right now.

Dominic would be right to think that. Dante could acknowledge—begrudgingly—that this was all about more than just an ego blow. But he'd already known that, hadn't he? The truth was that he had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted Jaime Farrow. He wanted to watch her come again, wanted to know what it felt like to be inside her, wanted to see this rebellious female submit to him.

But he couldn't have any of those things. Even if she wasn't off limits as part of his pack, he would have been sure to steer clear of her. His past had taught him that getting involved with a female he craved that strongly could only bring trouble. Of course none of these facts helped the situation, because forbidden fruit was so much more tempting.

As his gaze again roamed over her body, Dante's cock twitched. He couldn't help remembering how well they fit; she was almost as tall as he was, which meant that her body was aligned nicely with his, chest to chest, hips to hips. He remembered how hot and wet she had felt around his fingers. And when she'd come apart all over his hand...Fuck.

He still couldn't believe that he'd marked her. His wolf had been enraged at the time, knowing she was going off to meet another male, and had had a primal urge to bite her, to place his mark on her to warn off the other male. Never before had Dante lost his self-control like that. The female was dangerous to him.

He'd noticed that Jaime had covered the mark with makeup this morning. Clearly, she wasn't wearing it with pride. There was no denying that she was justifiably angry with him. Hell, *he* was angry with him. But the fact that she'd concealed the mark nettled him and his wolf. Dante should have been relieved—it meant that the pack wouldn't see it and then start launching questions. Instead, he wanted to wipe away the concealer. Wanted to see his bite on her flesh. His gaze repeatedly traveled to that spot on her neck, as if drawn to it. This was

messed up.

The ideal thing would be to stay away from her, but he had questions that needed answering.

This time she was going to answer him honestly or, by God, he'd blister her perfect ass with the palm of his hand.

Jaime had never been to a baby shower before, so she hadn't really known what to expect. Okay, yeah, she knew that they were little parties thrown for expectant moms, but that was pretty much the extent of her knowledge. What she hadn't expected was to enjoy herself. Jaime wasn't much for parties, but she was actually having a great time.

Earlier, while Taryn was having her afternoon nap, Jaime, Shaya, Grace, Lydia, and Hope had hung up all the decorations. The Winnie the Pooh theme matched the baby's nursery, though the Alphas planned to keep their baby in their room with them for the first few months.

Taryn had been so delighted that she'd cried. Not that it took much to make Taryn cry these days. Every time Trey tried to comfort her she hit him, which was fun to watch. The buffet was fabulous, particularly the cake—most of which had been eaten by Marcus—and the games that Shaya organized were fun.

When it came time for Taryn to open the gifts, there were more tears. It was clear that it wasn't just the hormones; she had been genuinely touched and grateful. Possibly the best gift had been the one that Shaya had given her. It was a photo frame that held three photographs. The space in the center was empty, but on either side were photographs of Taryn and Trey as kids.

"You can put a picture of the baby in the middle so you can see the resemblances between you," Shaya told her Alphas. Unsurprisingly, Taryn cried again.

Possibly the worst gift was Greta's. The old dragon actually gave Taryn a maternity dress that she'd made out of an old tablecloth. What kind of messed-up shit was that?

"She's a dysfunctional woman," Gabe commented as Dominic rushed over to steer Greta away from a murderous-looking Taryn. "Um...is there a reason why our Beta has been staring at you throughout the entire party? He looks..."

suspicious, I guess you could say.” She couldn’t really expect anything else, could she? Undoubtedly he’d have plenty of questions

—none of which she had any intention of answering. She knew why Dante hadn’t approached her to begin his quiz yet; he would never risk spoiling Taryn’s baby shower. Why did he have to have a sweet side? Jerk.

She felt an urge to touch the bite on her neck, just as she had at least a hundred times today.

Like those times, she ignored it. She hated that he’d done it. She liked that he’d done it. Her wolf was just as torn about the whole thing; she was infuriated with him for the possessive act, but she also liked the depth of his dominant streak.

“So what happened?”

“I sort of, um...I yelled at him last night. And growled. And hurt him.”

“Oh.” He sounded amused. “So then he’s probably wondering how a submissive wolf could challenge his dominance like that.”

Yes, particularly since there was no way he wouldn’t have picked up her wolf’s dominant vibes. She was surprised that he hadn’t told Trey and Taryn. Surely the fact that one of their wolves had been lying to them was something worth mentioning to their Alphas. For whatever reason, he appeared to be keeping the information to himself. She had to wonder if it was to make her nervous, to keep her on her toes. If so, it was working. “What do I say?” she whispered.

“How about the truth?”

“You know what will happen if I do that.”

Gabe shrugged. “It’s not for sure that they’ll ask you to leave.”

“I can’t risk it. I *won’t*.”

He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Okay.”

Seeing that he was glancing at Hope, who was smiling at him and blushing like crazy, Jaime asked, “Something going on between you two?”

“Not yet. But hopefully there will be.”

“If she can resist you, there’s something wrong with her.”

“You have to say stuff like that, you’re my big sister.” He cocked his head, giving her an odd look. “Thank you.”

She frowned. “What for?”

“After what happened with Mom and Dad...Our aunt and uncle might have housed us, but it was you who did the rest, you who did the parenting. And you had your own problems to deal with. I don’t think I ever thanked you.”

“You don’t have to.”

He rolled his eyes. “Will you just accept the thanks? I’ll probably never say it again, so you should really take advantage of this moment.”

“Fine. Thank you for the thank you.”

“So how are things going between you and Shawn?”

She grimaced. “They’re not. He’s still hung up on his ex-girlfriend, though he won’t admit it, so we haven’t even been doing the dirty.”

“Just like you’re still hung up on Dante.” At the sound of her growl, he held up his hands.

“Hey, I’m not judging. I just wish you guys would get your acts together and stop pretending you don’t want each other.”

“If he wanted me, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. It’s not like I played hard to get.”

“Sometimes people need to have something moved from their reach before they realize how much they want it.”

She loved her brother, but sometimes he made no sense to her. She knew Dante well enough to know that when he wanted something, he didn’t dance around it, he took it. “Whatfreakingever.” Gabe simply laughed.

As the party continued and Dante didn't show any signs of slackening his stakeout, Jaime began to get restless. Having his total attention should have made her feel uncomfortable, but it heated her blood. Like her blood needed heating up any further! Good thing she, Ivy, and Riley were going to the club tomorrow night. Operation Calm Libido couldn't come soon enough.

Eventually the party ended, and to Jaime's surprise, Dante didn't take the opportunity to corner her. That made her nervous, but she took advantage of that and scampered to her room. Not to hide.

No, of course she wasn't hiding. Okay, she was hiding. But considering that she was about to be interrogated by someone who was not only an ace at it but who primed her body with his mere presence, was it really any wonder?

A few minutes later, there was a soft knock on her door. Bracing herself, she took a deep, calming breath. Opening it, she was surprised to find Shaya. She was even more surprised when Shaya pushed her way inside and quickly closed the door.

"I need a favor."

Seeing her stand there with her hands clasped as if in prayer, Jaime tensed.

"What's wrong?"

"I need to get out of here for a little while. I was thinking of going to the Rouge Bar. Will you come? I just need to get away."

"Why, what is it?"

After a long sigh, she spoke. "Someone's coming to visit, and I don't want to be here when he does. Bring Gabe and Hope if you want, and we'll make a night of it. Just, please, I need to get out of here."

"Shaya, you have me totally confused and worried. If you want me to come with you somewhere then fine, I will. But, please, tell me what's wrong." Shaya bit her bottom lip hard. "Not here. Once we're off pack territory, I'll tell you, okay?" Impatient to know but not wanting to push, Jaime nodded. "Okay. Just give me ten minutes to get ready."

"I'll be waiting in my room."

Eager to get Shaya out of their territory before this mystery person arrived and Shaya hyperventilated, Jaime began swiftly searching through her pine triple wardrobe for something to change into that, unlike what she was currently wearing, wasn't stained with chocolate—her favorite food group. It was while she was stripping off her clothes that there was a heavy rhythmic knock that almost made her jump.

“Open up, Jaime.” Dante's tone was implacable, totally unyielding.

Well, hell. Not one to procrastinate, she quickly slipped on her white silk robe over her underwear and opened the door. She'd expected to find a very hostile-looking wolf staring back at her. Instead, Dante was wearing one of his cocky grins—a grin that had her body instantly heating.

“We need to talk, Jaime.” Dante swallowed hard at the sight of her. She had to be wearing a slinky robe, didn't she? “Aren't you going to invite me in?” *So that I can have inexhaustible, carnal sex with you*, he refrained from adding.

And have the cocky jerk sense the overwhelming effect he had on her libido? Jaime snorted inwardly. Not freaking likely. As pathetic as it was, Jaime wanted more of what he'd given her last night, wanted his hands and mouth on her again, even as she knew that the lust was one-way. Come on, how fucked up was that? As such, it so wouldn't be a good idea to have the object of her lust standing in her bedroom. *Lying down in it, sure*. She mentally slapped herself for that thought.

Dante arched a brow. “Well?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I'm a bitch like that.”

He persisted, “Let me in, Jaime.”

Ignoring the tug in his voice, she brought her index finger to her chin. “Now let me think...I've fed the cat, been to work, done my laundry, attended the baby shower...Sorry, but it seems that my schedule doesn't include talking to you. Bummer.”

A huge grin spread across Dante's face. He shouldn't like her attitude, but he did. "Don't make me push my way in, baby. You know I will."

The stubborn set of his smooth jaw told her that he meant every word. Releasing an exasperated sigh, she turned and walked inside, leaving him to close the door behind him. Jaime watched in bemusement as he wandered around the room like he owned it. Typical dominant male.

Oddly, her wolf liked having him in her personal space. *Well that's new*. Her wolf was usually too territorial over her space to be okay with that kind of thing. All shifters were territorial, but not as bad as Jaime's wolf.

"I like it," said Dante as he took in the rustic look of the room and the warm feel created by the natural, woodsy colors. Jaime was clearly a messy person—something he would imagine drove Grace crazy when she came inside to clean—but the room was somehow inviting, calming. The white canopy bed caused a series of erotic images to flick through his brain. Not helpful.

"So you wanted to talk."

He turned back to Jaime and was momentarily distracted by the way she was biting on her lower lip. Christ, that mouth. He wanted it again. He remembered how soft it was, how—

Enough. "Yes. It was an interesting conversation we had last night. I hadn't been expecting to end up flat on my back. That's some strength you have. What was it you said after calling me a son of a bitch? Oh yeah, that's it. You said that if you want to fuck someone that you goddamn motherfucking will. Huh." His wolf growled at the memory. "You even punctuated that by slamming the car door." As he took a step toward her, a stifling sensual need assailed Jaime, twisting her insides.

Crap. Her body was now officially in "Must Have Dante" mode, and it would only be a matter of minutes before he sensed it. Damn it, why did his voice have to be so sexily gruff? And did he have to be so incredibly masculine? And why, oh why, couldn't his self-assuredness piss her off instead of causing fluttering sensations in her stomach?

This whole thing sucked. Didn't every girl imagine that she would one day manage indifference around the guy with whom she had been infatuated?

Frustratingly, Jaime's body was not on the same wavelength as her mind; her nipples had tightened painfully, her breasts were aching, her clit was throbbing, and she was so damn wet it wasn't even funny. It was almost as though her body was submissively readying itself for him.

"Nothing to say to that?"

"What can I say?" she said meekly as she lowered her eyes. "PMS is a bitch."

"The submissive act isn't going to work with me any longer. Dominant vibes were washing off you in waves last night. Yet now I can barely sense your wolf. Maybe you could explain to me just why that is."

"Maybe you could just go home to Olive Oyll and eat some more spinach." There was that cocky grin again that tickled her in all the right places.

"Why can I barely sense your wolf, Jaime?"

She had to refrain from backing up as he continued to move toward her. The predatory look on his face and the stealth in his slow steps made her feel like she was being stalked. Her wolf liked the way he prowled toward her, liked being the sole focus of his attention.

"Jaime," he drawled warningly, continuing to close in on her. "Answer me." Again she ignored the pull in his voice, but it proved impossible to ignore the carnal hunger circulating through her system. And he was standing oh so close to her bed... She imagined herself on her hands and knees, clinging to the silk sheets, while he took her forcefully from behind.

"Don't look away from me."

She snapped her eyes back to his. "Why, are you going to do a trick?" He didn't want to smile, but he couldn't help it, damn it. He gave the smart-ass a look that swore reprisal. "Oh, baby, if you—" Catching a faint hint of her arousal in the air, he halted. *Fuck.*

He couldn't help inhaling deeply; the mix of the pure, tantalizing smell of her arousal together with her own unique scent was like a punch. A low growl rumbled out of him. It was definitely a mistake taking her scent inside him like that; knowing she was so wet and primed for him had his painfully hard cock

throbbing.

His wolf strained toward her, wanting at her again. Hell, he wasn't the only one. Calling on every ounce of control he had, Dante remained where he was. He couldn't pounce on her; he couldn't let himself have her, no matter how badly he wanted her. He had enough reasons to ignore his hunger for her, and he silently recited each one of them to himself.

As she watched Dante sense her arousal, Jaime inwardly cursed herself. She would have expected him to be wearing one of his cocky grins. To her surprise, there was no grin, no smugness.

Instead, pure male need blazed from his eyes. Not that she could take it as a compliment—the scent of a mature female wolf's arousal would have undoubtedly stirred his wolf and interested his body whether Dante wanted it to or not. Still, his reaction thrilled her wolf; the animal wasn't interested in the facts surrounding the situation, she saw only a strong, dominant, aroused male who would take care of her own arousal quite nicely.

Yeah, well, her wolf would have to be disappointed, because Jaime herself *was* interested in the facts surrounding the situation. This was a male who had made it quite clear that he didn't want her. This same male had not only been shoving his nose into her business, he had actually marked her when he had no goddamn right or reason. Possibly worse than all that, Jaime wanted him regardless.

“Answer my question.” His voice was taut with the feverish lust that was pounding through him.

“I don't have to tell you a fucking thing.”

Of course the word *fucking* had Dante's brain going back to its favorite subject—the idea of fucking Jaime. More fantasies began playing around in his head, making his balls ache. “Why are you being so secretive about this? Just answer the damn question!”

“Or what? You'll tell Trey? Go ahead.” She waved a hand at the door. “Go on, go tell him.” He probably should. No, he definitely should. But Dante knew that Trey would decide to banish her purely for lying about her wolf's dominant nature—there was no room for deception in a pack. While Dante understood that, he wasn't comfortable with the idea of Jaime being banished. Not until he

knew exactly why she had lied. Jaime wasn't a vindictive, disloyal person. If she was trying to keep her wolf's true status a secret, there had to be a very good reason. "I can't help you unless you're honest with me." He growled when she arched an imperious brow at him.

"Did I ask for your help, Popeye?"

In two strides, he'd covered the space between them. "Stop being so fucking stubborn and tell me," he ordered, all Beta now. The scent of her arousal swirled around him, blending with his own, making him close to drunk. The obstinate, challenging, hotheaded female was actually able to shrug off his order, and God help him, he found it sexy as fucking hell. All he could think about was stripping her naked and fucking her raw, fucking her into submission. His usually iron control was now papery thin, all because of this woman. "You don't even know that you're doing it, do you?" She double-blinked, confused—fully proving his point. She had absolutely no clue what she did to him, no clue just how hard he had to fight not to pounce on her and ravish her. If he didn't leave this room right now, she soon would.

Reminding himself of all the reasons why he couldn't have her, he stepped back. "Don't think this is the end of this, Jaime. I told you yesterday that I won't stop harassing you until I get answers." He thought about apologizing for what had happened last night, but he wasn't sorry—not even about marking her, oddly enough. So he turned on his heel and forced himself to leave before he dove on her again.

Deciding that she had definitely never met a male stranger than Dante, she stared after him as he waltzed out. His natural cocky swagger should have annoyed her, but damn if it didn't have her stomach clenching in need again. Jerk.

Although Jaime was eager to know what had Shaya in such a state that she was chugging down a glass of vodka like it was ice water, she didn't prod her for answers. She simply sat on the bar stool, waiting patiently for her to speak. Sensing that she and Shaya had needed a little alone time, Gabe had taken Hope onto the dance floor. He was good like that.

"I know I said I'd tell you, but I'm not sure I want to talk about it," Shaya eventually said.

"I think you do. I think this is eating at you."

Shaya offered a sad smile. “That’s almost the exact same thing that Marcus said.”

“Marcus is the one who has you upset?”

“No, no, definitely not. The shameless flirt guessed there was something upsetting me, and he wouldn’t stop hounding me until I told him.”

Jaime recalled seeing the two of them going on private strolls around pack territory together.

She had wondered if maybe they scratched each other’s itch occasionally, but apparently, it was something much more important.

“I’m glad I did tell him. Without having him to talk to, I’d have lost it. He’s the only one who knows. If I tell you, you have to keep it to yourself. I mean you keep it from Gabe, and Dante, and even Taryn and Trey. I know that’s not a fair thing to ask, so if you’re not comfortable with it, we won’t talk about it.”

Jaime wasn’t in a position to judge anybody for keeping secrets from their Alphas. Even if the idea had made her feel uncomfortable, she still wouldn’t be okay with leaving Shaya to deal with whatever this was alone. Sure, Shaya had Marcus, but sometimes a woman needed to talk to another woman. “You have my word that I won’t repeat a single thing you tell me.” Shaya slumped over the bar. “I know who my true mate is.”

That had Jaime raising her eyebrows. “Is he in the pack?”

“No. None of *those* guys would ever walk away from their true mate.”

“So he knows who you are? I mean, he knows you’re his mate?”

“He knows.” She took another swig of vodka. “I know it’s really unusual for someone to pick up on it within minutes of meeting someone, but I just *knew*. Maybe it’s because I was so eager to find him after seeing Taryn so happy with Trey that I was open enough to sense it. I saw a flash of recognition and then shock cross his face. I saw the way he watched me like a hawk. There’s no way I’ll believe he doesn’t know.”

“You didn’t try to talk to him?”

Her chuckle was humorless. “Oh I tried. You should have seen the way he looked at me. Or should I say, he looked *through* me. He’s made it obvious that he doesn’t want me.”

“He said that?” Jaime was ready to kill the guy already.

“That’s the thing, he said *nothing*. He doesn’t talk to me. Whenever he comes to our territory, he pretty much overlooks my presence. I don’t even stick around when he’s there anymore. I figure there’s no point if he’s only going to ignore me. It hurts, you know. It really fucking hurts.” Jaime could only imagine. “Why not tell Taryn?”

“She’d demand to know who he is, break his nose, and then force him to claim me. I want him to claim me because he *wants* to.”

“Maybe there’s a good reason why he hasn’t claimed you. Maybe you could try to talk to him again.”

“Give him a chance to dismiss me again like I’m a piece of shit on his shoe? No thanks. I’ve got a pretty good idea why he doesn’t want me. He looks down on me.” A surge of protectiveness shot through Jaime. “Why would he look down on you?”

“Because I’m submissive, and he’s *so* not.”

“Why should that be an issue? Just because you’re a submissive doesn’t mean your mate can’t be an alpha male.”

Another humorless chuckle. “He’s not just an alpha male. He’s an Alpha of a pack.” Shock made Jaime’s eyes widen. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. So you see the problem.”

Yes, she saw the problem. Alpha pairs of a pack were exactly that—a pair of Alphas. A submissive wolf could never hold the position of Alpha female and would be constantly challenged if she tried. Trey’s mother had been an exception, because no one had envied her position as Rick Coleman’s mate, but she had never had the respect and support of the pack as every Alpha female should. Jaime wanted to say something comforting, but unlike her brother, she was so bad at this. “Oh God, Shaya, if I knew what to say, I’d say it.”

“Thanks. The whole thing would be a lot easier if he didn’t visit the pack.”

“Why does he visit?”

She shrugged before taking another gulp of vodka. “I’m guessing it’s to talk business stuff with Trey.”

“He can do that over the phone. Not many packs socialize with other packs. You don’t think that maybe the reason he goes is to see you?”

“If it is, he’ll be disappointed, won’t he? I’ll never be there when he is. Not ever. There was one time when he showed up out of the blue. I hid in my room.” After a short pause, she added, “I’m thinking of leaving the pack.”

Jaime twisted fully in her seat, gawking unattractively. “What?”

“Believe me when I say that I love it there, I really do. It’s so different from my old pack—

tight and family oriented and supportive. But it’s not a safe haven for me, because *he* goes there. He can invade my home whenever he likes, and that taints it. If things get too hard...I don’t see what other choice I’d have. No matter how bad things get, I’d *never* leave Taryn while she’s pregnant. I want to be there for the birth. But after that...Well, we’ll see.”

“Where would you go? Back to your old pack?”

“I’d go where I’d never have any chance of bumping into him. I’d make a place for myself in the human world.”

Jaime gawked again. “You can’t be serious. Shaya, the lone-wolf lifestyle is no joke.”

“No, it’s not, but there’s no room for me in the shifter world if I can’t have my mate, is there? I can’t exactly have a real relationship with another shifter. Even those who aren’t yet ready to find their true mate still want to find them eventually.”

“It doesn’t mean you can’t find a shifter who cares for you enough to imprint on you.” Shaya placed her empty glass on the bar and turned in her seat so that she

was fully facing Jaime. “Let me ask you this: My mate might not want me, but do you think he’s going to let anyone else have me?”

“Hell.” No male would be okay watching his mate with someone else. An Alpha male? There was a pretty good chance he would kill any male who touched her, whether he wanted her for himself or not.

“My only chance of finding any kind of happiness with someone would be to leave the shifter community behind, leave *him* behind. Find a nice human guy who doesn’t come with baggage like Alpha shit and true mate bonds.”

“I hate to say this—really, really hate to say this—but you’re right, getting out of here does sound like the best option for you. I gotta say, though...Running from him wouldn’t be a good thing.

Running from a predator is like waving a red flag at a bull.”

“Yeah,” allowed Shaya, her voice so small and sad, “but if I told him I was leaving my pack, he’d try to stop me because it would suit him to know where I am and that I’m not with anyone else.”

“You’re probably right. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Is it Nick Axton?” she asked cautiously. It wasn’t such a hard guess, since he was one of the very few Alphas who visited.

Shaya’s expression morphed into one of sheer, unadulterated pain. She sighed heavily.

“Yeah.”

“Can I kill him?”

“I’ve been tempted to do it myself plenty of times. Oh God, listen to me whining. I’m letting him depress me. I promised myself that I wouldn’t.” She jumped to her feet. “Come on, time to dance.”

“Dance?”

“Yes. You know how much I love to dance. Besides, if I don’t stop dwelling, I’ll end up crying. Now come on.”

Nodding, Jaime simply followed Shaya to the dance floor. Then, like Shaya, she gave herself over completely to the music, letting it invade her body, charge her soul, and steal all other thoughts from her mind.

Dante had just sunk two balls, leaving only the eight ball, when Marcus came inside the game room eating a bag of chips. Glancing around, Marcus asked, “You guys haven’t seen Gabe, have you?” Like Dante, Trey, Trick, Tao, Nick, and his bodyguard, Derren, all shook their heads. Dante leaned down, getting himself in position to pot the black.

“He went out with the girls,” revealed Dominic.

Distracted, Dante missed the black completely. “Which girls?” Delighted that he now had the chance to pot the black first, Dominic smiled widely and bent over the pool table. He took his shot and then scowled at Dante when he scooped up the black, holding it hostage. “Hey!”

“Which. Girls?”

Dominic rolled his eyes. “Jaime, Shaya, and Hope.”

“Shaya?” echoed Nick, earning curious looks from everyone.

Dante demanded, “Where are they, Dominic?”

“Why, what’s the big deal?” But Dominic knew exactly what the big deal was. Dante wasn’t in the mood for his little “let’s see how far I can push my Beta” games right now.

“Where are they?”

Dominic sighed. “The Rouge Bar.”

Twenty minutes later, with Nick, Derren, Tao, Marcus, and Trick close behind, Dante edged through a mass of gyrating bodies. His eyes scanned the bar intently, searching diligently for the reason he was in this damn place. He didn’t much like it here. It seemed that there was always trouble at some point between

packs.

When he reached the far corner of the dance floor, he stopped dead as a sight captivated every muscle in his body. A female moving so in sync with the music, like her entire self, right down to her soul, was attuned to the rhythm. *Jaime*. Her slender figure was sensual, graceful, and spellbinding. As usual, the temptation to have her slithered over every inch of his skin, taunting him. No, haunting him.

And now his dick was getting hard.

“She’s hot, isn’t she?” said Marcus, following Dante’s gaze.

Trick frowned at Marcus. “You don’t *do* tall women.”

“I’d do her.”

“No one’s doing her.” Dante almost cringed at the command in his voice. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know that the guys did this just to needle him; it was a regular thing. But damn if he could help reacting.

Tao’s lips curled in amusement. “You finally ready to stake a temporary claim, Dante? Come on, it’s obvious that you want her.”

“How about we just order our drinks?”

“So you’re telling me that we came all the way here and you’re not even going to approach her?”

“I’m just here to keep an eye on our females, that’s all. It’s my job. Gabe’s a submissive wolf; he can’t exactly protect them all.”

Each one of his enforcers gave him looks that said, “Do you really expect us to believe that?”

“Have you all forgotten about the Glory situation? Her brothers could be here, and if they are, they might feel happy to use our females to get to me.”

Trick cleared his throat. “D, sorry to disappoint, but it seems like the point’s moot anyway. It looks like a claim has already been staked on Jaime.”

At those words, Dante's head snapped around and his eyes zoomed in on the broad male who was now pressing his chest against Jaime's back with his hands settled on her hips. She turned her head, smiled, and settled herself more firmly against him. A menacing growl escaped Dante. Every cell in his body wanted nothing more than to charge over there and snatch her away. Only one thing stopped him, only one thing kept his infamous self-control from failing him—if he went over there now and did that, he would, in fact, be staking a temporary claim. He couldn't do that. He couldn't get involved with any female from his pack. He *wouldn't*.

But he could watch her, could make sure the dance was nothing more than that—a dance. He admitted to himself that if it looked as though things were getting more serious than that, there wasn't much chance of him restraining himself from interfering.

As if Jaime sensed his heated gaze, her eyes landed on Dante. For a second they widened, and then she gave him a smile. It wasn't a flirtatious smile or one filled with sexual promise, though. It was one of recognition, the kind you would give to someone you knew but didn't bother your ass with; it was polite and warm, but quick to disappear. *Motherfucker*.

Trick blew out a rough breath. "Looks like you lost your chance there, D."

"Nah," Tao disagreed. "I'd say if he went over there and broke them up before things got too heated between them, he might have a shot. Of course we know he'll never do that." Dante didn't even spare the guys a glance. He knew they were playing with him, knew they were trying to make him act on what he wanted. He also knew that if that prick's hand crept any nearer to her breast, he'd snap the damn thing off.

What the hell was Popeye doing here? Jaime knew he didn't like this bar, so she had to conclude that the others had urged him to go along. She didn't dare look over at him, not wanting to see some female slinking all over him. And that was exactly what she would see. It was what always happened.

It made her sick to her stomach every time.

Ignoring his eyes on her—and she knew without even looking that they were still on her, she could feel the weight of his gaze—she continued to dance with the jaguar shifter behind her. He was easily a foot taller than she was, which was

evident by the fact that his erection was level with her back rather than her ass. From her peripheral vision, she could tell he was a good-looking guy.

Rugged. She liked that. She threaded her fingers through his ruffled dark hair, and yes, it was as incredibly soft as it looked.

He trailed his free hand up her outer thigh, skimming ever so slightly underneath her silky turquoise strapless dress. “You ever been with a jaguar before, wolf girl?” She shook her head. Jaguar shifters came highly recommended by Riley, she suddenly recalled.

“Good. You up for having some fun tonight?”

Was she ever. True, she’d rather it was with Dante, but the cocky ass didn’t want her, and if he wasn’t going to scratch her itch, somebody else would have to do it. Pining over him was just pathetic. If she carried on that way, she’d have nine cats before long. She was already on her way to spinsterhood if she counted Hunk.

“Jaime?” called Shaya.

The jag hissed loudly, warning away the female.

Moving out of his hold, Jaime snapped, “No, bad kitty cat.” Turning to Shaya, she asked,

“What is it?”

“I need to pee.”

It was an unspoken rule that none of the girls ever walked off alone. “I’ll be right back,” Jaime told the jag, who gave her a very carnal smile that promised all kinds of things.

It was as she washing her hands in the sink after using the toilet that she heard an irritating voice behind her.

“You must be Jaime.”



CHAPTER FIVE

“You must be lost,” said Jaime.

Glory came to stand beside her in front of the mirror where Jaime was drying her hands with paper towels. “I’ll get straight to the point.” She dug out her lip gloss from her small, studded pink handbag that matched her pink skirt—which, considering its length, was more like a belt.

“That would be nice.”

Glory touched up her lip gloss, returned it to her bag, and turned to fully face her. “I saw you with Dante the other day. Don’t think I didn’t notice the way you were looking at him or the way he was looking at you. And don’t think I haven’t been watching the way he’s been staring at you tonight either.” She curled her lip. “Let me be very clear. Dante’s mine. He’s my mate.” Jaime’s wolf growled, enraged by not only the female’s confrontational behavior, but her claim on Dante. “Your mate? Really? Wow. See, I’d like to believe you...I say I’d *like* to.”

“He *is* mine. I knew it the second I saw him. The only reason I haven’t ripped out your throat is that you’re one of his wolves and it would hurt him. But I’m warning you, just like I warned every other tramp that looked his way... *he is mine*. I don’t doubt that he’s denying it to anyone who asks.

He might not be ready to accept the mating, but it doesn’t change the facts.”

“*Are* they facts?”

The skin around Glory’s cheekbones tightened, but her expression quickly relaxed. “Why would I claim he’s mine if he isn’t?”

Jaime smiled and shrugged. “Well it’s your lie, sweetie, so go ahead and tell it however you like.”

“He’ll make it official when he’s ready. But just because I’m giving him time doesn’t mean I’m okay with him fucking little submissive sluts like *you*. ” Again Jaime’s wolf growled. Pacing and clawing, she urged Jaime to lunge at the female in front of her, but Jaime maintained a deadpan expression. “Thanks. That really means a lot coming from a backstabbing, rumor-spreading, attention-

seeking, black hole of need. But then, I suppose it's a good thing that you're spreading something besides your legs." Glory snarled. "I'd be very careful if I were you, honey."

"Is that right?"

"I'm no submissive. I could easily take you, and we both know it." The threat delighted her wolf, who at this point wanted nothing more than to rip out this bitch's throat. Her wolf, as always, believed the solution was "attack." She charged at her confines, body-slammed them, clawed at them. It was becoming painful to keep her buried, but Jaime somehow managed it. Unfortunately, Glory seemed determined to test her endurance.

"Do you know what's so sad about this? That you think he would be truly interested in you even if he and I weren't mates. Face reality, honey. He doesn't want you. If he did, he wouldn't have let that jaguar anywhere near you. Come on, look at you... Your wolf's so submissive, she doesn't even deserve to live. Let me show you what I like to do to submissive wolves like you." One of the bars on her wolf's cage gave way, and Jaime's wolf leaped for the surface.

Dante was staring at the door of the restrooms, impatient for Jaime to come back out, when he noticed Shaya dashing out and quickly squeezing through the crowds until she reached Gabe. Whatever she said to him had the guy's eyes bulging, and then he was swiftly heading to the restrooms.

Without thought, Dante stalked through the crowds, intent on finding out what was wrong.

Reaching Shaya, he gripped her shoulder and twirled her around. "What is it? What's happened?" Suddenly Nick was beside him, but Dante paid him no attention.

It all came out of her in a rush. "I was in the restroom in one of the cubicles when I heard them arguing and I figured they'd stop and one of them would walk out but then there was growling and I looked out and she had her hand wrapped around Glory's throat and was pounding her head against the wall and I tried to pull Jaime away but she won't listen and—"

"Jaime?" He still didn't have a clue what was going on, but if it had something to do with Jaime, it had something to do with him.

Whatever he'd been expecting to see when he barged into the women's restrooms, it hadn't been Jaime sitting on and pinning down a bleeding female. Glory was lying on her stomach while Gabe looked on, appealing to Jaime for her to stop. Then Gabe had his arms around her and was tugging her backward, away from Glory.

"You have to fight it, Jaime. Please, fight it," said Gabe.

Fight it? It was then that Dante noticed her eyes. They were wolf. There was no sign of Jaime there. If she had been in her wolf form, he'd have thought she might have gone feral. But this wasn't feral. This wasn't a loss of control. Not on the wolf's part.

What he saw in her wolf's eyes made him shudder. Rage. Pain. Fear. Torment. A primal need to defend. A primal need to protect. He saw a traumatized wolf reacting to danger in the only way it knew how.

"Please, Jaime, please, please fight it," Gabe begged as she strained within his hold. "You can't let your wolf win this."

Dante still didn't have a clue what exactly was going on with Jaime, but he did know one thing; a dominant wolf in that state wasn't going to respond to a plea from a submissive wolf. He stalked over to her and collared her throat with his hand in a very dominant move. It gained her wolf's attention. Jaime instantly froze and released a chilling growl.

He released a growl of his own, one that warned her not to challenge him insisting that she back down. Instead, she thrashed, apparently perceiving him as a threat and wanting only to eliminate him. At least her attention was no longer on Glory. That got him thinking...

"Tao!" He knew the Head Enforcer had followed him inside. "Get *her* out of here!" he ordered, gesturing to a moaning Glory. Her presence and scent would only make Jaime's wolf worse.

As Tao passed by with Glory in tow, Jaime lunged at her with such strength that she managed to break out of both his and Gabe's holds. Christ, she moved fast. Dante moved faster. He grabbed her just as she reached Glory and pulled her back against him. He kept his arm wrapped securely around her, pinning her arms to her sides. At the same time, he collared her throat again with his free

hand. Like before, it transferred her focus to him, and she froze briefly before struggling wildly again.

“Stop,” he growled into her ear. She didn’t. He looked at the others who were all gathered near the door. “All of you out! She’ll feel cornered if there are too many in here!” Gabe lingered, looking anxious and edgy. “Out. I’ll take care of her, I promise,” he added reassuringly.

Once they were alone, Dante returned his attention to the writhing female in his arms. “Jaime, I know you’re fighting her, baby, or you’d be in wolf form by now. I need you to fight harder for me.

Concentrate on me, concentrate on my voice.” Very, very slightly, her struggles eased. “That’s it, Jaime, fight harder for me, come on.” Rocking her from side to side, he whispered things softly into her ear, hoping to calm her wolf’s mood even though he knew the animal wouldn’t understand the words.

Little by little, her struggles eased until, a minute later, she slumped against him. Sighing with relief, he turned her to face him, keeping her in his arms, and slid to the floor. Sitting there with her cradled against his chest, he continued to rock her slightly. “Jaime,” he breathed. He was surprised when her lids fluttered open. Smoky-blue eyes looked back at him.

“Now you know.” Then she passed out. Shit.

The creaking of the restroom door had him looking up. Tao was wearing an expression that was an equal mixture of concerned and wary. “Is she all right?”

“I don’t know.”

“What the hell is going on?” Tao’s voice was soft but demanding.

“I don’t know that either.”

“But you know she’s definitely not a submissive wolf, right? You must have sensed the dominant vibes—they were clogging the air.”

“Yes, I sensed them,” Dante said impatiently, irritated that he was again stuck with unanswered questions. “Look, I need you and the guys to make sure Shaya and Hope get home fine.

Gabe is coming with Jaime and me. I need some answers, and I seriously doubt I'm going to get any of them from her right now."

Tao swallowed hard. "Are you sure it's a good idea to take her to pack territory?"

"You're suggesting I don't?" His voice sounded dangerous even to him.

"Hey, look, I really, really like Jaime. She's a great girl and she's a good addition to the pack, and I don't like the idea of her anywhere alone. But, well, she's dangerous, Dante."

"Maybe to females who challenge her, but not necessarily to anyone else." He knew that Jaime didn't go around picking fights. Glory had to have challenged her.

"You saw her, Dante. Her wolf lost it."

"No, she didn't." He sighed. "I think something's wrong with her wolf. She seems, I don't know...damaged."

"So you're saying you think Jaime lost control of her? That still makes her dangerous. Trey's not going to like that, especially since she's been lying to us about being submissive." He was right, Dante knew. The Beta in him agreed that the right decision for the pack would be for her to leave, but every cell of his body rebelled against it. His wolf, too, was angry at the idea of her leaving.

"Dante—"

"I gave you an order, Tao. Just concentrate on that and leave me to deal with this, all right?" It wasn't actually a question. With a stiff nod, Tao left. Shifting Jaime's weight slightly, Dante managed to stand upright. Then, curling her legs around his waist, he held her close as he exited the restrooms.

Instantly Shaya came forward, and Nick grabbed her arm, attempting to pull her back.

Scowling at him, Shaya shrugged Nick's hand away. "Is she okay?" she asked Dante, looking both confused and concerned, as did Hope. Trick and Marcus appeared to be as wary as Tao. Gabe was looking guilty and awkward.

Dante simply gave Shaya a nod. “You, come with me,” he told Gabe, who then followed behind Dante as he made his way out of the bar and over to the SUV. It made more sense to lay Jaime across the backseat, but Dante found that he wanted her close. Not bothering to question the impulse, he placed her on the passenger seat and draped his jacket over her.

Impatient for answers, Dante only waited until he had reversed out of the parking space before he started to dig for an explanation. “Well,” he drawled, glancing in the rearview mirror at the male wolf, who was fidgeting nervously in the backseat. “It would seem that she isn’t submissive.”

“Nope,” Gabe confirmed.

“But Jaime keeps her wolf subdued?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? It’s clearly driving her wolf crazy and making her—” He broke off as realization dawned. “Her wolf was already this way. That’s *why* Jaime subdues her.” Gabe’s voice was sad as he spoke. “She doesn’t see that she has any other choice.”

“But I remember seeing her shift once when we were kids, and her wolf was fine. What happened to make her like this?”

“That’s Jaime’s story to tell.” Although Gabe’s tone wasn’t disrespectful, it was resolute.

Dante admired his loyalty to his sister.

“How long will she be out?”

Gabe shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen her have to fight her wolf so hard before. It’s usually a few hours before she wakes up. It drains her.”

“Wait a minute, what do you mean you’ve never seen her have to fight her wolf that hard before? Are you saying it’s getting worse?”

“She doesn’t talk about it much. She doesn’t want me to worry. It used to be months at a time before her wolf had the strength to put up a fight like that.”

“When was the last time?”

“A few nights ago. When she has nightmares, it freaks out her wolf.” Dante’s hands clenched around the steering wheel. “Fuck.”

“She wasn’t going to put any of you in danger,” he assured Dante, clearly worried that his sister was in trouble with the pack. “She’d planned to leave as soon as it got too bad. She didn’t say it aloud, but I know her. I wouldn’t be surprised if she leaves tomorrow.” His voice broke with the last words.

“Why?” It came out a growl; both he and his wolf had no intention of letting that happen.

“After that incident, she’ll see herself as too much of a risk to the pack.”

“It looked to me like all she did was respond to a challenge.” Okay, so there was much more to it than that, but that was pretty much at the crux of it.

“Yeah, but you and I both know that won’t mean squat to Trey, given his overprotective state right now. It won’t mean squat to her conscience either.”

“If she leaves, if she’s without the connection of a pack and without territory, it’ll most likely make her wolf worse.”

“I know,” he croaked. “She’s done so much for me, you know. When our parents died, we went to live with our aunt and uncle, and they were great and all, but they already had five kids of their own to care for. A year later came a set of twins. You know what it’s like to live in a full house.

We were only their niece and nephew, so we came last. Jaime took more care of me than they did—

as if she didn’t have enough to deal with. I hate it that I can’t do anything to help her with this.” So did Dante.

Once they were finally on pack territory, Dante retrieved her from the passenger seat and kept her cradled against his chest as he walked up the stairs of the cliff face. Going by the fact that Trey wasn’t blocking the main door wearing the mother of all scowls, it was clear that neither Tao, Trick, nor Marcus had called to warn him. Dante wouldn’t have blamed them if they had; he’d have

understood. He'd have also kicked their asses.

Acting on instinct, he took her straight to his room and settled her down on his bed. No one would dare walk into his room without permission, so he knew she'd be fine in there. Recalling that Gabe had said she'd be out for hours, he left her there and went to Trey's office. He knew it would only be a matter of time before someone told their Alpha something, and Dante wanted it to come from him. He also wanted to make sure that Trey didn't make any rash decisions—something he was prone to do at times when the matter concerned his mate.

Not bothering to knock—he was the only one of the pack other than Taryn who didn't—Dante walked straight inside. His facial expression must have given away some of his anxiety, because Trey was instantly on his feet.

“Is it Taryn?”

“No, it's about Jaime.”

“Jaime?”

Dante sighed heavily and explained Jaime's situation in full detail. The look on Trey's face didn't bode well for her.

“You know she has to go, don't you?”

“Trey, you can't seriously be okay with her being out there on her own. You know what it's like to be banished.”

“Yeah, I do, and I know that none of this is her fault, but my main concern is that Taryn and the baby are safe.”

Dante held up a placating hand. “I know it's important that we keep Taryn protected right now, but does it really mean you have to toss Jaime out to deal with this on her own?”

“Yes, it does.”

Coming from anyone else, this reaction to Jaime's situation would seem cold, but Trey wasn't like most people. He functioned mostly on logic, on probability. He didn't make emotional decisions, because he wasn't an emotional person,

except when it came to his mate, which was exactly why logic was telling him that keeping Jaime here wouldn't be wise.

Dante sighed again. "If you want, I'll leave pack territory with Jaime and stay with her until..."

well, I don't know exactly what will happen if she's without a pack, though it's reasonable to assume things will get much worse for her. I can't leave her to deal with this on her own. What she needs is support and protection right now."

Trey looked at him curiously. "She matters to you, doesn't she?" Mattered to him? Dante wouldn't say that she *mattered* to him. Yeah, okay, she mattered to him. "Even if she didn't, I couldn't just ignore the fact that she needs help. No one should have to deal with something like that alone."

Trey was quiet for a few minutes, studying him intently. Anyone else might have squirmed, but Dante merely held his gaze while standing immobile—an act that told Trey he wasn't going to budge on this.

Finally Trey spoke. "Look, I know it goes against your nature to turn your back on someone who needs protection, and I see that she matters to you...so she can stay...but she needs to be under watch twenty-four/seven. I don't want her alone at any time, understand?"

"I understand." Dante didn't intend to let her out of his sight anyway.

"And if she turns rogue, Dante, she's dead. I've seen what a rogue wolf can do, and I won't have it happen to Taryn."

"Neither will I." But could he really kill Jaime? Even to protect his Alpha female? Dante wasn't sure that he could, rogue or not. In fact, he wasn't sure if he could let anyone else hurt her either, which meant that for the first time, his loyalty was divided. No, that wasn't good.

Whoever invented alarm clocks was an asshole. Jaime groaned and rolled away from the noise. At the same time as it registered that the noise was a cell phone—one she intended to ignore, as it wasn't hers and therefore wasn't her problem—she also realized that she wasn't in her room. A delicious male scent filled her nostrils. Her eyes flickered open to see Dante sitting on a chair beside the ridiculously huge bed, looking right at her. Without moving his gaze from hers,

he took his cell out of his pocket and answered it.

“Hello. Yes, she’s awake,” he said in response to Grace’s question. When she offered to bring a tray of food so that Jaime could have breakfast in bed, Dante’s wolf growled. It sounded like an offer of kindness, but he knew it was also the pack’s way of keeping Jaime apart from them. Stiffly, he said, “Thanks.”

Jaime glanced around the spacious room, noticing how different it was from her own. Not simply because of his very masculine oak furniture, but because it was obsessively neat and everything seemed to have its own place. It looked more like a showroom in a furniture store. By contrast, Jaime seemed to find order in chaos and tended to place something wherever there was space for it to go. She would bet that he would be horrified by some of her habits, like not putting CDs back into their cases and how she kicked her shoes off wherever she was stood at the time.

Dante actually had a shoe rack.

She was going to ask why he’d brought her here instead of taking her to her own room, but the answer quickly came to her. “You don’t trust me to be around the pack.”

“Actually, I brought you in here because I don’t trust you not to run.” That wasn’t entirely true

—he’d wanted her with him.

“And you’re hoping for some answers.”

“Not yet. First you need to eat.” She looked like the living dead, but he didn’t say that aloud, figuring it wouldn’t wash down well. They sat, studying each other in silence, until Grace knocked on the door. Without a word, Dante took the tray and gave her a simple nod of thanks. Going by the guilt that was plastered across her face, he guessed that she was feeling bad about the plan to keep Jaime slightly segregated, but that guilt didn’t placate Dante or his wolf.

The silence continued as they ate. As usual, Jaime had only two slices of toast and a mug of coffee, unlike Dante, who demolished a plate filled with eggs, bacon, sausage, potatoes, biscuits with gravy, and then a pile of pancakes with syrup. Well, he was a growing boy. Only then did he lean back in his seat.

“Talk.”

Considering that he already knew most of her secret, there didn't seem any harm in fully explaining it, particularly since she'd be banished either way. Jaime inhaled deeply. "My parents'

attack...I saw it. Gabe and I were supposed to be staying with our aunt and uncle for the night, but I'd forgotten to take Gabe's blanket—he wouldn't sleep without it. I went back to get it, and I heard voices before I even entered the cabin. I thought it was my parents arguing. They were happy together, but they were also very strong personalities, and it meant they argued a lot.

"But when I got inside, I smelled male wolves. I recognized one of the scents, knew it was my mom's brother. I couldn't hear every word, but I understood that the guys with him were people he owed money. They had brought him there to get the money. He was a compulsive gambler, always had been, and my mom had often helped him even against her better judgment. I should have gone to get help, I know, but it was like I was frozen stiff. And, well, I don't seem to have a flight response anyway."

Dante wondered why he hadn't heard about this, but then he supposed that since he hadn't been in contact with anyone from the Bjorn Pack since a few months ago, maybe it wasn't all that surprising.

"Suddenly all hell broke loose in the kitchen. Everyone had shifted, and they were fighting. I don't know if I made a noise or one of them scented me, but one of the males suddenly turned and leaped at me. I instantly shifted, gave my wolf the freedom she wanted to protect me. Instinctively, my wolf fought, but I'm pretty sure that if someone hadn't overheard the noises and come to help, I wouldn't be having this conversation right now.

"I don't remember an awful lot of what happened after that, because for the next few weeks my wolf wouldn't calm down and let me resurface. She was frightened and confused and angry. She didn't like it when others were close, saw everyone as a threat. She thought she still needed to protect me. It was three whole weeks before she let anyone near and eased back." Dante could picture it so clearly in his mind. He remembered what her wolf looked like: jet black with a tuft of gray on the end of her tail, almost as if it had been dipped in paint. He envisioned her beautiful wolf pacing back and forth in a confined space, missing the touch of pack members but at the same time fearing it. Fearing every little

noise, every unexpected movement, every person or wolf who came within close proximity of her.

“So I ran solo whenever I shifted, thinking that she’d heal eventually, that she’d find peace and go back to her old self. But she never did. Then one day when I shifted, I mistakenly came across another shifter. My wolf almost killed him, almost took over completely. I didn’t feel like I had any other choice but to contain her. And I was so scared that if I shifted again, I’d never come back.” Dante couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to fear your own wolf, to be unable to coexist peacefully with it. A shifter and his or her wolf should act as a unit, as one...not as two completely separate beings who warred with each other. He had no idea how Jaime was sane. He so admired and respected her for that. “How long has it been since you last shifted?” The gentleness in his voice made her eyes fill up. “Four years,” she whispered shakily.

“Oh, baby, come here.” Dante gathered her and placed her on his lap. He held her while she cried silently, hating that he couldn’t help. His wolf, too, hated the feeling of helplessness.

“Don’t worry,” she said as she wiped her tears with the back of her hand a minute later. “I’ll get my stuff together and I’ll be gone within the hour.” She tried to stand, but he tightened his hold.

“Like hell you will.”

“You want me to leave right this second?”

“Do you really think I’d let you go?”

Totally baffled, she shook her head slightly. “You heard what I just told you, right? You saw what happened last night?”

“What I saw was someone fighting—and fighting *hard*— to stop her wolf from surfacing. Even though your wolf was in that state, you managed to retain some control over her, or you’d have fully shifted.”

“Some’ being the key word.”

“I’m not letting you go.”

“I’m not yours to keep. Look, Dante, I understand that this is part of who you are, but you can’t protect me from this. Sooner or later—though I’m pretty sure it’ll be sooner—my wolf will be strong enough to take over. If she turns rogue, there’s only one choice. Trey will know that, and he’ll agree that I need to get my ass out of here.” A hint of smugness glinted in his eyes. “What?”

“I’ve already spoken to Trey. I explained your situation. He’s not thrilled about it, but he’s agreed to let you stay.”

“Then he’s more unstable than I thought. I have to leave here. Even if Trey’s okay with it, the others won’t be.”

“And what about your brother, huh? You’re going to leave him just like that?” The very idea of it made her chest ache, but she didn’t see any other avenue. “Gabe will understand. He knew this would happen at some point. He’s settled here, just like I wanted, like I hoped. He’ll be fine.”

“Physically, he will be,” allowed Dante, rubbing her back in a circular motion. “But emotionally? I’d say he’s going to be a wreck. You’re both very close, and you’re all he has left.”

“He’ll be fine.”

“So you’re just going to give up?”

Her eyes flared. “Excuse me?”

Good, she was angry. Anger was a good source of fuel, and she sure needed that right now.

“You’re giving up. Never had you down as a quitter, Jaime.” She tried to wrestle out of his hold, but he didn’t even seem to notice. “*Giving up?* If I was a quitter, I’d have bowed down to my wolf years ago. How dare you judge me! You have no idea what it’s like to live like this.”

“I can understand if you’re tired of fighting, if you’re tempted to stop fighting what you think is inevitable—”

“*Think* is inevitable? *It is* inevitable.”

He pursed his lips. “Maybe not.”

“What does that mean?”

“What I said. I want you to come with me somewhere.” Placing her on her feet, he gestured to a plastic bag beside his bed. “I had Shaya get some clothes together for you. Go in the bathroom and get dressed. Or you can dress right here if you prefer. I’m totally fine with that.” His devilish, cocky grin did something interesting to her insides. She snatched the bag from the floor and went into the bathroom. Ten minutes later, she came out feeling refreshed and dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans—both of which were skintight. How typical of Shaya, who was not only very fashion conscious but extremely fond of clothes that highlighted every curve.

As usual, Dante’s cock throbbed at the sight of her. He shackled her wrist with his hand.

“Come with me.”

Sighing, she allowed him to lead her through the network of tunnels, down the stairs of the cliff face, and over to the river where the patio table and chairs were set up. “What are we doing out here?” she asked the second he released her.

Dante slowly began to circle her. “Your biggest problem now is that your wolf is getting stronger, right?”

“Right,” she confirmed, confused as to where he was going with this.

“Then it stands to reason that in order to keep fighting her, *you* need to get stronger. You need to perfect your self-control. I don’t doubt that it’s good, but it could be better. And I can help you with that.”

“How?”

Having done two complete circles around her, he halted in front of her. “I’m going to train you.

I’m going to give you the same training I gave the enforcers. It’s hard as all hell, Jaime. There’ll be times when you’ll want nothing more than to use the skills I teach you to slit my throat. But it will help you, just like it helps me.”

That comment had her frowning. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, baby.”

The endearment and the intensity in his eyes made a tingle run down her spine. “Why is control so important to you? I know it’s nothing to do with your wolf. He’s not damaged like mine or a little too close to the surface like Trey’s.”

“No, he’s not,” allowed Dante. “It has nothing to do with my wolf.”

“Then why?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you if you do well with training. Are you up to it, Jaime?” It was more of a dare than a question. “Like I said, it won’t be easy. But it will make you stronger. It all depends on whether you want to keep on fighting, or whether you’re a quitter.”



CHAPTER SIX

“A short warm up?” said Jaime, gasping, as she rose from the forest floor. “More like an effective way to break my will to live. Shifter strength and speed or not, *that* was some hard shit.” Dante remembered thinking that very same thing on his first day of training. First, he’d had Jaime do some minor stretching, then eighty push-ups within a minute, followed by eighty sit-ups within a minute. He’d made her repeat each exercise five more times. “By the end of your training, you should be able to do eighty of both within the space of a minute.”

“Well, hell.”

“You can always stop here if you think this training will be too much,” taunted Dante. He knew that she’d never show weakness. “If you don’t think you can—” Jaime’s expression was serious as she replied, “Get on with it, Popeye.”

“Then, let’s get running.”

“Running?”

“We need to do a full lap of pack territory, but we’re aiming for you to be

capable of doing three within the space of twenty minutes. It's what I taught all the enforcers, and not just to build their fitness level. Whenever they're on duty, they're required to do a lap of our territory, checking for any breaches or problems. But being fit enough to do one lap isn't good enough. What if there's a problem and it requires them all to get on the job as a team? They can't afford to sit down and rest while they catch their breath, which is why they trained their bodies to cope with more. And now you're going to do the same, because we need to build up your strength."

Jaime gave him a curt nod. "Yes, sir."

His smile was devilish. "You really shouldn't say that, Jaime. You don't want me getting ideas."

She rolled her eyes. "So, how about that run?"

As they did their lap, Dante told Jaime the type of things enforcers needed to check for when doing a patrol check: unusual odors, unfamiliar scents or footprints or markings, damage to the forest, signs of forced entry on the perimeter fence, or any fallen tree limbs that could cause damage to the perimeter fence.

By the time they were back at the river, she was panting like crazy and bent over as she nursed a cramp in her side. But she was on her feet, which was good. He recalled that Dominic had passed out at this point on his first day. "I know I should probably keep your first session simple, take it easy on you and just concentrate on improving your fitness level," began Dante as he paced in front of Jaime. "But I won't, just as I didn't with the others. I needed them to understand that this was all about so much more than that. They need to be able to also work as a team that is so in sync with each other that they're more like a well-oiled machine."

"Well, my joints sure feel like they need oiling."

"Stop whining. Your accelerated healing rate will have you feeling better within the hour."

"In that case, could you give me an hour?"

"Will your wolf give you a break if you ask? No. And nor will I. So let's start.

One thing that every enforcer has to be an expert at is stealth—and it's something that is very good at helping with self-control, so I'll be teaching it to you. At a later point, I'll be testing you on this, possibly by bringing some of the guys to help."

"Why?"

"Because if you know I'm going to do that, you'll be sure to take this seriously. I know you well enough to know that you won't show weakness in front of anyone, especially your own pack." He was right, the asshole.

"You'll have to be good to fool them, because believe me when I say that the enforcers are experts at this. They have to be. Let's say that one of them does a lap of pack territory and finds evidence of intruders. They can't just run over there and take on the problem alone. They need to alert the team and, if possible, wait. If it's not possible, if their intervention is needed right then, they need to act. Shifter hearing can pick up a lot of things. They need to be able to move undetected, even by other shifters. In order to fool them, so will you."

"Move undetected," echoed Jaime, nodding. "Panting won't help me with that, huh." She straightened and made an effort to calm her breathing.

"That's why we'll be improving your fitness level and helping you to control your breathing better. No matter what, you never hold your breath." Dante put his hand on his abdomen and gestured for Jaime to mirror the act. "First, learn to breathe from here rather than from your chest. It means you can take more air into your lungs. So, what you want to do is take a slow, deliberate breath through your nose until your hand moves as you do." He gave a satisfied nod when Jaime followed the instruction. "It's always quieter to breathe through your nose. If you need to do it through your mouth or need to breathe heavily, open it wide and take deep, slow breaths." Ten seconds later, Jaime's breathing was under control and the panting had stopped.

"Good, very good. An important aspect of stealth is blending. You've probably noticed that when they're on patrol, the guys tend to wear clothes that are dark but never black. Black looks unnatural and outlines your silhouette, which makes you easier to see." Jaime's expression indicated that she hadn't considered that. "You want to wear dark greens, dark browns, dark grays, or dark blues, but never black. You want to cover as much skin as possible and for your

clothing to be tight—

nothing that rustles as you move. In the future, wear something like that for training.”

“Dark clothes that don’t hinder movement. Got it.”

“You need to be constantly aware of your surroundings. Always utilize your senses. You not only want to be careful of how much noise you make, you want to be sure you’re alert to any noises around you so that no one can sneak up on you. Also, notice the direction of the wind—you don’t want others to be able to pick up your scent.”

“So I don’t want to be heard, seen, or scented.”

“Exactly. Always be patient. Being stealthy doesn’t mean moving slowly, but in some instances it’s imperative that you do. If you’re *im* patient, your movements will be jerky and uncoordinated. That’s when you risk your presence being detected. Patience helps you remain silent.

Remaining silent helps you not get caught. And so we begin your first exercise in stealth. You’re going to stand absolutely still and keep your breathing quiet for an entire half hour, as if you’re merely a foot away from one of the enforcers.”

Jaime wasn’t impressed with the exercise. “You want me to just stand still and be quiet for thirty minutes?”

It wouldn’t be as easy as it sounded, but Dante wanted her to figure that out for herself. “It means no fidgeting, no shifting your weight from foot to foot, no whistling, no sighing—nothing. Each time you move or make a noise, we begin again.” With that, Dante sat on one of the patio chairs behind her and watched. Three minutes into the exercise, she cleared her throat. “You made a sound, now you’re caught.”

“Fuck.”

“Again.” Eight minutes went by and she began absentmindedly drumming her fingers on her thigh. “Nice tune.”

“Goddammit.” She released an exasperated sigh. “I didn’t even realize I was

doing it.”

“I know you didn’t, and that’s bad. You need to be fully alert. You need to be fully aware of every sound you make. If *you* can hear you, you can damn well bet the enforcers can, too. Now, we start again. Ready?”

Jaime released the tension from her shoulders and nodded. For a shocking eighteen minutes, she managed to remain still, but then she involuntarily bent her knees a little to relieve the stiffness in her legs. Instantly she realized what she had done and cursed. “It’s a lot harder than it sounds.”

“I know.” Dante rose from his seat and went to her. “You did well. Don’t worry, we’ll do a little at each session. It’s actually something you can practice anytime. Just see how long you can go relatively unnoticed in a room, or how long you can cope with staying out of the conversation at the table. Whatever. It is important.”

“Okay, let’s practice some more, then.”

“No, we’ll try more of that at the next session. Right now, I’m going to introduce you to the art of moving stealthily. You’ve seen the way the guys and I walk: fluidly, balanced, softly, evenly—”

“And in your case, cockily.” She’d never admit that his cocky strut was sexy as hell.

He gave her a mockingly castigating look. “You have to involve your whole body, but you also need to get the footwork right.” Physically demonstrating the move, Dante told her, “Place your heel down and then roll your foot along the outer side to the ground.” Jaime replicated the move. “Like this?”

“Perfect. Walking this way makes it easier to instantly halt if you need to.”

“I would’ve thought that the best way is to walk on the balls of your feet.”

“That does help you move quickly and quietly, but you need great balance and steadiness for that. Once we’re further into your training, we’ll try it. For now, we’ll stick to this.”

“Do I have to learn that weird sneaking crouch-crawl thingy?” asked Jaime,

scrunching her face up.

“Yes, because that helps you keep a low silhouette. Plus, it’s better if you’re always on your feet. That’s something we’ll work on another time. What we’re going to concentrate on now is simply strolling through the woods as quietly as we can.” Dante gestured for Jaime to follow him out of the small clearing and through the cluster of trees. “Avoid dead leaves or branches, and try to walk on anything solid like tree roots, rocks, bare dirt, or even patches of moss.” Two minutes into the exercise, Jaime—who hadn’t been doing too well and had gotten so agitated that she was huffing and growling at herself—asked, “What if the ground is littered with twigs, what do I do then?”

“You listen to the sounds of the forest and try to blend in. What can you hear?” Jaime released a long-suffering sigh and answered in an impatient voice. “Birds, bees, leaves rustling, animals scurrying around, the river...”

“Good. You need to blend in with those sounds. This is where the soft and even walk ends.

Sure, you still tread softly, but you don’t want your footsteps to be regular. Maybe move a few steps and then halt just like a small animal would do. Wait for the moment when the breeze picks up to move again, and then halt.”

“Huh. That means an occasional rest, too.” Jaime’s smile was impish. “I like that idea.” Dante just shook his head. “If you still manage to make a noise, freeze exactly where you are in whatever position you’re in. Remain in it for as long as you can, even if you think the person or people who’re tracking you have dismissed the sound. You can bet your ass they won’t have completely dismissed it, just as you wouldn’t if the situation was reversed.”

“What if they haven’t dismissed it at all and instead come to take a closer look?”

“Avoid combat if you can.”

That had her halting in her tracks. “Combat? You want me to fight the guys?”

“Eventually, yes. I’ve seen you move—you put me on my ass. There’s plenty more to learn, though. But as I said, you should avoid combat if you can. Stealth isn’t just creeping around without being seen, it’s about disappearing as if you were never there. I tell the enforcers the same thing. It might be honorable to

stand and fight, but it can be dangerous if they're alone. It can also endanger the team if they have some kind of plan cooked up and one of them just messed with it."

"So how do I do a Houdini?"

"It won't be easy with the guys, because they're shifters and they can follow your scent, so it's all about speed. Speed, and moving as quietly as possible so that they can't also rely on their hearing to find you. Tracking you just by using your scent alone can slow them down and place more distance between you and them."

Jaime threw her hands up in the air. "I can't even walk quietly. How am I supposed to run quietly?"

"That's where a little thing called practice comes in, baby, and you'll get plenty of that throughout your training. Don't lift your feet too high when you run and make sure you flex your ankle as if you're pushing the ground backward, like you would on a treadmill."

"What do your enforcers do if it's not a shifter who's tracking them, just humans? Does that mean they can just hide?"

"Yes, because I've ensured they're good enough that they're practically impossible to track.

And so will you be when you need to find cover and they're hunting you down. You don't need to necessarily find cover as such, but at least camouflage your shadow by standing next to a tree or maybe kneeling next to something of that height, like a large boulder or bush. All this is something you can practice in your own time. Maybe you could try sneaking up on Gabe." A mischievous smile split Jaime's lips. "I'm going to enjoy that. So what next?"

"Next," he said with a feral grin, "we improve on your combat techniques." The feral grin should have warned her that the tricky jerk meant to knock her on her ass time and time again. Clearly, he hadn't yet forgiven her for the parking-lot incident. Jaime didn't give him the satisfaction of yielding. No, she bore the pain and kept on moving. In spite of the grueling method of teaching, she suspected that she'd actually learned a lot more than she would have if it was just a standard lesson. Perversely, she was even enjoying it...until he suddenly

stiffened and twirled.

“What do you want, you nosy bastards?”

His gaze was locked on the trees to their right, but Jaime had no idea what he was looking at.

Then, looking highly disgruntled, the enforcers stepped out of the trees.

Dante turned to Jaime. “See how they blended their silhouettes with their surroundings? That’s what I was talking about.”

“She’s still here?” asked Tao sharply. He was looking warily at Jaime.

Dante’s smile disappeared. “Watch it.”

Jaime’s wolf growled in her head at Tao’s unfriendly tone, backing up Dante.

“Come on, Dante, be fair—she nearly killed Glory.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“She could be dangerous to the pack. No, she *is* dangerous to the pack. And when Trey finds out—”

“He knows.” Dante’s tone was soft, low, pissed.

“You told him?”

“Of course I did. He agreed that she can stay, providing I keep watch over her.”

“You left out that part when we talked earlier,” said Jaime. The idea of being monitored constantly was a hurtful one, but she understood. She wasn’t one of those people who let pride get in the way of things.

“If you must know, Jaime didn’t want to stay. I’ve convinced her to, and she’s agreed to let me subject her to the same training that I did to all of you. We hope to improve on her self-control.”

“Will that be before or after she’s attacked one of us?”

Jaime crossed her arms over her chest. “So you all want me to leave?” Trick and Marcus looked at anything but her, while Ryan gave her an apologetic look that said it was nothing personal.

“Jaime, honey, ignore Tao,” Dominic told her gently. “He’s just freaked out.” Tao rounded on him. “And so would you be if you’d been there last night.” He turned back to her. “In all honesty, yes, I think you should go.” He stiffened when Dante growled. “I don’t think that training her will make much of a difference. Mostly because there’s no way she’ll finish it.” Jaime arched a brow. “There’s no way I’ll finish it?”

“If anyone knows who has the potential to pass that kind of training, it’s me. *I’m* Head Enforcer.”

She snorted. “Yippee for you.”

“Dante doesn’t go easy. It’s tough.”

“And I can’t do it because, what? Because I’m a female? I’ll have you know that there are plenty of things women can do that men can’t.”

Tao snickered. “Like what?”

“Well, bend over in prison, for one. Multitask, ask for directions, belly flop with dignity, bleed for five days every month yet not die—”

“Have multiple orgasms,” offered Dominic. When Tao turned and scowled at him, he shrugged innocently. “What?”

“All right, all right,” said Tao, his hands raised in a placating gesture. He turned to Jaime.

“Look, if you think you can handle it, by all means try it. I’m looking forward to you proving me right.

But don’t expect me to be okay with you staying here. You’re a nice girl and everything, Jaime, but you’re also a danger to the pack, and I can’t endorse you being here.” With that, he and the other enforcers walked away. Her wolf relaxed slightly, though Jaime doubted that she would have done so if Dante hadn’t been so close and his scent hadn’t been surrounding her.

“None of the pack trust me anymore, do they?” She already knew the answer to that.

Dante placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “It’s not that. They’re just all in an overcautious mind-set right now because Taryn’s pregnant and Glory’s being a pain in our ass. Plus, most of them were there when Trey’s mom turned rogue. They’ve seen what a rogue wolf can do, and it hurt them all when Louisa had to be killed. They don’t want to have to go through all that again.”

“They shouldn’t have to. Why do you insist on me staying? You said Trey wants me monitored constantly. You’re Beta, you have enough to do without watching over me.” He cupped her chin. “Yes, I’m Beta. This is what Betas do.”

“You look after your wolves’ well-being, I know. But what about *their* well-being? I’m a danger to them.”

“Only if you stop fighting.”

“Answer me honestly. Do you really think putting me through this kind of training will make a difference?” She refused to even begin hoping.

“I know it will,” he replied with total conviction. Why was he so sure? There was no other acceptable alternative to him than that Jaime was safe and well.

Although Jaime wasn’t totally convinced, she wasn’t put off by the idea of training. She’d known without Tao warning her that it wouldn’t at all be easy. But neither was fighting her wolf.

Dante was right; she could admit defeat and, in effect, quit, or she could strengthen herself and continue to fight. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am.” He hung an arm over her shoulders. “Come on, let’s go move your stuff to my room.” She stopped dead. “What?”

He frowned and shrugged. “I guess I could move into your room instead. But my bed’s bigger.”

“Whatever gave you the impression that we would be getting into *any* bed together?” Her body and her wolf were fine with this potential arrangement, unsurprisingly.

“Gabe told me about the nightmares. He said they freak out your wolf and then she tries to surface. Don’t worry, I won’t take advantage of you being next to me in bed.” Though he’d be so very, very tempted, *and* rock hard the entire time. The sound of his cell phone ringing disturbed him from teasing her further. “Hello.” In response to Trey’s request, he answered, “Give me five minutes.” After he ended the call, he told her, “Trey wants me to take a look at some paperwork. Choose where we’re staying—my room or yours.”

“Well, since your bed’s bigger, I guess your room.”

He smiled. “Good. I’ll walk you to your room. I want you to get your things together. When I’m back from the office, we’ll move your stuff to mine. Okay?” Reluctantly, she nodded. Admittedly, there was a part of her that was both curious and excited about sharing a bed with Dante. However, another part of her was absolutely terrified, because she wasn’t good at ignoring temptation. As said temptation didn’t return her interest, it would be pretty damn messy if she jumped on the poor unsuspecting victim.

It didn’t take her long to pack some of her stuff together to take to Dante’s room. She figured that she didn’t need to pack and move everything. It would be easy enough to go back to the room at some point if there was anything she needed that wasn’t basic stuff.

She had expected Dante to be a little put out at the sight of her things lying around his room.

Instead, he seemed kind of...self-satisfied. Her wolf, though still Dante’s number-one fan, wasn’t too pleased about the move. She liked being in a space that smelled heavily of Dante, but she didn’t like losing her own personal, private space. As a matter of fact, neither did Jaime. There was also the none-too-small matter that spending a lot of time with Dante would mean that she was in a perpetual state of arousal—something which he would be well aware of, unless she could find some nose plugs somewhere. In fact, two pairs of nose plugs would be nice. That way, his amazing scent wouldn’t be constantly teasing her and her wolf.

God, this all had the making of a disaster. Especially when she knew just how gifted those hands were, and especially now that her state of arousal had hit critical levels.

Huh...it occurred to her then that it was Saturday. And there was one thing she had planned for tonight. Operation Calm Libido. Oh yeah, that was what she needed. With some luck, she might actually bag herself a guy for the night, and that would help her function like a normal person around Dante—who wouldn't be happy about her leaving pack territory.

Yeah, well, he would simply have to be unhappy, because there was no way she would let any person control her. Jaime had her own mind, and she knew how to use it. She was aware that she'd be in some serious trouble with Trey for ditching her guard, but Jaime's motto was that it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission. There was a chance that Trey would count it as a strike against her and banish her, but she knew that was going to happen sooner or later anyway.

She'd seen the looks the enforcers gave her earlier; she'd seen the wariness and distrust in their eyes. That same wariness and distrust had been in the eyes of the rest of the pack at lunchtime and at the evening meal. Only Dante, Shaya, Dominic, Gabe, and Hope had treated her just the same as before. Trey and Taryn had been absent both times, and Jaime strongly suspected that Trey was purposely keeping his mate separate from her. She understood that, she understood all their reactions, but it still hurt. It was truly only a matter of time before Trey changed his mind and slung her out. Why not just get it over with?

So while Dante and the enforcers were having a meeting in his office with Nick Axton—that cruel son of a bitch best hope he didn't see her anytime soon—she quickly changed into her black halter-neck dress with the neckline that dipped all the way down to the front clip of her bra, showing a little cleavage. Little black dresses were always winners, she thought.

Then, remembering the stealth tips Dante had taught her earlier, she scurried out of the caves and down to the parking lot. She hopped inside her Chevy and cursed as she saw that the keys were gone from their usual place behind the visor. *Dante*. He really was set on her not driving her baby, wasn't he? Asshole. She had a spare set of keys, but they were in her room.

Not willing to be discouraged by anything, she instead took the Toyota Highlander and zoomed out of pack territory, waving pleasantly at Cam, who was gaping at her from the security shack. Oh yeah, he'd be on the phone to Dante within seconds. No doubt she'd be subjected to a huge lecture from him

when she got back. But that was only if Trey didn't disconnect her from the pack before then

—something which was a strong possibility.

“No Trey today?” asked Nick from the chair across from Dante. They were the only two sitting. Tao, Marcus, and Ryan stood behind Dante while Nick's Beta, his bodyguard, and one of his enforcers stood behind him. Whereas Nick's demeanor was usually relaxed and friendly, it was much more formal today. Dante had a pretty good idea why Nick had called for a meeting.

“He's keeping Taryn occupied so that she doesn't know there's a meeting of any kind,” explained Dante. “He doesn't want her under any form of stress, though he can't seem to work out that his overprotectiveness is what's stressing her out.”

“I spoke to Glory about what happened. According to her, she did nothing more than try to use the restroom. She said that Jaime rounded on her, warned her away from you, and said she was going to teach her a lesson for spreading rumors about you.”

Dante had to give the female credit for her creativity. She even had her Alpha believing her.

No, Dante thought as he studied Nick more closely. Nick didn't believe her. But he wasn't happy about what had happened. “And what do you think?”

“I think...that you'll lie for Jaime no matter what she did.” Dante didn't deny it. He had strong morals and a fierce sense of right and wrong, but he'd sacrifice both to protect his wolves. He especially would for Jaime, but he didn't want to think on why. “Doesn't mean I'm lying when I say she merely responded to another female provoking her.”

“*Responded* is putting it lightly, don't you think? I'm surprised Trey hasn't banished her.”

“If you're going to question our Alpha's decision,” rumbled Dante, his tone low, “you really don't want to do it in front of me.”

Nick gave a curt nod. “Okay, I overstepped my boundaries. But Jaime caused a

lot of damage to Glory. It took four sessions to heal her, though it's fair to say our healer operates in a different way than Taryn and so it takes longer. I might not have a particular fondness for Glory, but she's still part of my pack. She's still under my protection."

"And Jaime's under mine. She told me the things Glory said to her. Not only did she lay claim to me *again*, but she repeatedly insulted Jaime and threatened her. I won't punish Jaime for responding to a threat, or for feeling a need to defend her own Beta. It's what we do here—we take care of each other, look out for each other. I told you at the diner that if Glory continued to make a claim to me then she'd be dealt with. Well, she's been dealt with."

"And the way she was dealt with doesn't bother you? The way Jaime lost all control doesn't bother you?"

Dante's patience was wearing thin now. "She didn't lose *all* control or she'd have shifted—

which is something you know. But what I fail to understand is why you're so interested in Jaime."

"I'm just surprised she hasn't been banished. Hey, don't get me wrong, I can understand if you're all hesitant to ask her to leave, but you have the other members of your pack to think about.

What if Jaime was to feel provoked by one of them? Would it be fine to you if she was to attack, say, Shaya in the same way that she attacked Glory?"

"Well, neither Shaya nor the other females are any of your business, so..."
Marcus let the sentence trail, shrugging.

Dante couldn't help but notice the way Nick fisted his hands so hard that his knuckles turned white. "Jaime is none of your business either. I don't have to justify anything to you, and I won't. If Glory didn't want to get her ass kicked, she shouldn't have dished out her attitude to Jaime. It's as simple as that."

Ryan grunted his agreement while Marcus said, "Yep" and Tao said, "Exactly."

"No, there's nothing simple about it," objected Nick. "Maybe some of your pack could stay with mine for a while, just until you're sure Jaime's under better

control. The mated pairs and the females, for example.”

“Why would you care about what happens to the people in our pack?” asked Marcus. It sounded like a simple inquiry, but Dante had known Marcus long enough to know when he was toying with someone.

“We have an alliance. Packs who have alliances help each other out.” Nick shrugged as if to emphasize the simplicity of his offer.

Marcus tilted his head. “Well, Cam and Lydia might be happy to leave. Grace won’t, which means Rhett won’t. Greta wouldn’t move from this place unless Trey did—which won’t happen.

Hope won’t leave because she’s become quite attached to Gabe, who I’m pretty sure will fully intend on remaining with his sister.”

“What about Shaya?”

“Shaya won’t leave Jaime or Taryn. Or Dominic, for that matter. They’ve become quite close.”

Nick’s face hardened. “I see.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re off somewhere together now, actually. If anyone was to try to harm her, Dominic would protect her with everything he has. She’s in very good hands.” Dante’s eyes danced from Marcus to Nick. Although the Alpha hadn’t picked up on the fact that Marcus was—for some reason—playing with him, he still looked like he was about to explode.

“Anything else?”

Nick shook his head. “If you change your mind about any of your pack staying with me for a while, let me know.” Sharply, he rose from his chair.

“I appreciate the offer and I know that Trey will too, but it won’t be an offer we’ll take you up on, especially when the cause of all the trouble is in the very place you’re proposing I send some of the pack.”

“Yeah, Shaya would kill her,” said Marcus with a smile. When Nick’s gaze shot to him, he nodded. “She may be a submissive wolf, but she knows how to take

care of herself better than most people. I suppose we can thank Taryn for that. The pair of them used to train together, and Taryn knows her stuff when it comes to combat.”

Hearing his cell phone ring, Dante fished it out of his pocket. Cam. “Hello. *What?* ” *Motherfucker.*



CHAPTER SEVEN

Leaving the Toyota outside Ivy’s house, Jaime, Riley, and Ivy got a cab to Enigma. The place was bigger than most. In fact, it looked more like a large warehouse than a club. The music seemed to vibrate through the ground. The second she entered, an array of odors assailed her: alcohol, lust, sweat, wolf, falcon, lion, jaguar, pure male musk.

Jaime inhaled deeply. The delicious odors, the heat, and the contradictory mix of excitement and satiation all came together and engulfed her, feeding her body’s needy state. A tingle spread through her already sensitive system, settling between her thighs. “I feel like a succubus in heat.”

“I’m not feeling much better,” said Riley. “I could draw blood with my nipples they’re so damn hard.” As she went to strut off in her tiny red skirt and her barely there white vest, Ivy tugged her backward.

“Oh no, Nala,” chided Ivy.

“I told you to stop calling me that!”

“No going off on your own. Let’s hit the bar first. Then we dance.”

“Sure,” said Jaime, “if we can get through the mass of gyrating bodies.” It was a further two minutes before they found a spot at the bar and were served. “One, two, three, down it!” Simultaneously Jaime, Ivy, and Riley gulped down their tequila shots before slamming the glasses down on the bar. Jaime gave a contented sigh. “That confirms it: happiness is a drink called tequila.”

“That was our fourth, right?” asked Ivy.

“Fifth,” corrected Riley. “Did you notice those guys over there?”

“If you’re referring to the ones about five feet away, staring right at us like we’re big juicy steaks, then yeah.” Going by the fact that their scents were each a combination of pine, wet earth, musk, and wolf, it was easy to guess that they were wolf shifters.

“Cute, aren’t they?” purred Ivy.

“They’re definitely on the prowl,” said Riley.

They most certainly were. Lustful and heated vibes were wafting from them. Jaime could admit to herself that those vibes were having the desired effect. “I quite like the one in the middle.

What about you guys?”

Ivy gave her a concerned look. “You’re really ready to move on from that giant?”

“Yup. I suppose I could continue to embarrass myself, but I’d rather not. Plus, now that he knows how messed up I am, he’s not going to care either way.” During the drive there, she had told them all about what happened at the Rouge Bar. It had taken fifteen minutes to talk Ivy down from placing a curse on Glory.

“Maybe he’s gay,” offered Riley. “I’m not just saying this because I’m your friend and I love you, but you’re gorgeous and fun, so if he’s not gay then there has to be something wrong with him if he doesn’t want you. I mean, look around you, there’re plenty of guys giving you looks. Just pick one of them and get Dante out of your system.”

“And you’re definitely over Aidan?” Ivy asked Riley.

“Oh yeah. The two-timing bastard actually had the nerve to accuse me of sleeping around on him. He even accused me of having some kind of affair with you.” A snort popped out of Ivy. “You don’t meet my standards.”

“Bitch,” said Riley affectionately, then pushed her glass away. “Come on, girls, get up. Time to hit the dance floor.”

Jaime couldn't have agreed more. She hadn't been there long before a guy—falcon shifter, her nose scented—pressed up against her. She twisted in his arms and locked hers around his neck as they danced. He truly was a gorgeous-looking guy. Her body's response was "oh yes." Her wolf's response was "meh." Her mind...It felt all wrong to her mind. There was only one guy she really wanted.

But you can't have him, so stop the pining.

Ordinarily she truly disliked being told what to do, but the voice had a valid point. So she stopped thinking about *him* and continued to dance with the gorgeous falcon shifter in front of her. His mouth was just coming down to hers when she heard a rumble behind her that made both her and the falcon freeze. A low, lengthy, pissed-fucking-off rumble. At the same time, a familiar delicious scent washed over her, exciting her wolf. What in God's name was *he* doing here?

Slowly she pivoted, only to find herself face-to-face with a homicidal-looking Dante: his eyes flashing wolf, his muscles bunched up, his mouth set into a hard line. The falcon—maybe he was dumb or perhaps it was a suicidal urge he was having—placed his hands on her hips in a "she's taken" gesture. Dante reached out, snatched her wrist, and tugged so hard that her body slammed into his. She thought about struggling but was more worried about the falcon's fate. He made a move toward Dante.

"I really wouldn't," warned Dante, though it wouldn't be a hardship to punch the prick.

Jaime watched as the falcon halted. As usual, that low tone of Dante's had the effect of a yell.

Her wolf approved and was instantly aroused by it, just like Jaime's traitorous body.

Dante held the falcon's gaze, refusing to let him look away. "Let me tell you what you're going to do now. You're going to turn around and walk away. Simple. If you don't, I *will* gut you open right here, right now," he said very matter-of-factly. "And then I'll feed your intestines to you. From what I hear, they don't taste great. Want to find out if that's true?" The falcon glanced at her, and she gave him a "just go" look. A mixture of indignant and agitated, he spun

on his heel and walked away. Smart. Jaime tensed as Dante's eyes suddenly locked on her like a predator watching skittish prey. "What're you doing here?"

"I came for you."

"How did you even know where I was?"

"It was easy enough to guess. You've gone here lots of times with your coworkers on Saturday nights. Now let's go."

She pulled her arm free. "I am not some teenager who sneaked out, and I don't have to ask for your permission to leave pack territory."

"Your wolf could have got freaked out over something and—"

"My wolf is what you might call fried. It'll be a day or two before she even has half the strength to overpower me."

"I don't care. We're going." He reached out to grab her, but she dodged him.

"Don't pull away from me, Jaime. You can't imagine how much it irritates my wolf when you do that."

"Haven't you figured out yet that you can't control me?"

Yes, he'd figured it out a long time ago. Strangely, he liked it just as much as he hated it. Right this second, though, he wasn't in the mood to be challenged by her. "You're pushing me, Jaime, and you're pushing me hard. Don't do it, don't make me more pissed than I already am." She laughed a humorless laugh.

"You're pissed? Good, because I'm really, really pissed right now. You came after me when you have no need or right to, you chased away that guy as if he'd assaulted me or something, and now you're trying to drag me back to pack territory like I'm some petulant kid. What is your problem?"

His problem was that he wanted her so damn bad he ached with it, so damn bad that he couldn't ignore that ache anymore. If his attraction to her had been purely physical—hell, *attraction* was a mild word—maybe it would have been easy enough to ignore. But there was much more to it than that. He admired and respected her for everything she had gotten through, for how much fight she had inside that amazing body. He enjoyed her company, he enjoyed her smart-ass comments, and he valued that she didn't fear him. No matter how thunderous his

temper was or how firm his orders were, she never bowed down to him, never tried to placate him, never cowered.

Each time females shrank away from him in the past, it greatly offended both him and his wolf.

Dante would never harm a female, no matter the situation, and had those females looked past his build, had they looked deep enough, they would have known that about him. So far, Jaime was the only one who had looked deep enough. And that touched him in a way that he hadn't expected.

Maybe he should have been distrustful of her, knowing that she'd lied to him, but he wasn't at all. She'd held her secret to protect herself, and he could never judge her for that. Although she'd kept that secret, she wasn't a fake. She didn't hide her nature or personality—what you saw was what you got. Yet she was as complicated as she was straightforward. That amused, entertained, and drew him.

In short, she had somehow made herself important to him without even trying. She was like a fucking magnet to him. It was like Rhett had said, like called to like. And this person who knew just what it was like to *need* control called to him.

It could be said that they were bad for each other. The problem with them was that they mirrored each other's hunger and fed on each other's lust, making self-control incredibly difficult for both of them. While on an intellectual level he acknowledged that the best thing he could do was leave alone this female who ate at both his control and his wolf's, it wasn't going to stop him from having her. He wasn't sure if anything could. Not just because he ached for her so badly, but because he had come to view her as his.

Maybe he should feel like an ass, considering that there was a female out there who was his true mate, waiting for him to claim her. But the truth was that he didn't want to find her. He'd been kidding himself in thinking that he could ever give up his position as Beta; it would have made him feel as though he was abandoning his pack, selfishly letting them down by choosing his own happiness over their safety and well-being. He wasn't the first person to forsake his true mate—a person he might never even find—and he wouldn't be the last. There was no longer anything holding him back from taking Jaime. Even if there had

been, he wasn't sure he could have fought it any longer.

His wolf very much approved of his decision to finally act on his hunger for her. "Get out of the club, and get in the SUV."

"You can go if you want, but I'm staying." Then came the change in the emotional temperature around her—evidently, he was now more than pissed.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" His expression and tone dared her to repeat herself, but at the same time warned her not to.

"I'm. Staying. I came here to dance and have fun. You, being the workaholic that you are, wouldn't know anything about that." She thought he was going to have an aneurysm, she really did.

But then a crooked smile surfaced on his face—one that made her nervous.

"Fine. You want to dance, we'll dance." Once again he pulled her to him, ensuring that her body was meshed to his; one of his hands clasped her nape and the other clutched her ass in a very possessive grip. Rebelliously, she stiffened and glowered at him, but Dante simply held her tighter and bit her lower lip.

"Keep your teeth to yourself!"

"You'd better get used to me biting you, baby, because it's going to happen a lot."

"Oh I don't think so, Popeye. I have more pride than to jump into the bed of some guy who spent the past few months dismissing me. It's a little too late to come knocking on my door." Dante fisted a hand in her hair—a shifter gesture of ownership that he saw infuriated her as much as it aroused her. He pinned her with a look. "You won't be jumping into *some guy's bed*, Jaime. You'll be in mine. Oh yeah, deny it if you want, but we both know it's going to happen. I'm getting inside that pussy. You're going to take every inch of me, and you're going to love it." She should *not* have liked the dominance in his tone or the determination in his gaze, yet, perversely, she did. She really shouldn't have liked that there wasn't a hint of compromise in his tone either, yet, odd as it was, she did like it. That didn't mean she was going to give him what he wanted, though. Oh no. If he thought he could ignore her and that she'd jump when he finally decided to call, he was so wrong. "Not a chance, big guy. Besides, I'm

not your type, *remember*? You don't think of me that way. You like your females to be nice and slim."

Stunned, Dante froze. Either Trick had told her what he'd said, which was unlikely, or she'd overheard their conversation. Suddenly, he felt like shit.

"There's no need to feel bad. This might come as a surprise to your overinflated ego, but I no longer want you."

"Yeah? Well, the scent of your arousal tells me different. You're already wet—you can't help it. Just like I can't help that I'm hard as a fucking rock whenever you're near."

"I didn't say you couldn't get a response from my body. It doesn't mean I have to act on it."

"But you will, baby. You will because you know how good it will be. Now dance with me." It was both a demand and a dare.

He wanted to play, did he? Well, Jaime would see how he liked a reversal of roles. She would see how he liked it when someone else took the lead. Jaime relished the surprise in his eyes when she twined her arms around his neck and ground against him. Allowing the pounding, throbbing beat of the music to invade her body, she swayed and writhed and swiveled her pelvis. Dante moved in sync with her movements, and their dark, sensual dance had her getting wetter by the minute.

As they swayed and grinded, he skated his hands over her back and roughly cupped her ass, building a need inside her that soon had her liquid and pliant against him so that it was he who was leading the dance—sneaky fucker. Jaime soon regretted beginning the dance. She'd just wanted to tease him for being a jerk, but she'd ended up teasing herself. The way her hardened nipples rubbed against his chest was sending teasing bolts of pleasure down to her clit. She was wet and aching and had never felt so empty. Honestly, she didn't think she had ever needed relief so badly in her life.

This was sexual torment as its worst. She gasped as he bit her earlobe and sucked it briefly into his mouth before speaking into her ear.

"Turn around." Again his words were a demand and a dare. Slowly she turned in

his arms, though Dante was pretty sure she only did it because she wasn't prepared to back down. "Arms around my neck." Very slowly she raised her arms and hooked them around his neck, making her arch slightly against his chest. "Very good. Now keep them there." Jaime involuntarily shivered as, breathing hotly on her nape, he very, very slowly slid one of his hands up over her dress until it was resting just below her breasts. His other hand slid seductively down her flat abdomen and inched closer and closer to the juncture of her thighs, but he stopped just as the tips of his fingers reached just above her clit. The contact was already too much, but no way would she struggle free and let him see that. No, she'd withstand the pleasure and show him just how little she wanted him. Of course it would be a total lie, but he didn't have to know that.

Dante kissed his way from her nape to her ear. "You're mine now, Jaime." He let his hand creep up and knead her breast. "Not just for one night. When I say you're mine, I mean you're mine.

But see, here's the thing. Now you have to deal with me, and I'm not easy to deal with." He thumbed her nipple, enjoying the way she jerked and moaned.

Jaime was about to contradict his claim to want more than one night, but then his fingers dipped down and brushed once over her clit. Officially distracted, she arched against his hand, but he didn't repeat the action. Instead, his hand ever so slowly glided down her inner thigh while the other moved on to her other breast, squeezing hard. Hearing a moan slip from her, she gave herself a mental wallop. She was supposed to be withstanding the pleasure, wasn't she! Yeah, okay, she could do that.

Really.

As his hand reached the edge of her dress, he snaked it underneath and abruptly cupped her possessively. "Mine, Jaime." Offended by the thong that acted as a barrier between him and what was his, Dante effortlessly snapped it off and stuffed it in his back pocket. Then his hand was delving underneath her dress again and his fingers were skimming through her folds. "So wet." His finger circled her opening, and instinctively her hips shifted toward his hand. "That's it, baby." He harshly plunged his finger inside her, startling a loud moan from her, and swirled it once, twice.

Jaime's eyes drifted shut as bliss and heat rushed through her body like wildfire. Damn it, hadn't she only moments ago told herself that she'd withstand the pleasure? Snort. Some resolve she had. One orgasm wouldn't be so bad though, would it? Deciding that it certainly wouldn't be, she clung to his neck, moaning, as he began to slowly thrust his finger in and out of her. Every thrust was masterful, just like him.

"Hot. Tight. Wet. I can't wait to feel you around my cock." He drove another finger inside her, wrenching a groan from her. "Do you like the falcon, Jaime?" She opened her eyes and twisted her neck to find Dante watching her intently. Right then, he looked dangerous. His lips were fixed into a hard line, his nostrils were flaring, and his eyes had gone wolf.

"Is he what's got you this wet?"

The sensible answer was no. It was also the truthful answer. She shook her head.

"So this is for me?" He wiggled his fingers inside her before thrusting again. Not satisfied with her nod, he said, "Answer me, Jaime."

"Yes."

He rotated his fingers. "Do you want to know what's going to happen when we get back? I'm going to fuck you. Really, really fuck you. Fuck you like no one ever has. You want that, don't you?" The way her inner muscles contracted around his fingers told him the answer to that. "Good, because it *is* going to happen. And you're going to scream for me. Not for Pretty Boy, not for the falcon, not for anyone else. Me. Only me." He thrust his fingers hard and deep as he took her mouth. Like last time, the kiss became pure animal lust and he was growling into her mouth as she was groaning into his. "That's it. Fucking come."

As if that was what her body had been waiting for, Jaime's climax washed over her and he caught her as she sagged against him. Hell, her legs were freaking shaking. The guy was lethal. When Jaime opened her eyes, it was to see his lips twitch into a smile of victory. It should have pissed her off, but as that had been one hell of an orgasm, she'd overlook the cockiness.

He slid his fingers out of her and brought them to his mouth, sucking first one and then the other without once removing his gaze from hers. Her darkly rich taste burst on his tongue, had him wanting more. He fully intended to have more.

“I knew you’d taste good. Now it’s time to go.” This time, Jaime didn’t argue. She probably should have, but at this point all she could think about was having him inside her. She’d lecture herself about the whole I-shouldn’t-jump-when-he-calls thing tomorrow. Right now, she needed him inside her. After giving Ivy and Riley—who had been watching in open-mouthed fascination—a brief wave, she allowed Dante to lead her out of the club. Neither of them spoke throughout the journey home. In fact, neither of them said even one word until they were inside his room.

No sooner had he shut the door than Jaime found herself pinned against it. His mouth abruptly landed on hers, and his tongue swept inside like it owned her. She doubted that there was anyone in the world who kissed like Dante; with his tongue, teeth, and lips he dominated, devoured, and conquered. Quickly the kiss became raw and primitive, and so damn deep that it was as if he was tugging at her soul through his mouth. Every single nerve in her body went on high alert, eager and impatient for him to fill her and rid her of that burning ache that *just wouldn’t go*.

She yanked at his T-shirt and slid her hands underneath, running them along the smooth yet firm abs that his T-shirt had only hinted at. His stomach clenched and he growled as she raked her nails from his collarbone down to the waistband of his jeans. She gasped when he abruptly bit down hard on her lower lip and sucked it into his mouth. Her wolf liked the possessive act.

Finally pulling back, Dante let his gaze travel the length of her body. That little dress clung to her like a second skin, highlighting those delicate curves he loved. He couldn’t decide whether he wanted to bunch up that devil’s creation around her waist or strip it off completely so he could get a better look at what was beneath. He had pictured her naked so many times, it bordered on ridiculous.

Tonight, he would find out just how accurate his imagination had been.

Gripping her wrists, he pinned them above their head. “Keep them there. Now watch while I touch you.”

That deep, dominant, controlled voice sent a feverish tremor through her body. Seeing his eyes ablaze with determination and possessiveness, Jaime understood exactly what she would be getting herself into. He wouldn’t be like the guys she was used to, wouldn’t be satisfied with just a hint of submissiveness from her.

He would be intense, greedy, commanding, and would insist on her surrender—something she didn't like to do. So why was she wetter than she'd ever been in her life?

As Dante skimmed her lower lip with the pad of his thumb, she flicked it with her tongue.

Smiling, he trailed his thumb down her chin, the column of her throat, and down the valley between her breasts. Reaching the front clip of her bra, he flicked it open. His hands slowly slid the bra and dress aside so that they framed her bare breasts. They were round, full, and perfect. He molded them in his hands, thumbing the rosy, taut nipples that were begging for his attention. It would be cruel to disappoint them.

Startling a gasp from Jaime, he swooped down and took a nipple into his mouth. He sucked, nibbled, licked, bit, and drew on her nipple with his teeth. Over and over he did it, changing the rotation each time. Soon her breathy moans turned into sobs as she tugged on his hair, wanting him to release her.

Dante arched a brow at her. "Hands above your head." With a low growl that made him smile, she did. He licked his way to the other nipple, loving the uniquely sun-kissed taste of her skin. He lavished it with the same overwhelming attention until once again her moans were sobs and she was struggling against him. He was so tempted to take her right there, but he wasn't finished with this body yet. "I want to look at you." In seconds, he had whipped the dress up and over her head and slung the bra aside, giving him an unobstructed view of that body that he was obsessed with having, owning.

Fucking beautiful. Her stomach was nicely toned, her gorgeous shapely legs went on forever, and God help him, she had a full Brazilian. "The heels can stay. I want you to lie on your back on the bed for me."

The command and power in that gruff rumble made her shudder. Her wolf loved the authority in his voice even while she felt challenged by it; she saw a male who could handle her and give her what she needed. Jaime thought about rebelling against him for the hell of it, but the resolve in his eyes warned her not to ignore his order, and she knew the sadistic asshole would keep her hanging for a while if she did. No, she needed release *now*. She'd rebel another time.

"Very good," said Dante when she complied.

Jaime literally couldn't look away from his body as he slowly approached the bed, stripping as he went. She licked her bottom lip as she gazed at his tanned, incredibly toned chest, imagining running her tongue between the grooves of his gorgeous abs. He was literally the embodiment of power, and that acted as a narcotic to her wolf. Was she really about to let Dante fuck her? Was this really happening? Damn, she hoped so. If this was a dream, it was the best she'd ever had.

Allowing her gaze to roam lower, Jaime's eyes widened at the sight of his cock. *Holy mother of fuck*. "Well-hung" would be an understatement—though that wasn't surprising, since he was a big guy all over. His cock didn't let down in the girth department either. It wasn't huge in a way that looked unnatural; it was just on the right side of well-endowed.

Dante's mouth dried up at the sight of her all laid out for him. "Spread your legs for me." She didn't. She just stared up at him defiantly. "Don't make me have to punish you, baby." That sounded kind of interesting. "And how exactly would you punish me?"

"By not letting you come."

"Jerk."

"Spread your legs, Jaime." Very, very slowly she parted them, and he inhaled sharply at how wet she was, how swollen and pink and glistening. Drawn by her alluring scent, he settled himself between her thighs and swiped his tongue through her wet folds, making her cry out. Her darkly rich taste had him groaning for the second time that night. "You taste so good." Although he was desperate to be inside her, he suspected that he'd be gorging himself on her taste for a while.

Gripping her by her hips, Dante pinned her still as he feasted on her; licking between her folds, circling her clit with the tip of his tongue, nibbling on the hood of her clit, and stabbing his tongue inside her. She made the most amazing noises: husky little moans, choked cries, and throaty groans that had his cock throbbing. God, she was so responsive, so receptive. "Do you know what you taste like? Sin. You taste like sin." And he couldn't get enough of it.

Damn, was there anything that this guy wasn't good at? It would have been annoying if she wasn't benefiting highly from it. Still, she needed him inside her.

“Dante, stop with the teasing and fuck me!”

Instead, he plunged one finger inside her and closed his mouth over her clit, suckling hard. Just like that, she fragmented beneath him. So. Damn. Responsive. He kissed and nipped his way up her shuddering body and draped himself over her. “Don’t worry, baby, I’ll give you what you need, and I’ll make you come so hard you’ll scream.”

She didn’t doubt that. With one hand knotted in her hair and the other pinning her down by her hip, he *finally* began to ease himself inside her. The pressure of his thickness caused the most delicious twinge of pain; she wasn’t, by any means, a masochist, but an edge of pain always intensified the pleasure for her. She’d never had anyone as big as Dante before, and the sensation of him stretching her was unfreakingbelievable.

Jaime was so wet that he had no trouble pushing inside, but still he moved slowly—much too slowly for her liking—as he fed her inch after inch. He stilled when he was halfway inside her, giving her time to adjust, but it was time she didn’t want or need. Neither Jaime nor her wolf wanted to be carefully handled. She curled her legs around his hips and tried tugging him toward her to take him deeper. The tugging didn’t work. The asshole withdrew an inch, warning her with his eyes that he’d move at his own pace. “If I wanted to be treated like a porcelain doll, I’d have said so!” she growled. “I can take it, Popeye!”

“Is that so?” His wolf agreed with her, urging Dante to take her hard.

“Yes!” She should have known better than to challenge him; he reared back and then slammed home, burying his cock so deep inside her that she was surprised she couldn’t feel him in her throat.

She cried out as her back bowed. She had never felt so full in her life, and damn, it hurt, but it was a good hurt.

Dante groaned as the tightest, hottest, wettest pussy he’d ever felt contracted around him. It was so good it was also torture. Feeling the prick of her claws on his back only added to the pleasure. “Open your eyes and look at me. Don’t take your eyes off me, Jaime.” Opening her eyes, she started at the blazing intensity on his face. No one had ever looked at her like that, like he wanted to possess every part of her. She moaned as he suddenly began to move.

His thrusts were slow, shallow, and sensual, just as teasing as they were heavenly. But they weren't enough. "Faster." He ignored her. "Faster."

"I'll go faster when I'm ready to go faster." The sneaky little bitch tightened her muscles around his cock and threw her hips hard at him to counter his thrust. Dante stilled her by pressing down hard on her hip, digging his claws into the skin warningly but without drawing blood. "Don't.

Move." Instead, holding his eyes, she again defiantly clenched around him, smiling a very satisfied smile at the sound of his tortured groan. Bringing himself nose to nose with her, Dante gripped her by the throat. "Unless you want me to pull out and leave you hanging like this, do as you're told." *The fucking shit-stain!* She'd have hit him if she thought the big lug would actually feel it. Her wolf wasn't impressed with that order either. There was more than one way to irritate him and get what she wanted. She softened her expression and gave him a sympathetic smile. "Oh, Dante, if you'd just explained that you were adjusting to being inside a woman you don't have to inflate, I wouldn't have pushed you like that."

He gave her throat another squeeze. "Jaime."

"You know, if it feels too weird, you could just put the head in."

"Jaime."

"Don't worry, I understand if you're a little out of practice when it comes to real women, so

—" She cried out as he suddenly slammed into her—a punishing thrust. He didn't start pumping away inside her to prove his virility, though. Damn wolf.

"Playing little games isn't going to work with me, baby."

Yeah, she'd gathered that. The truth was that she was in totally unfamiliar territory with Dante.

She was used to getting her own way when it came to guys, even those who were overbearingly dominant. She had always been able to control them in her own subtle way. A little reverse psychology, or simply feeding their egos, often went a long way in getting what she wanted. She wasn't above using a little

provocation either, and if she had said those things to another guy, he would have fucked her to prove his masculinity. But not Dante. He wasn't a guy she could have dancing to her tune or who would fall for her little tricks. Awkward fucker. "I don't need this gentle bullshit! I told you, I can take it!"

"Are you sure?" he taunted, loving to see her riled.

"I'm sure," she bit out. A gasp burst out of her as he suddenly began hammering into her. Each of his branding strokes was a stab of complete and utter bliss. The only problem was that she knew he was keeping himself in check. She wanted all of him. Beating his back with her legs and clawing at him, she growled, "Stop holding back from me!" The next thing she knew, he'd withdrawn from her and she'd been roughly flipped onto her stomach. Then Dante was draped over her, nibbling on the mark he'd made on her neck. "Look, I know you live in caves, but this prehistoric man behavior is totally unacceptable."

"I love these tattoos." She had an angel on the back of her left shoulder and a devil on the back of her right shoulder. The angel, however, was holding a bottle of booze, covered in tattoos, and puckering her lips flirtatiously.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"You want it as hard as I can give it, right?" He looped an arm around her and pulled her to her hands and knees. "You should be careful what you ask for." He drove a hand into her hair, snatched her head back, bit into the crook of her neck, and slammed home. Dante groaned as her muscles tightened around him. He gave the fresh bite on her neck a soothing lick, liking the look of it there. His wolf growled his approval, wanting Dante to mark her again. Oh, he planned to.

Dante swirled his tongue around the shell of her ear and then sucked the lobe into his mouth.

"Feel me, Jaime. Has anyone ever been this deep inside you?" She shook her head, and he was male enough to feel smug about that. "Does it feel good?" At her nod, he gave her a rewarding thrust.

"Does it feel good when I fuck you?" She nodded vigorously, so he gave her another rewarding thrust.

"Better than when Pretty Boy fucked you?"

Guys and their egos! She thought about telling him to grow up, but she liked his version of rewards. “Yes.” That got her the forceful thrust she wanted.

“Did you let him have your ass?”

“No.” Another fierce, rewarding thrust.

“Have you let anyone else have it?”

“No.” Two fierce thrusts were her reward this time.

“You’ll let me have it, won’t you, baby? You’ll let me fuck every hole in your body, won’t you?”

At that moment, she was pretty sure she’d let him do anything if he just made her come. She nodded. His weight suddenly left her upper body, and then, growling, he began violently pounding into her just like she wanted. A fierce climax was creeping up on her as he relentlessly drove into her faster, harder, and deeper than anyone ever had.

“You’re mine, Jaime. And you won’t let anyone else near my pussy, will you, baby?” It wasn’t a question, but a statement. When she didn’t contradict him, he rewarded her by pounding into her impossibly harder.

“Dante...I need to come.”

“Good, because I want to feel you come all over me.” He snaked his hand around her body and found her clit with his finger and thumb. “Come, Jaime. Do it *now*.” He bit into her shoulder and pinched her clit simultaneously, and Jaime’s entire body stiffened as a bolt of pleasure shot through her that was so perfect it was also bad. As he’d promised, she came so hard she screamed.

Her inner muscles closed and fluttered around him. “Fuck, Jaime.” Three fierce thrusts later Dante exploded inside her, shuddering and filling her with his come. The only thought he had when his brain recovered from the most intense orgasm he’d ever had in his life was “Again.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

The incessant ringing of Dante's cell phone pulled Jaime from dreamland. She nudged him, urging him to wake and answer the damn thing. Or maybe sling it at the wall, whatever, as long as the noise came to a stop. The response from him was a grunt. A grunt that sent vibrations through the nipple that his mouth had been latched onto for most of the night. As if that wasn't bad enough, he'd also kept two fingers buried inside her. So yeah, she was horny to the point of crankiness.

She lightly slapped his shoulder. "Phone." Another grunt. Followed by his mouth suckling on her nipple. "Phone," she repeated a little breathlessly. She wasn't sure whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that he could play her body like it was an instrument. After so many years of wondering, finally she knew just how good he would feel inside her—too good. She gasped as his fingers swirled inside her.

"So wet," he murmured before drawing the taut bud back into his mouth.

"Well, duh. I was hardly going to have a dry spell after having your fingers jammed inside me all night."

Hearing the irritation in her voice, Dante smiled around her nipple. At that moment, the phone gave up and he felt her body relax a little. Clearly, Jaime wasn't a morning person. "Want me to take care of that frustration before your training session, baby?" Jaime snickered. "You'd better."

"I'm not sure I like your tone."

"I'm not sure I care."

He nipped the curve of her breast but then licked it soothingly. He was just about to mold himself around her and spread her legs when his phone started ringing again.

"Answer the freaking thing before I smash it. Hey!" she whined when he slapped her ass before going to retrieve his phone from the pocket of his pants.

Dante was too sexually frustrated to bother with a hello. "Dom, this better be good."

"I just wanted to let you know that Nick called Trey with the same offer he made

to you last night,” Dominic informed him, sounding pretty pissed about it. “Clearly, he wasn’t happy with your answer. I can’t understand why he’s so interested in keeping our females and mated pairs safe.” Dante had an idea about why, but it wasn’t something he intended to mention until he was sure.

“So what did Trey say?”

“Told him to mind his own business and stop questioning his decisions or the alliance is over.”

“I thought he might.”

Jaime growled, “Tell Dominic to go jump up his ass. It’s too early for phone calls!” Though she supposed she should probably get used to waking up earlier each morning if she was still going to make it for breakfast after training.

Dominic chuckled. “So she’s not a morning person?”

“Ignore her, she’s just horny.” He grunted when she flung her hairbrush at him.

“I take it her training session will be delayed by you having to take care of her condition.” Dante grinned. “I wouldn’t be much of a protector if I didn’t take care of all her needs, now, would I?”

“Oh the sacrifices we make.”

“You two are dicks,” snapped Jaime.

“I’ll show you a dick,” growled Dante as he ended the call and leaped on her. There was nothing gentle about their union; it was hard, fast, and wild, and he came so hard he’d been close to passing out—something that had been a reoccurrence throughout the night. It seemed that Jaime was an aphrodisiac to him.

He had expected to her to give him plenty of grief throughout the training session, but although she struggled and was nearing unconsciousness, she only rarely snapped at him. Apparently, she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. Her wolf, on the other hand, reacted plenty of times. Her wolf tried several times to surface and attack him, clearly viewing him as a threat.

Although it pained Jaime, she managed to keep control of her wolf. He was so proud of her, and he ensured she knew it by fucking her with his tongue during their shower afterward.

Entering the kitchen fifteen minutes later, Jaime's good, just-had-an-extremely-satisfying-orgasm mood dampened as she saw Greta at the long dining table. Jaime had thought that as they were a little late for breakfast, most people would be gone by now. She'd kind of hoped that Greta would be included in that number, because she had no doubt in her mind that the old woman would torment her about her wolf's state.

"Good morning," drawled Grace from the stove of the modern kitchen. The twinkle in her eye said she knew about Dante and Jaime, and she approved. Yet she lacked her usual enthusiasm, and Jaime knew it was because the woman was now wary of her.

"Thanks," said Jaime, inhaling the coffee. She decided to ignore the fact that Lydia, Cam, and Rhett wouldn't even look at her. Gabe, Hope, Shaya, and Dominic gave her genuine smiles and gestured for her to sit with them—like she would have sat anywhere else. It didn't take a genius to work out why the others had been sure to sit at the opposite end of the table.

Jaime's ass had barely touched her seat before Greta started speaking.

"Fornicating all night, were you?" spat the old woman, to which Shaya rolled her eyes. For whatever reason, Greta never used the word *sex*.

Taking some toast from the selection on the table, Jaime gasped at Greta in mock outrage. "We were simply bouncing on the bed to test the endurance of the springs. Is your mind always in the gutter?" Dante snorted a laugh, but said nothing. She was thankful for that. She liked to fight her own battles.

"In my day, we didn't share a room with a male unless we were mated."

"Oh, here we go," grumbled Shaya.

"There was none of this sleeping around," continued Greta. "We saved ourselves for our true mate. Anyone who didn't was branded a jezebel." She huffed. "As if it's not bad enough that you're a jezebel, you're unstable. A ticking bomb is what you are."

Her wolf growled, but Jaime just cocked her head as she said, “I suppose I’d find you kind of interesting if I was a psychologist, huh.”

“There’s that bad attitude again.”

Jaime gave her a sympathetic look. “Aw, Greta, haven’t you figured out yet that I’m bad with or without the attitude?”

“That’s another problem: you’ve no respect.”

“It doesn’t feel like a problem.” Hunk suddenly jumped onto her lap and snuggled against her, making Jaime smile even in spite of the drivel she was listening to.

“You think you can behave however you want because my Dante’s protecting you, don’t you?”

Humph. I’ve got news for you. He can’t protect you against Trey, and I know my grandson doesn’t want you here. The last thing he needs when Taryn’s nearing the end of her pregnancy is any danger or trouble, and that’s exactly what you are. Dante’s mad to keep you around.”

“Greta,” murmured Dante, cautioning her with his eyes to stop.

“It’s true,” she insisted. “She could turn on any one of us at any time. How can you let her fool you like this? She’s only fornicating with you to make you keep her around. *And* she’s constantly disrespectful to me—you’ve heard how she talks to me.” She sneered at Jaime. “You’re jealous of the relationship I have with Dante.”

Jaime cocked her head, looking at Greta curiously. “You know, I used to think you were snarling at me, but now I see that...it’s actually just your face.” Dante’s coffee sprayed out of his mouth and over the table. Jaime patted his back as he coughed and laughed at the same time.

“Dante, son, can’t you see the danger she brings to the pack? She’s unstable, for God’s sake!

Crazy!”

Jaime turned to Shaya. “Ever played that game, ‘hit Granny with the polo mallet’?”

“Forget it!” Greta jumped to her feet. “If you’re not willing to listen, Dante, there’s no point in me continuing. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Now that he’d recovered from his coughing fit, Dante drained the last of his coffee and ran a hand over Jaime’s hair. “You okay, baby?”

She smiled. “Fine.”

“I’ll drive you to work. Don’t argue, I hate the thought of you in that tin can.” Of course she argued. It was what she did best. Eventually, though, she caved and let him drive her—mostly because she liked being around him, even when he was subjecting her to that gruesome training that she was aching from. He kept his hand on her thigh throughout most of the journey and gave her a deep, drugging kiss when he finally arrived at the sanctuary.

“I’ll pick you up at the end of your shift.”

“You have enough things you need to be doing.”

“I’m still picking you up. Deal with it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, by the way, the Toyota SUV is parked outside Ivy’s house. I drove it there last night before we went clubbing, but I had to leave it there. No way would I drive when I had every intention of drinking.”

“I’ll have one of the guys pick it up later.”

She told him Ivy’s address and was just about to hop out of the vehicle when he suddenly gripped her neck and tugged her to him, bringing his mouth down hard on hers. It was a devastating kiss with an edge of possessiveness to it. The second he released her, she understood why. Shawn was watching from the door of the main building. “One night of fucking doesn’t give you a right to mark me as your territory,” she told him, growling.

He collared her throat with his hand again. “I told you at the club, you’re mine. I want more than one night, and I want more than just fucking. We’ll discuss it later. Go on.” Unsure whether to be happy or doubtful, Jaime got out of the SUV

and headed to the main building to change into her work clothes. Shawn never said a word to her, and she hadn't expected him to. Ivy and Riley, on the other hand, grilled her for information. Was he good in bed? How many times did he make her come? When did he bite her neck?

"He said he wants more than one night."

"More?" Ivy's brows shot up. "You don't believe him," she surmised by Jaime's expression.

"I don't know. I mean, I don't think Dante would lie about something like that, but he never does relationships. I know there must be some kind of story behind it, but I've no idea what."

"Why are you finding it so difficult to believe that he'll make an exception for you?"

"Look at me, Ivy. I'm not saying I think I'm ugly, but I'm plain and I know it. If it wasn't for the big breasts, I doubt I'd get much attention at all. Dante's own words were that I'm not his type. Plus, it's worth noting that it wasn't until he thought I was with Shawn that he showed any interest in me at all. Maybe it's one of those guy things."

Ivy went to object, but then sighed. "I get what you mean. It would make sense that his ego got stepped on and so he wanted it stroked. But it would also make sense that he'd make an exception for you. Jaime, I've told you, like, a million times, you are not plain. I know you think of yourself as a bad catch because of your situation with your wolf, but that doesn't mean that guys will think so." Jaime snorted. "You're kidding, right?"

"I know better than to keep up the compliments. Your low self-esteem stops them getting through to you. But what I will say is that I saw the way Dante looked at you last night. He looked at you like he thought you belonged to him. I honestly thought he was going to tear the falcon apart limb by limb."

"Yep," agreed Riley. "He's kind of scary. So what are you going to do?" Jaime blew out a breath. "Talk to him, I guess. He said we'd discuss it later."

"Good idea," said Ivy with a nod. "Right, we need to get to work. I just want to say one thing."

Last night was the first time I've ever actually been up close to Dante, the first time he and I have ever made eye contact. He wasn't drawn to me, Jaime. The magick didn't work on him. The only guys who can resist it are those who are totally hung up on another person. You might want to think on that." With those words, Ivy turned and walked away.

Not knowing what to do with that information—her thoughts were jumbled enough—Jaime simply put it to the back of her mind and got to work. But apparently she and those jumbled thoughts didn't quite have an understanding, because soon enough they were tormenting her again. In all fairness, though, how could she not be feeling confused right now? The guy she wanted with every ounce of her being had gone from being aloof to suddenly wanting some kind of relationship with her.

What made it even more confusing was that he was fully aware of just how broken she was—a broken female wouldn't be attractive to a dominant male. None of it made any sense. Of course a relationship with Dante was what she wanted, but not if that relationship didn't mean anywhere near as much to him as it did her. And it wouldn't mean as much to him. It would eat at her to be with him, care about him, and want to mean something to him, when he only saw her as a convenient body.

When her shift was almost over, she took out some garbage bags as usual. It was as she threw them into the huge garbage container that several unfamiliar scents surrounded her. Spinning, she found seven male wolf shifters, smirking and chuckling. All were clearly related, and all closely resembled Glory.

"Hello there, honey," said the one in the center who was the tallest and stockiest of the seven.

His eyes surveyed her body, and a creepy smile took over his face. Looking in his eyes, she couldn't help but get the feeling that someone else was driving. "I can see why he might be tempted to ignore his mate for you."

"How's your sister doing?" she asked tonelessly. Her wolf paced restlessly, recognizing their posture as threatening and beginning to feel overly anxious. In truth, Jaime wasn't feeling particularly calm either, but she wouldn't let them see that.

"You hurt her pretty badly. As you can imagine, I can't have that. And since

you're Dante's girl, that means you're a way to hurt him, too. By dealing with you, we're killing two birds with one stone."

Her wolf lunged at her confines, but Jaime breathed through the pain and ignored it. "So you're going to gang up on and beat up a girl. Huh. Your bravery staggers me." His nostrils flared. "You messed up her face."

"I'd do it again. What your sister fails to realize is that the huge circle of fire in the sky is what the world revolves around, not her. She wants Dante and thinks that she's therefore entitled to have him, even if he doesn't want her. It's kind of sad and pathetic, really." He looked at her curiously. "There has to be something wrong with you. Here you are, confronted by seven male shifters who have every intention of beating you to a pulp, and yet...you're giving us attitude and insulting our sister. In a way, I kind of respect that." Seeing that he was about to signal to his brothers to move toward her, she sighed and held up a hand. "Look, guys, you might want to think twice before doing this. I'm not an easy target. And I've seen *CSI*. I know how to get rid of the bodies and everything." The crazy asses actually laughed, which only served to anger her wolf, who was now howling her frustration as she continued to attack her cage, wanting out. For once, she wasn't overreacting.

One female against seven males was, undeniably, bad odds. She couldn't call Ivy and Riley. With their ear protectors on, they'd never hear her. The only thing she could think to do was distract them until one of her coworkers came out.

Jaime looked at the empty space beside her. "I'm pretty sure they intend to hurt us badly, Mr.

Dungworth. We don't like violence, do we, Mr. Dungworth? What course of action would you suggest?" She let her face take on a speculative look, as if she was considering an opinion.

"Interesting. Illegal and immoral, but interesting." When she turned to the brothers, it was to see the seven glancing at each other with expressions that begged "What the fuck?" The middle brother looked to the others, gulping hard and seeming nervous. "Let's get this over with." None of them moved.

"Glory's right, she's crazy," hissed the one on his left.

"She's also *one* female. Now come on."

“I wouldn’t do that,” interrupted Dante, growling, as he came out from behind the main building. “I really, really wouldn’t.” He’d noticed the huge truck as he neared the sanctuary, and some sixth sense had told him that it was Glory’s brothers. While a part of him had wanted to race over to the parking lot and confront them, the Beta in him had known it was important to be careful. If they’d heard him coming, they could have panicked and jumped on Jaime before he was even out of the SUV.

After making a quick call to the enforcers, he quietly approached to investigate. Thank God he’d gotten here in time.

“Okay, baby?” he asked Jaime without looking at her.

“Super.” Her wolf calmed a little at his voice and presence, but she was still very much on edge.

“Good.” He stepped forward until there was only a small space between him and the brothers.

“I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. You’re all going to turn around and leave here. You’re going to ensure that your sister stops spreading sweet little lies about me being her mate, and you’re going to make sure she stays the hell away from Jaime.”

She shivered at his words. Sheer dominance and power had dripped from every syllable.

The brother in the middle snickered, clearly too stupid and crazy to be nervous. Seeing that he was clearly the most dominant and the leader, Dante had every intention of demobilizing him in the quickest way possible in order to unsettle the others.

The crazy idiot advanced a step toward Dante. “Or what?”

Dante smiled, but it wasn’t pleasant. “Do you really want to know the answer to that?” The idiot’s response was to aim his balled-up fist at Dante’s nose. Dante blocked the move with his arm and delivered a head-butt hard enough to make the idiot stumble and triple-blink. He righted himself quickly and unsheathed his claws before taking a swipe at Dante.

Dodging the claws, Dante struck at his neck, aiming for his pressure points and easily taking him out of the equation. As he'd expected, the second the others watched their brother fall unconscious, they suddenly seemed unsure and rattled. Unfortunately, it didn't completely discourage them from doing what they'd come to do.

One of them lunged at Dante, only to receive a kick to the ribs that took the breath from him and put him on his ass. Not someone who fought fair when he or any of his pack were threatened, particularly when it was Jaime, Dante didn't hesitate in delivering another kick—this time to the face, making blood spurt from his attacker's nose.

Two came at him this time. Dodging the blow aimed at his temple, Dante gripped one of his assailants by the throat, lifted him easily, and sent him colliding into the other wolf who had been heading for him. Both of them crashed into one of the vehicles and bounced to the ground, groaning.

One managed to jump to his feet and again flew at Dante, subjecting him to a series of blows and kicks. After some ducking, weaving, and blocking, Dante ended the duel with a palm-heel strike to the face.

Catching Dante off guard, a fifth brother came at him from the side and would have managed to sink his teeth into his throat if Dante's reflexes hadn't been as perfect as they were. He ducked, causing the male to topple over him and fall flat on his face. Swiftly, the other wolf bounced to his feet, but before he could make any further threatening moves, Dante swung his arm in an unnaturally fast, fluid motion, and his fist connected heavily with the male's temple. His head flew to the right, and his entire body went limp as he awkwardly dropped to the pavement with a heavy thump.

Knocked out cold.

Seeing no sign of the other two males, Dante's heart leaped into his throat. *Jaime*. He twirled sharply and cursed at the sight he found. There was Jaime scowling down at two guys. One was trying to snap a dislocated shoulder back into place, but didn't seem to be having much luck—most likely because he was dizzy as all shit. The other guy was curled on the ground, cupping his balls with what looked to be a broken wrist and glaring at her through blood that was dripping from an ugly gash above his eye.

More surprising, there wasn't a scratch on her. In fact, she looked cool as a cucumber. He could sense that her wolf, on the other hand, was royally pissed. Huh. She'd been paying more attention during training than he'd thought. Good girl.

"I'll get you back for this, bitch," the male cupping his balls managed to grit out.

She gave him a patronizing smile. "I know this must be painful for your ego. Try not to think of it as being defeated. Just think of it as being beat up by a girl." Shuffling sounds had Dante's head whipping around. Other than the two who were still out cold, the brothers behind him were back on their feet, apparently ready for more. Also, Jaime's dizzy victim had now snapped his arm back into place and was dragging himself to his feet, just like the brother beside him. Not good.

They all looked ready to dive on Dante and Jaime as a unit, but then all seven suddenly stilled as the most riveting sound Dante had ever heard filled the air. It was no surprise to see Ivy behind Jaime with her arm outstretched, her palm facing outward.

When Jaime had explained that Ivy was a Siren and that her voice could lure those around her into a trance, he had been expecting it to be choir-like and angelic. It was anything but. There was no real way to describe it. It was smoky, husky, and velvety, but not low or quiet. No, it was powerful, and it was commanding the attention of each of the brothers, who were no longer intent on advancing on him and Jaime. Instead, they stood gaping at Ivy, totally under her spell. When she stopped, they remained where they were, motionless and mute.

"Dumb shitheads," muttered Ivy. "Sorry I didn't hear them sooner." Before Dante or Jaime could say anything, a gold Chevrolet Tahoe pulled up. Tao and the enforcers dived out. "You took your time, didn't you?"

"Luckily, Ivy stepped in." Jaime watched as Tao, Trick, Dominic, Ryan, and Marcus all stared in amazement at Ivy. Tao's jaw was at risk of hitting the floor. Ryan was gulping hard as his gaze wandered over her. Dominic was wearing the most flirtatious grin ever. Trick was practically drooling. Marcus's eyes were shining with lust. And Dante...well, he spared Ivy a brief glance before returning his attention to the brothers. So Ivy was right, Dante was immune to her sexual lure.

He was so getting lucky later.

Suddenly Dominic's expression turned impish, and she knew one of his cheesy lines was coming. He cocked his head at Ivy. "Screw me if I'm wrong, but haven't we met before?"

"Knock it off, Dominic," Jaime complained before giving Ivy an apologetic look. "You'll have to excuse him. He has a habit of dishing out cheesy lines. It might be some kind of disorder—we're looking into it." To her surprise, Ivy seemed amused rather than irritated.

Dominic put his hand over his heart, feigning hurt. "That wasn't cheesy. I can't believe you'd say that."

Finally snapping out his ogling, Trick took in the state of their attackers and his brows arched.

"How long will they stay like that?"

"Until I free them from the trance," replied Ivy, glaring at the brothers with hate in her eyes.

"Or kill them, whichever."

"Cool," said Marcus, to which Ryan grunted his agreement. "You okay, gorgeous?" Marcus tentatively asked Jaime, keeping his distance, as if he expected her to snap any moment now.

Tao frowned at her. "Good thing Dante got here and dealt with them before you lost control and ate them."

"Don't, Tao," growled Dante.

"If you must know," said Ivy cockily, "Jaime dealt with Assholes Number Six and Number Seven over there, and yet here she is, calm and collected. So give her a fucking break or I might just break that jaw of yours that's still hanging loose."

Jaime wouldn't have thought it possible for Dominic's grin to turn any more flirtatious, but it did. He was looking at Ivy like he wanted to own her. Oh for the

love of God.

Dante went to Jaime's side and rubbed her back soothingly. "Sure you're okay?" She nodded. "Fine."

"Good. Get your stuff from your locker. I'll have Tao drive you back to pack territory while the guys and I take care of those pricks. You really don't want to see what comes next." He was right, she didn't. She knew the guys would make an example of them to ensure they got their message across so that it never happened to anyone in their pack again.

"Ryan can drive her," said Tao with a scowl.

Dante held his gaze. "Believe me when I say that I'd rather you weren't anywhere near her.

But if I don't get you out of my sight, I'm going to end up going for your damn throat. Take her home.

Oh, and Tao? Don't try winding her up. She's better at it, and she'll have you in tears." To Jaime's surprise, Tao didn't try it. He remained silent the entire time he drove. She could feel the tension and anger emanating from him and knew he was dying to give her a piece of his mind, but he restrained himself.

Back at pack territory, she took a long, soothing shower and dressed in some fresh clothes. At a leisurely pace, she dried her hair while listening to some music, hoping to ease her wolf's mood. It worked well enough. An hour later, she made her way to the laundry room, wanting to ensure she had washed the offensive scent of Glory's brothers from her coveralls. She knew she wasn't supposed to go anywhere without Dante beside her, but they all should know by now that Jaime didn't follow rules. Besides, she had no idea if he was back yet.

She stopped still as she passed the living area and caught a thread of the conversation.

"...know she's your sister, Gabe, but you have to admit that we're right."

"Honey, I love you and your sister," said Lydia softly, "but Cam's right."

"I know that leaving the pack might make things worse for her and she could

end up dead,” said Rhett, “but if she turns rogue while she’s here, she’ll be killed, so she’ll end up dead anyway.”

“Rhett!” chastised Grace. “For shit’s sake, she’s one of our wolves.”

“Hey, I’m not saying we should banish her, but I do have a valid point.” Grace growled at her mate. “Dante’s going to watch her constantly, so surely that’s enough.” Greta’s witchy voice came next. “He’s only one person. He can’t watch her every minute of every day, and I very much doubt that he wants to.”

“Okay, well then, maybe some of the enforcers could help,” suggested Grace with a sigh.

“I will,” offered Ryan. Clearly, the guys were all home. Jaime was anxious to know if Dante was in the room, but she didn’t dare move and try to peek. She wanted to hear every word.

“She’s dangerous, Ryan!” Greta snickered. “She was only here to try to mate with one of you anyway. Be glad none of you fell for her charms enough to mate her or you’d die with her.”

“Dante thinks that if he gives her the same training he gave us and teaches her better control, it might help,” Trick informed them.

Greta huffed. “Yes it *might*. Shall I tell you what else might happen? She might attack Taryn.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” gritted out Shaya. “She needs help. Not all this.”

“It’s true, Shaya,” insisted Greta, “and if anything was to happen to Taryn or the baby, Trey would completely lose it and the entire pack would fall apart—and all because we kept Jaime here so that she could live a little longer than she otherwise would have. I don’t know what my Dante’s thinking by wanting to keep her here.”

“I tried talking to Trey about it, but he cut me off.” Tao sighed. “All I can think is that Taryn told him not to make Jaime leave. He won’t do anything that will upset Taryn right now.”

“What do you think about her being here, Marcus?” asked Cam.

A heavy sigh. “I wouldn’t like to see her out there alone.”

“But you have to admit it’s unsafe for us to have her here. Even her own brother can admit that much, can’t you, Gabe?” said Cam.

“I honestly can’t believe you’re all talking like this.” Gabe’s pain was obvious in his voice.

“Do you think I don’t know what you’re doing? You know Jaime will listen to me, and you think that if you can convince me it’s best for her to leave, I’ll ask her to. Well fuck all of you. Have none of you even wondered how her wolf came to be like this? Have any of you even wondered what she must have gone through? No. I agree that it’s important that the pack is safe, but Jaime *is* pack.”

“Damn straight,” said Dominic as Shaya said, “Exfuckingactly.” Greta ignored them. “It makes me wonder if Dante should still have the position of Beta.” There were several gasps. “I love him, he’s one of my boys, but he’s not thinking straight. He’s not putting his pack first. I have to question whether he needs a break from his duty.” There was a short silence then. “Maybe she’s right,” said Tao.

“Maybe,” agreed Cam.

Offended and enraged, Jaime couldn’t stay hidden any longer. It was one thing for them all to judge her, but not Dante. “How come I wasn’t invited to the party?” Tension and awkwardness filled the air the second she entered the room. “I mean, you’re discussing my life and when exactly it should end, so I would’ve thought I have the right to be here.”

Greta snarled, though she looked uncomfortable. “Any decent person who knew they were a danger to their own pack would leave.”

“Any decent person who knew someone in their pack needed support would give it,” countered Shaya.

Jaime folded her arms across her chest. “Let me ask you something, Greta. If this was Dante, or Tao, or Dominic, or any of your other ‘boys,’ would you be saying the same thing?” Greta averted her gaze, unsurprisingly. “You know what this reminds me of? The day when Trey was banished.

Everyone stood around, shouting out their opinions about him—claiming he was unstable, a danger, and that he needed to be killed or ordered to leave. I’m getting an idea of how that must have felt for him, how deep that betrayal must have cut him. Well, thank God he had people who supported him enough that they even left with him. Funny how that same supportive bunch is now acting just like the people they once resented.”

“Jaime—”

“No, Trick, I don’t want to hear it. I don’t need to. I think you’ve all said enough.”

“Jaime, honey, wait,” pleaded Dominic.

“You know what pisses me off the most? That any of you could actually question Dante’s competence as Beta. You’ve betrayed him by even *thinking* that. Not one of you would do better at that position than him. Not one of you could take his place and fill it. And if you tried, I’d kill you.

Even if it meant coming back from the grave.”

Seeing that she was about to leave the room, Gabe stood and took a step toward her. She held up her hand. “I need some time alone, okay,” she said softly. He nodded, smiling.

More specifically, what she needed was to leave the place for good, but if she’d said that aloud, either he, Shaya, or Dominic would most likely have tried to stop her. This was something she had to do whether she liked it or not. It might make her wolf go over the edge, and she might turn rogue within a few days’ time, but she had only been delaying the inevitable. She couldn’t stay here in this place where she was not only unwelcome, but feared. Especially not when it meant Dante’s position as Beta might be in jeopardy. She knew how much he loved his job, and she wouldn’t be the reason he lost it.

“I’d like to think that’s the end of it,” Dante said to Trey as he paced slowly in his office. “But I doubt even the beating they were given will stop them from coming after me again. Or Jaime.” Trey leaned forward in his seat, resting his elbows on the table. “You say she got involved in the fight but didn’t lose control?”

“Like I tried to explain, her situation with her wolf isn’t like yours. It’s not that she lives close to the surface and so puts Jaime at risk of turning feral. Her wolf is just...traumatized. It means she’s constantly on the offensive, but it’s because she’s scared. Most of the time Jaime’s in control of her, but sometimes her wolf gets enough strength to lunge for the surface. Despite that she’s been doing that for the past four years, Jaime has kept enough control that she hasn’t shifted forms.”

“So that’s why you started training her. You think if she has better control, if she makes herself stronger, she’ll be able to suppress her wolf.” Trey sighed. “I’m sorry, Dante, but I don’t see how that will work. Oh it’ll work for a while, sure. Maybe even a few years. But soon her wolf will gather enough strength again, because what’s happening isn’t natural. Confining her wolf isn’t natural. Don’t kid yourself into thinking you can truly help her, because you can’t.” Dante shook his head. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do, and so do you. It would be the same as the body trying to work without a heart.

Your heart is too much a part of your body just like your wolf is too much a part of your soul. One can’t exist without the other.”

“Maybe her wolf will get used to being confined and stop fighting to surface.”

“You know that she won’t—she’s a dominant wolf. Dante, it doesn’t make you a failure that you can’t help her.”

“And if this was Taryn we were talking about? What would you do?” Trey’s expression was fierce. “Everything I could to keep the crazy woman alive, no matter what it was.”

Dante hadn’t expected any other answer. “Then don’t ask me to give up on Jaime. I won’t.”

“She matters to you even more than I thought,” Trey observed with a frown.

“Jaime’s mine.” The sound of his cell phone interrupted whatever Trey had been about to say.

“It’s Tao,” he told Trey before answering. “Hello.”

There was a hesitant pause and then Tao sighed heavily, almost as if in resignation. “It’s Jaime.”

Dante’s wolf went still. “What about her?”

Another pause. “She left.”

“She *what?*”

“About fifteen minutes ago,” he answered reluctantly. “She left in her Chevy carrying a bulging backpack.”

“Why are you only telling me now?” A growl trickled out of Dante as realization dawned on him. “You weren’t going to, were you? Christ, Tao!”

“You don’t need to yell at me! I feel bad enough, all right! Just go and get her and bring her back. She’s pack, and she shouldn’t be out there alone.”

“I’ll deal with you later,” Dante promised him before ending the call, only interested in finding Jaime and carting her back over his shoulder.



CHAPTER NINE

Three times Jaime kicked the tire. Not that she thought it would make the car suddenly roar to life or anything, but it sure felt good. So Dante had been right. Her Chevy was on its way out. And now here she was in the middle of a dirt road with no choice but to take her bag and carry it the rest of the way to Ivy’s house. Huffing and cursing, she threw her backpack over her shoulder, slammed the door shut, and began walking.

As she’d left pack territory, she’d seen only Tao, who was beginning gate duty. He’d seen her bag, known she was leaving for good. For a second she’d thought she spotted guilt on his face...Nah.

What she knew for sure was that he’d keep Dante occupied long enough that the big giant wouldn’t realize she was gone until she’d had enough time to get away. She suspected that he *might* want to come after her. Dante was the most determined person she knew, and he took his job seriously; it wouldn’t sit well

with him to think that he'd failed one of his wolves. But Trey wouldn't let him come after her, he'd talk sense into him, would disconnect her from the pack link with utmost relief.

At that point a countdown would start. She wasn't sure how long it would be before her wolf finally took over, though she was certain she'd have at least a couple of days. She figured that she'd spend that time with her two BFFs and then...well, Ivy wasn't going to like what Jaime was about to ask of her. But she was a practical enough person to admit that Jaime was right.

Not saying good-bye to Gabe had been hard, but she'd call him later and explain. He'd be in a homicidal mood for sure, but he'd understand. She'd have to make him swear to take care of Hunk too, she mused.

Hearing the sound of a vehicle in the distance, she turned. Hitchhiking wasn't the most attractive idea, but it was a lot better than walking all the way to Ivy's house. It was only as the vehicle approached that she realized what she was looking at. The pack's Toyota Highlander. Oh.

Great.

Sighing, she waited until the SUV came close. Dante was out almost at the same time that the engine cut off. He stalked predatorily toward her. Her wolf paused in her pacing, unsure whether to regard him as a threat. He stopped in front of her, his face unreadable and blank, giving away nothing of the rage that was practically seeping out of his pores.

"You tried to leave me."

Jaime blinked rapidly, surprised by his gruff words. She was sort of expecting a lecture for sneaking off. "I couldn't stay there."

"Why?" His tone was harsh.

"You know why."

He arched a brow tauntingly. "Giving up so soon, Jaime?"

She barely managed to keep her anger in check. "I have no choice but to leave, even if it does make things worse."

“No choice?”

“I’m not wanted there.”

“If you weren’t wanted there, you’d have been banished.”

“That’s certainly what most of the pack want. I heard that much for myself.” His entire body stilled. It was then he noticed the flickers of pain in her eyes. He wanted to comfort her, but he didn’t trust himself to touch her right now. Fury was thrumming through him, and his wolf was urging him to bite her, to remind her that she was his. “Who upset you?”

“They only said what I already knew. Then they started questioning your competency as Beta, all because you want me to stay. I couldn’t have that.”

Although that touched him, he couldn’t soften his voice. He was still so damn angry with her for leaving. “So you thought you’d scuttle away without a word?”

“You would have tried to stop me, just like you are now.”

He gave a short, humorless laugh. “No, baby, I *am* going to stop you. Where would you have gone, anyway? To Shawn?”

“To Ivy, actually. I was going to stay with her for a couple of days and ask her to give me an injection when I do finally shift.”

“An injection that will kill you? Damn it, Jaime!” He felt sick at the mere idea of it.

“Look, I get that it’s hard for you to feel like you’ve let down one of the wolves you’re responsible for, but I’ve left. I’m not part of the pack now—you’re not responsible for me anymore.” He fisted a hand possessively in her hair. “You. Are. Mine. That’s it, that’s all there is to it.” His wolf fully agreed.

She struggled against his grip, but he only tightened it. Her wolf bucked at his dominance, both liking and disliking it. “Fucking me doesn’t mean I belong to you!” She gasped as suddenly his mouth came down hard on hers, giving her a punishing, possessive, demanding kiss that told her he meant every word, that she was going nowhere but with him.

When he finally broke away, they were both panting. “Like I said, you’re mine. I protect what’s mine. You *are* going to come back with me, and you *are* going to learn every single skill I teach you to make you stronger, and we’ll deal with what comes together. Now get in the SUV, Jaime.” His voice was softer now, but his tone was unmoving.

The picture he’d painted was so tempting, so very much what Jaime wanted, but his possessiveness made no sense. The protectiveness, sure. But not the possessiveness. “You told me you don’t do relationships.”

“I don’t. It only ends up a mess when true mates come along.” The hurt in his eyes made her chest ache. “Then why? Why ask for more?” A slight pause. “Because you matter.”

Her stomach fluttered at his words. No, it wasn’t some kind of romantic declaration. It was a simple truth delivered in a no-bullshit manner, and she liked it even more for that.

“Before you think to scoff at what I’ve said and tell me that I don’t matter to you, know that it won’t make me leave you here. You’re coming back with me either way.” Denying her feelings might have been smart, but she wanted to take the hurt out of his eyes, not make it worse. “You know you matter,” she said sharply, which earned her a cocky smile. Then his arm was around her and he was drawing her to him. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled deeply. “Tell me what happened, Dante.”

He stiffened, knowing what she meant. It was the last thing he wanted to talk about, but she wasn’t going to totally understand everything until he told her. He kissed her forehead and went to sit on the tree stump a few feet away. “Her name...was Laurie. My wolf went crazy whenever she was around, just like he does with you.” He almost smiled at the surprise on her face. She really had no idea what she did to him.

“To be blunt, we fucked like rabbits. But it was more than that, I...well, I cared about her.

Loved her. Three months later imprinting began without us even consciously deciding it, but both of us were glad about it. A few weeks later, her true mate came along—though she hadn’t realized it, because she was partly imprinted with me. That blocked her ability to feel the mating bond. But he knew, and he

set out to make sure that the imprinting stopped.” Hearing the pain in his voice, she opened her mouth to tell him that he didn’t need to say any more, but he shook his head and lifted his hand to stop her.

“He seduced her into cheating on me. I could actually feel her pleasure through the partial bond. I knew that she was with someone else, knew how much she was enjoying it.” *Oh God.* Before she’d even thought about it, Jaime was straddling him and curling her arms around his neck. “You really don’t have to —”

“No, I do.” He took a preparatory breath, rubbing his hands up and down her back, taking strength from her. “I hunted them both down, ready to kill him. She stopped me, said she chose him.

That was painful enough, and the breaking of the imprinting bond was even more painful. I had migraines all the time, this weird empty feeling, and sometimes I was close to being medically depressed. What added to it all was that her true mate...is actually my brother.” Jaime gaped. “What?”

“You remember Blane, right?”

The name made her wolf growl. Blane was the oldest of the six and had been the worst when it came to taunting Dante. All of them had tormented him. But Blane...She’d often wondered if he was stable. She’d been relieved when he mated into another pack four years after Dante had left. She hadn’t once thought that his mate had been half Dante’s at the time that he found her. “He made me eat a spider once. I spat it at his face.”

Dante chuckled. “Good girl. As you know, my dad was Beta when I was a kid, and he was pretty caught up in his job. When he chose his position over Mom, she sort of...deflated. She became a shadow of her former self. She didn’t live, she just existed, going through the motions.”

“You think that was why she died when you were seven? Feeling the bond weaken made her weak?”

He nodded. “When Dad didn’t survive the loss and Blane became our guardian because he was the oldest, there was no one to hold him back from targeting me all the time, so the bullying got worse. The others followed his example. I think that’s why control is so important to me. My childhood was like a whirlwind. So

many things happened around me and to me, none of which I could do anything about, no way of stopping it, no way of protecting myself, no way of helping my mom as I watched her slowly weaken until she was just a shell.”

“I get it,” she said softly. She also understood that if she was to have any kind of relationship with him, she would have to accept his controlling streak and occasionally accommodate it.

“All my life Blane took things from me—toys, clothes, CDs, money. And then he took her. And he loved that he’d been able to do it. I can understand that he would want her as badly as he did, but had it been me and I found my mate happily involved with someone else, I’d have walked away. I wouldn’t have wanted to cause her any pain by separating her from someone she obviously cared for.”

No, he wouldn’t have, thought Jaime. He was too good a person to do something like that.

Could anyone really blame her for being obsessed with the guy?

Absentmindedly, he began twirling a strand of Jaime’s hair around his finger. “That’s why I swore I’d never get into a relationship again until my true mate. But then you came along.” He smiled, tracing her lips with the tip of his finger. “My wolf was practically obsessed with you, and I was constantly hot and hard for you. I kept you at a distance, but then I hated that distance. You know, even when we were kids I was protective of you. I didn’t like it when I didn’t know where you were.”

“You hated me,” she countered.

“No, I didn’t. You irritated me,” he chuckled, “but I didn’t hate you. Who do you think got that group of bullies off your back? You reminded me of me. I saw you getting teased, and it made me think of what I had to deal with at home.”

“I’m sorry you had to deal with all that. And I’m sorry about what happened with that bitch.” His lips curved into a grin. “Is that jealousy I hear?”

“Damn right. I have an ugly jealous streak. I have a lot of ugly streaks. So I can’t understand why we’re having this conversation. You know how broken I am, you—”

“You’re not broken,” he quickly insisted. “Don’t talk about yourself like that. On the contrary, you’re stronger than most people I know.”

“Not strong, just too stubborn to give in to my wolf.”

He shook his head, sighing inwardly. She would never see herself as he saw her. “The reason I told you about Laurie is so that you’d understand what you’re getting into.” His tone was serious now, grave. “If we take this further, I won’t let you go. If your true mate comes along, I won’t step aside. If he tries to take you, I’ll kill him. My wolf won’t see him as someone who has rights to you either. He’ll see him as a threat, and he’ll want nothing more than to rip his throat out. If you say yes now, that’s it. You have to tell me if you can deal with that.” His intense possessiveness shouldn’t have been a turn-on, but it was. Soon enough she’d work out what was wrong with her. “What if *your* true mate comes along?” He brushed her nose with his. “She’ll most likely hate me, because I won’t leave you. I kept telling myself that the reason I don’t want to find her is that I’m not ready yet, but the truth is I won’t ever be ready. She’ll want too much from me, and she’ll eventually ask me to give up my position as Beta, just like my mom did to my dad.”

“You’re sure she’d do that?”

“I’ve seen it happen to a lot of Beta pairs. The female doesn’t like that her mate’s loyalty, attention, and time has to be divided. This is something else you need to understand. My job is very demanding, Jaime. I have a lot of responsibilities, and it means I won’t be able to give you the same time and attention that another guy could, that your true mate could. I need to know if that’s enough for you.” What he didn’t say was that if she told him that she didn’t want him, there wasn’t a chance that he would leave her alone. He’d hound her until she changed her mind.

“You’ve been honest, so I will, too. As cruel as it might sound, I don’t want to find my true mate, either. I don’t mean it in a bad way. It’s just that I can’t give him all of me. I can’t let down my walls without letting my wolf get out. Plus, I’d be risking his life if I mated with him. If my wolf does surface and turn rogue, she’ll have to be killed. It won’t be easy for him to survive that.” He nodded in understanding, thinking that maybe a relationship between them might just work.

Jaime understood him and respected how much he cared for his job, and she wouldn't want to imprint any more than he would.

“But there's the little detail that you'll never be able to control me all the time the way you want to. I've no doubt that you'll still try. You can't help yourself. But you'll only end up frustrated and pissed.”

He shrugged. “That's all right. Makeup sex is good.” He took her mouth gently this time, having a long, leisurely taste. “Don't leave me again.” It was an order, but even he heard the slight plea in those words.

“I won't,” she promised. Not willingly anyway.

No matter how many times Jaime assured him the following morning that she had no intention of running again, she couldn't make him relax. Not even the physical toll from the training session calmed his agitated state. He was convinced that if the pack gave her a hard time or talked any more about if he was fit to be Beta, she would be tempted to leave. He was right; she would be tempted.

But she'd promised him that she wouldn't leave him again, and Jaime didn't break her promises.

Still, Dante was set on ensuring that the pack didn't say anything else that might act as a trigger and make her break that promise, which was why he had his arm curled around her as they went for breakfast. His hold made it clear that he considered her his, that he believed he had a claim on her.

Dante smiled when everyone at the table lifted their heads and recognized his possessive posture. “You all got what you wanted. She left. Well, I've brought her back, and she's staying. I don't need to tell you that what Jaime needs right now is support. If you can't bring yourself to give it to her, then fine. But if that's how you feel, stay away from her altogether.” To Jaime's surprise, no one said a word. She'd kind of expected some sort of uproar, or at least a few objections. Instead, she actually received smiles from some of the people who had only yesterday decided that it was best if she was gone. Apparently, her gesture of leaving and her protectiveness of Dante had gone a long way with them.

Gabe, Shaya, and Dominic weren't very happy with her for running off and made it clear with reproachful looks, but their silent treatment didn't last any

more than two minutes, and soon they were chewing her ear off about one thing or another.

Having demolished his overloaded plate in record time, Dante leaned back in his seat.

“You’re off work today, right?”

“Yep,” she said as she petted a loudly purring Hunk. “Sundays are my day of rest from work.”

“Rest?”

Smiling at the way he echoed the word in utter confusion, she said, “Yes. I like to rest or go do something fun. Shaya and I have already arranged to go shopping for a few hours.” She was about to add that she’d take two enforcers along when Dante began shaking his head madly.

“You two can’t go out shopping alone when Glory and her brothers are desperate to get their hands on you, Jaime.”

The nonnegotiable tone had Jaime slowly arching a brow. “I can’t?” Dante shook his head again, his face darkening. “No. Not a chance.” She gave him a sympathetic smile. “Aw, Dante, exercising your will on me is purely a waste of time. You know this already. Would you like an aspirin?”

“You’re not going. That’s it.”

“Whatfreakingever.”

“I’m serious! There’s no way I’ll let you put yourself in that kind of danger!” *Let her?* “Dante, don’t make me kick you to death.”

Pissed with her attitude, he growled. His wolf was just as unhappy about her intentions.

“Look, it’s one thing not having a flight response, but it’s another thing to have no sense of self-preservation. Not only did Glory confront you, but her brothers tried to attack you.”

“Ten out of ten for observation.”

“You can’t go off and make yourself an easy target. I won’t allow it.” Jaime sighed. “I’m pretty sure we went over this yesterday, big guy. Just because you and I have close encounters of the best kind doesn’t mean you get to control me or baby me.”

“I want to do a lot of things to you. ‘Babying’ isn’t one of them.”

“Good. Then it’s all settled.” She gave him a winning smile. “See how easy that was?”

“Jaime,” he gritted out. Seeing the resolve on her beautiful face, he bit out, “Fine. I’ll go with you.”

She had to have heard him wrong. “Sorry?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he repeated, “I’ll go with you.”

“You’ll go shopping?” she said slowly, stunned.

“Yes.”

“But you’ll be off doing Beta stuff.”

“I have Tao and four enforcers—I can delegate.” He noticed the surprise on the faces of those around him, but he paid them no attention. He was only interested in ensuring that the stubborn female beside him didn’t hand herself over to Glory’s brothers on a platter.

The workaholic was actually prepared to take most of the day off? Nah, surely not. She glanced around the room as she said, “I’m being Punk’d, aren’t I?”

“‘Fucked’ is what you’ll be getting, but that’s for later.” She studied his face, still incredulous. “But you hate the mall.” Yeah, he did. He hated shopping, period. “I hate the thought of you in danger more.” Aw, how could she resist him when he said stuff like that? “Okay, big guy. You can come.”

“Why thank you,” he replied acerbically.

“Great,” said Dominic, “you guys can drop me off at the tattoo studio first. I’m getting the finishing touches done to my tattoo.”

Jaime went to ask him about it, but Dante’s words distracted her.

“I have a condition, though.”

“A condition to what?” she asked, both suspicious and confused.

“To coming with you shopping instead of making your day miserable by hounding you. I get to buy you something.”

That would have excited her if he hadn’t said it like a threat. “Define ‘something.’” His impish smile surfaced. “You’ll see.”

Five hours later, she saw. And gawked. When she could finally speak, she said, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope.”

“You can’t buy me this.”

He folded his arms across his chest—a gesture that said this was nonnegotiable. He’d anticipated resistance, because he knew Jaime well enough to know that she wasn’t the slightest bit materialistic. “Yes, I can. You’re mine, I protect what’s mine, and you’re going to accept this. The end.”

“Dante, I’m serious.”

“Baby, so am I.”

“I thought you meant chocolates or maybe a pair of shoes or something. Not a brand-new top-of-the-line car!” His grin was totally unapologetic, which peeved her even more. “Dante, I’m not letting you spend that much money on me.”

He advanced on her. “Hey, I’ll spend my money on you *if* I want to, *when* I want to.” She made a slashing motion with her hands. “Look, I appreciate the offer, but it’s too much.”

“No, no more arguing. I had the patience of a damn saint today. I let you drag me

around the mall, and I hardly moaned at all.”

He was right. Call her mean, but Jaime had quite enjoyed dragging him, Tao, and Ryan from store to store. Whenever Dante tried rushing her, she had slowed her pace until he finally received the message and stopped pestering her.

While Ryan often manned the entrance, Dante would personally escort her around every store while Tao escorted Shaya. It had been hilarious watching Dante’s huge frame try to squeeze through racks of clothes. It hadn’t been hilarious when the female assistants openly stared at him or flirted.

Several times Jaime had shot snarls at the women or placed her hand on his arm possessively, warning them away. She literally hadn’t been able to stop herself from doing it.

He naturally found that funny. The only thing that had saved him from getting a whack over the head was that he hadn’t once—no, not even once—responded to the ogles or the flirting. He had been solely focused on Jaime, despite most of his oglers being model material. That had scored him some serious bonus points.

He lost some of said points when he tried telling her what she could and couldn’t wear.

Basically he wanted every inch of her body covered at all times. She had just given him an indulgent,

“sure thing” smile and then bought what she wanted anyway. He soon gave up.

She hadn’t been able to resist asking questions like, “Do these jeans make my ass look big?” and “Does this skirt make my calves look fat?”

Sheer and utter horror had flashed across his face every time, as if he’d sensed that there might not be a right answer. Each time, however, he would say, “No, baby, you look beautiful, you should definitely buy that,” which of course could be translated into “Please get me out of this fucking store.” Just when she’d thought he’d forgotten about his “condition,” he’d informed her that they had one more place to go before collecting Dominic at the tattoo studio. She hadn’t for one second suspected that he meant a car dealership. Why would she? Normal people didn’t go and spend more than twenty thousand dollars on a girl they had only been seeing for, like, two minutes.

Okay, she could admit to herself that she seriously liked the silver Chevy Captiva, but damn it, that wasn't the point. She shook her head at him. "Dante —"

He fisted a hand in her hair. "It's important to me that you're safe, and as much as I'd rather chauffeur you everywhere, my job is too demanding for that. Plus, I know that would make you feel suffocated, and then you'd get pissed at me all the time. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she admitted.

He released her hair and smoothed it out. "I'm not good at relationships, baby. Most likely because I haven't been in one since I was eighteen years old. The ones before Laurie weren't serious.

I get that I'm going to mess up often, especially when I get all controlling and overprotective. This car is a compromise—I get to know that you're not driving that tin can that you've been insisting we get fixed, and you get to have your independence. Okay, you get to have some of it. For it to be a compromise, you have to meet me halfway here."

He really was trying, she suddenly realized. It wasn't often you could get a controlling person to make any kind of compromise about anything. What bothered her was how expensive this compromise was.

Reading her mind, he said, "It's just money, Jaime. I have plenty of it, and I want to spend some of it on someone who matters to me." Trey—like most Alphas—had hands in many pies, and it was Dante who had educated him on business. He had investments of his own that had all paid off, and he wasn't one for splurging. But with Jaime it was different. He wanted to buy her things, wanted to spoil her in the way that her parents had never been able to when she was younger. "Is that really so awful?"

His soft, cajoling tone almost had her saying no without thought. She knew he could afford it, but that wasn't her point. "If I accept this now, you'll try to buy me other expensive stuff, too."

"No, baby, I won't try to do that. I *will* do that. But I'll do that even if you don't accept it." Ignoring her groan, he gently turned her so that she was facing the vehicle and curled his arms around her. He whispered into her ear, "You know

you want it, Jaime. I know you want it. I heard you once before say you love the new-car smell. I can't wait to christen it. You can ride me in the front seat. Up and down, up and down, up and down on my cock until—”

“You're such a goddamn jerk!”

Ignoring her attempt to wriggle out of his arms, he laughed, relishing the scent of her arousal.

“Ready to drive your new SUV to the tattoo studio?”

A sizzle of excitement and anticipation ran through her. Sure, she was still a little uncomfortable with him buying something this expensive for her, but she also knew that this was more than just a gift to him. This was an effort to make their relationship work, even if it was a strange method. Although his overprotective streak had the potential to drive her crazy, she didn't want to change him. She cared for him just as he was, and she understood that in order for this to work, she would occasionally have to accommodate his weird ways. “Don't think this means you'll get your way all the time, Popeye.”

He grinned against her nape. “Never would I think that.” His grin totally disappeared when he realized what her idea of driving was. “You're going to get us killed! Slow down!”

“Oh, live a little, will you,” she said. “I'm only doing eighty.”

“You're going one hundred and ten miles per hour!”

“Sure, if you want to get technical about it.”

His heart missed a beat when she barely dodged a pedestrian. “Slow the hell down, Jaime, or I swear I'll shove you in the backseat and do the driving myself!”

“Okay, Grandma, we're slowing, happy now?” She rolled her eyes at his thunderous scowl.

“I'll even slow down enough that Tao can catch up, okay?” The scowl was still on Dante's face when she parked the SUV ten minutes later. “Are you regretting giving it to me yet?” He growled at her amused smirk. “No, but I'm seriously

rethinking the idea of letting you chauffeur yourself. Develop a better sense of self-preservation *fast*.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

Growling again, he exited the vehicle and opened the driver’s door. She was still wearing that goddamn smirk. At least she’d given up arguing about her ability to let herself out of cars and was indulging him in this. Caging her wrist with his hand, he led her into the studio, ignoring the amused looks that Shaya and the guys were wearing inside the safety of the Toyota.

Dante was surprised by the interior of the studio. He’d expected either a medical, biker, or Zen look. The place was like an art gallery, slash record store. It was very clean and had a calming, welcoming feel, and Dante had to wonder if the latter was because of a little magick, since the people who worked there were, in fact, witches. The accelerating healing that came with being a shifter made it nearly impossible to be tattooed. Witches, however, were able to tattoo shifters effectively.

He wasn’t sure whether it was because they enchanted the ink or because they, too, were preternatural beings.

On the walls were framed photographs of amazing tattoos—the kind that would make you want a tattoo yourself even if you hadn’t thought about it until then. There were, all in all, six tattoo artists at work, and all spared them only the briefest glance, totally focused on what they were doing.

Dominic, who was speaking—well, flirting—with the blushing receptionist, held up his index finger, gesturing that he’d be one minute. Jaime sighed and rolled her eyes. Typical.

As Dante flicked through one of the portfolios placed on the coffee table in the corner of the reception area, he whispered into Jaime’s ear, “Do you think we could get my name tattooed on your ass?”

Gaping, she slapped his upper arm. “I’d laugh if I thought you were joking.”

“It would be the biggest turn-on ever to take you from behind and see my name on your ass.” He was getting hard just thinking about it.

In a voice both sweet and sarcastic, she asked, “Shall I have ‘Chattel of’ tattooed there too?”

“I guess that would be all right.” He chuckled when she slapped his upper arm again.

“Does your girlfriend know that you like to flirt with other females?” asked a deep, rumbly voice.

Dante and Jaime looked up to see Nick Axton breezing into the studio, his eyes fixed firmly on Dominic, who was tucking a folded slip of paper into his pocket.

Sensing that Jaime wanted to intervene, Dante gave a subtle shake of his head. He wanted to see how this played out, wanted to know if his suspicions about Nick’s odd behavior were correct.

That wasn’t going to happen if he and Jaime stepped forward. So far the Alpha hadn’t noticed them in the corner, as his attention was solely on Dominic.

Considering that there was a powerful Alpha glowering at him, Jaime had expected Dominic to either buckle slightly or straighten to his full height and mirror Nick’s confrontational stance.

Instead, he strolled casually toward the Alpha until he was a foot away, not looking in the least bit rattled. Jaime was impressed. But then, he wasn’t an enforcer for nothing.

Cocking his head, Dominic asked, “I have a girlfriend?”

“Does she know that you take other females’ numbers, too?”

“Oh you noticed that. You sure do seem to have a lot of interest in me. I don’t bat for both teams, sorry.”

Nick closed the small distance between them. “Break it off with her.” The words dripped with power and authority. Yet Dominic simply shrugged and said, “It’s going to be hard to do that when I don’t know who you’re talking about.” Dante could see that Nick was surprised by Dominic’s failure to cower. People tended to underestimate just how capable the playful wolf was. Dominic’s dominance was subtle but very much there, and it was clear that Nick was just coming to

that realization.

“In any case,” continued Dominic, “the only Alpha I take orders from is Trey. Take care now, Nicky.”

When he tried to walk past, Nick stepped in his path and growled menacingly. “I’m not done yet.”

Knowing that things would quickly escalate from here, Dante stepped toward them. “Let him pass, Nick.” The Alpha didn’t react at all, just continued to stare at Dominic as if imagining which would be the most stimulating way to kill him. “Dominic, go wait in the Toyota. Tao, Ryan, and Shaya are in there waiting for you.”

“Excellent,” said Dominic with a grin, stepping around the Alpha, who was currently watching the Toyota through narrowed eyes.

“Want to tell me what that was all about?” Dante asked Nick, though he was damn confident what it was about.

Nick looked as though he had every intention of walking out without answering, but then he saw Jaime and stopped. “So you haven’t been thrown out yet.” Jaime gave Nick a beaming smile. “Shocking, isn’t it?”

“You find this funny? You’re barely in control of your wolf. You could hurt the people in your pack.”

She snorted. “You’re a fine one to talk about hurting people in my pack, aren’t you? You don’t deserve her.” She ignored Dante’s gaze, now only interested in the jerk in front of her. “She deserves better.”

“She told you,” he surmised in a quiet voice. “I didn’t realize you were so close.”

“So close that I’m seriously considering clawing off your balls and feeding them to you. Not because I’m losing control, but because you’re an *ass*.” His eyes danced to Dante. “She told you, too.”

“No. I figured it out. It won’t be long before the rest of the pack does, too, if you continue acting the way you have been. I can’t work out whether you’re

planning on taking some time before claiming her, or you have no intention to at all.”

“The latter,” Jaime answered for him.

Nick’s focus returned to her. “You must know why I can’t claim her.”

“What I know is that you don’t even have the decency to discuss it with her. You act like she doesn’t exist. You make her feel small and worthless. What kind of male does that to his mate? No male worth his salt ever would.”

Even knowing that Nick was a powerful Alpha, Dante still had the undeniable urge to punch him. He might have told Trey about it and asked him to stop Nick from coming to pack territory if he didn’t know for certain that Trey would want to kill Nick. “If you don’t intend to claim her, you need to stay away from the pack and stick to phone calls from here on out. Taryn won’t be in the least bit merciful if she finds out. Trey turns homicidal if he sees Taryn even the slightest bit upset. What happens won’t be pretty.”

“I know,” the Alpha bit out.

“Then stay away.”

He didn’t say “I can’t,” but his expression said it for him. Jaime felt her mood soften slightly at the sheer and utter torment on his face. Not claiming Shaya was killing him. Still, there was only one way this could go. “Stay away. You owe her that.”

“You’re right, I do.”

But he still wouldn’t stay clear of Shaya. Jaime could tell that much. She could understand that he would feel compelled to seek out his mate, but he was *choosing* not to claim her, and that meant he had to ignore the draw. Jaime knew exactly what Shaya would do if he didn’t. “There’s a lot you don’t know about Shaya. You think her being submissive means she’s weak? Pfft. There’s nothing weak about that female. If you push her, she’ll react, and not in a way you’ll like.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Unwilling to elaborate, she simply said, “Exactly what I said.” Dante nodded his agreement. “Claim her or leave her alone. Not just because it’s unfair to Shaya, but because it could end up causing a war between our packs.” The Alpha snickered. “Who are you either of you to preach to me about claiming your mate?”

You’ve both forsaken yours. Forsaken them and shackled up with other wolves.” Inwardly, Jaime flinched. He was right—there was no escaping that or buttering up what she was doing. As if Dante sensed the twinge of guilt she was feeling, he took her hand in his.

Dante inclined his head at Nick, allowing that. A part of him felt bad about it, but there was no way he’d let Jaime go, and that was that. “But we’re not insisting on sticking our noses into their business and hanging around them, are we?”

“Don’t kid yourself into thinking that if your true mate comes along you’ll be able to ignore her. No matter how content you are with another female, the draw will be there. No matter how many times you tell yourself to keep a distance from her, you won’t be able to. If I were either of you, I’d get out of this relationship while you can. Before one of you gets hurt.” He was gone before either Dante or Jaime could respond. Jaime wasn’t exactly sure if, or how, she would have responded. Nick had been right again. If Dante’s mate appeared tomorrow, she would lose him. Even if he didn’t leave her, Jaime would still be hurt, knowing that he was with her and thinking about someone else. He’d said he didn’t want to find his mate, but Jaime knew that if he did find her, things wouldn’t be so black and white to him anymore. It was one thing to know your mate was out there and another altogether to actually see her, wasn’t it?

For Jaime, to find her mate truly would be the worst thing ever. Although she was determined to fight her wolf’s desire to take over, she knew there was still a chance that she could. To join with her mate would therefore be to risk his life, and she couldn’t do that. In Dante, she had found someone she cared for who wouldn’t demand more than she could give. Someone who would care enough to be upset if anything happened to her, but who wouldn’t die along with her. In him, she had found what she needed. And losing that would break something inside her, even if it was kind of melodramatic.

“Hey,” said Dante gently as he skimmed his thumb over her jawline. He didn’t

like how quiet she was, knew that what Nick said had gotten to her. “You okay?” Nodding, she let him lead her outside to the Chevy. When she didn’t object to him driving, he knew her mind had to be racing like crazy. His usually animated Jaime was mute as he drove. Halfway to pack territory, he pulled to the side of the road. “Talk to me.”

“I’m fine,” she said without looking at him.

“You’re not fine.” He cupped her chin and turned her head so that he could see her eyes. So much confusion and anxiety there. It caused a weird tugging sensation in his chest. “Talk.” After a tense pause, she finally asked, “Dante, are you sure this is what you want? You, me, this relationship?”

“You know me well enough to know that I don’t make important decisions without giving them clear thought.”

“I know but...Look, you said you wanted a relationship, but, I mean, what constitutes a relationship to you?”

“I’ve told you, I don’t have much experience with them. For me, this is permanent. Exclusive.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. You’d have been this possessive no matter who I was.

Relationships—permanent or not, exclusive or not—can be casual, or they can be semiserious, or they can be something much deeper.” She wanted to know just how much he was willing to emotionally invest in this.

He shrugged. “As deep as it can get between two people who are so against the idea of being bonded. I don’t know how deep that can go, Jaime.”

Neither did she, but she did know that their resistance to being bonded made the relationship about as secure and settled as a feather in the wind. Which meant that Nick was right; Dante could easily leave her if his mate came along. Just the idea of that made her chest ache. She hadn’t thought it had the potential to hurt her that much. “Maybe we should take Nick’s advice and end this now.”

“What? Why?” He twisted in his seat to fully face her.

“I get why you don’t want to find your mate. But let’s say that you did. You’d be curious to know if your position was something she could have accepted. You’d want to talk to her, get a feel for the type of person that she is. It’s only natural. If it turns out that you being Beta is something she can accept, you’ll go to her. I wouldn’t expect anything different.”

“That’s not going to happen. The likelihood of me recognizing her on sight is a million to one anyway. What happened with Nick and Shaya is rare.”

“But if it did, you’d leave me for her. I wouldn’t blame you, but I’d still want to rip your heart right out of your chest with my bare hands. And her heart, for that matter.” His expression turned fierce. “I’d do the exact same thing to any guy who tried to take you from me, even your mate. I told you that.”

“The difference is that nothing could change my mind about mating with him. I’d never do it.

But with you...it could turn out that you’re wrong and she is okay with the Beta thing, and then you’ll be gone and I’ll be alone and it’ll goddamn hurt!” Her voice broke slightly at the end, and she turned her head away to blink the tears from her eyes.

“Look at me, Jaime. Look at me.” Finally, she did. “I want this. I’m keeping you. If you think you have a choice, that’s not my problem.”

“Keeping me? I’m not a stray kitten, I’m a person.”

“If you were a stray kitten, I’d give you a kick up the ass and walk away.” She did a double take. “You’d kick a kitten?”

“I’d kick Hunk if I didn’t think the gremlin would eat my foot.”

“All right, we’re getting off the subject.” Inhaling deeply, she let out a long breath. Her voice was small when she spoke. “I just don’t think I could bear it if I got comfortable in this relationship and then you left me later.” There, she’d set aside her pride and admitted her fear.

He cupped her nape and joined his forehead to hers. “Ah, baby, that’s never going to happen.

I'm not leaving you, and there's no way you're leaving me again, so don't even think it." He crushed her mouth with his, shooting his tongue into her mouth and coaxing her own to play. Relief filled him when she responded as enthusiastically as she always did. "Like I said, I don't know how deep this can go. Neither of us wants to be bonded, we test each other's self-control, I don't have a good work/play balance, I'm going to drive you absolutely insane trying to control you, and you're going to drive me insane when you rebel...Maybe it's fucking doomed, I don't know. But don't you want to know?"

No, she didn't want to know, she *had* to know. And didn't that just piss her off. She gave him a curt nod.

"Good. Because nothing and no one will keep me out of your life, Jaime. Not even you."



CHAPTER TEN

Over the next few weeks, as Dante intensified the training, Jaime came to understand just why Tao expected her to quit. In truth, she had come close to quitting many times. Who wouldn't? Dante was mean when he was in Trainer mode.

Each session they would begin with the warm-up that always left her feeling as though she'd been strapped to a medieval torture device. Once they had finished their laps of the perimeter, Dante would instruct her to practice more on stealth. When she began to progress, he'd increased the timings until soon he was asking her to remain still for an entire hour. Hard shit.

Only one week into their training, he had introduced her to his assault course. If hell had a playground, that would be it. Not only did she have to navigate through a large number of obstacles, but sometimes it was at extreme heights or even underwater. Then there were the snake pits and the eell pool and the times she needed to play limbo under a wasp nest. Not fun.

A number of times her wolf had wanted Jaime to take a chunk out of him. She had to admit the temptation was there. Come on, what did he think she was, a Gurkha freaking guide?

It took two weeks before she was no longer nearing a state of unconsciousness at the end of each sparring session and had perfected each combat move he taught her, such as the palm-heel strike, overhand, elbow strikes, round kick, side kick, sweeping, chokeholds, and joint locks. It was then that he introduced more combat moves such as the eye gouge, hammer fists, knee strikes, ground fighting, counters to strikes, and chokes and holds. She was still trying to perfect those, which was why she was currently on her ass. “Evil,” she said, panting. “That’s a good word to describe you right now.” Dante merely smiled down at her. “That’s what all the enforcers said during training. But they learned, and so will you.” He wondered if Jaime had any idea of just how much progress she had made in her training. She had soaked up everything he taught her. He suspected that Tao’s words were a big part of why she refused to give up, but most of it was because the female was made of steel. He knew she wasn’t convinced that bettering her control would make any difference long-term, but she was sticking with the regimen in any case. He was so unbelievably proud of her.

Now not only was she fitter and more experienced at combat, but her control over her wolf was improving. In the beginning, her wolf had managed to surface just enough to growl during sparring, but not anymore. Even now as Jaime was on the ground with her opponent looming over her, she was able to quash her wolf’s extreme urge to take a swipe at him and warn him off. And he *knew* it was what her wolf wanted. He could sense her agitation, as could his wolf.

After a few of the pack watched her spar a week ago and saw how well she kept her wolf leashed, their anxiety lessened to the extent that Trey didn’t insist on her being constantly guarded. He still didn’t let her be around Taryn alone, but that was pretty much expected.

Dante reached down and offered her his hand. She didn’t take it, just like he knew she wouldn’t. Instead, she jumped to her feet, making a distinct effort to regulate her breathing.

“Am I right in thinking that when it’s time for me to play cat and mouse with the enforcers and it does come to combat, they aren’t going to hold back?”

“You are definitely right to think that. Not even Dominic will hold back. I think you’d be surprised if you ever saw him fight. His humor and relaxed countenance totally disappear. It has to.

When it comes to combat, it's officially a life-or-death situation. As soon as their opponents realize that they're facing an enforcer who's come to defend the pack, they will know exactly what that means: they're going to die. No enforcer would allow anything different. It would be nice if they handed themselves over at that point, but unfortunately, they don't. They do everything and anything to fight the enforcers off and prefer to die fighting."

They began to circle each other slowly as he continued to speak. "And they don't fight cleanly, Jaime, but neither do my enforcers. They each know it isn't just about them as individuals; enforcers are responsible for one another's safety, and they know to use the raw, aggressive skills I've taught them, because the alternative is death—either theirs or that of a packmate—and that is not allowed." His commanding, dominant, assertive tone almost made her shiver. He might be evil like this, but he was also sexy as all hell.

"I'll expect you to enter that same 'it's me or them' mind-set if you ever find yourself in a confrontation again. If any of Glory's crazy-ass brothers get hold of you, don't give them the chance to get in the first move. You must do everything and anything you can to subdue them: you hit first, you hit hard, and you aim to end the struggle as quickly as possible. That means targeting the vulnerable parts of the body, like the face, the neck, the groin. When you're in combat with the enforcers in a few weeks, you have to think of them as opponents and treat them just the same."

"That won't be a problem," said Jaime. "They've got some karma coming their way." His wolf liked her merciless streak, baring his teeth in a feral grin. Just the same, Dante found himself grinning. His Jaime had a fondness for vengeance, and he had the distinct feeling that the enforcers, particularly Tao, would be sorry they doubted her ability to complete and pass the training.

"Good. Let's go again."

For twenty minutes, Jaime fought with everything she had, hit him with every move she knew...but soon enough she was flat on her back, gazing up at him. "You're so not getting lucky later."

"That's what you always say," he chuckled. Both he and his wolf tensed as they saw that Jaime was in some pain with the effort to keep her wolf suppressed. Squatting down, Dante collared her throat with his hand to get her wolf's

attention. Distrustful and unsettled though she was, her wolf had come to acknowledge Dante's dominance over her. Sometimes his handling helped calm her wolf.

Other times, her wolf viewed his behavior as a challenge and she rose to that challenge—or, at least, she tried to, but Jaime always managed to keep a hold on her. The animal was too temperamental for him to predict her responses, but he was prepared to risk it whenever Jaime was in pain.

He let his eyes flash wolf, communicating directly with Jaime's wolf. Little by little, the tension left Jaime's body, and he knew her wolf was calming. "Better, baby?"

"If you like your wrist attached to your arm, you might want to release me." He smiled at that. Even if he could get her wolf always to instantly submit with the dominant move, which was terribly unlikely, he would never get Jaime to do it. Placing his free hand beside her head, he leaned over and nipped her mouth. "You like it when I hold you like this." Okay, yeah, she did, Jaime could admit to herself. But admit it to Popeye? Not a chance. She snorted derisively. "It's cute that you really believe that." He smiled against her mouth before claiming it with his own. She went lax, giving him what she knew he wanted and smiling at the sound of his groan. Then, in a move he'd only recently taught her, she flipped him onto his back and straddled him. "You dropped your guard. Tut, tut, tut."

Grinning lopsidedly, he shaped her waist with his hands. "It's a habit with you. How can I not get distracted by this delectable body that's all mine? Seeing it all hot and sweaty is the highlight of my day."

"I can say the same about you." She would actually be disappointed when the training was over. At present, she was guaranteed to spend a few hours alone with him each day. The guy worked practically all day, every day. As such, sometimes these few hours were the only quality time they managed to have. She still saw him at mealtimes, but they were surrounded by the rest of the pack and he was still in Beta mode then, so it wasn't the same.

She understood that he had a lot of responsibilities, and she was proud of him. But was it such a bad thing that she missed him when he was gone? In fact, she missed him when he was there, because even when he was with her, he wasn't always completely there. His mind could sometimes be on things he needed to

do or hadn't done, and his cell phone was like a hotline.

Although she had been prepared for it, she hadn't really realized until recently just how much of an effect his dedication to his job would have on their relationship. She'd hoped to teach him how to find a work/play balance, but it was proving difficult. Why? Two reasons. One, Dante didn't seem to think the lack of a balance was a problem. Two, she had realized that, on a subconscious level, he didn't want to find that balance.

It had taken her a little time to figure out why, but eventually she'd deduced that Dante actually had intimacy issues. Not sexually, but emotionally. It wasn't really such a surprise, considering that the woman he had loved and imprinted with had betrayed him. But it was difficult to know that the person she cared about avoided any chance of feeling the same, even if it wasn't on a conscious level.

Mattering to him wasn't the same as him caring about her. Knowing that she was second in his life was hard, particularly because he came first to her.

"So how will you be spending your evening?" he asked.

"I have a poker game to go to."

"Poker, huh?" He smiled, knowing she'd win simply because she hated to lose. Even when she lost, she didn't count it. "Who's playing?"

"Me, Shaya, Gabe, and Dominic."

"Dominic," he echoed with a snap of his teeth. "He spends a little too much time with you for my liking."

She ignored his odd tone. "Friends tend to do stuff together."

"Yeah, and 'stuff' is fine when it isn't a guy flirting with you all night."

"If you could call it flirting," she said with a snort. "Dominic would never trespass, and you know it."

He did know it, but it still pissed him off that while he was away from her she was with that pervert, who would happily make moves on her if the path was

clear. Okay, it was more that he was jealous that he couldn't spend as much time with her as Dominic could.

"You could come to the game, too."

"I can't, baby. I—"

She held up her hand. "You don't have to explain. I know you're busy. It was just a thought." The more understanding she was, the worse he felt whenever he disappointed her. "It's Josh's birthday party tomorrow. We could go if you want." No doubt it would be a big event, since Josh had recently taken over as Alpha of the Bjorn Pack after the death of Trey's uncle.

"I wouldn't have thought you cared."

He shrugged, smoothing his hands up and down her thighs. "Being honest, I'm not particularly interested in rebuilding my relationship with him. Too much has gone on for that to be possible. Plus, he actively encouraged Trey's banishment. But I've heard that his mate's pregnant. Maybe it would be a good idea to shove all our shit aside. I'd like to know my niece or nephew." Oh, he was just way too cute. Not many people would be able to put aside the kind of crappiness that existed between him and Josh. Jaime doubted that she could've. Although Josh had really only followed Blane's example, it was no excuse, in her opinion. He had his own mind, his own will, and he should have used it. He should have protected his baby brother. "Any opportunity I can find to spend some time with you, I'll take."

Although she'd said it with a smile, Dante had sensed the slight sadness there. He sat upright and folded his arms around her. "I know we don't get much—"

"This is your job, I get that."

Dante sensed her melancholy and sighed inwardly. He wondered if she had any idea just how much she'd changed him over these past few weeks. Before her, there were times when he'd gone almost three days without sleep or with just a brief nap in his office chair. Now every night he went back to his room, because he knew she'd be there when he did. Welcoming him, holding him, giving him attitude, and making him laugh.

She also drove him insane. He could never find a damn thing in that room

among all that clutter. The number of times he'd tripped over one of her shoes and nearly broken his neck was unreal. She'd jumbled his neat and orderly room just as much as she had his neat and orderly life. For the first time, he'd wondered if maybe his life had been too orderly—or dull, as Jaime liked to think of it. She brought color to his black-and-white world. If someone had told him before now that he would like to complicate his predictable world, he'd have snorted.

The sound of his cell phone beeping snatched him from his thoughts. He reached over to his jacket, which was on the ground beside Jaime's, and dug out his cell. Seeing that he had a text message from Trey summoning him to his office, he gave her an apologetic smile. "Training's over for today, baby."

Hiding her disappointment, she smiled and rose from the floor so that he could get from underneath her. "No worries. I'll see you later." He stood upright, shot her a smile, and then the playful, tender look on his face disappeared and the Beta mask slid right back on. Her Dante was gone. Without a second look at her, he grabbed his coat and jogged away.

Slipping her arms into her jacket, she fought off the chill she felt at the loss. Not just of his body heat, but of *him*— Dante the person as opposed to Dante the Beta. Intending to go for a quick shower before breakfast, she began making her way back to the caves. Halfway there, her cell phone rang. She smiled when she saw that it was Ivy. "Hey, bitch, what's up?" A pause. "Um...Jaime, I..."

The croaky sound had Jaime halting in her tracks. "Ivy? Ivy, is everything okay?"

"One of the dogs, Jaime..."

Ivy didn't have to say any more for Jaime to understand. No matter how prepared they were for the dogs being put down, it always hit them hard. "Who?" No answer. That said more than words could, but still Jaime persisted, hoping that she was wrong. "Who was put down, Ivy?" A long pause. "Ben. I'm so sorry, honey."

Emotion clogged her throat, but she held back the tears. "What happened?"

"He attacked one of the staff last night. He hurt him really badly, Jaime."

“But Ben wasn’t a violent animal.”

“You know as well as I do that just because he never hurt you doesn’t mean he’d never hurt anyone else. If we don’t know their histories and what’s traumatized them, we don’t know what might trigger them to snap. I really am so sorry, Jaime.”

“I’m fine,” she lied, her voice unsteady.

“Take today off. You really don’t want to be here today.”

No, she didn’t, because although she understood that the staff member wasn’t to blame, she would undoubtedly find herself wanting to kill him. “See you tomorrow. Take care.” It was only a second after she ended the call that the tears came. Yeah, she should be used to this by now, but it was always a blow to her system when one of the dogs she cared for had to be put to sleep. At some point the same thing could happen to her—something could act as a trigger for her wolf and give her enough strength to surface. And then God knows what her wolf would do. Jaime just hoped that someone dealt with her before she could hurt anyone.

Suddenly feeling the need to be held—dominant female or not, she wasn’t made of stone—she instinctively called Dante. No answer. Five minutes later, she tried again. No answer. After another fifteen minutes she tried again, and again, and again. Soon three whole hours had passed and he hadn’t responded in any way to her attempts to call him. She knew there was no pack emergency, knew his meeting with Trey had ended two hours before. She even knew where he was—his damn office. But she wouldn’t chase after him.

When he didn’t appear for lunch, her sense of desolation increased. Again, she tried calling him, but nothing. When he didn’t turn up to the evening meal either, she was so down on herself that even her wolf was feeling depressed. Down because of Ben, down because she could soon be just as dead as he was, and down because the one person she needed wasn’t there. So she did what she always did when she wanted to forget about something for a little while. She made it her mission to get drunk.

The knock on his office door made Dante groan. It was now ten in the evening, and all he wanted to do was hunt down Jaime and take her to bed. He knew she’d been trying to call him, but he had been so damn busy. First he’d had to

have a meeting with Trey to discuss a possible alliance with another pack; Trey had wanted him to do the necessary research into the pack before a decision was made.

Then Dante had had to see some of his own pack individually to go over issues they had raised. Then there had been phone calls he'd had to take or make, and a lot of paperwork to mill through. As much as he'd wanted to talk to Jaime, the last thing he'd needed was to hear her husky voice and have her distracting him.

"Come in." He was surprised to see Trick enter with a smile on his face.

"D, um, you might want to see this."

"Later, I've got a lot of stuff to do."

Trick rolled his eyes in a way that said, *What's new?* "No, you really do want to see this now.

Come on."

A mixture of exasperated, curious, and confused, Dante rose from his seat.

"What?"

"It's nothing to be worried about, she's fine, but—"

"Jaime?"

"Just come take a look."

"Dude, you are so my BFF," said Jaime as she folded her arms behind her head and gazed up at the night sky. "I mean, I don't go counting stars with just anyone, you know." Shaya, who was lying beside her on the grass, put a finger to her lips. "Don't tell Taryn this, okay, but you're so my BFF, too. Oh wow, look, that one's twinkling. Twinkle, twinkle, little star, la, la, la, la, la, la, la."

"You know what I don't understand? Why they sing 'Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.' Why do they wonder? They already know what it is—they answered their own question before they even asked it."

"Oh yeah. My favorite nursery rhyme was always 'Georgie Porgie pudding and

pie, kissed the girls and made them cry, and when the boys came out to play...he kissed them too 'cause he's funny that way.'"

Jaime burst out laughing and gave her drinking partner a high five, almost missing her hand.

"Only you could make me laugh on a day this sad." She released a sigh. "Ben was such a gorgeous dog, you know. My heart used to ache for him when I saw him shaking and trembling."

"You have to look at it this way...he's at peace now. He's up in doggy heaven." Jaime frowned at Shaya. "Do you think there's a separate heaven for dogs?" Shaya looked at her like she was stupid. "Duh. Have you not seen the movie *All Dogs Go to Heaven*?"

The girl had a point. "I'm still sad that he died. I'm going to die like that, too. Just like him, I'll snap and attack someone close to me." Currently, her wolf was quiet. For some reason, large amounts of alcohol made it difficult for shifters to change form, as it seemed to submerge their animals, which was why it was very rare that shifters drank large amounts. But Jaime would be fine in the event of a problem, because she wasn't drunk, not even a little.

"Dante won't let you die."

An ugly snort popped out of Jaime. "I doubt he'd be much good in an emergency with me. I've tried calling him about fifty times, but has he answered? No. Has Beta Boy taken his attention away from his job for even one second for me? No. I should just call him. I should just call him and tell him exactly what I think of him. No, I shouldn't. Here, take my phone. Don't let me call him." She fished her BlackBerry out of her pocket and handed it to Shaya.

"I got your back. You're like the sister I never had. Did I ever tell you that?"

"Aw, sweetie, right back at you. You know that I love you, right? Seriously, I'm not just saying it because I'm tipsy. I really do love you. You and me are tight. We're like this." She crossed her fingers. Shaya nodded, mimicking the move. "I mean, if you hadn't been here for me tonight, I dunno what I would've done."

"It's the least I can do. You've been here for me, too. Like with the Nick thing. I still can't believe how he's acting."

“You know, we should totally get a gun and a shovel and take care of that guy. I told him to stay away from you, you know. Oh yeah, I warned him away. I don’t think he’ll stay away. But we can shoot him when he comes here.”

A look of pure excitement took over Shaya’s face. “Yeah! Let’s go get a gun right now!”

“Ooh yeah, we so should. But wait, I don’t have a permit. You?”

“No. Damn. We’ll get one tomorrow, and then we’ll assassinate His Alpha-ness.” She and Jaime shook hands and nodded.

A random thought suddenly popped into Jaime’s head. “Why do you think spiders travel alone? It has to be pretty lonely. Really lonely. I’m lonely.” Shaya’s head whipped around to face her. “What? Why? No, you can’t be lonely. That’s not allowed.”

“There’s just this big gulf between Dante and me. But it’s fine. It’s totally fine.”

“It’s not fine.”

“No, it’s not. I should tell him that. Gimme my phone.” She held out her hand, but it flopped onto her chest.

“You know, I think he really cares for you.”

Jaime gasped, feeling suddenly optimistic. “You do?”

“It’s practically tattooed on his forehead. Ooh—let’s get a tattoo.”

“Yeah!” Jaime rolled onto her side. “We totally should. Let’s do it tomorrow.”

“Totally. Definitely. What’re you getting? I’m thinking of getting ‘Nick Axton Is a Fuck-Ass’

right across my forehead.”

Jaime pursed her lips as she considered it. “I like it. It’s different. It has an edge to it.”

“I know, right?”

Patting the ground to her left, Jaime frowned. Gazing around and finding no sign of what she was looking for, her frown deepened. “Did you hide my drinks?” Shaya shook her head. “No, why?”

“I came out with, like, eight, and they’re gone.”

“You sure you didn’t drink them all?”

“I can’t have, or I’d be drunk, wouldn’t I?”

“Oh yeah, I never thought of it like that.”

Suddenly four heads were peering down at them, smiling in amusement, but only one held Jaime’s attention. “Hey, Popeye, how’s it going?”

“Popeye,” chuckled Shaya with a pig-like snort. Tao, Trick, and Marcus chuckled, too.

“What you doing down there, baby?” Dante asked, smiling. She was absolutely wasted. Seeing the eight empty bottles at her feet, he could guess why.

“We’re just talking,” replied Jaime. “You’ve heard of talking, right? It’s what people do on the phone. Well, those who *answer* it.”

Dante winced. Yeah, he deserved that. “I’m sorry, I am. I just had a lot of paperwork, and I was trying to get through it quickly so I could get back to you.”

“Aw, that’s so nice,” whispered Shaya, sounding close to tears.

He squatted down and stroked Jaime’s hair. “Come on, baby, let me take you inside.”

“Dude, you can’t.” Panic was in her voice.

“Why not?”

“We’re supposed to be getting drunk.”

“Well, I think you’ve both accomplished that. Come on, don’t make me go to bed alone. I’ve missed you.”

Shaya looked at Jaime. “Aw, he’s good, isn’t he?”

“His mouth is talented in more ways than one. I recall nearly passing out once.” Both girls went into a giggling fit.

Shaking his head and smiling, Dante picked her up and cradled her against him. Surrounded by her scent, he suddenly felt much more at ease, and the tension that had been riding him all day began to leave his body. Only she had the ability to calm and settle him like that. “Come on. Maybe you can tell me what possessed you to get wasted.”

“That was why I called you,” she mumbled against his T-shirt as he carried her. “I wanted to tell you.”

“Tell me what, baby?”

“Ben’s dead.”

“Ben? Who’s Ben?”

“The dog at the sanctuary. I used to sit in his cage with him.” His eyes fell closed as guilt jabbed him. “Ah, baby, I’m sorry.” He recalled how tenderly she’d stroked the dog, how she’d looked at him with such affection. Christ. Dante didn’t think he’d ever felt this much like shit in his life. There he’d been, with his head buried in his work, deliberately ignoring her attempts to contact him, and all this time she’d really needed him.

Sure, it was his job to take care of the pack, but Jaime was pack, too. He’d been thinking of her as the distracting girlfriend, forgetting that she was also among those who needed him. He’d let down the one person he would never wish to let down, the one person who didn’t deserve it.

“I’m so sorry about Ben, baby,” he said again once they were in their room. Sitting her on the edge of the bed, he tugged off her shoes. “And I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. It was shitty of me not to answer the phone or call you back.”

“Why didn’t you? Don’t you want me anymore? Am I boring you now? Wait! Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know.”

Guilt stabbed him again. He'd made her doubt him, had made her question her own self-worth.

God, he really was a bastard. "You could never bore me, and yes, I definitely want you. I'll always want you."

"Prove it," she dared, lying back.

"Oh no. Not right now. You're wasted, and you need to sleep it off." Not that he wasn't absolutely desperate to have her.

"No, I don't. I need you inside me." She needed to know he still wanted her. Needed to feel secure in his desire for her again. But he shook his head as he neatly positioned her shoes on the shoe rack. Freak.

"I'll prove it to you in the morning."

It was sweet that he really thought she was so easily put off.

In a swift, fluid movement that Dante hadn't seen coming, Jaime bolted upright, dropped to her knees in front of him, and unbuttoned his fly. "Whoa, baby, no."

"No? Huh. Your body's saying yes." She licked the head of his hard, ready-to-go cock and blew on it.

Dante shuddered and bit back a groan. She hadn't sucked him off yet, and he knew why: dominant females only did oral sex on their own terms. This, unfortunately, didn't count. "No, Jaime, you're drunk."

"Objection, I'm tipsy." She gave his cock a long lick from base to tip and smiled when it twitched against her lips.

He couldn't let her do this, he couldn't. It would be taking advantage of her while she was in this state. But, God, it would feel incredible, wouldn't it? Those lips would feel amazing around his

—

Tapping into his infamous self-control, he backed away. "Not tonight." The little witch followed him. He backed up again. She followed him again, this time

reaching out and grabbing his cock—not so tight it hurt, but tight enough that it made him hesitate in trying to back away from her again.

“Stay, Popeye.”

He ground his teeth as she began working her soft hand up and down his length with a firm, sure grip. Forcing himself to ignore the pleasure and attempt to reason with her, he placed his hand over hers to still her movements. “Not tonight, not while you’re wasted.” As if he hadn’t spoken, she let her tongue flick out to circle the head of his cock. “*Fuck.*”

“Well we *could* fuck, but you don’t want to. So I’m thinking I’ll just give you a blow job instead.”

His eyes drifted shut as she licked him again, and he was so tempted to let the pleasure sweep him under. *No.* He drew in a deep breath to help clear his head, but instead was assaulted by the sweet scent of her arousal. That really didn’t help. Then she licked the slit, sweeping up the precome there. “Son of a bitch, Jaime, stop.” She didn’t. She took the head into her mouth and sucked hard, wrenching another loud groan from him. The heat of her mouth was unbelievable, but he couldn’t let her do this. He yanked on her hair, tugging her head back. “I said stop.” She looked up to see his lips set into a hard line and a burning resolve in his eyes—both of which told her not to disobey him. Snort. He should know her better than that by now. “I want to taste you.”

He groaned. What guy wouldn’t want to hear those words? And hearing them in that carnal voice while she was on her knees in front of him...It was his fantasy come to life, and he wanted it so badly. “If you still want to do it in the morning, I’m definitely game. But not right now. If I let you do it, you’ll be pissed with me when the alcohol’s out of your system.” He felt her go lax as her grip on him loosened, and she nodded. “Good girl.”

He released her hair and was about slip his hand under her arm to pull her to her feet when she surprised him by shooting forward and clamping those plush lips around his cock again. “Shit!

Jaime...Jaime, I’m not a saint.” She sucked so hard her cheeks hollowed as her head bopped up and down on him. “Jaime...” The witch sucked harder while at the same time massaging his balls with one hand. He shuddered when the head hit the back of her throat as she sucked him deeper. Worse, she grazed him

lightly with her teeth just before he felt her throat contracting around him. *Fuck it.* He slid one hand to the back of her head and tangled it in her hair. “Harder. Oh yeah, baby, that’s it. God, that feels so good.”

Jaime smiled triumphantly around his cock. She had him. She’d splintered his self-control, which meant that he still wanted her as badly as he had before. Rewardingly, she danced her tongue along his shaft, enjoying bringing him this pleasure that she knew he’d wanted for a while.

“That’s it.” Keeping his grip on the back of her head, he fed her more of him. “Suck me deep, Jaime. Take as much of me as you can.”

She could tell by the sound of his voice that he wasn’t expecting her to take all that much of him. But there was something he didn’t know about her, and it made her smile inwardly.

As Dante watched her swallow his entire length—something that no one had ever done before

—he almost came right then. No gag reflex. “Shit, baby.” He drank in the sight she made, knowing it was burned into his memory. “You look so damn gorgeous down there with my cock in your mouth.” Her eyes briefly darted up to his. “Are you mine, Jaime?”

It wasn’t a question, Jaime knew. Flicking a look at his face again, she saw the warning in his eyes to give him the answer he wanted. Knowing he would lose all control if she didn’t even slightly object, she simply nodded. He growled his approval, wrapped her hair around both his fists, and began fucking her mouth.

“Suck harder, Jaime. Make me come.” The combination of her obedience and the feeling of her claws dragging down his thighs pushed him over the edge. Growling her name, he came hard in her mouth, brushing the back of his hand down the column of her throat to ensure she swallowed it all.

For him, it was another way to mark her as his. He might not be able to claim her as his mate, but he could sure as hell mark her in as many ways as he could.

He was ready to return the favor when she suddenly flung herself on the bed in a starfish position, and he’d swear she was asleep before her head even hit the pillow. Crazy bitch.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mom screaming. Black wolf. Blood. Growls. Black wolf. Dad shifting. Teeth.
More wolves. Claws.

Mom screaming. Black wolf. Dad roaring. Claws. Black wolf. Blood. Teeth.
More wolves. Dad roaring. Blood. Blood. Blood.

“Jaime, wake up, baby.”

Black wolf. Blood. Growls. Mom screaming. Black wolf. Teeth. Claws. Blood.

“Wake up.”

Mom screaming. Claws. Black wolf. Blood. Blood. Black wolf. Blood. Blood. Blood.

“Jaime, now!”

With a loud gasp, Jaime vaulted upright in the bed. Her panting quickly became a loud cry of pain as her wolf fought with everything she had to escape her cage and deal with the threat that she didn't understand was long gone. Jaime instinctively creased over with the pain, curling her arms around her stomach to help ease the spasms. Her wolf persisted in trying to escape her confines, leaping at the walls, clawing at them, and body-slamming them as she howled in anxiety. Breathing and thinking through the familiar agony, Jaime fought to keep control, to prevent the change.

“Come here, baby, come here.” Dante curved his body around her. His wolf was frantic with the need to do something, to cancel out her pain. Snaking a hand around her throat, Dante whispered into her ear, “It's okay, it's okay.” But he sensed no response from her wolf. “Calm down,” he ordered, pouring authority into the words. That seemed to get her wolf's attention, as a rebellious growl trickled out of Jaime. Good. If her wolf was focused on him, she was focused on the present as opposed to the past. “Stop.”

“I'm going to be sick,” warned Jaime as her wolf became distracted enough that she resisted fighting to surface. Leaping out of Dante's hold, she dashed to the en-suite bathroom and vomited repeatedly into the toilet until there was nothing left. The entire time, Dante held her hair out of the way and stroked her back.

“She fought a lot harder than that time at the bar.”

Jaime simply nodded, breathing heavily.

“But you kept control, baby. You still fought off her efforts to shift.”

“Only just.”

He understood now why she so feared what her wolf might do if she took over. He'd sensed her wolf's fear and anxiety, her need to defend and protect and to

eliminate the threat she believed was there. If she had surfaced in that state, she would have attacked him or anyone else near for sure.

“You certain you still want to keep me here?”

It was a rhetorical question, he knew. She genuinely thought he’d fear her wolf now. He gripped her chin. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She sounded tired and defeated even to herself. “Dante, you know it’s best for me to—”

“You’re not leaving me. You promised me you wouldn’t, Jaime. Yes, she was strong. But you were stronger. And you’ll keep getting stronger.”

“Yeah, but so will she.”

Just as Dante had anticipated, Josh had gone totally over the top for his birthday. Colored lanterns, balloons, and birthday banners were everywhere, particularly in the opening of the forest. Hey, Dante loved a good party like everyone else, but the whole thing was set up in a way that suggested the guy was all-important and deserved to be worshipped. Being Alpha didn’t mean the pack owed him that.

It was his job to earn their trust and respect.

“Is it just me who’s thinking that he’s gone a little overboard?” grumbled Jaime. Although she wasn’t at all interested in celebrating Josh’s birthday, she was quite enjoying seeing her old packmates.

“Nope, not at all.”

Seeing that yet another guy was ogling Jaime, Dante curled an arm around her and gripped her hip possessively. Not that he could really blame the guy. She was always beautiful to Dante, but she looked particularly stunning tonight in her white strapless dress and white stilettos. He’d barely resisted taking her hard and fast before they left. He was looking forward to rolling up that dress and bending her over while he fucked her until she forgot how to breathe.

Seeing so many males admiring her had his wolf on edge, as if waiting to be challenged. Dante couldn’t help wondering if any of those guys from this pack

were ex-boyfriends of hers. It was probably best that he didn't know. He couldn't be sure he wouldn't punch them if it turned out that they were.

Snapping him out of his thoughts, an elderly couple approached. Immediately he recognized them from when he was younger. Just as many other members of his old pack had done that night, they shot question after question at him: How had he been? How was the rest of the Phoenix Pack doing?

Were he and Jaime mated? Then they would ask Jaime if she had any intention of returning and all about how Gabe was doing. He quickly came to realize that Jaime and Gabe had been popular in the pack, and he had to wonder why it was that they left.

Although it was nice seeing old pack members, he often found his mind drifting. He was very much aware of just how much work he had waiting for him back at his office, and it was playing on his mind. Being here was taking away valuable time he could have used on getting all that done.

Several times people had had to repeat their questions at least twice before it even registered to him that they were talking to him. Luckily, Jaime was a good conversationalist.

"You know, you could at least *look* like you're enjoying yourself." He blinked at her words, only then realizing the elderly couple was gone. He supposed it was kind of obvious that he was eager to leave. "Sorry. I just have a lot on my mind." Yeah, and that was always the problem with him, thought Jaime with a sigh. She wanted to be understanding, she really did, but sometimes she couldn't help resenting how little consideration she got. It was one thing for him to be tending to his duties, but it was another thing for him to be off in a world of his own when he was supposed to be spending time with her. Resisting the urge to argue with him was difficult, but she managed it.

"Dante," drawled a voice that was almost as gruff as Dante's. Jaime inwardly rolled her eyes.

God, she despised this guy. Out of all the brothers, he looked the most like Dante, but he was nowhere near as attractive.

"Josh," said Dante with a nod and a shake of the hand. "Happy birthday."

“Thanks. This is my mate, Rhea. You saw her briefly when we came to your territory with some of the others to ask about Taryn.”

Dante gave her a nod. “Congratulations on the pregnancy.”

“Thank you,” she said, placing a hand on her flat stomach. Josh turned to Jaime then.

“Jaime, it’s been a while. How’ve you been?”

“Super,” she replied flatly before quickly switching her attention to Rhea, giving her a brief hug. The redhead was a lot like Ryan in the sense that she didn’t say much, but she had a keen pair of eyes and a strong set of morals.

Dante frowned when Josh didn’t even arch a brow at Jaime’s lack of respect toward him. It was clearly no surprise to him.

“She’ll never forgive me for the way I was with you when we were kids,” he told Dante. “She didn’t feel that she could respect and follow me as she should be able to with her Alpha.” That was what her behavior was all about? That was why she left the pack? Dante swallowed hard, touched by the idea, and ran a hand down her hair. He’d known she was angry at all his brothers, but he hadn’t suspected that this anger was what made it impossible for her to follow Josh.

He hadn’t suspected it was enough to make her leave the pack she had been born and raised in.

Another redhead suddenly approached and gently nudged Rhea. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

As Rhea’s sister’s gaze raked over Dante, Jaime had the urge to poke those ogling eyes right out of her head. That same urge had repeatedly come to her throughout the night when various females had flashed him smiles that said they were remembering good times with him. Jerk.

Rhea nodded. “Dante, this is my sister, Marley. Marley, this is Josh’s brother. He’s also Beta of the Phoenix Pack.”

Marley gave him a dazzling smile and began chatting away to him, not even sparing Jaime a glance. Not that she and Jaime had ever been good friends or

anything. Quite the opposite. It was kind of hard to be friends with someone who once tried to shove your face in a toilet, and Jaime was a grudge holder. Seeing that Marley was now licking her bottom lip invitingly at Dante and had moved even closer, Jaime clenched her fists. Her wolf was urging her to bare her teeth. “I take it the staring and drooling are side effects of your meds?”

Marley’s eyes finally went to Jaime, and she actually blushed. “Oh. It’s you.” She turned back to Dante. “Please tell me you’re not with her. I mean, she’s had nearly every guy here.” Just like that, Dante’s blood was boiling. His attention shot to Jaime, who, rather than looking angry or defensive, appeared bored.

Jaime sighed. “You never let the facts get in the way, do you, Marley?”

“She’s lying?” Dante had to hear her say it loud and clear.

Offended, Jaime gawked. “Of course she’s lying! How could you think she wasn’t?!” Insulted, her wolf flexed her claws, wanting to take a swipe at him.

Marley’s expression was sympathetic when she spoke to Dante. “Oh, you didn’t know? Well, I guess I wouldn’t want to broadcast that if it was me. I can understand why she’d lie about it.” Seeing that Dante was actually looking doubtful, Jaime wasn’t sure who she wanted to hit more. It wasn’t as if the guy was the Virgin freaking Mary anyway, was it? How hypocritical was that! What hurt her most was that he would actually think Marley was telling the truth.

“Marley, enough,” chastised Rhea.

“He has a right to know. I actually figured he already knew.” She shook her head at Jaime.

“You really have no one to blame but you, though.”

Somehow suppressing her wolf, who was eager to slice open Marley’s stomach, Jaime simply gave her an unpleasant smile. “You know, I watched an old episode of *Friends* yesterday. It was so damn funny it could have made your boobs fall off...Oh, you saw it.” Startled laughs burst out of both Rhea and Josh. In an instant, Marley’s expression went from amused to horrified.

Jaime jabbed Dante in the chest with her finger. “And you...It’s almost as though you have a curiosity about testicle retrieval surgery.”

As she began marching off, Dante strode after her and looped his arm around her, pulling her back against his chest. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“Get off me.”

“I shouldn’t have doubted you, I’m sorry. My head’s just full of all kinds of stuff right now.” Of course it was. She sharply shrugged out of his hold and turned to face him. He stiffened as if bracing himself for impact. What, did the workaholic jerk think he’d actually cracked her hard-won self-control and she was going to lunge at him? He should. She was thinking about it. Now would be good.

“Don’t be mad, baby—”

“We’re leaving.”

“What?”

She couldn’t believe that he sounded genuinely surprised. “You might be standing right there, but you’re not actually *with* me. Your head’s somewhere else, just like always. Sorry to see that spending time with me bores you so much.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to spend time with you. You know I do.”

“When there’s sex involved, sure. Or when you know that sex will *soon* be involved, sure.” He felt his face harden. “It’s not like that.”

Ignoring him, she continued, “But any other time, your head is back in your office.”

“You knew my job was demanding, Jaime.”

“Yeah, I knew I’d have to share you with your job. What I didn’t know was that I’d come second to it.”

“You’re not second.” How could she even think that?

“Yes, I am. But I don’t deserve to be.” He looked about to say something, but then a tall, regal-looking brunette decorated in pearls appeared, and his mouth dropped open wide, making Jaime frown inwardly. Was it admiration? Shock?

Horror? All three?

“Laurie,” he muttered to himself, stunned.

The bottom fell out of Jaime’s stomach, and suddenly it felt as though her lungs had been pierced. God, not *her*. Not the woman he’d once loved enough to imprint with. Her wolf instantly growled, viewing her as competition. Then Jaime looked down and saw the boy at her feet, a boy who looked just as Dante had when he was ten years old, and a sickening feeling overcame her. It was well known that female shifters couldn’t get pregnant by anyone they weren’t mated to, but Laurie had been partly imprinted with Dante. She had been his mate—well, *half* mate—for a short while.

Could that count?

“Dante, how are you?” Laurie stepped forward and hugged him hard. When Dante’s hand left Jaime’s back and he awkwardly returned the hug, Jaime honestly thought she was going to be sick. Or slaughter them both right there and then.

Stepping back and trying to regain his sense of equilibrium, Dante replied, “I’m great. You?”

“Fabulous, thanks. Who’s this?”

Double-blinking, he turned to Jaime and saw how stiff she was. Her face was totally blank, but he could sense that she was pissed with him. Hugging another female was asking for trouble. Hugging a female he had once been partially imprinted with was pretty much suicidal. He had a feeling that he might have to do some serious groveling tonight. “Jaime, this is Laurie, Blane’s mate. Laurie, this is Jaime, my—”

“Packmate,” Jaime finished.

Dante winced. Oh yeah, he was in deep shit. It wasn’t as though he’d *wanted* to hug Laurie.

He’d just been in shock, and she’d practically dived on him. He’d always thought that if he saw her again, he’d at least feel a mixture of sadness and yearning, but there was nothing. There wasn’t even anger at the pain she had

once put him through. That pain had been dulled since being with Jaime and was now nothing more than a slight prick of betrayal. How could he possibly yearn for someone else when he had a woman as amazing and perfectly suited to him as Jaime?

Despite recognizing Laurie as the female he had once been partially mated to, his wolf paid her no attention. He was more concerned about Jaime, fretting over how agitated she was. Right now, Dante was thinking of killing Josh for not warning him that he'd invited their eldest brother and his mate. "Where's Blane?"

"He couldn't make it. So it's just me and Leif."

Dante hadn't even noticed the kid until then. He felt the color drain from his face. He decided to ignore the fact that the kid looked so much like him. He also decided to ignore that the boy was approximately ten years old and it had been ten years ago that he and Laurie were together. Lots of people had kids who resembled their siblings. It didn't mean anything.

Laurie curled an arm around Leif and hugged him to her side, smiling proudly. "Isn't he the best looking boy you ever saw?"

Jaime noted that Leif tensed at the contact and was peering up at his mother with a confused expression, almost as if her affection and pride in him was unusual.

"It's the Garcea blood, isn't it, kid?" Dante said to him.

Leif smiled a crooked smile that looked so much like Dante's, and Jaime's heart almost broke.

The possible implications were just too much for her to take in right then. She needed to get away, even though it wouldn't be a good move to leave while the only woman he'd ever loved was practically lounging all over him, talking madly about a kid who was quite possibly his. The jerk wasn't even removing her hands from him!

At any other time, Jaime would have clawed the bitch and made her claim on Dante clear, but what was the point in her making any kind of possessive gesture? Jaime cared for Dante—more than she was willing to admit, in fact—but that was part of the problem. Just as she'd anticipated, it ate at her to be with

him, caring so much for him, when those feelings weren't returned.

She "mattered," he'd say. Yeah? Well, "mattering" to him wasn't enough to make her feel secure in the relationship. Because of that, he didn't feel like he was hers. If the delighted look on his face was anything to go by, he was still very much in love with Laurie anyway. He looked the happiest he had looked all night. Far be it for her to ruin the prick's cozy reunion with the female who had once betrayed and left him. If he actually stupidly preferred someone so disloyal and fickle, they deserved each other.

Fifteen minutes had gone by since Dante first noticed that Jaime wasn't beside him. He'd guessed that maybe she'd gone to get another drink or use the restrooms, but she still hadn't reappeared. She could have just gotten to talking to someone, but both he and his wolf had the feeling that that wasn't it.

"Excuse me," he muttered to Laurie, who was jabbering on about something or other. He'd forgotten how vain and superficial she was. Or maybe he just hadn't noticed before. He hadn't taken more than four steps before he heard her calling him.

"Dante, wait."

He turned. "I can't, I need to find Jaime. I don't suppose you saw which way she went, did you?"

She studied his face and then her smile fell. "She's more than just a packmate to you, isn't she?" She bit her bottom lip, suddenly looking nervous. "Could we go somewhere to talk? Alone?"

"About what?"

"I just wanted to clear things up. I know the decision I made, leaving you for Blane...I know it must have hurt you and—"

He quickly cut her off. "Laurie, you chose to be with your mate. I can't blame you for that."

"I heard that you stopped dating after I left you."

And that had flattered her, he realized. "What happened made me hesitate to get

involved in a relationship again, yeah.”

“But you’ve made an exception with Jaime?” She didn’t sound too happy about it. As if she thought he should be still pining after her.

“Yes. Look, I need to go find her.”

“Wait.”

“What, Laurie?” he asked impatiently. She flinched at his tone.

“You hate me, don’t you? Please don’t, Dante. I couldn’t bear it if you hated me.” Why did he get the feeling that this was all an act to get him to stay with her and comfort her?

“I don’t hate you. It was a long time ago. Say bye to Leif for me.” He moved away before she could say another word and headed to where Josh stood only a few feet away. “You haven’t seen Jaime, have you?”

He chuckled. “I’m the one person you can be sure she’d avoid.”

“So you haven’t seen her?”

“No. I’m surprised you let her leave your side.”

“You could have warned me that Laurie was here.”

Josh had the grace to look sheepish. “I actually hadn’t expected any of you to come and—”

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

“Well, if you’ve been distracted so much by your ex that you neglected Jaime, you can bet your ass that she’s left by now.”

Dante was thinking the same thing. Nodding, he delved into his pocket and retrieved his cell as he walked away, continuing to scan the crowds. To his surprise, she answered on the fourth ring. Oh.

He’d sort of expected the silent treatment. Maybe she wasn’t pissed after all.

“Hey, baby, where are you?”

“What the fuck do you care?”

No, she was definitely pissed. “Where are you?”

“I’m in a cab, and I’m about five minutes away from pack territory.” He picked up his pace until he was practically marching to the SUV. “I’m on my way back now.”

“Oh don’t leave on my account! Stay with your precious Laurie and have a for-old-time’s-sake fuck! I hope she strangles herself with those damn pearls!” It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to tell her that her jealousy was making him hard. “Keep giving me attitude, baby. I’m looking forward to fucking it right out of you.”

“I don’t think so, Popeye! You stay the fuck away from me! We’re done!” He was pretty sure his heart stopped for a second. “What do you mean, we’re done?”

“We’re done, over, *finished!*”

His wolf growled angrily. “Like hell we are. We’ll talk about this when I get back. I’ll be there soon.” She’d already hung up on him.

He was going to spank her ass so damn hard.

That plan was unfortunately foiled by the fact that she wasn’t in their room. Going by how faint her scent was, it was obvious that she hadn’t been in there since earlier. It was easy enough for Dante to guess where she was hiding. He stalked through the tunnels until he came to her old room and turned the knob. The door didn’t budge, and he almost smacked his face on it. *Motherfucker.* She’d locked him out. “Open up, Jaime.”

“Fuck off.”

He might have snapped at that if he hadn’t heard the tears in her voice. “Ah, baby, let me in. I know how that must have looked to you, but I couldn’t care less about her. Come on, open up.”

“Just go.”

“Not a chance.”

“I’m pretty sure I already told you *we’re done*.”

Both he and his wolf growled at that. “We’ll never be done, Jaime. Now let me in so we can work this out.”

“Just leave me alone and go back to that bitch!”

“I don’t want her, I want you. Now open the goddamn door.”

“Look at it this way: you won’t have to divide your time anymore. You can go live, eat, sleep, and shit in your office and there’ll be no girlfriend to call you.” He heard the seriousness in her voice and found himself beginning to panic. She wasn’t just saying this in anger or because she was upset. She genuinely wanted to end this.

Fuck that. In the weeks that they had been together, she had gone from being important to him to being essential to him. He no longer just wanted Jaime, he needed her. He hadn’t even realized just how much he needed her until right then. He didn’t even care if needing her made him weak. “I told you a few weeks ago, nothing and no one—not even you, baby—will keep me out of your life. Open up. We need to work this out.”

“Not in a million years, Beta Boy! *Now leave me the fuck alone!*” He might have persisted if she hadn’t burst into tears that very second. It sent a sharp pain zigzagging through his chest. He’d made her cry. He’d hurt his female that badly. “Okay. If that’s what you really want, I’ll leave you alone.”

As the sound of Dante’s footsteps faded away, Jaime began to cry even harder into her pillow. At this point, her jaw was aching and her throat was hurting, but she couldn’t stop. Even though she could barely breathe through the tears and her eyes were beginning to sting, she simply couldn’t stop.

A part of her hadn’t wanted him to go, had wanted to let him in her room and in her body, and just let being second best be good enough. For a while it really had been enough, but the more she grew to care about him, the harder it was to be satisfied with just that. She didn’t want him to give up his role as Beta or to neglect his duties. She just wanted him to want her the way she wanted him.

Wanted to come first in his heart. The sad fact was that she didn't even come close.

What happened the night before had brought home just how far down she was on his list of priorities. No matter how busy he was, it wouldn't have been too hard to take one minute out of his day to answer her calls. But she'd accepted his apology, had given him the benefit of the doubt. Then she'd spent most of her day excited about tonight, about getting to have some time with him to have fun. All she'd had to look forward to was Dante wearing a vacant expression while she went totally unheard.

But when his ex-half-mate came over, he was all smiles for her. She easily got his attention and then managed to keep it so well that he hadn't even noticed when Jaime walked away. Laurie had noticed, and she'd seemed extremely smug about it. Any other time Jaime might have answered her wolf's urge to skin the bitch alive, but Jaime had known the tears were coming and *damn* if she'd have cried in front of everyone like that.

It was the first time in her life that she'd experienced a "flight" instinct. How ironic was it that the one person who was supposed to make her feel safe and secure was the one person who had made her want to run away?

That thought just about broke her. Not even attempting to fight the tears, she cried herself to sleep.

Jaime squirmed slightly as a big, hard body covered over her back and molded itself around her.

The cocktail of pine needles, cinnamon spice, and sandalwood that filled her nostrils made her smile. She knew that scent, would know it anywhere. Of course she would. This wolf was hers.

She hummed as he pressed a feather-light kiss to her nape. The feel of his hot breath on her skin made a shiver run down her spine, and she jerked slightly.

"Shh, baby. Relax for me." When she did, he kissed the side of her neck lightly, rewardingly. "Good girl. My good girl." Gently, he planted more feather-light kisses on as much of her neck as he could reach. Occasionally he nipped the skin or licked at the bite marks there, making her moan.

Feeling his hard cock pressing against her ass—oh yes, please, she'd like some of that—she pushed back against it, suddenly wishing they weren't wearing any clothes. He groaned into her neck and began rocking against her, which caused her clit to rub against the bed each time. A white-hot surge of pleasure ran down her spine, and her breathing quickened. She'd been wet since almost the second she scented him, and now she was aching for him. When she felt his mouth at her cheek, she turned her face to his.

He flicked his tongue out to tease hers. "Hungry, baby?" She nodded. "Tell me you forgive me."

Jaime frowned. Forgive him? Forgive him for what?

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her ear before nibbling on the lobe. "I hate that I made you cry."

Cry? He hadn't made her cry, why would he—

Jaime's eyes flipped open, and all at once reality hit her. Ohhhhhh, the bastard. She struggled and twisted under him, growling and cursing. He lowered his body down even more on hers, trapping her there, and used his hands to pin hers to the bed. Had she been lying on her back, she would have been able to bite the fucker. Recalling every combat move she knew, she repeatedly attempted to turn the tables and gain the upper hand. As her trainer, he knew every damn move she was going to try, and he was prepared for every single one.

Eventually she stopped struggling, begrudgingly accepting it was useless. Her wolf was utterly pissed about that. "I locked the door."

"A locked door isn't going to keep me away from you," he said softly as he brushed his lips over to her nape and raked his teeth lightly over the skin. What he wanted to do was bite her hard, mark her again so that she understood who she belonged to, but he knew that throwing his dominance around wasn't going to help here. Even his wolf understood that. He'd messed up, he'd hurt her, and now he needed to fix it.

"The point is I don't want to see you."

"I know." He gently kissed her neck once more. "And I don't blame you. But we need to talk."

“You know what? We really don’t.”

“Do you have any idea how good it feels finishing work every night and coming back to find you right there in our bed? I don’t want to lose that.” It was strange how quickly he’d come to think of his room as *their* room and his bed as *their* bed.

“Only because you like having sex on tap.”

Dante bit her ear punishingly. “That’s not what I mean and you know it.” He kissed his way along her neck and over to her bare shoulder, glad she’d worn the strapless dress. He needed access to as much of her skin as he could to keep himself calm. Of course it was also making him harder than he already was. “If I was less selfish, I’d do what you want and let you go. If I was decent, I’d stand back and let you find a guy who’s better for you. But, see, the thing is...I wouldn’t let that guy live. So we need to work this out.”

“What’s the point? We’re barely ever together anyway.”

He couldn’t help feeling a little defensive. “I warned you my job was demanding.”

“It’s more than that. You hardly ever delegate. You’re always doing jobs that you don’t really need to do. You obsess over unfinished stuff. Even when you are with me, you’re constantly checking your e-mails on your BlackBerry or making calls. It’s like you feel compelled to be busy all the time.

I’m worried that you’ll burn out at some point.”

“Are you saying you want me to give up my position?” It was the one thing he’d been waiting for, the one thing he’d dreaded. Her response surprised him.

“No, absolutely not. I’m not giving you an ultimatum here. I’d never do that. I’m just explaining why I can’t be in this relationship—if you could call it that. You can’t have any idea how hard it is to be snuggled up to someone who you know is thinking about being somewhere else. I honestly thought I could handle it, Dante, but I can’t. I can’t handle coming second. If I didn’t care about you as much as I do, maybe I could.”

Hearing that she cared about him made him want to smile even as the tears in her

voice made him want to punch himself. He kissed her neck again, unable to get enough of the sun-kissed taste of her skin. “You don’t come second. Don’t ever think that.”

“What else am I supposed to think? I can understand that you have to work a lot, I get that and I accept it. But you never make any time for me and you. When we are together, we don’t do anything together other than train and fuck.” She felt him flinch. “It’s true, Dante. That’s not a relationship. It makes me a booty call, and I deserve better than that.”

A heavy sigh escaped him. “You’re right. You do deserve better. I honestly didn’t realize that I was reducing our relationship to that. The thing is, I’m relatively new at this, and I’m just taking my cues from you. I’m not used to being part of a couple, to having to make time for another person and constantly consider them—”

“Because you hold yourself back.”

“What?”

“You use your job as an excuse to avoid emotional intimacy. At first, I thought you knew, I thought that you’d open up a little now that we’re together. But you truly don’t realize that you do it, do you?”

He went to object to her claim, but he couldn’t. She was right. He did do that, and he had been doing it for a long time without even realizing it. Totally off-center, he buried his face in her hair, inhaling the familiar and comforting vanilla smell of her shampoo.

“I can understand why you do it. In all honestly, I’m not sure that I’d have been able to get into another relationship if someone I’d partly imprinted with had betrayed me and left me— *and* to be with my sibling. The fact that you’re even trying astonishes me. Especially when you obviously still love her,” she added, swallowing hard.

He lifted his head, frowning. “What? No—”

“I saw the way you were with her. You couldn’t take your damn eyes off her.” Her wolf growled at the memory.

Loosening his hold on her hands, he began massaging her palms with his thumbs. “I know I probably acted a bit weird, but it was just the shock. The last thing I’d expected was to see her. I felt nothing for her, Jaime. Nothing. My wolf wasn’t interested in her either.” Although her instincts told her he was being truthful, Jaime couldn’t quite believe that. “You gave her more attention than you did me. God, you didn’t even notice me leaving.” He winced. “Like I said, I was caught off guard, and she was telling me all about my nephew and, well, I was interested. Just like I’m interested in knowing Josh’s baby despite not having much of an interest in Josh himself. I don’t believe kids should pay for their parents’ mistakes.” She wondered if he was aware that he was talking about himself. “Yeah, well, your *nephew* sure looks like you.”

He knew what she was getting at. “He’s not mine.”

“You asked her?”

“No. But I know that Blane wouldn’t have kept him around unless he was sure the kid was his.

Besides, I’d have smelled the pregnancy on her before she left me. There’s no mistaking the smell of a pregnant shifter.”

Okay, he did have a point there. She might have thought of that herself if jealousy hadn’t been taunting her.

“I know I behaved like a dick tonight. It wasn’t fair to you that I let myself be distracted by thoughts of work—”

“—and Bitch Face.”

“And Bitch Face,” he allowed, stifling a smile. He had no idea how Jaime could think he wanted anyone but her. He’d assumed she knew how much he needed her, but then why would she?

He hadn’t told her, hadn’t even hinted at it. Instead, by working so much and so hard, he’d given her the impression that she came second to him.

It occurred to him then that if he didn’t give her those words, he really would lose her. “It’s a good thing that you care about me, baby, because I care about you. A lot. I’m not going anywhere. I can’t give you up, Jaime, and I won’t.

Now that I'm aware that I'm holding back from you, I can focus on changing it."

"I don't think you can. You're constantly stuck in Beta mode. You let your job define you.

Your job isn't who you are, Dante, it's what you *do*. There's a difference, but you don't see that." He thought about that for a second and then sighed. "You're right. Everything you've said has been right. Not that Rhett and the guys haven't already said that to me a thousand times. I just never really thought of it as a problem. But that was when I didn't have you to think about. You have needs and I'm not meeting them, and that's not acceptable to either of us. Give me a chance to fix this, baby.

I'll do what I can to ease my job commitments. I'll start delegating more and making sure we get more time together and—"

"Don't try to make huge changes," she interrupted, touched by the gesture and feeling her anger begin to melt. "That'll never work. And I'm not asking you to make big changes, I never did. I just wanted to appear in your schedule somewhere."

"From now on you will," he vowed, lifting his weight to flip her onto her back so that she could see the seriousness in his gaze. "When I plan schedules for me and the enforcers, you're going on mine—right there in black and white. You were right when you said that sometimes I do stuff I don't really need to do. I just have this...urge to be doing something, to keep busy. But I'll work on it

—no pun intended. I'll finish at a certain time each evening, okay? I can't say that I won't be called out occasionally to do things or sort things out. It's part of my job. But I'll make time for you, for us." As he stared down at her with a hint of desperation in his eyes, he seemed so lonely and lost.

He looked at her as if she was his lifeline, as if he really did need her. Jaime never would have guessed that this relationship was so important to him. Never would have imagined that he was prepared to make these kinds of changes to his life. She felt even more of her anger fizzle away.

When she didn't speak, Dante felt himself beginning to panic. His wolf was equally anxious.

He dropped his forehead to hers. “I know I’m a little fucked up. Don’t give up on me, baby. I’m not saying that things will suddenly be perfect. I’m a guy, and guys can be stupid. I admit I need the room to mess up a little. I can’t promise I won’t piss you off again, but I can promise you that I’ll never deliberately hurt you. Nothing is more important to me than you. Nothing.” Why did he have to say stuff like that and wear that vulnerable expression when she was trying to stay mad at him? Earlier, she had been resolute on the decision that their relationship was over. But hearing him say these things, knowing that he cared about her and was prepared to make so many changes to his life in order to make this work...It was hard to hold out against that. Oh and now he was delivering sensual licks to her neck, knowing perfectly well how it made her melt. “That’s a low move.”

He chuckled. “I’m not above using sneaky methods. You know, when I was five, my dad told me that if I hadn’t been the runt of the litter, I’d have made a good Beta. He said that even when I was a toddler I had a one-track mind, that if there was something I wanted, nothing would distract me from trying to get it. And now I want you. And I can promise you right now that if you tell me you still want to end this, I won’t leave you alone. I’ll do everything I can to wear you down. I’ll stalk you until you cry, panic, and give in.”

She tried not to smile in amusement, but it was hopeless. Trying to resist him was hopeless.

“You know, before you, I worked even longer hours and I didn’t make time for anything else.

Everybody thought I couldn’t possibly have been happy to work so hard, but I was. It wasn’t until *you* that I realized I hadn’t been happy at all. I’d been sort of content, but that’s not the same thing as being happy. Not really. You answer a kind of... *need* inside me that I hadn’t known I had. Do you hear me?

I *need* you. I’d never imagined saying that to another person. If you’d have asked me to choose between you or my job, I’d have chosen you, baby.”

As she saw the truth in his gaze, tears stung her eyes. She combed her fingers through his hair.

“You are so good with that mouth.”

He grinned, but he couldn't relax until he'd heard her say that she wasn't going to leave him.

“Does this mean you forgive me, that you'll give me a chance to fix this?” She released a long-suffering sigh. “I guess so.”

As relief washed over him, his body seemed to unlock from its position and sag. Dante fused his lips with hers, taking her taste inside him, pouring his need for her into her mouth. He kissed a path down her chin and along her neck, letting himself drown in her scent. He rubbed his cheek against hers, wanting that scent on his own skin and wanting his scent on hers.

“But I won't forgive you for hugging Bitch Face,” she added, snarling.

As his mouth twitched into a smile, he was glad she couldn't see his face. He knew she wouldn't appreciate him finding her jealousy amusing—and damn hot, for that matter.

“Don't think I don't know that you're smiling.”

He lifted his face and nipped her lip. “It's a smile of relief, baby.” She snorted. “Sure it is.”

“I swear things will change,” he told her in a grave voice.

Jaime wasn't positive that they could, despite his good intentions. But it was important in relationships to accept the bad with the good, wasn't it? He'd said he'd choose her over his job, but she didn't want to ask that of him. She cared for him too much to do anything that would hurt him.

Maybe with the right support, things could change over time. “I don't mind helping you with Beta stuff if you want.”

“Help?”

“I know it plays on your mind when you have things to do, and I see that it's a big weight on your shoulders. I work at the sanctuary most mornings, but I still have my afternoons free.” Emotion clogged in his throat. “You'd do that?”

“I'm not saying I don't think you can do your job,” she said quickly in case he

became offended. “I’m just offering to help.”

“Even though it would mean that you’ll sometimes work long hours, too?”

“If you think it will be good for you, yeah.”

He honestly couldn’t believe this. Instead of giving him an ultimatum, she was offering to work alongside him. This female got to him in ways that he could never articulate. He brought his lips down hard on hers again, shooting his tongue into her mouth to dance with hers and kissing her hungrily, almost violently. An urgent need to be inside her hit him. A need to feel her cling to him, mark him, and come apart around him.

“Does that mean you like the idea of me helping? You could think of me as your secretary or something.”

An impish grin surfaced on his face. “You really shouldn’t have said that. It’s making me think some really dirty thoughts about fucking you on my office desk.” He lifted her leg, hooked it around his waist, and he dug his hips into hers, groaning.

She snorted. “As if I’d let you do that!” The breathlessness in her voice totally contradicted her words, but it was his fault for continuing to rock into her at a very seductive rhythm. She was still feeling needy from earlier, and this was making it worse. Jaime did love makeup sex.

“Oh you would,” he drawled, breathing hotly into her ear. “And you’d love it. Love it when I bent you over and tugged down your jeans so that I could see that gorgeous ass of yours.” Peeling up her dress to her waist, he snapped off her thong and slid his fingers between her slick folds. “I’d check to make sure you were nice and wet for me, just like you are now. Then I’d do this.” Jaime cried out when he plunged two fingers inside her. God, she’d needed that. Helplessly she moaned as he nibbled and sucked on her neck while slowly fucking her with his fingers. He kept his thrusts slow and shallow, enough to make her moan, but not enough to make her come. He was such an ass.

“I’d thrust them in and out and in and out until you couldn’t take any more.” With his free hand, he unbuttoned his fly and rubbed the head of his cock between her folds. “And then...I’d fuck you like I own you. Because I do.” Dante removed his fingers and slowly and deliberately pushed his cock inside

her, wanting her to feel every inch of him sink deeper and deeper. Never had he felt a pussy this amazing—so hot, wet, suctioning, and oh-so-tight around him. He was pretty sure that no one in the world had a pussy this good. “Mine. All mine,” he said against her lips.

“Dante.”

“Shh. I’ll take care of it, baby.” Very, very slowly he withdrew, and then he slammed into her.

He’d hoped to go slow, but...“Fuck, I need this.” Then he was pounding into her with deep, branding thrusts. A territorial growl escaped him. This amazing female was his. This body that he constantly craved was his. He paused briefly to rise to his knees and hook her legs over his shoulders, allowing him to go even deeper with each violent thrust. He knew the cries that tore from her throat were a mix of pleasure and pain. He knew exactly what line between the two that she rode, and he gave her exactly what she wanted.

Surprising a gasp from Jaime, he abruptly bit down on her nipple through her dress. He sucked it hard and plucked at it with his teeth over and over. “Dante, I’m going to come.” Good, because he wasn’t going to last much longer. Not when the panic he’d felt at losing her was still riding him. “Bite me, baby. Bite me hard.” Rearing up, she sank her teeth into his shoulder through his T-shirt. He growled. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Jaime sensed the desperation in his movements, because it was the same desperation she was feeling. Desperation to reconnect and be sure that they were there with each other and that everything was okay. Feeling his claws digging into her thighs, leaving marks of possession, she snarled in the back of her throat. It didn’t surprise her when a powerful fist knotted in her hair and pulled hard.

Objecting to a dominant male marking you when he thought you belonged to him was asking for trouble. But she liked trouble.

“*Mine*, Jaime. No one else will ever fuck this pussy again. It belongs to me—you belong to me. Admit it.” When she didn’t, he tugged harder on her hair. “Admit it or I’ll stop right now and come all over you.”

“Do you have to be such a goddamn jerk?!”

“Admit it!”

“I’m yours,” she gritted out.

“That’s my good girl.” Then he bit down hard on her neck, and her pussy constricted around him as she came, screaming and shuddering. With a loud, guttural groan, he exploded inside her, filling her with everything he had—marking her with his come just as he had with his claws and teeth.

And he knew right then that he was seriously close to loving this female, if he didn’t already.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Dante dedicated the following few weeks to ensuring that Jaime didn’t ever again think that she came second to his job. He did just as he’d promised her that he would: he delegated more to the enforcers (who were happy about it and sincerely loved Jaime for making him “see the light”), he scheduled uninterrupted quality time for them to spend together alone, and he always headed back to her at the same time each night.

That nagging feeling to keep busy taunted him from time to time, but all he had to do was remind himself how it had felt when Jaime tried to end things between them. Just like that, the nagging became background noise. He refused to go through it again, refused to lose her for real.

It probably would have been much harder to adapt if Jaime hadn’t kept her promise to help in the afternoons. At first it had been hard to let her help, because he wasn’t comfortable having another cook in the kitchen—particularly a messy one—but the difference her help had made was actually shocking. She had taken over having the private meetings with members of the pack who had grievances, and they had actually come to prefer speaking with her. He guessed it was most likely because of how she gave a person her full attention; it probably reassured them that their issue would be addressed.

In addition, she often answered and made important calls. Her husky sex-hotline voice made her a popular medium of communication, and he knew she was often

asked if she was mated. That pissed him off, but she only laughed at his jealous grumblings.

One thing he didn't allow her to help him with was the paperwork. He had a nicely organized system going, and he did not want her fiddling with it. Fortunately, she wasn't a fan of paperwork, so she merely shrugged at his refusals to accept her assistance—just as she had done only five minutes ago. She knew she was messy, and she was unapologetic about it. It was surprisingly endearing even while it made him crazy.

Because of her new duties in the pack, her increasingly improving control of her wolf, and her perseverance with the training he was giving her, the pack had settled around her. There were some who still had some reserves—namely Greta, Cam, and Trey. But it was only ever Greta who voiced them, and that was no longer out of any real concern. Greta did that purely to torment Jaime for fun.

He could sense that Greta actually admired Jaime for the strength she had shown. But obviously the old woman would never admit it aloud.

Dante wasn't really in much of a position to criticize people who wouldn't admit things aloud.

Not considering the thoughts he'd been having and keeping to himself lately. Six nights ago, he had lain there looking at Jaime's sleeping face, thinking about just how different his life had become since she came along. Being his support boat, his assistant, and his confidant, she was much like a Beta female, he'd mused. A second later he'd dismissed that thought, because no, it was more than that.

She was like an enforcer, a Beta female, and a mate all rolled into one. And that was when he had first started contemplating the idea of imprinting.

His aversion to mating up until now had been that he didn't want to have to give up his position within the pack. But he knew that Jaime would never ask him to do that. Even when he was neglecting and hurting her, she hadn't given him an ultimatum. In fact, she was supportive of his job and even helped him juggle his responsibilities so he could have a work/life balance. Not only that, but he cared about her. Cared more deeply than he was comfortable admitting. In short, she was everything he needed and wanted. The only thing he wanted now was more of her. He wanted, needed, every single part of her.

Getting her to agree to imprint, however...that could prove to be difficult. Although she was battling hard to maintain control of her wolf, and fully intended to win that battle long-term, he knew that she had her doubts. She would never mate with him, as she would see that as risking his life. If she had been anyone else, he'd have been confident that he could wear her down over time, but he could begrudgingly admit that the woman was, in fact, more stubborn than he was. He'd learned quickly that she was resistant to bribery and emotional blackmail. She was also *way* too smart to fall for his attempts at reverse psychology, so little tricks would get him nowhere.

He told himself to just be satisfied with what he had, but now that he'd explored the prospect of imprinting, he couldn't let it go. He wouldn't be satisfied until he owned her, body, heart, mind, and soul. That presented him with an even bigger problem. If he wanted to be bonded to her that badly, there was a good chance that the process of imprinting would automatically begin. What he had to decide now was whether he should tell her what he wanted, or whether to let her find out when she suddenly started wearing his scent and sensing his feelings. Yeah, he didn't think Jaime would appreciate the latter. But to tell her what he wanted would be to risk her leaving him. He couldn't do that. Wouldn't.

"You're staring," Jaime accused in a singsong voice from the small sofa to the left of his desk.

She hadn't had to look up from her laptop computer—she was supposed to be checking the Pack Web but had ended up playing solitaire—to know that. She'd *felt* his eyes on her; she always did. He had a way of looking at her that made her feel that she was the only thing he could see, the only thing of any relevance to his life. His need for her—both sexual and emotional—was right there in his eyes for her to see whenever she wanted to. He didn't hide it, didn't hold back from her anymore. And she loved it.

Jaime hadn't found it at all surprising that his office was immaculately tidy and orderly. So orderly that it often made her want to mess it up just for fun. Honestly, neat places were the equivalent of big, red, tempting "Don't Press" buttons to her. But Dante would probably hyperventilate, and while that would also be fun to watch, it would make him take longer with his work.

Opting out of telling her that he'd also been lost in thoughts of imprinting on her, Dante instead said, "Give me a number between one and twenty."

Unable to see where this was going, she shrugged. “Eleven.”

“You lose. Now strip off your clothes.”

She laughed, adoring how roguish he could be sometimes. Despite being a naturally good-humored person, he was only ever this playful with her. She loved that he was comfortable enough to drop his guard for her. “Aren’t you supposed to be going on a pack run?” He was, but he didn’t want to go without her. He felt bad leaving her behind, hated the idea of her alone and yearning to run with them but not able to. “Too much paperwork to do.”

“Bullshit. Get out there. You’ve avoided going the last few times, and don’t think I don’t know why. Your wolf needs this.”

“He needs you more.” It was true.

“There’s that mouth again,” she chuckled. “Get out of here. I’ll be waiting naked in bed for you. How does that sound?”

Rising from his seat, he went to squat in front of her. Taking the laptop from her and placing it on the sofa, he took her hands in his and massaged her palms with his thumbs. “Come with us.” He breathed her in, letting her delicious, captivating scent galvanize and arouse him.

“I can’t. You know that.”

“You don’t have to shift. You can still come with us. Taryn used to do it all the time before overcoming her latency.”

“I know, but the others hadn’t felt threatened by her. The pack might have accepted that my wolf is messed up, but that doesn’t mean their wolves will be so accepting.” He brushed his lips against hers, still as obsessed as ever with that carnal mouth. “Their wolves will sense your wolf’s temperament, yes, but they’ll also sense your control over your wolf.

If I thought they’d be tempted to challenge you, I’d never suggest it.”

“Trey won’t like it. He’s too overprotective with Taryn right now.”

“He and Taryn won’t be there. He took her to bed just after dinner. The

pregnancy wipes her out.” Drawn by the marks on her neck, he leaned forward and licked at them. He grazed his teeth over a certain spot, thinking his claiming mark would look perfect right there. And he *would* claim her, *would* ensure that she irrevocably belonged to him. “Come. I want you with me. My wolf wants you with us.”

Touched by the sentiment, she swallowed hard. It had been a long time since she had been on a pack run, and it called to her on a primal level—a call she had ignored for a very long time. “Okay.” As they walked through the tunnels toward the main door, Dante smiled at how silent and fluid her movements were. After only two months of training, she was effortlessly stealthy, and he was so proud of her. The determination, persistence, and tenacity she had exhibited had shocked all the enforcers. It had earned their respect in a way that nothing else could have. In fact, Tao had actually admitted that he had been wrong about her—and he wasn’t a guy who would easily admit when he was wrong.

Midway through one of the tunnels, they came across Gabe. Jaime gave him a huge smile.

“Hey there. Aren’t you going on the pack run?”

He returned her smile. “No. Hope and I have plans. Look, um, I’d like to talk to you alone for a sec.” He flicked a brief glance at Dante, who Jaime suspected wasn’t pleased.

“Sure.” At the sound of the objecting growl behind her, she sighed. “He’s my brother, Dante.

I’m pretty sure he’s not about to make any sexual advances if you leave us alone.”

“It’s not anything bad,” Gabe assured Dante. “I just want to talk to Jaime about something before I mention it to anyone else.”

Dante didn’t like that there might be secrets between him and Jaime, but he knew that Gabe often went to her for reassurance or advice. They had a close sibling relationship, and that wasn’t something Dante would ever impose on. He kissed her temple and nodded. “I’ll wait for you outside.”

“Nothing’s wrong, is it?” she asked Gabe as soon as she knew that Dante was

out of hearing distance. Although he'd assured Dante it was nothing bad, she wouldn't have been surprised if her brother had simply told Dante what he thought he'd want to hear to make him leave.

"No, not at all. It's good news."

"Don't keep me in suspense."

He inhaled deeply. "Hope and I have begun imprinting on each other." That had not been what she'd expected, though maybe it should have been, considering how much time they spent together. "Oh, wow. Gabe, that's great." His perceptive eyes narrowed slightly. "You don't seem as though you really mean that." Knowing he would sense if she was lying, she held her hands up in a placatory gesture. "Hey, look, I'm not going to ask you if you're sure this is what you want. I know you well enough to know that you'd never forsake your true mate unless you loved Hope. I just...let's just say that I know someone who was partially imprinted with someone who then met their true mate. What happened afterward wasn't pretty. But if you care enough about Hope to risk that, then I'm happy for you." His expression softened at her support and approval. This was what she had wanted for him when they came here. She had wanted him to be happy and settled here in case she had to leave. Gabe being mated was more than she could have hoped for, and it meant that he would never follow Jaime if she left.

"You're thinking this means I'm trapped here now, aren't you," he guessed with a smile.

He was a pain in her ass. "Stop reading my mind."

"I just know how that brain of yours works. Thanks for being so supportive. I appreciate it.

And I hope the same thing happens for you and Dante someday." There was no denying that she wanted that, but it wasn't something that could ever happen.

Hearing Gabe bring it up only served to put salt in the wound. "Gabe, you know that—"

"What I know is that the guy absolutely adores you. Look at all the things he's done for you, all the changes he's made. You don't do that for someone unless

they mean a lot to you.”

“It doesn’t mean he wants to be bonded.”

Gabe snorted. “You’re not dumb, Jaime. It’s only a matter of time before imprinting starts.

You must already know that.”

She shook her head. “Dante would never want that. Especially when there’s no guarantee that Trey won’t make me leave the pack at some point. I’ll keep fighting my wolf every step of the way, Gabe, but I won’t ever allow myself the luxury of thinking that I’ll always be able to. Trey would be right to throw me out if my wolf got too strong. Dante would have to choose between going with me or breaking an imprinting bond”—again—“and I know he’d never choose the latter. I wouldn’t let him.”

“You know he’d never let you leave, no matter what anybody said. If you try to go, he’ll track you down and drag you back here. We both know that you’d never be able to hold out against him if he fought to keep you or wanted to imprint on you.”

Damn her brother for knowing her so well. Her words were quiet and sad. “I’d be risking his life if I imprinted on him.”

He put his arm around her and pulled her to his side. “Jaime, you must realize how much better your wolf has been. She responds to Dante—he makes her feel secure. It stands to reason that she’d feel even more secure if you bonded.”

“I can’t ever take that risk, even if he wanted me to.” She knew for sure that he wouldn’t chance going through that pain again.

“At least you’re admitting that you want to. That’s more than I expected. If you’re scared that you’ll lose him to his true mate, don’t. If he wanted her, he wouldn’t be in so deep with you. And if you’re feeling bad that you’re not waiting for your true mate, don’t do that either.”

“Don’t you feel bad that you’re not waiting?”

He sighed. “A part of me does. But there’s no guarantee that I’d find her. Lots of

shifters don't.

I've found somebody I love enough to bond with them. I'd be an idiot to ignore that. And so would you." With a kiss to her forehead, the pain in her ass released her and continued down the tunnel.

He'd always had a way of jumbling her thoughts.

Outside the main door, she found Dante waiting impatiently. "You could have gone without me. I'd have followed."

He took her hand in his and dragged her to him so that he could plant a kiss on her mouth. "No.

We go together."

He often did that—ate up every single bit of personal space she had. She shouldn't have liked it, should have instead felt threatened by it or found it imposing. Instead, it made her feel safe, cared for, protected, and cosseted. The way his body heat swathed and encased her only added to that feeling of safety, only made the close contact more comforting. It scared her how much she liked it, because she wasn't sure how she'd cope if she no longer had it. A little of that anxiety must have shown on her face, because he cupped her cheek and breezed his thumb over her mouth.

"You okay, baby?" Her bright smile settled and invigorated him.

"Fine. Let's go."

In a small clearing far into pack territory, they found the rest of the pack. Having watched them out of her bedroom window many times whenever they gathered near the lake, Jaime knew which wolf was which. She smiled as she watched a wolf with the salt-and-pepper fur—Dominic—

playfully bound into a wolf whose fur was black other than that on his face, neck, and the insides of his ears, which were a creamy blond. Ryan, she knew. He somehow withstood the impact and gave the salt-and-pepper wolf a look that could only be described as superior. Then he swiped his paw at him, knocking him to the ground.

Suddenly two gray-brown-yellow wolves—Trick and Marcus—were on top of the salt-and-pepper wolf. The three of them tussled and wrestled, releasing high-pitched barks.

“Maybe one day Dominic will realize that he doesn’t have a chance of coaxing Ryan to play.

How’s your wolf?” Dante studied her expression intently as he ran a hand through her hair and brushed his lips against hers.

“She’s a little wary. She knows these are her packmates, but she’s never encountered their wolves before. I’m pretty sure she’ll be happy to see yours.”

“Good. Hopefully it’ll help her settle.” He smiled at the hunger in Jaime’s eyes as he stripped naked right in front of her. “Soon, baby,” he promised. In a matter of seconds, he had shifted.

Jaime crouched down to the large gray-black wolf in front of her. He rubbed his cheek against hers and sniffed behind her ear, taking in her scent. Smiling, she shoved him by his muzzle. “Go on.

Go play.” He licked her hand and yapped playfully. Then he loped off to join the mock fighting along with a jet-black wolf—Tao.

She could only laugh as she watched the five wolves chasing, pouncing, ambushing, and shouldering one another. There was also a lot of jaw wrestling and grabbing each other by the scruff of the neck to wrestle each other to the ground. The other wolves lounged around, watching the scene with only a slight interest.

Unsurprisingly, she found herself lamenting that she couldn’t free her wolf and play with the others. She wanted to be able to shift with Dante and let their wolves run together, wanted to be at one with her wolf rather than at war with her. Although her wolf, too, wanted to run with her male, she was too distracted and wary to actually yearn for it.

Pulling Jaime from her thoughts, a graceful red female wolf appeared beside her. Shaya. Jaime ran her fingers through her fur, frowning in distaste as the red wolf repeatedly licked her face. “Bad girl.”

Seemingly jealous, her gorgeous gray-black wolf trotted over and bumped the female wolf's body aside. The red wolf snapped at him in complaint, but she didn't challenge the dominant male wolf. Instead, she went to lie beside the salt-and-pepper wolf who was sprawled on the ground, panting crazily.

It had been so long since Jaime had felt this sense of belonging. Her wolf had settled a little now that her male was here, and she lazed within Jaime, content though still alert—always alert.

When the gray-black wolf stretched out in front of her and then rolled onto his back, showing her his white undercoat, Jaime knew what he wanted. Chuckling, she alternated between lightly scratching his stomach and simply petting him. For almost an hour they stayed like that until he shifted back into his human form. Some of the others followed suit.

Leaning up to rest on his elbow, Dante bit her lower lip and sucked it into his mouth. "My wolf likes you petting him. But now it's my turn. Let's go." He saw her eyes flare with the same hunger that he knew was in his. Standing and tugging on his T-shirt, he gestured to the jeans on the ground next to where she was still sitting. "Pass those to me, baby." She sighed at the garments, feeling totally torn. On the one hand, it seemed pointless for him to dress since she intended to have him naked again when they returned to their room, but she didn't want him strolling around in his birthday suit in front of the other females. It was one thing for him to do it while shifting, but it was another for him to give others a chance to ogle him. How could they not? So she threw the jeans to him, laughing when the zip caught on one of his chest hairs. And that was when she felt it...that sense that something wasn't "right." That something was there that shouldn't be. No, some *one*.

Instinct made her look at a certain small opening in the trees that surrounded the perimeter gate. As her eyes zoomed in, she understood. "Everybody move!" She had barely jumped to her feet when it felt as if someone had smacked her leg with a sledgehammer. She let out a pained, pissed-off cry as her leg gave way and she ended up on her back. "Go! Go! Go!" The submissive wolves within the pack didn't hesitate to move, but Dante and the enforcers remained. Trick, Dante, and Tao knelt beside her.

"You've been shot," said Tao disbelievingly.

“Thanks for pointing out the obvious. Now will someone go find the shooter!” A burning sensation—that was what she’d heard being shot felt like. *Burning sensation, my pale, fat ass*. It was like a bomb had gone off inside her calf and hot sulfur had been poured into the wound.

“Ryan and Dominic are already on it,” Trick told her.

“I’ll kill him.” Dante’s voice was like a whip. “I will. Whoever he is, he’s dead.” The only thing stopping Dante from acting on the urge to join Ryan and Dominic in hunting down the shooter was that Jaime was hurt. He tore open the leg of her jeans to get a better look at the injury on her calf.

His instinct was to scoop her up, hold her to him, and get her inside, but he wanted to be sure that the bullet was out first. If it was lodged somewhere sensitive, moving her might jostle it around painfully.

“I’ll go make sure Grace has the examination room ready,” announced Marcus.

Dante merely nodded, focused on Jaime, concerned and angry in equal measures. He would bet he was more ashen than she was right now. His attempt to examine her leg failed when her body jerked and she cried out. Seeing her wrapping her arms around her stomach as she tried to curl up, he knew what was happening. He collared her throat. “Stop.”

Jaime tried to pull his hand away when she sensed that his display of dominance was only increasing her wolf’s anger. The combination of Jaime’s shock, pain, anxiety, and anger was enough to massively agitate and panic her wolf. The fact that the threat could still be nearby only fueled her wolf’s state. She wasn’t in a receptive mood right now and only viewed Dante’s action as interference. The dumb-ass, however, didn’t release her.

“Stop,” he ordered again, flexing his grip on her throat. When it still didn’t work, he brought his mouth down hard on hers, forcing his tongue into her mouth and seeking her own. It was a devouring, forceful, urgent kiss that demanded attention, demanded a response. When he got that response, he softened the kiss, hoping to calm and reassure her wolf. “Better?” he asked hoarsely when he pulled away.

Jaime nodded, though she was very aware that it wouldn’t take much to have her wolf fighting to surface again.

“Good. Now I need to get a better look at your leg. I’ll be careful.” He cursed when he saw that there was no exit wound. “It’s already starting to heal, and if we don’t get the bullet out soon, it’ll be permanently embedded there.” Quickly Dante whipped off his T-shirt, tore off a strip, and tied it around her calf to add pressure to the wound. “Sorry, baby, but I need to move you.” As he scooped her up, Jaime gritted her teeth against the pain. She knew he was being as careful as possible as he carried her through the trees to the caves, but every single movement made her wince. She did her best to keep quiet, but she couldn’t help hissing as they ascended the stairs of the cliff face. They found a concerned Grace waiting near the door.

“I’ve prepared the examination room, and I’ve got Lydia there already waiting,” Grace told them as she walked at Dante’s side through the maze of tunnels.

Inside the examination room, he gently placed Jaime on the bed, even though what he really wanted was to hold her against him. Needing to touch her, he placed a hand on her shoulder. “She’s been shot in her calf. The bullet’s still in there.”

“I’m going to need you to stand back, Dante,” said Grace.

Dante couldn’t help the growl that escaped him. No one kept him from Jaime, no one, especially while she was hurting.

Grace eyed him warily, but she remained firm. “I know you’re worried about her, but I’m going to need the space. Let’s face it, you take up a lot of it.”

“Dante, it’s okay,” said Jaime.

Her soft words smoothed over the jagged frays in his control. Grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, he grudgingly moved aside, not once releasing Jaime’s gaze. Being apart from her while she was hurting went against every instinct he had. He wanted to lie with her, feel her skin, bathe in her scent, and give her whatever comfort he could. Not that she’d accept any comfort, the stubborn woman, but he needed the contact just as much as she did. The thought of anyone even *wanting* to hurt her made his blood boil. His wolf was growling and pacing, anxious, enraged, and wanting vengeance.

Every time Jaime cried out in pain, he moved toward her only to receive a “stay back” look from Grace. Though she was one of the kindest souls he had ever

known, Grace was also a hard-ass when she needed to be. That didn't stop him from growling at her for keeping him apart from his female, even if it was slightly irrational, considering that she was tending to Jaime's wound.

"Dante."

Hearing his Alpha call him, Dante froze. The Beta in him urged him to answer the summons, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't walk away from Jaime. A part of him knew that he was overreacting by not wanting to move from her side. That same part of him acknowledged that she would heal and be absolutely fine—no other outcome was allowed. But another part of him was raging; this was Jaime, *his* Jaime, and she had a hole in her fucking leg. She was bleeding and in pain, and that was absolutely unacceptable.

"Dante," Trey called again. As if he sensed Dante's struggle, he added, "You don't have to leave the room, just get your ass over here."

"Go on," Jaime told him gently. When he didn't move, she assured him, "I'll call you if I need you."

Nodding, he—ignoring Grace's sharp look—squeezed past Lydia and kissed Jaime's hair, inhaling her scent. Very, very reluctantly, he walked to where Trey stood in the doorway with Trick and Tao. Dante stood at an angle so that he could still monitor Jaime.

Tao winced at the sight of all the blood. "I still can't believe she was shot." Neither could Dante. Sure, he'd known that Glory's brothers would try something sooner or later, but he hadn't considered that there would be guns involved. Shifters fought with tooth and claw.

Guns were considered cowardly, and not many shifters used them.

Trey folded his arms across his chest as he spoke to Trick. "When you said Glory's brothers were crazy, I didn't think you meant crazy enough to skulk around my territory with a rifle and then shoot one of my wolves."

"And all because their little sister doesn't like being denied what she wants," growled Dante, striving to remain calm while anger bubbled through his veins.

Trey studied him closely and narrowed his eyes. "You will *not* head out there the

second Jaime's leg has been taken care of to go hunt those assholes, understand?" Dante growled again, further incensed by the way that Trey had seen right through him. "They *shot* her, Trey. *Shot* her. I can't let that slide." His wolf was in full agreement. No one got to harm Jaime and live.

"And we won't let that slide, I can promise you that. So there's no need for you to turn vigilante on us. If I have to, I'll *order* you not to do it, and then I'll have the enforcers take care of this."

"No fucking way. Jaime's mine. Her shit is my shit, and those bastards are mine. It's difficult enough not to go to Nick's territory and rip out Glory's throat—her being female doesn't mean shit to me or my wolf right now."

"Yeah, I can see that," said Trey. "But you've got to get a hold of yourself, Dante."

"Get a *hold* of myself? You're kidding me, right?"

"Do you remember that time when I almost attacked Tao because he'd told Taryn he wanted to mate with her?"

Suddenly Tao was looking anywhere but at them.

"Do you remember what you said to me?" persisted Trey. "You said that I had to choose what was more important—kicking the living shit out of Tao, or making sure that Taryn stayed. I knew you were right when you said she'd have left if she thought she was causing fights within the pack. You told me to go to her and make sure she was okay. So I calmed my ass down and I went to her. You need to do the same now. Pick which is more important—going off on your own personal crusade, or being here for Jaime while she needs you. From what I heard, you let her down when she needed you once before. Do you really want to do that again?"

For a long moment, Dante didn't speak. "I hate that you're right."

"I know. I hate it when *you're* right. In the morning, we'll discuss how we deal with this. For now, just concentrate on Jaime."

"Why didn't anyone tell me that Jaime was hurt?" Taryn practically screeched as she stomped toward them, cutting off what Dante was about to say. Marcus

wasn't far behind her, giving Trey an apologetic look.

"You were supposed to be guarding her," Trey growled at Marcus.

"You mean he was supposed to stop me from leaving the room." Trey blocked her path, but the tiny female was peering under his arm, trying to get a look at Jaime. "She's been shot!"

"Yes, she's been shot but—"

"She needs healing."

"Grace and Lydia are taking care of it," Trey assured her in a voice someone might use to soothe a mental person having a tantrum.

"Yeah, with tweezers, bandages, and all that medical crap. *I* can have her fully healed in under a minute."

"Yes, baby, you can, but we agreed that you wouldn't use your healing gift while you were pregnant, remember. Your gift makes you tired and weak—"

She snorted. "*You* agreed on it, Flintstone. I did no such thing." Sighing, Trey picked her up and headed for their room. "Come on, let's get you back to bed.

We'll play Hiding Pedro. That should calm you down."

"Why do you always try to use sex to calm me?"

"Because it works, my crazy little nympho."

"Ass."

Once his Alphas had disappeared down the tunnel, Dante turned back to Jaime. The sight of her there, pallid and tired, made him want to kick himself. How hadn't he sensed that someone was there watching them? He, with all his training, should have known immediately and gotten to the bastard before he could hurt her or anyone else. She was his, he should have protected her, that was how it worked.

"If you're standing there blaming yourself, I'll bitch slap you, Dante. Seriously,

don't make me do it.”

Jaime's voice snapped him out of his thoughts and made him smile. He noticed that Grace and Lydia were also smiling. Approaching the bed, he ran a hand over her hair and sighed. “I should have sensed he was there.” Grace appeared to have given up trying to keep him from Jaime, because she didn't scowl at him this time, though she did make a Greta-like humph sound.

“The enforcers didn't sense him either. Whoever he is, he knows what he's doing. I wouldn't be surprised if he hadn't been in position for more than ten seconds before firing. It would be his best shot—no pun intended—at avoiding detection.” A few months ago, she would never have made any such prediction, but Dante's training had changed her in many ways.

His thoughts exactly. “You're a good student.”

“You prefer it when I'm bad.” She flinched when Lydia jabbed her arm with a needle.

“Goddamn it, Lydia.”

“It's just another painkiller,” she explained, looking sheepish. “The first one wore off fast.” Grace gave Jaime an apologetic smile. “Sorry, but we have to keep the good stuff for when Taryn goes into labor. Dante, would you get Jaime something clean to wear? Her clothes are covered in blood. So are yours, actually. You could do with a quick shower.” Yeah, he thought, but that would involve leaving Jaime's side.

“Go on,” Grace encouraged softly. “It'll only take you a minute. Your wolf isn't going to calm down while you have her blood all over your skin and clothes.” No, he probably wouldn't, but all the same...

Jaime growled. “Oh for the love of God, Dante, go take a shower, I'll be fine.”

“Okay, I'm going.” If she was well enough to growl and snap at him, she was well enough to be alone for a few minutes. “I'll close the door while you strip.” After what had to have been the quickest shower in the history of the world, he returned to Jaime's side with one of his T-shirts that she liked to sleep in. He helped her slip it on and was about to insist on being left alone with her when suddenly he heard his name being quietly called. He frowned when he saw Trey

in the doorway again. “What is it?” he asked as he approached him, wondering why his Alpha was speaking quietly.

“Dominic just called me. Ryan got the bastard.”

Dante snorted. “Of course he did. He’s like a ghost when he’s tracking.”

“The shooter...He’s not one of Glory’s brothers.”

Taken aback, Dante shook his head as if to clear it. “What? Who is he?”

“They don’t know. He won’t talk.”

“Did they put him in the hut?” The hut was the place where they took intruders for a “chat.”

“Yes. I know ordinarily the interrogating would be up to you, but...” Trey eyed him speculatively, and Dante knew why.

“I’ll be fine with this.”

“The whole matter’s too close to home for you.”

“Which is why it has to be me. You’d say the same thing if this was Taryn.” After a few moments, Trey nodded.

“I’m going, too.”

Both Dante and Trey frowned at the pasty yet fearless-looking female on the bed for eavesdropping. “No, you’re not,” snapped Dante. “You’re staying here.”

“You don’t get to order me around, Popeye.”

“No,” agreed Trey. “But *I* do.”

“If someone shot me, I have the right to find out why,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Dante will find that out for you.” He turned back to Dante. “Go. I called the enforcers.”

They're all making their way to the hut as we speak."

Dante gave him a nod of thanks. The last thing he wanted to do was leave Jaime's side right now, but this was something he needed to do. With one last look at her, he left.

"I don't believe this," griped Jaime.

Trey looked at her like she was dumb. "You're as bad as Taryn. You've been shot—you need to rest so you can heal."

"I need to see that asshole so I can gouge out his eyes. That's what I need."

"You've never seen Dante interrogate someone, have you?" Most likely in response to her gulp, he correctly surmised, "But you've heard about it. He's the best for a reason. He'll do whatever he has to in order to get answers. *Whatever* he has to. He doesn't want you seeing him like that."

"I'd never judge him." Never.

"Maybe you wouldn't, but he won't risk that. When he goes into that 'zone,' as Dominic calls it, he's not the same person. Not because he's cruel or likes to inflict pain, but because he will never put people under his protection in danger, and if that means inflicting pain, then that's what he'll do.

That wolf in the hut—he isn't just some guy who was roaming too close to our territory, he's someone who hurt you. Dante won't have one ounce of mercy in his system, just as I wouldn't if it was Taryn.

If you care for him, Jaime, respect his wish to do this without you and don't give him a hard time about it later."

"Whatfreakingever," she grumbled.

Sensing that she had backed down, he nodded approvingly. "I hope you meant what you said about not judging him, because there's no way he'll let that guy live." The second Dante stepped into the hut, the lanky wolf's eyes widened and he began struggling against his bonds. Obviously, then, he knew all about Dante's reputation as an interrogator. Not many didn't, which was why the wolf's struggling wasn't an uncommon reaction. Although Dante had never

gotten any pleasure or satisfaction out of the process, he wondered if this time might be a little different.

He was literally starving to see the person who dared to hurt Jaime in the same kind of pain that she was going through at his hands. Maybe that was wrong, sick, and even callous, but right then he simply didn't care. His usual morals were buried beneath the rage that was coursing through him, demanding some form of retribution. He understood now just how hard it had been for Trey to hold back and play the waiting game after those wolves attacked Taryn. Jaime was his and would always come before everything else—even his conscience.

With slow, casual steps, Dante came to stand before the male. Like his enforcers, Dante didn't recognize him or his scent. He had racked his brain, trying to think of people who might want to hurt him and would think to use Jaime to do it. He had as many enemies as the next person. But an enemy who hated him enough to hurt someone close to him? The only ones who came to mind were Glory and her brothers—which made him think that this male in front of him was linked to them in some way. But this seemed out of character for the brothers. Crazy people tended to do their own dirty work, because they enjoyed it.

Dante's wolf growled and bucked, wanting freedom so that he could tear apart this male who had hurt Jaime; his struggle to be free was so fierce that Dante's eyes flashed wolf. The male in front of him struggled harder, pulling against the rope that bound both of his wrists to the arms of the chair.

Dante's wolf liked that the male's fear was practically pulsing in the air, relished the scent of it.

"Name?" The male didn't answer, and Dante hadn't expected him to. Dominant wolf or not, he would be intimidated by the sight of Dante and the enforcers, but that didn't mean it wouldn't take a fair bit of pressure before the wolf would break. "Name." It was a demand this time, not a question.

Sweat was beading the captive's forehead and greasing his hair. "Fuck you."

"Good name, I like it. Easy to remember. Mind if I call you Fuck for short?" He ignored the scowl directed at him. "Why don't you start by explaining what inspired you to hang around our territory with a rifle?" The male said nothing. As Dante bent forward, the scent of the male's fear in the air rocketed. "I asked you a question. You don't have to answer it. In fact, I'm hoping you don't."

“Fuck you.”

Dante smiled crookedly. “You’re not going to be cooperative? I love it when that happens. An interrogation’s no fun without a bit of torture mixed in, don’t you agree?”

“If you’re going to kill me, just get it over with.”

“I would if I could, Fuck, but as it turns out you’ve got some info I need. Please tell me you’re not ready to share it, because I haven’t got to the fun part yet.”

“I’m not telling you anything,” he growled.

“Good.” Dante grabbed the little finger of Fuck’s left hand and snapped the bone. After the scream of pain faded, Dante asked, “Who are you, and why did you target my female?”

“Fuck you.”

Dante grabbed the next finger up on his left hand and snapped it backward. Fuck’s howl of pain was just as ear piercing as the last. Dante repeated the question with the same amount of patience as before. “Who are you, and why did you target my female?”

“Fuck you.”

He wrenched hard at Fuck’s third finger. Maybe the screams should have made him wince and penetrated his enraged state, but all Dante could think was that these fingers belonged to a hand that had aimed a gun at Jaime and shot her. “I don’t think I have to point out that if you drag this out, this is going to continue for a while.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m beginning to think you have a very limited knowledge of the English language.” Dante snapped his index finger. “Has that answer come to you yet?”

“What’s the point in telling you anything?” he wheezed out, pain etched into his face. “You’ll kill me anyway.”

Dante sighed. “Let’s look at it this way, Fuck. Once you’ve told me what I want to know, I’ll have no more use for you, and you’ll be quickly disposed of. But if you drag this out, you’re going to go through a lot of seriously bad pain first. You shot my female, you put a hole in her leg, you made her bleed, you put her through a serious amount of pain, and I have a huge fucking problem with all that. None of it is acceptable to me, and none of it is forgivable for me. Naturally, there’s no chance of you getting out of this hut alive. Whether you die quickly or painfully is up to you. What will it be?”

“Go fuck yourself!”

Dante shrugged and then quickly snapped his thumb. “Before you again advise me to fuck myself, I should point out that I intend to work through each one of your other fingers. Then I’ll move on to your wrists. Oh and then I’ll look forward to dislocating your shoulders. And after that—”

“All right, fine! I’m a lone wolf. I do...jobs,” he admitted begrudgingly.

Dante whistled. “A gun for hire, huh.” It wasn’t unusual for lone wolves. It was a good way for them to earn money, favors, or protection.

“Your female was just a name on a long list,” he said with no remorse whatsoever.

“Who gave you her name?”

“She didn’t introduce herself.”

Glory. “Go on.” When he didn’t respond, Dante repeated, “*Go on.*”

“I’ve told you enough al—” He stopped abruptly and yelled as Dante snapped his other index finger. “She just said to make sure the bitch was dead!”

“Dead?” echoed Dante in a low, menacing voice. So the shooter had been aiming to kill, not to injure, and probably would have succeeded if Jaime hadn’t sensed his presence and quickly moved.

As the reality of just what could have happened to her hit him, a sinister growl rumbled out of him.

She could be dead right now. He could have lost her, could have been forced to grieve her—

something he would have done every single day for the rest of his life. Nothing would have helped him move forward. No one could have replaced her. Not even his true mate. He gritted out, “And you had every intention of making sure she was dead, didn’t you?” Fuck looked up at him miserably. “You’re going to kill me now, aren’t you?”

“Without blinking.”

It was an hour later before Dante returned to the caves. Any other time he would have spent some time alone, but he needed to see Jaime. Needed to be sure she was safe and well. He also needed the sense of calm that only she could give him. To his surprise, she was asleep with Hunk curled up beside her protectively.

Grace looked up and smiled from the chair beside the bed. “She’s fine,” she assured him quietly. “I’d say she’ll be fully healed by morning.”

“Thanks, Grace.” He made a mental note to thank Lydia tomorrow.

“Are you staying in here with her? Lydia or I can do it if you—”

“No, I’ll do it.”

“Okay. Come get me if she wakes up through the night in pain, all right?”

“I will. Thanks again, Grace.” Sinking into the chair that Grace had vacated, he stared at Jaime’s sleeping face, marveling at how she never, ever looked at peace when she slept. She was always frowning or pouting or wearing that odd little expression that made her cute little nose crinkle up. Leaning forward, he placed a soft, lingering kiss on her forehead, ignoring the hiss that came from the huge, ugly cat that was snuggled into her. When Jaime’s eyes fluttered open, he cursed. “Sorry, baby, I didn’t mean to wake you. Look, I know you’re pissed at me for telling you to stay behind, but

—”

“I’m not. Well, I am. But I get why you didn’t want me there. You okay?” The way he rested his head on her shoulder said that he wasn’t. “Did you get answers

from him?”

“In the morning, baby, we’ll talk about in the morning, I swear. I just can’t think about it all right now.”

Because he needed to calm down, she realized. On the outside he was the picture of calm, of course. “You don’t have to feel bad about killing that guy.” She wouldn’t have if the situation had been reversed.

“I don’t. He hurt you.” Dante knew he should feel some remorse, knew it probably made him a bad person that he didn’t. But that kill had about as much significance to him as a tiny splinter, because of what the bastard had planned for Jaime.

“You’re not a bad person,” she told him, knowing where his thoughts had taken him. “I’m not saying you’re perfect. You’re cocky and a know-it-all and you’re addicted to working. But you’ve got a nice big dick and great bedroom skills, so I’m willing to overlook all that.” He laughed and lifted his head. Only Jaime could have put a smile on his face when he was in this mood. “Then I’ll be sure to put my big dick and my skills to good use tomorrow. Now you need to sleep though.”

She wanted to sleep beside him, but there was barely room for her on the single bed, let alone both of them. Besides, Hunk would probably slice open his cheek if Dante tried. She gripped his hand. “Stay with me.”

He kissed her softly, amazed that such simple contact could soothe him. “You couldn’t get rid of me even if you wanted to.”

They both knew that he was talking about more than tonight.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“The wound is fully healed,” declared Grace after she had carefully examined Jaime’s leg the next morning. “I think it will still be a little tender to walk on for a few hours. By tonight, it’ll be fine again.”

Jaime looked at the panicky wolf who sat gingerly on the bed, as if his body

weight could break her. “Happy now?”

Dante kissed her cheek and filled his lungs with her scent, reassuring himself and his wolf that she was fine. “I just wanted to be sure. You were almost killed last night. Give me a little space to be more overprotective than usual.”

“Give me a little space to breathe. I’ve agreed not to go to work, but there’s no way I’ll agree to sitting in this damn bed all day.”

The door opened, and Lydia strode inside with a tray of food. Gabe was close behind her, carrying two mugs of coffee. While Dante had been off interrogating the lone wolf last night, her brother had barged into the examination room and fussed over her for at least thirty minutes straight. It had taken Hope, Lydia, and Rhett to convince him to go to bed.

“Morning, sunshine,” drawled Gabe, who knew she was the world’s worst patient.

Scowling, she took the mug of coffee. “If you’ve come to fuss again, you can leave right now.

I’ve had enough of that from Popeye here.”

Dante nipped her earlobe punishingly. “You’d be the same if it was me.” She snorted. “No I wouldn’t, because you wouldn’t even be in this bed. You’d have been out of it the second the bandage was on.”

He couldn’t argue with that, so, stifling a smile, he said nothing and took a swig of his coffee before digging into the pancakes that Lydia had placed on the tray for him.

“Your silence speaks for you.”

Gabe chuckled and kissed her forehead. “Give him a break.”

She gasped. “Whose side are you on?”

“His, in this case. He just wants to take care of you. Let him.”

“Traitor.”

Suddenly there was a light knock on the door, followed immediately by Shaya peeking through.

“Is it okay to come in?”

“Yes, please do,” Jaime quickly replied before Dante could say something dumb about her needing peace and quiet. Shaya smiled and walked inside, and then a crowd of people followed behind her and piled into the room.

Dante went to object, but Grace shook her head, saying, “They just want to see that she’s okay.”

Begrudgingly, he didn’t comment as each of the pack—other than Greta—gave Jaime a brief hug, though he did release a low, territorial growl whenever one of the males touched her. Marcus earned a whack over the head when he kissed her smack on the mouth purely to rile him. Jaime raised a brow at Dante, but he just shot her a wide, unrepentant grin.

“How does the leg feel?” It was clear by the way Taryn was fidgeting that the healer in her was finding it hard to know that someone in her presence was injured.

“A little tender, but that’s it,” replied Jaime, flexing it. “Give me a couple of days and I’ll be ready to challenge Glory.”

Dante nearly choked on his food. “You will not.”

Her wolf growled, displeased by his objection and tone. Dante had told her all that he had learned from the lone wolf last night. There was really only one thing Jaime could do now. “Dante, that crazy-ass woman tried to have me killed. Call me strange, but I’m not prepared to let that go.”

“She’ll pay for what she did. It doesn’t mean you have to challenge her.”

“A few months ago, I wouldn’t have. But your training taught me how to keep a handle on my wolf when I’m fighting. Why not put those skills to good use? Besides, she’ll just keep doing stuff until I do. Generally people who want someone dead will not stop until they’ve succeeded.”

“Yep,” he agreed, playing with her hair, “but she’ll have to get through me to

reach you, and that's not going to happen. You don't get involved at all. The enforcers and I will deal with it."

"I'm not the type of person to sit on my ass while everyone else shovels the shit." A huff escaped the old woman standing near the door. "If your wolf wasn't insane and you weren't such a liability, you wouldn't have to, would you."

"Uh-oh," said Jaime. "Greta's mouth is open and words are spilling out. That can't be good."

"Because of that, the responsibility now falls to my poor boys." Jaime groaned. "Please tell me you'll cut the apron strings at some point. Seriously, it's kind of disturbing."

"It's your wolf's state that's disturbing. I don't know why Dante couldn't have settled for someone who wasn't mental, rude, slutty, and fat. There've been some lovely girls in his life. Why he had to pick you is beyond me."

Jaime cupped her ear. "Sorry, what? It was hard to understand you while all that shit was streaming out of your mouth."

Dante held a hand up to shush Greta and gripped Jaime's chin, bringing her face to his. "I won't let you put yourself in danger, Jaime. Deal with it."

"Before we decide what to do next, we need to talk to Nick about what happened," Trey interrupted.

Jaime resisted the urge to glance at Shaya to see if she was okay at the mention of Nick's name. She made a mental note to check in with her later.

Tao leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "What's the point? He's been no help at all."

Trick nodded his agreement. "So far, all he's done is protect Glory."

"That's only to be expected," said Trey with a shrug. "She's one of his wolves. I'd want damning evidence before I handed over any of you to someone to be punished. Even then, I wouldn't want to do it."

Dante sighed. "Then we don't contact him about it. I told him that time I met

him in the diner that if she didn't let this drop, I'd deal with her myself without his approval. He said he'd do the very same thing if the situation was reversed."

"Still, I doubt he'd truly be okay with it. And the last thing I want right now is to be battling with another pack. Taryn doesn't need that kind of stress—" Taryn growled. "Flintstone, please explain what I did to give you the impression that I was delicate?"

"Taryn, you're due to give birth any day now." His expression was fierce and his voice was firm, but he might as well have been whispering for all the good it did to intimidate his mate.

"That doesn't mean anyone in the pack has to suffer because of that. I think Jaime's right. I think Glory will keep this up until someone gives her a very good reason to stop. If she acted alone, it's possible that her brothers no longer wish to get involved."

"That wouldn't surprise me, given what Dante, Jaime, and Ivy did to them when they turned up at the animal sanctuary," said Marcus.

"No." Jaime shook her head. "I saw the looks on their faces. They were excited about hurting me. They were going to enjoy it. Especially because they're unbelievably overprotective of their baby sister and know I hurt her badly. I can't see them wanting to let someone else have the privilege of hurting me in return. They'd see it as being robbed."

"She's right." Dante took her hand in his, wanting to feel her skin against his. "The brothers wouldn't let this go. But they'll know by now exactly what happens when they confront us. They'll most likely want to bide their time, may even think we'd fall for the 'Oh, they've let it go' trick.

Maybe Glory didn't want to wait and acted alone this time. Whatever the case, we can't let this go." Jaime nodded. "Which is why I fully intend to challenge her." Dante tightened his grip on her hand. "Jaime—"

"Just what would you do to a guy who not only attempted to have you killed, but was claiming I was his mate?"

That didn't even require an answer. He knew that she had a point, knew that nothing in this world would have stopped him from challenging someone who

tried to claim her, but fairness didn't matter to him right now. All the fear and anxiety he'd felt last night was still lingering in his veins.

The last thing he could condone would be for her to be in any form of danger ever again. And she honestly expected him to? What perturbed him more was that his wolf wasn't objecting to her intention. He saw it as just that his female would challenge the person responsible for her injury.

"I'm not asking for your permission," she said softly, "but I am asking for your support."

"I can't." With that, he released her hand, slammed his mug on the bedside table, and stood sharply. As he stormed out of the room, he heard her hitch in a breath behind him, knew his reaction had hurt her. A part of him wanted to do a U-turn and lock his arms around her, fuse his lips with hers, and tell her he was sorry. But he couldn't, because he wasn't sorry. He didn't want her challenging Glory, and nothing could change his mind on that.

Until Jaime came along, he'd never been a brooder. Never saw the attraction in going off to be alone somewhere to simply stew on his feelings. But he found himself doing that for the next few hours. As if the rest of the pack knew exactly what he was doing in the living area, they completely avoided it the whole time. Well, all but one.

"You're an ass. You know that, right?"

Dante looked up at the tiny, scowling blonde standing over him and sighed.

"Taryn, honey—"

"Don't you 'Taryn, honey' me, Barney Rubble." She perched herself on the sectional sofa beside him and moaned as if she was glad to be off her feet. The large piece of furniture practically swallowed her. "Look, I realize that you're inexperienced with relationships, so I'll give you a heads-up. Refusing to offer support to a girlfriend who is constantly supportive of you—that's bad."

"Why is it so bad that I don't want her hurt?" He honestly didn't get it.

"*You're* hurting her right now by not supporting her."

"I'm trying to protect her from herself. She could have fucking died, Taryn. The

guy shot to kill.”

“Yes, and she wanted to kill him. But she didn’t. You did. You got your revenge. I’ll bet you wouldn’t be sitting here so quiet if you hadn’t.”

Maybe not, but that wasn’t the point. “What if her wolf pushes to the surface like last time, huh?”

She gave him a disgusted look. “You don’t believe that will happen any more than I do. Your training has helped her so much. You’re good for her, and she’s good for you. Don’t mess that up for yourself.”

“I don’t see how wanting her alive and well is going to mess anything up.”

“Of course you don’t. But that’s because you’re stupid. You think that since you have a dick, you’re more dominant and should make all the decisions and everything will work out as you want it to. If you want a female who’ll let you deal with all her problems, go find yourself a nice submissive wolf. It’s not in a dominant wolf’s nature to hide behind other people. You know this. You’re expecting Jaime to be something she’s not.”

“I’m expecting her to care about her own safety.”

She released an exasperated sigh. “How do you think it feels for Jaime to have someone claiming the person she cares about? You know how hard that would be for you, and for your wolf.

Making it even harder is that this same someone threatened her once before and made her wolf strive to surface. *Now* she’s trying to have her killed. What else do you expect Jaime to do? By doing what she did, Glory effectively challenged her. No, the bitch didn’t expect her to survive it, but Jaime did, and now she’s in a position where she has to deal with it.”

“I can protect her.”

“Sure you can. But this isn’t about your level of macho-ness. It’s not about you, so stop trying to make it about you.”

Not about him? “She’s *my* female, she’s—”

“A person with her own mind who you’ll never be able to control no matter how hard you try,” finished Taryn in a surprisingly patient voice. “You care about her. I get it. You want her to be safe. I get it. She gets it. But you can’t fight Glory. Her brothers, sure. But you can’t fight a female, and you never would.”

Fair point, but that didn’t make any difference to how he felt. “I can’t be okay with her putting herself in any kind of danger.”

“No one’s asking you to be happy about it.” With a slight struggle, she managed to get to her feet. “But you need to support Jaime in this. So do it, or lose her. One or the other.” Why did she have to be right? All he wanted was for Jaime to be safe. It wasn’t like he was asking her for a kidney or for her to eat her own foot or something. Damn dominant females and their independent streak. As much as it infuriated him, he had to admit that it wouldn’t be fair to ask Jaime to ignore this and be something that she wasn’t. He couldn’t bring himself to be okay with it, but he could support her the way she’d supported him. His wolf settled a little at that.

Sighing, Dante finally left the living area and sought out the female who had a way of turning him inside fucking out. Eventually he found her in the game room with Shaya, Gabe, Hope, and the enforcers. To his surprise, each one of them scowled at him when he walked in, even the usually passive Hope.

Apparently uninterested in him, Jaime didn’t react at all to his presence. She limped around the pool table to take her shot, reminding him of just what had happened the night before, reminding him that she shouldn’t even be standing here right now, reminding him of just how scared he was of losing her. Dante wasn’t good at handling fear, and he wasn’t good at handling helplessness. Here he was in a situation where he had to deal with both.

When he gestured to the others with a tip of his head for them to leave him alone with Jaime, they completely ignored him. Great. His own female was being protected from him.

“Out.”

The command got their attention and, grumbling and scowling, each member of the pack slowly left the room. A few of them shot him warning looks that said, “Don’t upset her again.”

“Finished sulking, have you,” Jaime said flatly before sinking each of the balls that remained on the pool table. How was it that she could want to gut him and kiss him at the same time? Oh she was royally pissed, just like her wolf. But damn it, he was wearing that soft, vulnerable expression again. As much as she deeply suspected he did it on purpose, it got to her every time.

His voice was soft and beseeching. “You have to see why I don’t want you challenging anyone.”

“Well, you needn’t worry about it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I called Nick, I told him I wanted to issue a challenge on Glory, and he informed me that she’s missing.” *Spineless bitch*. Her wolf was in full agreement with that assessment.

“You called Nick? You did that without discussing it with me?”

“I did discuss it with you. You made your stance clear.”

As he sensed the depth of her anger, he shook his head disbelievingly. “You have no idea just how much it scared me when I realized you should be dead right now, do you? You just don’t get what that would have done to me. Nothing would have gotten me through it. Nothing, Jaime. I’d have been exactly like my mother was at the end: going through the motions, existing, but not living. Is it really that awful that I don’t want anything to happen to you?” If he thought that talented mouth was getting him out of this one, he was so wrong. “You, you, you—that’s all I hear. Let’s revisit the facts, big guy. *I was the one this happened to. I was the one who should have died yesterday. And I’m the one who’s been getting called Limp-A-Lot all damn morning. But wait, no, you’re the victim here, aren’t you? So sad. Well, I hope that pity plane you’re on malfunctions and hits the ground like a goddamn dart!*”

He caught her just as she was about to leave the room and curled both arms around her, keeping her back to his chest. “You’re right.”

“I know that.”

He sighed and kissed her hair. “Believe it or not, I came in here to tell you that

I'd support you if that's what you need. But then I saw you pale and limping... I'm used to being the protector. I *want* to protect you, and I don't want you to have to protect yourself even though I know you can." She gave him a sideways glance as, surprised, she said, "So you're not disputing that I can?"

"No. Definitely not. I know how capable you are." He turned her around and cupped her neck with his hands, using his thumbs to lift her face to his. "I know I made this about me. I'm just not used to having someone else who I have to think about. I've been on my own for so long that I sometimes don't even realize how self-centered I'm being."

"I can totally help you with that with some well-aimed bitch slaps if you want. You'd soon learn."

He couldn't help grinning. "I did tell you I'd need the room to mess up a little. Overprotective and controlling is a real bad combination, huh?"

She nodded, feeling her mood calm at his self-recriminating tone. He was a perfectionist who was forced to face that there was something he was far from perfect at, and it was getting to him. She wanted to smack the shit out of his ex for making him cower from relationships for so long. Not that she liked the idea of him with other females, but she liked the idea of him all confused and self-doubting even less. "But so is bitchy and stubborn. When you think about it, we shouldn't match at all, should we?"

"Yes, we should." He kissed her lightly and let his hands slide down her body until they were locked at the small of her back. "As much as I like control, it's not healthy for me to have it all the time. Your rebellious streak takes care of that. If you weren't so bitchy, you'd probably let me steamroll you and wrap you in cotton wool."

"I guess."

"My overprotectiveness makes up for your appalling lack of a flight response, and my controlling ways give you a way to exercise your bitchy streak. I mean, you have to admit that yours runs so deep it's more like a muscle. I give you a way to flex and stretch it when you need to." She fought a smile, but it was hopeless. "Jerk."

Moving his hands down to cup her ass, he said, "Wanna go to bed and play

doctors?” Chuckling, she punched his arm. “No, I don’t.”

“Sorry, that was immature. How about playing gynecologists?” Again, she chuckled. “I would, but lunch is calling my name loud and clear.”

“Baby, I’ll call your name as loud and clear as you want.”

She kissed him lightly. “Save it for later, big guy.”

“Dick-tease.”

Less than twenty-four hours later, Dante was arguing with her again, and losing at it again. He had wanted to give Jaime another morning free of training to give her extra time to recover, but the stubborn female refused to rest. Eventually he had to concede that she was right on two scores. One, her leg was, in fact, totally healed. Two, he would never have given anyone else extra time. Jaime didn’t want special treatment. His wolf loved her strength.

As usual, they started with their warm-up and did several laps of pack territory. It was no longer necessary to do any exercises on stealth—that had become clear on the morning before last when he had introduced pressure drills. During the drills, he had asked her to close her eyes and rely only on her other senses as she avoided Dominic, Marcus, and Trick, who were skulking around the woods. Not only had she been able to remain undetected, but she was more difficult to sneak up on than a sleeping cat. The guys had soon learned as they attempted to track her through the woods that unless Jaime wanted you to see her, you wouldn’t.

In fact, now, Jaime was physically the perfect enforcer. Not only had she perfected every combat move and mastered stealth, but she was as fit as Dante and as resilient as they came. “You’ve done amazingly well with your training over the past few months, Jaime,” he told her as they finished their laps of pack territory and stopped for a drink at the patio table. Whereas at one time she would have collapsed into one of the chairs, now she stood upright, ready and alert. “But I’m pretty sure you know that.” Her self-satisfied grin proved him right.

“Can I just ask why the guys are hiding in the woods?”

He grinned. No matter how good they were, she always sensed when anyone was around.

“That’ll become clear in a minute. As I said, you’ve done well. And everything I’ve taught you will help you when you challenge Glory. But there’s more to it than combat moves. So now it’s time to address the number one challenge you’ll face when confronted with a threat—which you soon will be. Yourself.”

Jaime’s forehead crinkled. “Myself?”

“You can be your own worst enemy in a dangerous situation if your head isn’t in the right place. Let’s not forget that the challenge will only end when one of you has been subdued or killed.

More often than not, it’s the latter. You might think killing someone will be easy. It’s you or them, so therefore it won’t be a problem, right? You’d be wrong to think that.” In truth, Jaime knew it would be a problem for her. There was no denying that she could be vengeful, but in the past that had always taken the form of practical jokes or maybe knocking someone out cold. But killing someone? This would be a new one. As much as it didn’t sit comfortably with her, and as much as she hoped that Glory would yield during the fight, Jaime strongly doubted that anyone who wanted her dead that badly would surrender.

“There’s another thing that you need to be prepared for, Jaime. As much as you’re confident that you can control your wolf, we both know you’ll have doubts lurking. These doubts will distract you. And if you feel your wolf strongly fighting to surface, you’ll become a little spooked. You can’t afford to do that.”

She didn’t bother denying any of that. “Okay, so tell me how to get over my fear.” Dante looked at her incredulously. “Why would I do that? Fear is a basic survival mechanism.

It helps you stay alive. It’s an automatic response that dumps adrenaline into the bloodstream, which helps us.”

Jaime’s face scrunched up. “Sweating like crazy, having your heart race, and shaking like a shitting dog helps us?”

Dante chuckled. “No, but adrenaline will help with increasing your speed and strength and increasing your tolerance for pain. The time it becomes a problem is when you let that fear become something else—panic. Once you begin to panic, your ability to think rationally often goes out of the window.”

“Right. So how do I do that?”

“Acknowledge what fear actually is—it’s just your brain communicating to your body that it senses danger. Accept fear for what it is, and work with it. That’s when its power disappears.”

“Accept it as a chemical reaction that’s there to help me.”

“Yes, because if you don’t, if you let it control you, then you’re, to put it bluntly, fucked. You can be killed. And that’s not acceptable to me. Yes, you’ve kept your wolf under control during training, but sparring with me is very different from what you’ll be facing in reality.”

“I know, I know,” said Jaime flatly. “I won’t be in a safe environment fighting one of my pack, I get it.”

“No, I’m not sure that you do. Glory won’t want a fight, Jaime. Her objective will be to kill you as quickly as possible, particularly since you’ve overpowered her once before. I very much doubt that she’ll shift, because she knows how dominant your wolf is. She’ll come at you so swiftly you might not see it coming. She won’t want to give you a chance to use any of your moves on her.

Even if you manage to land a lot of good blows, that won’t be all it takes. She will have moves of her own. She’s been in countless fights before. She’ll be used to being hurt and ignoring the pain to carry on.”

“I don’t think she’ll stop until one of us is dead,” she said quietly.

He repeatedly clenched his fists. “Neither do I. This is why it’s imperative that you’re able to switch quickly from one mind-set to another—namely, that you can be prepared to kill. That kind of thing isn’t easy. Throughout your entire life, you’ve had morals instilled in you. You have a conscience that interferes in every choice you make. It’s similar to brainwashing, in a sense. None of that can matter, Jaime. Even in the context of self-defense, you still can’t fully justify killing a person to your conscience. It is what it is. You need to be able to accept that rather than make excuses for it.”

“Like you?”

“Like all the enforcers, but yes, like me. I have a very fierce sense of right and

wrong, but when it comes to defending or protecting this pack, I'll cross over any lines I wouldn't otherwise cross. You need to be able to do the same. It doesn't mean you have to stop being a good person and that you have to harden. But like it or not, it will change you in some ways. You can still be the person you are now, but with an ability to cross right over any ethical lines when you need to. When you're involved in a fight with Glory, you *will* need to. So, can you do that?"

"I can do it." Jaime set her jaw.

"I don't know how long it will be before Glory finally appears again, but I think we can be pretty sure that she will. So until then your training won't involve exercises or practicing. I'm going to be asking you to do something much harder than that. From now on, there'll be no more sparring.

There'll only be attacks. Not just with me, but with the guys, too." Jaime smiled evilly. "Good."

"You might be thinking that this will be fun, but believe me when I say that they won't go easy on you. They *will* hurt you, and they *will* continue until you either yield or pass out, unless you can give as good as you get. You can't afford to care that these are your packmates. You can't afford to care that hurting them will be hard. In fact, hurting people close to you would pain you ten times more than hurting Glory. You do everything I taught you—you fight dirty, you cheat, you make them bleed.

They'll do exactly the same to you, as will I. Are you ready for this?" After a few moments, she finally replied in a strong voice. "I'm ready." Jaime had done better than Dante ever would have imagined. He was pretty sure the guys were just as surprised. While Jaime was hesitant and awkward during her first fight, Marcus hadn't held back at all. She had therefore learned the hard way what happened when she let her feelings distract her. After that, she had been merciless. She hadn't said one word at any point, as if she had taken herself into some sort of zone where the only thing that mattered was survival—and that was exactly what Dante had been hoping for.

He had purposely left Dominic until last, knowing how close he and Jaime were—something Dante would never be happy about. Although there had been the briefest flicker of unease in her expression, it had quickly disappeared, and

Jaime had fought just as dirtily as she had with Marcus, Trick, Ryan, and Tao. As expected, Tao got it the worst. The second it was all over, the enforcers enveloped her in a hug. Not a comforting act, but a show of respect.

Trey, who stood a short distance away and had observed the entire thing, looked truly impressed with Jaime. While the enforcers were still fussing over her—all of them tended to joke with her as if she was one of the guys—Trey approached Dante. “You did good with her.”

“I can’t take all the credit. She worked hard. She only tried to kill me twice.”

“She’d make a good enforcer. But...I think she’d make an even better Beta female.” Dante’s gaze shot to his. “What are you saying?”

“Just that I’m no longer so troubled about her staying. I admire anyone who shows that much strength and determination. And she puts you first. You don’t put yourself first to anything. You’ve been too focused on your role as Beta—you deserve to have something of your own too, and I know you want to imprint on her. Although you don’t need my approval or blessing, you have it.” With that, Trey turned and walked away.

That had been a surprise. Trey was right, Dante wouldn’t have sought his approval, but he was glad to have it. Now all he needed was Jaime’s approval. Dante swerved his head to see the female in question— *his* female—jogging over to him, smiling. She was bruised and covered in scratches and bumps. If he hadn’t known they would heal in a matter of hours, he would have freaked.

“My wolf’s feeling really smug right now.”

He returned her smile and pulled her to him. “I’ll bet.”

In response to the strange look on his face and the strain in his voice, she cocked her head.

“You okay?”

He kissed a spot on her forehead that wasn’t smeared with blood. “More than okay. I’m proud of you.” *But I have no idea how to tell you I want to imprint on you without scaring you off.*

“Good. Let’s go take a shower.”

Dante told himself, as he walked hand in hand with her back to the caves, that he would talk to her about it in their room. Unfortunately, the words didn’t come out. He wasn’t scared of the commitment that would come with it. As far as he was concerned, she was it for him whether they were bonded or not. But he was still worried that she would leave before she agreed to imprinting.

Losing her wasn’t something he could allow.

Still, he was resolute that they would talk about it. He’d been silent about it for long enough, and he wouldn’t last much longer before it burst out of him anyway. If she said she didn’t want it, he could simply agree that things remain as they were. Then, naturally, he’d do his best to wear her down over time.

He told himself that he’d bring it up when they were in the shower. Yeah, he’d fuck her with his tongue until she was on the verge of an orgasm, and then he’d stop and tell her. But that didn’t quite work out because, once again, he chickened out. He’d tell her before they left to go to lunch, he promised himself. Preferably while she was naked, because then she couldn’t run out on him.

However, not only did he become terribly distracted by her naked body and mischievous smile, but she chose that moment to get on her knees and suck him off. So, yeah, his wits were a little too scattered for him to have any kind of conversation right then.

After that, they’d been caught up with Beta stuff—that was the excuse he was sticking to anyway. Before he knew it, they were seated at the long dining table having their evening meal and he still hadn’t told her.

“Now you’re just being selfish,” Dominic said to Jaime, shaking his head. “You have that body for the rest of your life. I only want it for one night.” Not in the mood to hear his packmate making moves—no matter how playful—on the female he intended to claim, Dante growled. “Dominic, no. Not to Jaime.”

“But—”

“No.”

Dominic sighed in resignation. “Okay, fine.”

Noticing that Trey seemed to find the whole thing extremely amusing, Dante raised a brow at him. “It’s funny now that he’s not saying this shit to Taryn?” Trey smiled. “Of course.”

“I’ve always got some stored up for my gorgeous Alpha female,” said Dominic with an impish grin.

Instantly Trey’s smile fell from his face. “Dom, don’t do it.” Dominic held his hands up, pleading innocence. “I was just going to ask her if she went to Boy Scouts...because she has my heart all tied in knots.”

Taryn groaned and chuckled at the same time. But then she gasped loudly and everybody froze.

“I think my water just broke. Yep. My water just broke.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Watching Trey pace up and down anxiously outside the examination room, Jaime couldn’t help feeling sorry for him. Still, she wasn’t budging. She, Dante, and the enforcers had been charged with guarding the door and ensuring that Trey didn’t get through. After he’d lost his temper four times with Grace, as if it was solely her fault that the baby wasn’t yet out, Taryn had insisted that he wait outside until she was fully dilated. If the sounds she was making were anything to go by, she wasn’t far off.

“I should be in there with her.”

“She’s not alone,” said Jaime. “Shaya will help keep her calm. Grace and Lydia have delivered lots of babies, so they know what they’re doing.”

“That’s not the point. I’m her mate. I should be in there.”

“As soon as it’s looking like the baby’s ready to come out, Grace will come get you.” Dante patted his back once as he passed. “Don’t worry. Taryn would never let you miss this.”

“I can feel how much pain she’s in—well, I can feel a hint of it, which is bad

enough, and I take back that I said getting kicked in the balls was worse than childbirth. She's also feeling woozy.

Drunk.”

Jaime smiled. “That’ll be the gas and air.”

Suddenly he grimaced and paled. “The contractions are getting real strong. I hate that I can’t help.”

“*Trey!*”

At the sound of Taryn’s screech, he struggled to pass Jaime, Dante, and the enforcers.

“*Trey, you bastard!*”

Instantly the guy stilled.

Jaime gave him a pitying smile. “Yeah, you really don’t want to go in there yet.” She had been around shifters in labor before, and she knew exactly how colorful the air could become, and just how easily the females could turn on their mates.

He straightened, as if steeling himself, and knocked loudly on the door.

“Not yet, Trey,” Shaya called from inside the room.

“Let me in, Shaya. I want to be with her.”

“Yeah, let the bastard in so I can break his nose and shove it up his—”

“Okay, Taryn, I’ll let him in.” Shaya only opened the door a crack, and Trey pushed his way inside, shutting the door behind him. His mate slung a string of profanities at him that had everybody’s lips twitching. Jaime didn’t move from her place near the closed door, determined to be one of the first to see the baby when someone finally allowed them in. Dante and the enforcers must have been thinking the same thing, because none of them moved either.

Half an hour and a lot of cursing, growls, and cries later, they heard Taryn declare, “I can’t do this! Just leave her in there. She’ll be fine.”

“You’re doing really well,” Lydia assured her.

“No, I’m done! I’m tired, I’m sweaty, I’m in agony, and *why* do I feel like I need to shit?”

“It’s totally natural to feel that way,” said Grace in a placatory, calming voice. “Some women even have one during labor.”

“What?” The word dripped with horror. “Women can shit when they’re in labor? Tell me that won’t happen to me! Don’t you let me shit, Grace!” A loud, lengthy cry signaled that she was having another contraction.

Trey’s voice was soft and encouraging. “Just breathe, baby.”

“I am fucking breathing! And why does this gas and air make me sound like Darth Vader?”

“Here, how about I move it out the way for—”

“Don’t you touch it,” she growled at him. “It’s mine. Understand? *Mine.*”

“Okay, okay, you keep it, it’s yours.”

“Wanna try it?”

“No thanks, baby.” His smile could be heard in his voice. The only time his tone ever softened that way was when he was talking about, or talking to, his mate. It was a tone totally reserved for her.

A loud groan. “God, here comes another one.”

“You’re doing so well, Taryn,” praised Shaya. “I think you’ve only broken one of my fingers.”

“I think I’ve had a shit, Shaya.” The poor woman sounded distressed and mortified. “Have I, Grace? Don’t lie to me.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“I have, you’re lying. Is she lying, Lydia?”

“No,” Lydia quickly said, “you haven’t, I promise.”

“Shaya, why does it feel like the bed’s floating?” Taryn asked in a very loud whisper, though Jaime was sure that Taryn thought she was being quiet.

“Maybe we should take the gas and air from her,” suggested Trey.

“Fucking try it.”

“Stop growling at me,” he whined.

“I’m not fucking growling! You need a fucking hearing aid!” More cries of pain as another contraction hit. “Grace...I think I can feel the head.”

“It is the head, Taryn,” confirmed Grace. “On the next contraction, I need you to push for me, okay.” A long pause. “Ready? Go.”

“Push,” encouraged Trey.

“ I *am* pushing, doofus.” A few moments later, there was a sob. “Why isn’t anything happening?”

“I know you’re tired, baby, but—”

“Don’t you touch me, Flintstone, this is your fault! Don’t think we’re playing Hiding Pedro ever again!”

Shaya sounded stern yet amused. “Now, Taryn, that wasn’t nice.”

“Cut it out of me!” Presumably Taryn was totally ignored, because she growled, “Fine. Give me a knife, I’ll do it!”

“One more, Taryn, and it’ll all be over, I promise. I need you to push really, really hard this time.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing all along? ”

It was doubtless that Grace paid no heed to the string of insults that Taryn called her. Not long later, Grace said, “Here we go again. Ready? One, two, three.” Jaime was pretty sure the entire pack flinched at the sound of Taryn’s high-pitched scream. As it faded, the sound of a baby crying filled everyone’s ears.

Outside the room, everybody's face instantly lit up, but no one made a sound, eager to hear what Grace would announce to Taryn and Trey. Ten seconds later...

"Congratulations, you have a baby boy!"

"I always said it was a boy. Didn't I say it was a boy, Trey?"

"Yes, baby, you did," he said with a choked cry.

At that point, everyone outside the room started jumping up and down and making loud celebratory noises. Jaime just knew that this kid was going to get spoiled rotten by the entire pack.

Her old pack hadn't been like this one. Although everybody had looked out for each other, they hadn't been so close and tight-knit. Baby Coleman would want for absolutely nothing.

It wasn't until twenty minutes later that the door opened and Trey stepped out holding a tiny little bundle wrapped in a blue blanket, pride and awe written all over his face. "Everyone, this is Kye River Coleman." Tao immediately tried to take him, but Trey shook his head. "Later. I only brought him out so you could all see him for a second."

Jaime leaned over and lightly ran her fingers over his head of soft blond streaks. "Aw, he is too cute."

"Trey, he looks just like you when you were a baby," Greta told him. "Except for the blond hair. But we can cut that off, it's fine."

"You go near my son's hair, you senile old witch, and I'll finally shave that lip of yours!" called Taryn from inside the room.

Greta's mouth twitched into a self-satisfied smile that had Trey sighing and shaking his head.

"You couldn't wait until later before trying to irritate my mate?" Greta just shrugged unapologetically and went to take the baby. "You can all hold him later."

“Please, just one little tiny hold!” pleaded Jaime.

He thought about it for a second and exhaled heavily. “Just a few of you. And quickly. You want his head in the crook of your elbow and then wrap your other arm around him,” he told her stiffly, as if repeating what he himself had been told.

Carefully, Jaime took the baby from Trey and smiled, marveling over just how gorgeous he was. Even all wrinkled and scrunched-up, he was too cute for words. Best of all was his smell. She had never smelled anything like it before. There was truly nothing to compare it to. It was just a sweet, earthy, divine, addictive scent that made her melt. It called to her on a primal level and made her consider things she hadn’t before, making her feel slightly off-center and exposed in a way she couldn’t explain. Instead of making her want to hand Kye over to someone else, it made her want to keep him right there where he was. Her wolf, too, had an urge to keep Kye close—an urge Jaime didn’t understand but didn’t question.

Dante watched Jaime holding Kye with a smile of pure delight on her face and felt a twinge in his chest. Suddenly and unexpectedly, he imagined her holding *their* baby. The picture was so clear in his mind that a lump actually appeared in his throat. Maybe it was the wonder of the moment, he wasn’t sure, but suddenly every wall he had felt away. Every fear and doubt was pushed to the back of his brain, and he felt stripped bare.

Going by the way Jaime was swallowing hard and biting on her lower lip even as she was still smiling down at Kye, Dante guessed that the same thing was happening to her. And then she looked up at him, flashing him a smile, but as their gazes met, a knowing so primitive and absolute hit him with a force that almost hurt. As her eyes widened, he knew the same knowing had hit her, and he was sure that the wonder, shock, confusion, and recognition in her eyes would be reflected in his own.

“She’s hogging him. Move out of the way so I can get to my great-grandson,” Greta complained as she tugged on the back of his T-shirt. Feeling in some kind of daze, he stepped aside.

As Jaime awkwardly handed Kye to Greta, he saw she was in that same daze. As she looked back at him, he saw another emotion on her face. Sheer panic.

No. The word continuously raced around Jaime's brain. Her mate. He was her mate.

She didn't need to ask herself how she hadn't realized this before now. How would she have known? She could recall asking her mom about mating bonds when she was a little girl. Her mom had explained that a mating bond was like a frequency; if it was jammed by something—fears, mental barriers, doubts, an imprint bond, a reluctance to mate—the frequency couldn't be picked up.

By caging her wolf and building so many walls, there was no way Jaime could have sensed it.

Dante was no more open than she was. He had walls of his own, not to mention a total aversion to finding his true mate. And what with her having that same aversion, neither of them had had a hope in hell of sensing it.

Maybe it should have occurred to her, since she'd been drawn to him even when they were kids, but plenty of people had crushes. A girl could crush on plenty of guys over the years, thinking she was totally and unquestioningly in love with each one of them at the time. Never with any of those guys had she wondered if it meant that he was her mate, so why would she have thought her crush on Dante was anything more than exactly that—a simple crush?

It wasn't really important at this point. Now that she knew the truth, she had to figure out what she was supposed to do about it. What *could* she do about it? She sure couldn't claim him for obvious reasons. But how could she be around him each day without doing so? Even now, she could feel the urge to take what was hers building in her system, taunting her, hounding her, and nagging at her.

Now she could understand exactly what Shaya and Nick were going through. No wonder the guy was finding it so difficult to stay away from Shaya. The draw was more than a simple attraction, more than just a pull. It was magnetic, enticing, a pressure on the mind that had nowhere to go. It was a crushing and overwhelming craving, as if she needed to feed an addiction. She honestly felt as though she might soon shake with the beating need to claim him.

The longer mates resisted, the worse the urge to claim became. Suddenly she felt a little sorry for Nick. Not that it excused his behavior. But she could understand it, just like she could understand Shaya's need to be away from this person to whom she knew she would never be mated. There was no way that Jaime could

be around Dante every day while this urge was gnawing at her. The only choice she had was to leave, even if the idea did send a dull pain knifing through her body and soul. It was that or go absolutely insane.

Gabe's words suddenly came to her: his contention that if she ever left, Dante would track her down and bring her back. But Dante wasn't stupid. He'd know that there was no way that they could claim each other as mates. It wouldn't be simple to get any wolf—let alone a very dominant, controlling, possessive male wolf—to resist claiming his mate. But the sad reality was that they had no other choice but to part ways, and he would know that.

Jaime knew he was nearing her before she even scented him. She was now totally aware of him and of every move he made, and this awareness prickled all over her skin and tantalized her nerve endings.

“I think you and I need to have a talk,” Dante said into her ear. He could easily hear the lust and desperation in his voice. If he didn't get inside her soon, if he didn't claim her, he was going to lose it.

“Really? What about?” Playing dumb probably wouldn't work, but she figured that if she just kept denying him he might get pissed and march off in a huff—inadvertently giving her time to pack and leave.

Dante wasn't surprised by her response. He'd known that she would fight this. While he acknowledged the sense and logic in that, he also knew that nothing would prevent him from claiming her. Not her, not her anxiety, and not the chance that he would die with her if she turned rogue and was killed. “Our room. Now.”

“Why?” She kept her manner cool, knowing it would irritate both him and his wolf. His warning growl proved her to be right.

“We need to talk in private.”

Acting confused, she shrugged. “Okay. But we can do that in the office.” She knew perfectly well what would happen if they were anywhere near a bed.

“Someone might disturb us there. Let's take a walk outside.” Reluctantly, Jaime allowed Dante to lead her outside and down to the clearing by the lake.

Only then did he release her hand before coming to stand in front of her. “No more playing games, Jaime. You know exactly what this is about.”

“I know that you’re acting weird.”

“I get that you’re scared, baby, and I get why. But if you expect me not to claim you, you don’t know me at all.”

“Claim me?” She forced a disbelieving shake of the head. “I thought you were totally against imprinting.”

His wolf bared his teeth. “Don’t, Jaime. Denying who I am to you pisses my wolf and me off more than you can ever imagine.”

Good. “On a serious note, did you bang your head or something, sweetie? Or maybe you’re talking in code. Yeah, I don’t understand code. I can speak Thundercat.”

“Jaime, this is a dangerous game you’re playing, baby. Stop. Now.”

“Okay, now you’re starting to freak me out. I think I’ll just go on back to—”

“Don’t move, Jaime.” He went nose to nose with her. “You can keep on playing games, or you can acknowledge that I’m your mate, and we’ll discuss it like adults. Choose.”

“Your mate? You’re kidding, right?” Before she could see it coming, he wrapped one arm around her, pinning her own to her sides. With his free hand, he put pressure on the baroreceptor in the carotid artery at the base of her neck where it met her shoulder. Ten seconds or so later, she passed out.

God, who the hell was moaning? Oh, it was her, Jaime realized dazedly as she opened her eyes. It took no more than five seconds to remember exactly why she was in that daze. It was never a nice feeling waking up after blacking out, but it was worse when it had been your damn mate who sent you to dreamland. She’d kill the jerk.

Quickly it registered in her brain that that might be a little difficult right now. Not only were her wrists bound together, but they were pinned above her head. Pinned *to a tree*. Yes, two thick ropes—the same kind that he used for his cruel

assault course—were securing her body to a tree; one was looped around her waist and the other was looped around her tied wrists. She really was going to kill him.

“Dante? Dante, what the hell is this?”

He didn't appear or respond, but she knew he was there. Knew it. Repeatedly she squirmed and struggled within her bonds, ignoring the burning sensation it left on the flesh of her wrists and stomach. But no matter what she did, neither knot loosened even slightly. Similarly, the tie binding her wrists didn't give. Because of how her hands were joined closely, as if in prayer, the only things her claws would have sliced open if she unsheathed them were her hands. So, yeah, okay, she had to face the fact that she was stuck to a tree. “I know you're there. Get over here and untie me.” Her wolf was ready to tear out his throat.

A few moments later, Jaime watched as Dante slowly strolled out of the trees. He didn't come close. He stopped at least five feet away from her, stiff as a board. He didn't speak, didn't move his gaze from hers, didn't move at all. It was kind of eerie. Worse, his expression was completely blank.

There was no devilish smile, no playful twinkle in his eyes. “Untie me.” No response. “Now, Dante.” Nothing. “Stop being a jerk, Popeye! You want to talk? Fine, we'll talk. Now untie me.” Still nothing.

Okay, now she was *really* freaked out. She had to wonder if this was what he was like when he was interrogating intruders, if this was that “zone” that Trey had mentioned. He wasn't going to torture her into admitting he was her mate, was he? No, Dante wouldn't hurt her. If there was one thing she knew for sure, it was that he would never ever hurt her.

When Dante saw the flash of fear on her face, he almost caved. But it was gone as quickly as it came. He knew she was spooked and feeling vulnerable, but that was the whole idea. He knew just how stubborn she could be. If Jaime didn't want to do something, nothing in the world could make her. As such, if she wanted to put those damn walls of hers up again and keep him out, there was no way to get them down again. Not unless he stripped her of them. Not unless he made her as vulnerable and unguarded as she'd been when she held Kye in her arms. The only way to get her to admit the truth to both him and to herself was to lower those walls for just a minute.

Surprising Jaime, the robotic version of her male slowly came toward her. Although he didn't close the distance between them, she could feel the heat emanating from him and covering her like a blanket. If he reached out, he could touch her. But he didn't. And that unblinking stare was too eerie for words.

She kicked out at him, but he caught her foot and pulled off her shoe, slinging it aside.

Instinctively, she kicked out with her other foot, only for him to do the same damn thing.irate beyond belief, she repeatedly kicked out at him, growling and snarling. Although she managed to make contact a few times, the big, overgrown male didn't even flinch. In fact, he waited patiently, like a parent might do for a toddler having a tantrum.

Weary and panting, she finally stilled. "Let me down, Dante," she said unsteadily. It wasn't just her anxiety that had her feeling shaky. It was the intense, crushing, overwhelming urge to have him inside her, to mark him, and to have him mark her. In spite of how freaked she was feeling, need was curdling low in her belly, and she was wet and aching. Going by the low growl he released as his nostrils flared, he'd sensed it.

Finally, his blank gaze freed hers, and his eyes lowered to her T-shirt. Abruptly, he unsheathed his claws and tore it open. In another abrupt movement, he snapped open her bra, freeing her breasts.

He took a moment to look at them, hunger and lust blazing from his eyes, before shredding her jeans and panties. Her wolf growled in approval of his strength, aroused by the power in his body and the intensity of his mood. Apparently, the fact that he'd tied her to a tree was no longer so important to her wolf. Weird animal.

Cocking his head and pursing his lips, he slowly raked his eyes over her, much like a predator that had caught its prey and was assessing its worth. He took in every inch of her from her feet to her...throat. Her face didn't seem relevant, as if all he viewed her as right now was a conveniently available body. That hurt.

"Dante, let me down." To her infuriation and discomfort, he didn't acknowledge that she had spoken. Ever so slowly he moved until there was only a hairbreadth between them, his eyes glued to her throat. Oh no. He was going to claim her right this second, like this. "Dante, enough is enough, all right. You've had your

fun. Now untie this damn rope!”

Instead, he leaned forward and licked the crook of her neck. A shudder traveled down her spine and her clit tingled, making her gasp and moan. Again, he licked the same spot. And again. And again. Then he raked his teeth over it, and she squeezed her eyes shut, knowing what he was going to do and hating him for it. But, surprising the hell out of her, he suddenly dropped to his knees.

She watched as he inhaled deeply, taking the scent of her arousal inside him, but he didn't lean forward as she'd expected him to. No. When he finally touched her, it was only to run his fingertip over her foot. She couldn't help but moan in relief at the skin-to-skin contact. Taking his time, he explored every inch of her legs with the gentlest touch, sliding his hands over them like he'd never seen them before. Like he was learning her, worshipping her, memorizing her, marking her...but never was his touch seductive or invasive. He totally skipped her sensitive zones. It drove her freaking crazy, and she was breathing so heavily she thought she might hyperventilate.

Then he was exploring her stomach using his hands, tongue, and teeth. Her entire body shuddered when he traced a circle around her belly button with his tongue. She would never have thought that a soft, gentle touch could fire her arousal, but to her surprise it totally did. God, she needed to come so badly, and he knew it.

By the time he finally stood before her again, she was trembling with want. And what did he do? Just stared at her breasts. *Stared!* It felt like an hour had passed before he reached out and trailed the tip of his index finger along her collarbone, pausing briefly to swirl it inside the hollow of her throat. His tongue traced that same path, and her head thumped back onto the tree as she tried arching toward him—and failed. Again, there was nothing seductive about his movements, but she was more turned on than she had ever been in her life.

She didn't realize he'd dropped to his knees again until she felt his tongue at her navel.

Slowly, he dragged his tongue upward, occasionally nipping her flesh as he went, traveling through the valley of her breasts and only stopping when he reached the hollow of her throat. A tremor rippled through her entire body, causing her eyes to fall shut and a loud moan to escape her.

When she opened her eyes, he still wasn't looking at her face, but at her breasts. She wanted him to look into her eyes, wanted some form of acknowledgement. "Untie me." She gasped as he lazily and teasingly circled a nipple with his finger, never quite touching the hard bud itself. He gave the same treatment to the other nipple before replacing his finger with his tongue. Then he sucked her nipple into his mouth, grazing the hard bud with his teeth and biting down. "If you're not going untie me, then at least make me come!"

The jerk didn't react in any sense. Needing some kind of relief, Jaime wrapped a leg around his hips and ground her clit against the hard bulge in his jeans. There was no reaction from him whatsoever, as if he didn't even notice. She was about to yell at him again when a finger suddenly slid between her folds, sending shudders of pleasure and relief through her body. That same finger lightly flicked her clit and circled it over and over, but the movements were too featherlike to make her come.

"Dante, why are you doing this?" she practically sobbed. He said nothing. Just slid his finger between her folds again, letting the tip hover near her entrance. "You want me to beg, is that it?" Still no reaction. Ever so slowly— *too* freaking slowly—he pushed his finger inside her. A noise that was something between a groan and a sob escaped her. Repeatedly, he slowly and gently thrust his finger inside her, pausing occasionally to swirl it around. God, she was so damn close to coming and so damn close to going insane. Her cries became louder as her climax began closing in on her. It was going to be a big one...But then he stopped and withdrew his finger. *Stopped!*

She was about to tell him she was going to rip his cock off in his sleep when he was back on his knees and his tongue was teasing her clit. "Oh my God." Using his thumbs to part her folds, he licked and nipped and growled against her flesh. Then he was sucking her clit between his lips and nibbling on the hood. She cried out as two of those magical fingers pushed inside her. Her muscles automatically tightened around them, trying to keep them. The bastard withdrew them. "Stop teasing me!" It was supposed to be a scream, but it came out as a pathetic wail.

Then Dante proceeded to show her the *real* meaning of being teased. Again and again, he brought her to her peak with his tongue and fingers, only to stop and wait for her to come down from her high before starting all over again. Sometimes he would return his attention to her breasts instead, leaving her

feeling emptier than she had ever felt in her life.

She sagged in relief when he finally lowered his zipper and freed his cock. The feel of the head rubbing at her entrance was so good that she almost cried. Panting with the need to come, she wrapped her other leg around his hip—an invitation. But instead of plunging inside her, he lowered her legs and began fondling her breasts again.

She screamed in frustration and struggled against her bonds, but it was useless. As if she wasn't writhing, screaming, and insulting him, Dante continued to alternate from teasing her breasts to finger-fucking her to sinuously rubbing his cock between her folds. She moaned. She groaned. She whimpered. She sobbed. She cried. She threatened his livelihood. She even tried kicking the shit out of him again. After what felt like hours of sensual torture, she was practically delirious with the need to come. So delirious that she did what she'd never done before.

“Please!” Nothing. He simply continued to nibble on her shoulder while teasing her clit with the tip of his finger. She curled her legs around his hips again and groaned as she felt the head of his cock against her entrance. “Please fuck me!” Still no reaction. What made the whole thing so much worse was that he wouldn't meet her eyes, wouldn't even look at her face, wouldn't talk to or respond to her. Like she was just any woman, like she was no one at all to him.

A mixture of enraged, hurt, horny, and restless, she completely snapped. “You don't get to treat me like this! Like I'm just some faceless fuck! I'm not one of your one-night stands! I'm not one of your little sluts! I'm your mate!” He rammed every inch of his cock into her and, that easily, she fragmented. A throaty scream tore from her as flames of ecstasy lanced through her, making violent orgasmic convulsions rack her entire body.

When she opened her eyes, she gasped at the feverish hunger glowing on his face. How he hadn't come was beyond her understanding. He really was the embodiment of self-control. Although he was meeting her gaze—*finally*—he still didn't speak to her. She realized then what he'd been doing. Realized what he wanted. She didn't want to give it to him, she really didn't, but she couldn't fight him, or *this*, either. She needed him so much in every way someone could need another person.

She had even before she knew he was her mate.

Suddenly feeling drained mentally and physically, Jaime sagged and her head fell forward to rest on his shoulder. She cried and cried, hating how weak and helpless she was. When she felt him kiss her hair, she returned her gaze to his. His expression was patient, expectant, and resolute. He wasn't going to budge on this.

"I'm your mate." She cried out as he rewardingly thrust once inside her. "Your mate," she again admitted, and again he drove into her just once. She knew what he was waiting for. "And you're mine."

Triumph, relief, and satisfaction filled Dante. "Goddamn right. And don't ever forget it." Then he was gripping her ass and hammering his cock inside her. Taking her. Claiming her. Branding her.

Jaime thought she might black out; his pace was merciless and wild, and it felt so amazing and right that tears stung her eyes. Although the bark of the tree was biting into her skin, it only complemented the other sensations spiraling through her as every bit of the ravenous longing that had been riding her was now, finally, indulged.

"Tell me what you want, Jaime," he ordered hoarsely. "Tell me." The urge to claim her as his mate was pushing Dante so hard it was actually painful, but he wouldn't do it without her consent.

Not just because it wouldn't be fair to her, but because he needed to hear her say that she wanted it.

His stubborn mate didn't. Abruptly he stilled, staring deep into her glazed smoky-blue eyes. Ignoring her sounds of irritation, he held her immobile and flexed his cock inside her, making her whimper.

"Do you want me to claim you?" he demanded.

A huge part of her was saying no, but it was drowned out by her need to have every part of him, to lay the ultimate, irrevocable claim on him. "Do it." He withdrew until only the head of his cock was inside her. "Not good enough. I need to hear you say that you *want* it."

A short pause. "I want it."

Dante thrust up into her tight pussy, wrenching a loud cry from her. Then he was again ramming into her relentlessly, determined to leave no doubt in her mind of who she belonged to and would always belong to. Growling, he brought his mouth down hard on hers. He thrust his tongue inside, meeting hers, exploring every crevice of her mouth. The kiss was greedy, deep, and urgent, and she met every demanding stroke of his tongue with equal intensity.

As he'd expected, she jumped in surprise as he let one of his fingers gently circle the bud of her ass. "Shh. I'm not going to hurt you, baby. You know that. But I am going to fuck this ass soon.

Fuck you where no one else ever has. Because it's mine to fuck, to protect, and to blister with my hand if you *ever* deny I'm your mate again."

Startling a cry from Jaime, he pushed his finger into her ass. The sting didn't distract her from the hurt in his voice. She hadn't meant or wanted to do that by denying him. On the contrary, she'd been trying to protect him from a very uncertain future. But still, she'd caused him pain, and she hated herself for that. "I'm sorry."

The apology startled Dante so much that he actually stopped. "Then tell me you're mine. Tell me you'll never deny me again."

His pain was still in his voice. Determined to take it away, Jaime did something that she, as a dominant female, would never have envisioned herself doing. She gave him her throat.

As her head fell back in invitation and submission, Dante groaned and almost came right then.

His mate was submitting to him in the ultimate way. "Such." Thrust. "A." Thrust. "Good." Thrust.

"Girl." With what could only be described as a territorial growl, he resumed pounding into her so hard he was pretty sure it was hurting her, but there was no way he could hold back even one ounce of himself.

Burying his face into the crook of her neck, he licked and scraped his teeth over

the spot where he'd visualized his mark would be. "My good girl. My mate." To punctuate that, he sank his teeth hard and deep into her skin, tasting blood, and plunged a second finger into her ass.

White-hot fire lanced through Jaime, and she screamed his name as the most intense and most moving orgasm she had ever experienced slammed into her. She succumbed to the primal urge to bite down on his neck, sucking hard and branding him as hers.

As her pussy clamped around his cock and her teeth marked him, Dante half growled, half groaned. He punched into her one last time and erupted inside her, fully claiming her as his mate.

"Mine."

What happened next was as exactly as Jaime's mother had described; her whole body tightened and a painful pressure thumped her brain, but the pain quickly disappeared and feelings of

"warmth" and "rightness" flowed over and through her. She felt comforted, secure, and safe. Although she could easily feel her connection to Dante, it was only partly developed and not yet solid. Still, she could sense him and what he was feeling. Could feel *him* on a preternatural level, feel him completely, as though he was blanketed around her. She knew that even when they were apart, she would feel him, would feel joined to him. In that way, the bond was a little like a shadow—something she wouldn't be able to touch, but a presence that was always right there.

Dante easily sensed that Jaime was going through the same sensations that he was. The metaphysical bond allowed him to simply *know* what she was feeling. As such, he could sense her happiness and contentedness just as he could also sense her fear that by bonding with him, she would destroy him. "Do you really think I'd want to live without you anyway?" Jaime groaned. "Oh God, I'm going to have to cope with you sensing my feelings all the time, aren't I?" Panting and shuddering with the aftershocks, they were still locked together. He tucked her hair behind her ear, his gentle touch so at odds to his roughness of a minute ago.

"Yup. That means no more secrets. And it means that whenever I'm messing up, I'll know and I can fix it before hurting you."

“And it means I’ll know whenever your mind is on your job instead of me.” She’d expected him to panic a little at that, but he smiled.

“I haven’t done that for a while.” Reluctantly he withdrew from her body, but he held her to him. After slicing through the two ropes securing her to the tree with his claws, he tackled the knot tying her wrists. She groaned in pain as she lowered her arms and rotated her shoulders. “I’m sorry, baby.” Laying her on the grass, he straddled her and gently massaged her arms and shoulders.

“I can’t give you all of me,” she whispered. He froze for only a second. “I can’t let down all the walls.”

“Yes, you can,” he objected gently. “I know you’re afraid to share the burden of subduing your wolf, and I know why. But I *want* to help.”

“I don’t want you to have to.” The last thing she’d ever wanted was to go to her mate loaded with baggage. She didn’t want Dante to have to heal her.

“I know. But I’m greedy and I want all of you—the good parts and the bad parts. Have you considered that maybe over time the bond will help your wolf heal? It will serve as an anchor, which is something she’s never had before.”

Jaime might have thought he was just kidding himself, but even now she could feel her wolf’s contentment with the bond. “But if she doesn’t, I could make you weak. I could even kill you.”

“Or we could make each other even stronger.” When she went to object, he leaned down and kissed her gently. “No. If you can’t say anything nice, zip it.” She snapped her teeth at him, but smiled.

“I don’t care about what may or may not happen. You’re my mate and that’s it.”

“And you’re mine. And if you ever let another female touch you again, I’ll gut you both.” She rolled her eyes at his crooked grin. God save her from guys who found jealousy hot!



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The identical looks of shock on each of the faces staring at them were almost comical. Jaime and Dante had made a short pit stop at their room to change clothes—he hadn't wanted the others seeing her in nothing but his huge T-shirt—before going to the living area, where everyone other than the Alphas and Kye were lounging. Their announcement had received a stunned silence.

“How did I not see this coming? I should have picked up on it.” Rhett sounded like someone who thought he'd lost his super-power.

Grace looked at her mate oddly from where they were sat on the sofa. “Why? You never picked up on Trey and Taryn.”

“I did, I just hadn't said anything.”

“Sure you did, honey.” Turning to Jaime and Dante, she smiled. “I had a feeling you guys would imprint, but this is even better.”

Lydia's smile was ever wider. “A birth and a mating all in one day. How awesome is that?”

“When do you want the mating ceremony to take place?” asked Grace excitedly.

“You have to let me help with it,” insisted Lydia as she leaned forward in Cam's lap. It was tradition for the other members of the pack to arrange most of the ceremony.

Cam sighed, which earned him a cautioning look from his mate. “I won't lie and say I don't still have my worries about Jaime's wolf,” he said, looking between Jaime and Dante, “but I am happy for you guys.”

Greta huffed. “An insane jezebel as a Beta female? Ludicrous.”

“Yet true, so suck it up, Grandma Grinch,” said Jaime with a sweet smile.

Tao gave Jaime a mock frown. “I guess this means I can't bitch at you anymore, since you outrank me.”

Ryan nudged Tao with his elbow. “One word: karma.” He then turned to Jaime and Dante.

“Congratulations.”

“Gorgeous, you could do so much better than him,” Marcus told Jaime. Predictably, Dante responded with a low growl. That pleased Marcus so immensely that his clown-wide smile surfaced.

“Congratulations to both of you,” said Trick. “You two getting together was always going to happen, even if you weren’t true mates.”

When Dominic saw that Jaime and Dante’s attention was on him, he shrugged. “What can I say? You’ve shattered my dreams. Jaime, are you really going to ignore this chemistry we have?”

“Dominic,” bit out Dante, giving him a warning shake of the head.

“Come on, you can’t blame me for being attracted to her. Look at that body and those entrancing eyes and that beaming smile.”

“Dominic, seriously, don’t do it.”

Naturally, he ignored Dante. “I swear, when she smiles it lights up the entire room like a candle in the dark.” He winked at Jaime. “Let’s go upstairs and prove it.” His eyes widened as Dante suddenly dove at him. Quickly the pervert darted out of the way, laughing, as Dante chased him out of the room and down the tunnels.

“Boys.” Jaime sighed.

“I don’t know what either of them sees in you anyway.” Greta huffed.

Jaime gave her a sweet smile. “If you don’t stop bothering me, I’m going to fart and watch with glee as you pass out from the smell.” She switched her attention to Gabe, Hope, and Shaya, who were now beside her.

Hope gave her a respectful nod. “Congratulations. You make a good couple. Thank you for being happy for Gabe and me.”

Jaime shrugged, smiling. “You make him happy.” That was all that was important to Jaime.

“You’re looking very pleased with yourself,” she said dryly to her brother.

“I told you he adored you.” He kissed her cheek. “He didn’t have to claim you, Jaime, but he did. He could have walked away, but he didn’t.”

That made her think of someone else. Someone who had been very quiet—an usual thing for Shaya. It struck Jaime that hearing about other people mating might be too painful for her.

Shaya must have known what she was thinking, because she dragged her to the side as she told her quietly, “Don’t you dare think I’m not happy for you, okay? I’m so thrilled for you and Dante.

Both of you deserve to be happy.”

Sensing that she was being truthful, Jaime relaxed a little. “I felt what the urge to claim was like. God, Shaya how do you do it?”

“It’s not easy.”

“Are you still thinking of leaving?” It was the last thing Jaime wanted her to do, but she could truly understand why Shaya might feel that she had to.

She shrugged. “Maybe I won’t have to. He hasn’t been here for a while. Maybe he’s planning to stay away now. God, I hope so.”

“Is it easier when he’s away from you?”

“Not easier where the urge to claim is concerned. But it’s easier here.” She placed her hand over her heart.

“If it makes you feel any better, he’s going through the same pain. I saw it on his face that day in the tattoo parlor.”

“Emotional pain and physical pain are two different things. I’m not saying that I love him or anything. I don’t know him. But when your own mate doesn’t want you or even acknowledge you...

that’s pain.”

Now that she was mated, Jaime could imagine exactly how that felt. That evening as she lay naked on top of Dante, with him still semihard inside her, she said, “I’m not sure that Trey will be as happy for us as the others have been.” They still hadn’t seen the Alphas, who were both spending quality time with their new arrival.

“Yes, he will.” Dante paused in doodling on her back with his fingers and kissed her hair. “I know he will. He gave me his blessing when he knew I wanted to imprint on you.” Startled, she lifted her head to meet his gaze. “You wanted to imprint on me?”

“Obviously.”

“But...after what Bitch Face did—”

He put a finger to her lips. “That was all a long time ago, and yes, I’d stayed clear of relationships because I didn’t want to go through that again. But I knew you were nothing like her.

You don’t play games”—kiss to her forehead—“you’re not self-absorbed”—kiss to her cheek

—“you’ve got a big heart”—kiss to her lips—“and you’re loyal to the bone.”

“And I’m broken.”

“Hey, what have I told you? You’re not broken. Don’t say that. You wouldn’t have agreed to imprint, would you?”

“Only because I don’t want you to be hurt. If we’d imprinted and Trey asked me to leave, you would have had to break the bond. I knew you wouldn’t want to go through that a second time, and I wouldn’t have wanted you to.”

“I’m glad she did what she did. I never thought I’d say that, but it’s true, because I wouldn’t be mated to you right now if she hadn’t.” He studied her through narrowed eyes. “You would have left me, wouldn’t you?” She didn’t look even the slightest bit guilty about it. “I would have hunted you down.”

“I know.”

He snaked a hand around her throat, ignoring the spark of irritation in her eyes. “Know this, too: if you ever get an idea like that again, I’ll know, baby, and I’ll spank your ass so damn hard there’ll be a permanent handprint right there.”

She gave him a cheeky smile. “As long as you understand there’ll be a matching one on your face.”

He smiled crookedly as he flexed his cock inside that pussy that was made for him. Gripping her by the waist, he gently moved her up and down on him. “So... is there any chance of you reconsidering getting my name tattooed on your ass?”

Jaime rolled her eyes at his possessiveness. “Not a chance,” she said a little breathlessly as he began to harden further inside her.

“How about my initials?”

“Not going to happen, Popeye. Get over it.”

“Now that’s just mean.”

“You have your brands all over me.”

“I know.” He smoothed his hands up and down her back, loving the velvety feel of her skin. “I just think it would be hot.”

“You really want someone touching and looking at my bare ass?” She refrained from smiling as his grin vanished, just like she’d known it would.

He cupped her ass possessively, again slowly impaling her on him. “No, I don’t. This ass is mine. Mine to look at, and touch, and bite...and fuck.”

“You truly believe I’ll let you do that, don’t you?” She patted his head patronizingly. “Aw, you’re so pretty.”

“Oh you’ll let me. Right over my office desk. You don’t want to admit it, but you want it. I knew that before we mated, and now that we are, I can feel that you’re intrigued.” Damn that freaking bond. “Intrigued and willing aren’t the same, Popeye.” He patted her head just as she had his. “Aw, you’re so full of shit.” Before she could respond with an insult or a bitch slap, he flipped her onto her back and fucked her until neither of them had the strength to do anything other

than roll onto their sides and sleep.

“I’m going to work with you this morning,” Dante declared before shoving a huge piece of bacon into his mouth.

Everyone at the dining table paused what they were doing, and Jaime knew why. He hadn’t said that he was driving her to work, he had said that he was going with her—quite different.

Although Dante had been doing fairly well with his controlling and overprotective nature, now that they were mated, things would be a little complicated. Not only would he be more possessive, jealous, controlling, and protective than ever, but as long as their bond wasn’t fully developed, he would be even worse. “Why?” It was a dare for him to admit that he couldn’t get a hold on his protective streak.

“Because I want to spend time with you, and then I want to take you out for lunch afterward.

Kind of hard to do that if you’ve got your own car with you.” She snorted, as did some of the others at the table. “You mean you don’t want to miss the expression on Shawn’s face when he sees the claiming mark.” He shrugged unapologetically. “And there’s also that little matter of you being paranoid that if you’re not with me twenty-four/seven, something terrible will befall me.”

He cupped her chin. “Something bad already happened to you. I’m not prepared to let it happen again.”

“I doubt Glory will hire another lone wolf to shoot me.”

“Probably not,” he allowed. “But that’s not to say that her brothers aren’t ready to make their next move yet. You know they *will* make another move soon. You yourself said that you didn’t think they’d get someone else to do their dirty work.”

She couldn’t really argue with that. She wanted to, but she couldn’t. As much as she was someone who took care of her own problems, Jaime wasn’t the type who lived in a delusional world where she could take them on by herself if those problems were as huge as people intending to kill her. Dante was right, and she’d be a suicidal idiot not to accept help.

Besides, it wouldn't be fair not to meet him in the middle. And he *was* trying to meet her in the middle. She had felt his panic when she told him she was starting work again this morning. She had expected him to immediately insist that she remain on pack territory, but he hadn't. He'd held back.

"You've helped me with my work, now I want to help you with yours," he said with an innocent shrug.

Jaime sighed. "Fine."

A suspicious look crossed his face. "That was too easy."

"No, this is me being sensible and appreciating how hard it is for you to not hound me about going to work."

This was why she was so perfect for him, Dante thought. She accepted his little quirks—okay, big quirks—and though she was stubborn, she compromised when she could. She let him take care of her even though she didn't need him to, even though it often nettled her to be coddled. Dante lifted her from her seat and placed her on his lap to straddle him. "Thank you." He buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled deeply. Although he loved her scent and often found himself wanting to writhe in it, he looked forward to their bond advancing and their scents finally mixing. She shuddered when he grazed her claiming mark with his teeth; he loved looking at it, loved knowing that she was irreversibly his and that everyone else would know it, too.

"Not at the breakfast table, kids," complained their Alpha female playfully as she strolled in, but Dante simply held Jaime tighter. Trey was behind Taryn, with Kye nestled in the crook of his arm.

Instantly, most of the pack were on their feet, trying to take Kye. Rather reluctantly, Trey handed the baby to Shaya, who then swatted everyone else away.

"Your cat has not moved from my son since the second he scented him," Taryn told Jaime as she sat. "He sleeps by his crib, like he's protecting him. When Trey slung him out of the room, he slept outside the door. It's so cute."

"It's not cute at all," Greta insisted. "You have to be careful with cats. Some of them will sleep on a baby's face and smother them."

“What?” demanded Trey.

Taryn rolled her eyes. “His overprotectiveness has now transferred from me to Kye.”

“Why did you give him River as a middle name?” Greta’s face was scrunched up in an expression of distaste.

“One, I love the name. Two, I love rivers. Three, I knew you wouldn’t like it.”

“Congratulations,” Trey said to Jaime and Dante. “Shaya told us that you mated.” Taryn’s face lit up. “Yes, congrats. Sorry, I totally forgot. I blame the sleep deprivation.” Dante and Jaime both gave their Alphas nods of thanks. “I need to get you to work or you’re going to be late,” he told Jaime before putting her on her feet and then rising. “See you guys later.”

Tao, can you take care—”

The Head Enforcer raised his hand. “Don’t worry. I’ve got everything covered.”

“It’s odd seeing you delegate,” commented Taryn. “I like it.” Dante grinned. “Me too.”

As he and Jaime were passing, Rhett tugged on his T-shirt to halt him. “And you said you’d never let a female wrap you around her little finger.” His smile was so wide it could have challenged one of Marcus’s clown smiles.

“What?”

“That’s what you said at Taryn and Trey’s mating ceremony. My, my, my, how the tables have turned.”

Dante scowled. “Shut the fuck up.” Rhett just laughed.

During the entire drive to the sanctuary, Dante kept his hand on Jaime’s thigh. Much like her scent, the contact had a way of arousing him, settling him, and stirring his wolf all at the same time. It was shocking just how different he felt now that he was mated.

Although he had always been aware that he was without the other half of his soul, he hadn’t truly understood what that meant until he mated with Jaime and felt their bond begin to form. He hadn’t known there were so many hollow spaces inside him until she came and filled them, hadn’t realized just how incomplete he was until her soul fused with his.

Even with all his ease, confidence, and faith in himself, he’d only been half a person. Now that the metaphysical bond existed between him and Jaime, he had someone who balanced him out.

Jaime’s nature complemented his in that she was strong in areas where he might be flawed, and vice versa. In sum, they made each other stronger.

Now, if he could only get his mate to acknowledge that, he might have a chance at getting her to lower those walls of hers and let him in totally, give him all of herself. How ironic was it that all his life he’d been worried his mate would

demand too much from him, and it was *he* who was doing the demanding?

If he let the subject alone, he would end up with the exact thing he'd always wanted—a mate who wouldn't ask to be his “everything” and would hold back rather than be totally dependent on him.

The trouble was that he found he didn't want that at all. He wanted every single part of Jaime and was prepared to give her exactly the same in return. How could he not? She was vital to him, even though she was also a pain in his ass.

When they arrived, Jaime gave Dante a pair of coveralls that were a little too tight and didn't hesitate in putting him to work. He had a feeling that she hoped to discourage him from following her there again, but nothing would discourage him from being sure that she was safe. Not even cleaning up shit and listening to a building of howling, barking dogs. Unfortunately, Shawn congratulated them about the mating. Dante had kind of been hoping for a fight, but whatever. The witch and the lioness were just as happy.

“I'm so pleased for you both.” Riley almost squeezed the life out of Jaime.

“Thanks,” Jaime managed to wheeze out.

Blushing, Riley merely gave Dante a congratulatory smile. Apparently, he still intimidated her.

Once Riley had released her, Ivy gave her an equally enthusiastic hug. “If anyone deserves this, honey, it's you.” She turned to Dante, frowning. “I'll bet you feel like an idiot for ignoring your attraction to her for so long.”

Actually, Dante did. There was really no need to rub salt in the wound. After work, he took Jaime to the Steakhouse for lunch, but rather than going home as they'd originally planned, they spent the entire day together. First they went to an ice-cream parlor that Jaime swore made the best ice cream ever—it really did—and then they went shopping to get some personalized gifts for Kye. He hadn't realized before just how maternal Jaime was. Dante liked this side of her, and he liked knowing that she would be happy if she got pregnant.

He wasn't exactly in a rush to have pups, but he also wasn't a person who believed there was a best time to have kids. No matter when you had kids, it was inevitably going to be a soul-shaking experience that affected just about

everything. In his case, it was going to have a serious impact on his job and the hours he worked. But he'd learned his lesson since meeting Jaime that the significant people in his life should always come first. When it finally happened for him and Jaime, when she finally became pregnant, he would be proud and smug as all hell.

By the time they were done shopping, it was six p.m. Dante let her talk him into going to the movies to see a recently released horror movie. He hadn't been for a long time and enjoyed himself more than he'd expected, particularly the part where they made out. He resolved that they'd make time to do stuff like that again. Sure, they spent quality time together, but it was very rare that they spent an entire day alone. In the future, he would ensure that he set aside one whole day each week to spend with Jaime, just the two of them doing whatever they wanted, or doing nothing at all.

It was eight thirty when they finally returned to pack territory. As they proceeded down the tunnels en route to their room, laughing about a specific scene in the movie, Jaime suddenly became aware that the place was eerily quiet. As they entered the living area, it became apparent why. She scented her before she saw her, and immediately Jaime's wolf was alert, growling and flexing her claws.

"Dante! Oh my God, I'm so glad you're back!"

Dante blinked in surprise as Laurie jumped up from one of the bulky leather armchairs and was suddenly hanging from his neck. Before he even heard the chilling growl behind him, he was untangling Laurie from him and setting her back by her shoulders. His wolf growled, offended by the touch of another female. Her face molded into an expression of confusion, and then her eyes found Jaime. Presumably his mate didn't look friendly at that moment, because Laurie blanched and swallowed hard.

"What're you doing here, Laurie?" He distantly noted that most of the pack was in the living area, and none of them looked happy.

"I had nowhere to go." Tears filled her eyes, but there was no telling whether they were authentic or not. She flopped back into the armchair. "It's Blane. He... Let's just say he's handy with his fists. I've borne it for years. He's my mate and the father of my son, I had to. But I couldn't take it anymore, and lately he's been turning his fists on Leif. That's not something I'll tolerate."

“Where is Leif?” Sensing his mate’s anger and extreme discomfort, Dante took her hand in his.

“One of your packmates, Grace, took him to the kitchen to get something to eat.”

“Not to be insensitive, but why come here? Your dad is the Alpha of your pack. He’d be the obvious person to go to.”

“My parents are on vacation for ten more days. No one else in the pack could have protected me from him, and I couldn’t have gone to stay with any of my family in other packs, because Blane would know to look there. I thought about going to Josh, but I couldn’t be sure that he wouldn’t take Blane’s side and call him. This is the one place that Blane would never expect me to be.”

“And you want to stay here?” asked Jaime, her tone dangerous but empty of any hint of the physical pain she was going through. It had been a while since her wolf had tried so hard to surface, but the animal saw this female in front of her as a threat to her mating.

Sensing her wolf’s state, Dante released Jaime’s hand and slid his palm under her hair to cup her nape. Anybody looking would have interpreted it as simply an affectionate touch, as opposed to a move designed to calm her wolf. Laurie certainly saw, and she didn’t look pleased about it. The move didn’t make Jaime’s wolf back down, but it did make her begin to calm.

“Just until my parents are back.”

“Dante, Jaime,” began Trey, “I think we should talk in my office. In private,” he added when Laurie went to follow.

The second they were inside the office and the door was shut, Jaime announced to her Alpha,

“She can’t stay here.”

He didn’t look surprised. “Jaime, this is—”

“No, she really can’t stay here or I’ll kill her.” She wouldn’t be able to stop herself or her wolf.

“Believe me, I’m not interested in having strangers—particularly one who hurt Dante the way she did—in my pack. The only reason she got through the gate was that she had the kid. I’m not comfortable with sending a kid out there when there’s a chance that he could be hurt.” That was only to be expected, given that Trey’s dad had been abusive. Jaime would have been just as sympathetic if it hadn’t been for one thing. “She’s lying.”

“My instincts tell me that you’re right, but now that I’ve got Kye…” He sighed. “I don’t know how to explain it. Let’s just say that it’s made me a little more protective of the kid than I would’ve been before.”

She turned to her mate. “Do you believe her?”

He shook his head. “I can’t work out what her game is. But, like Trey, I’m not comfortable with slinging Leif out of here. I know what Blane is capable of. Even if he’d never hurt them before, he’ll undoubtedly be furious when he finds out that they’ve run off, particularly that they ran to *my* pack. I don’t think you’re any more comfortable with throwing him out of here than we are.” He was right, she wasn’t comfortable with it. “Have you already agreed to let her stay?” she asked Trey.

Trey shook his head. “I wanted to talk to you both first. I can understand why this might be hard for both of you, and if you find it too hard, then I will—despite that it doesn’t sit well with me—

tell them to leave. My pack comes first.”

So if she really wanted Bitch Face gone, if she explained just how hard she’d find being around a woman whom her mate had once loved and been partially mated to, Trey would insist that Laurie leave. As much as she appreciated that and truly wanted Bitch Face gone, she—damn her freaking morals!—didn’t consider her feelings to be more important than the safety of a ten-year-old boy. “I can handle it.”

Proud of his mate, Dante curled an arm around her and tugged her to his side. He knew through their bond that she didn’t believe she’d handle it well, but she was willing to deal with it for Leif’s sake. He was sorely tempted to tell Trey to refuse them sanctuary. He wanted to spare his mate this pain and just order away this woman who was nothing more to him than a bad memory. Ten days, he reminded himself. Ten days and she’d be gone from their lives for good.

“But there’s something she needs to hear first.”

Before Dante could ask Jaime what she meant by that, she was out of the office. He and Trey followed behind her as she made her way back into the living area. Then she was in front of Laurie’s chair and bending over so that they were eye to eye.

“As you’ve already guessed,” Jaime began to the rightfully wary female, “the decision is that you and your son can stay. But hear this and don’t forget a word of it. You do not ever, ever touch Dante again. Ever,” she hissed. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m hoping you ignore me, because then I’ll have the perfect excuse to drag you out of here by your hair and proceed to smack the shit out of you.

But if you don’t want that, keep your slutty little hands off my mate.” Dante blew out a breath and shook his head a little as he reminded himself that it would be very, very bad to bend Jaime over the sofa and fuck her right there in front of everyone. His wolf growled his disagreement. Her show of dominance had gone straight to Dante’s cock, and if the pained expressions on the faces of the enforcers were anything to go by, it had had the same effect on them. Dante gave them a “Don’t even think it” look. He wasn’t like their Alpha; he didn’t like the idea of others admiring what was his.

“Your mate?” Laurie repeated numbly.

“My mate.”

She looked at Dante, who had come to stand beside Jaime. “I didn’t think you’d imprint again.”

“Neither did I, but I would have imprinted on Jaime. As it turns out, that wasn’t necessary.” Utter shock took over Laurie’s face. “You’re true mates?”

“Yes,” confirmed Jaime. “So you might want to think about that the next time you have an urge to leap at him, which, for the record, was downright pathetic.” With that, Jaime sharply turned and left the room.

Dante’s brows arched as every single female in the room rose from her seat and, casting withering looks at Laurie, also left. It was a show of loyalty to Jaime. It was a gesture that said that Laurie wouldn’t be thought of as one of the females here. It was also their way of saying that they didn’t agree with Trey’s decision.

Dante turned to him. “If the other females don’t like it, Taryn isn’t going to either.”

Trey’s smile of agreement was strained. “And since she’s just given birth, I can’t even play Hiding Pedro with her to calm her down. Damn.”

“Dante, thank you so much for letting me stay.”

Dante looked down at his brother’s mate. “It’s not me you should be thanking. If Jaime hadn’t assured Trey that she could deal with you being around, you’d be gone.” Before she could say anything else, he trailed after Jaime, following her scent to their room. He wasn’t surprised to find that she had locked herself in the en-suite bathroom. He got the hint. She wanted time alone. Surely she’d learned by now that Dante didn’t accommodate the “time alone” thing for long.

He waited until he knew she was immersed in the bath before picking the lock on the door. She didn’t open her eyes when he crouched down near the bathtub, but he knew that she was aware of his presence. He dipped his hands into the water and stroked her bubble-covered arm. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s not your fault.” In a way, she wished it was, because then she’d have someone to take it out on. But she’d sensed what Dante felt when he was around Bitch Face...nothing. He’d felt nothing.

He’d been suspicious and frustrated *with* her. But *for* her? Nothing.

Even so, it was freaking hard to be around someone whom her mate— *her mate*—had once loved enough to imprint on. Making the whole thing worse was that she and her wolf already felt insecure because the mating bond wasn’t fully developed.

“I hate knowing you feel like this.” So did his wolf. A dizzying concoction of anxiety, infuriation, jealousy, unease, and dejection was coursing through her. “It doesn’t mean we have to hold off with the mating ceremony, does it? I don’t want her presence to affect things.” Jaime’s gaze shot to his. “You want a mating ceremony?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” The answer quickly came to him. He slid a hand around to hold her nape and squeezed. “Stop thinking of yourself as broken and no good.”

“I *am* broken. And I’m a bitch.”

“You’re not broken. Your wolf is traumatized, but she can heal. You are strong and caring and kind and, yes, a bitch. You’re *my* bitch. I’m proud that you’re mine, and I want everyone to know that.” Leaning over, he fused his mouth with hers, licking along the seam of her lips, coaxing her to open for him. When she did, he swept his tongue inside and indulged in a thorough tasting of her.

“You’re not going to leave me for her?” Despite feeling that he meant every word and that he felt nothing for Bitch Face, she needed to hear him say it.

He cupped her face and stared right into those smoky-blue eyes. “Nothing and no one could make me leave you. You made your choice that night when you tried to run from me and your tin can broke down. You’ve been irreversibly mine since then.”

“Choice,” she echoed, snorting. “Like you would have accepted a no.” He smiled. “Of course I wouldn’t have. I’d already decided you were mine.” He kissed her again before skimming his nose along the crook of her neck. Nothing and no one should smell that good. Searching out her gaze again, he scrutinized her face. “Are you sure you can deal with her being here? If you think it will be too much for you and your wolf, just say the word and I’ll make her leave.”

“I’d make her leave myself if it wasn’t for Leif.”

“If I thought he’d be willing to stay here without having his mom with him, I’d ask Trey to send her to stay with one of her relatives and keep Leif here until her parents are back from wherever they are. But although I’m his uncle, I’m still a stranger to him.”

“And we don’t know for sure if there’s some truth in what she’s saying. We know what Blane’s capable of doing, and we know that he’d have no problem with hurting a kid.” It made no sense to her that people like that existed. What importance could they possibly have to the world?

“Even so, if you can’t deal, we’ll tell her to find an alternative. You come before everyone else and everything else. You’re more important.”

Knowing he truly meant that almost brought a lump to her throat. “I can deal. For the kid’s sake, I can deal.”

He kissed her gently. “Ten days and she’ll be gone.”

“I can’t guarantee the bitch will still be alive in ten days,” she said, curling her upper lip.

“Especially if she touches you again. Skank.” A groan of annoyance escaped her when she sensed a vibe of heat through the bond. “I can’t believe you’re horny right now.”

“Baby, I’m always horny when you’re around, especially when you’re all naked and wet like this. But seeing you all assertive, possessive, and protective of our mating gets me instantly hard.

Want to play gynecologists again?”

That pulled a reluctant smile from her. “Only if you make me scream so loud that there’s no way she won’t hear me.”

He flashed her a cocky smirk. “Oh, that won’t be a problem.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next morning, Dante smiled as Jaime announced to everyone at the table—Laurie in particular—

that they had set the date for their mating ceremony as a week from now. He knew she was hoping that Laurie wouldn’t want to be around for the ceremony and would give up on her game and leave. He had yet to figure out just what that game was. Right now he was more concerned about finding a way to get that damn cat away from his mate. The ugly, furry thing gave Dante the evil eye each time he touched Jaime. As he sat on her lap being petted, he actually looked kind of smug.

“Is he yours?” Leif, who was sitting opposite Jaime, asked.

“Yep.” She smiled. Jaime liked the kid; she was surprised that he was so centered and friendly given who his parents were. “His name’s Hunk.”

“Hunk?” echoed Bitch Face with a snicker. Jaime decided to ignore her. She’d quickly learned over the past hour that paying the woman no attention ticked her off.

“What happened to him?” Leif’s eyes took in all the scars.

“We’re not sure exactly. All we know is that he was badly abused.”

“My gran has lots of cats.” His face lit up. “She loves them, but my grandfather hates them.” It was clear that he cared deeply about his grandparents.

“Dante’s not very fond of Hunk, are you?” Jaime glanced at her mate to see that he was frowning down at the cat on her lap, probably thinking up ways to get rid of him.

“I think it’s jealousy more than anything else.” Shaya’s smile was playful. “He doesn’t like anyone or anything else having your time, attention, or affection.” Dante’s expression was unrepentant. “Damn right I don’t.”

“You never liked cats, did you?” Bitch Face’s expression suddenly became nostalgic as she reached across the table. Her hand didn’t touch Dante’s, but it came close. “I remember when—” She jerked back when Hunk hissed at her. “Oh.”

Jaime shot her an apologetic look. “Sorry. It’s just that he can sense evil.” Leif laughed aloud at that but stopped when his mom gave him a reprimanding look, returning his attention to his third bowl of cereal. The kid was like Marcus in that he ate like a horse. His mother, on the other hand, appeared to be one of those people who survived on celery sticks and plain crackers.

With a sensuous smile, Bitch Face spoke. “So, Dante, I was hoping you could give us a tour. I know we’re only here for a short time, but this place is huge and I’d hate for Leif to get lost somewhere.”

“A tour’s probably a good idea.” Dante turned to Ryan, who sat at his left. “You can spare an hour to show them around, right?” Ryan’s ever-present scowl deepened, but he nodded, grunting.

“You’re not going to do it?” she asked Dante, sounding both disappointed and frustrated.

“I’m Beta. I have a lot of things to do.”

“Oh. Well, you know if you ever need any help—”

“If he needs any help, he has Jaime.” Taryn’s smile wasn’t pleasant, and Bitch Face had the sense to lower her gaze. “She’s Beta female of the pack, after all.”

“I want to be Beta when I’m old enough.” Leif licked a stray Cheerio from his spoon.

Dante smiled at him while combing his fingers through his mate’s hair with the hand that had been resting on her shoulder. “You could be.”

“My grandfather says I’d make a great Beta one day. My gran thinks so, too.” Again his face lit up as he spoke of them.

Bitch Face played with his hair. “You can be whatever you want to be, honey. You’ve already got what it takes to train to be Beta one day.”

Leif looked at her curiously, as if praise from his mother was a totally new thing. It made Jaime think back to the night of Josh’s birthday when Leif had seemed both uncomfortable and confused when his mom showed him affection.

“The Beta role is in the blood,” his mother continued. “Just look at your Uncle Dante. You could be just as great as he is one day. Couldn’t he, Dante?” Dante ignored her attempt to take the attention from her son. “When your other grandfather, my dad, was Beta, he—”

Leif’s brows shot up. “He was Beta, too? Really?”

Dante cocked his head. “You didn’t know?”

“Blane doesn’t—” Leif stopped short when his mom interrupted him.

“Have you finished your cereal?”

Blane, not Dad, Dante noted. He exchanged a look with Jaime. It probably shouldn’t be such a shock that the kid didn’t seem to consider a man who apparently hit him often to be his dad. But he hadn’t spoken the name *Blane* with fear or anger, as if he associated that person with bad, painful memories. Leif

spoke the name with indifference, much like someone who was speaking of a person he barely knew.

“Are you sure you can’t take us on the tour?” Bitch Face’s sensuous smile was back. “Leif would love to spend some time with his uncle, get to know you and —” Jaime groaned. “Oh dear God, have some pride, woman!” It was impossible not to cringe for her.

Leif’s mouth twitched into a smile, which he hid by ducking his head. It was the same smile that every female, even Greta, was wearing as they all openly showed their disdain for this intruder who seemed intent on spending time with Dante.

Well, every female other than Taryn, who was snarling at Trey. “Only a man would allow a *mated* male’s ex-girlfriend to stay with the pack and stupidly think that everything will be fine.” Trey cuddled Kye against his chest as if his son could somehow protect him. There was no denying that his tiny mate could be scary at times.

“Well, I have to get to work.” Jaime didn’t miss how Bitch Face’s expression turned cunning, as if she was dreaming up a way to get Dante alone while Jaime was gone. That expression was replaced by one of frustration when he spoke.

“I’m coming with you again.”

Jaime didn’t object for two reasons. One, although she trusted Dante, she really didn’t like the idea that Bitch Face would have the opportunity to get him alone. Two, she had to admit that she liked it when he went along with her. She liked having him around her. Her wolf liked it, liked to be surrounded by his scent.

Although her wolf didn’t totally trust him not to harm her emotionally, she was happy with the bonding and acknowledged that he was her mate. Jaime had to wonder if her wolf would have been content with the mating a few months ago. Her wolf had been much more temperamental back then, so eager to distrust and avoid everyone around her. Now she seemed to be open to trusting Dante. She just didn’t feel that she could yet.

As Jaime wasn’t so opposed to him working with her occasionally, she didn’t overwork him this time. Just as when they were doing Beta duties together, they worked well as a team, tackled the work together and did it peacefully. That was,

however, until a certain incident cropped up. One of the dogs that had been transported in a rescue van had gotten out of his crate and stood in the parking lot, growling at anyone who tried to approach.

“Jaime’s best at this,” Ivy declared, electing her for the job of calming and collecting the Doberman. “I’ll be ready with the tranquilizer gun just in case her charm doesn’t work on him.”

“No fucking way.”

Jaime narrowed her eyes at the giant who was suddenly planted in front of her. “Move, Dante.”

“You are *not* going near that dog. Look at him.” Dante blanched at the mere idea of her going anywhere near it.

“I see him,” she said patiently, understanding that he would feel so overprotective. “I see a scared animal who is feeling defensive right now, and I fully intend to help him.” He folded his arms across his chest. “I said no.”

Those words might not have rankled so much if it hadn’t been for the dominance that coated them. He was actually trying to pressure her into yielding to him, pulling the Beta act on her. Jerk.

“Haven’t we already established that you have no control over me?”

“This isn’t about trying to control you. It’s about keeping you safe from a vicious dog that would happily eat you.”

“Now you’re just being melodramatic.”

“I’m making up for your lack of a flight response.”

She rolled her eyes, losing her tolerance and not prepared to let her mate try to dominate her into giving in to him. It hurt that he would actually do that. “Step aside.”

“No, I will not let you near some traumatized animal that could easily go crazy and attack you!” Realizing what he’d just said, Dante squeezed his eyes shut. By insinuating that the dog behind him was beyond help and could easily snap and

hurt people, he was insinuating that things were just as hopeless for Jaime's wolf. In truth, he didn't really believe that about her wolf, but his words had given an altogether different impression, and he hadn't missed the pain that flashed across his mate's face. He hadn't had to see it, he'd *felt* it. "Jaime—" With anger dripping from every word, she spoke in a flat voice. "Move out of my way and let me do my job." She shouldn't really be surprised that Dante had never believed her wolf could fully heal, but it hurt all the same, because she had wanted to believe him.

Knowing that nothing he could say would make her budge on this now, Dante reluctantly stepped aside. He'd hurt her enough already, and he didn't want to push her further and hurt her again.

But if that dog made any threatening moves, Dante would be on it before it could blink.

Blocking out Dante and shoving aside her emotions to deal with later, Jaime passed him and took the leash that Riley—who, along with Ivy, was scowling at Dante—was holding out. Jaime had been in this situation enough times to know what to do. Keeping a safe distance between her and the dog, which was in a challenging stance and baring his teeth, she knelt down. Towering over him would make him feel intimidated, and that would negate her chances of making him see her as no threat.

She spoke to him in a calm voice, hoping it would reassure him and that her sense of calm would, in turn, help him calm. She wasn't fazed by his growls, as she knew that more often than not, growls were warnings as opposed to acts of aggression. Still, not heeding those warnings could result in a bite, and she didn't want one of those. She'd been bitten a few times in the past. When the bulldog had locked onto her hand, it had hurt like a motherfucker.

Wanting the dog to understand that she posed no threat, she avoided eye contact, as that was something he would interpret as confrontational. Digging her hand into her pocket of her coveralls, she fished out a few of the dog treats she kept there. She threw some to the side of him and waited.

After sniffing the air, he eventually nibbled on one of the treats. Once he'd eaten each of those treats, she tossed a few more.

Turning to the side to communicate that she wasn't challenging him, she slowly

inched forward. After only a few feet, she stopped and tossed him some more treats. She waited patiently as he ate them, and then gently patted the ground before holding out her hand, encouraging him to come to her. At this point he had stopped growling, but his posture was still alert. After several minutes, he seemed to adjust to her presence and decide that she wasn't a threat, because he began to approach her.

Jaime stayed totally still as he sniffed the back of her hand. Only when he seemed calm did she, still talking to him in a soothing voice, slowly take the leash from her other pocket. Without gripping his collar, she simply clipped the leash to it, all the while speaking quietly to him. Although she wanted to stroke him, she avoided it. There was no way of knowing whether he had what Ivy called "hot spots"—places he disliked being touched that could set him off.

Jaime's entire body was a hot spot right now. If Dante touched her even once, she'd kill him.

As if he sensed that, he made no attempts to touch her or speak to her as they worked the rest of their shift. In fact, it wasn't until they were almost on pack territory in the SUV that he reached across and placed his hand on her thigh. By that point, she had calmed down enough not to shake him off, especially since she could feel how mad he was at himself.

"You know I wasn't talking about your wolf."

"Really?" she drawled with skepticism heavy in her voice.

"I admit that my choice of words was bad and the whole thing came out wrong, but I do not think your wolf is beyond help."

Although she sensed that he was speaking the truth, it didn't improve Jaime's mood much.

"This isn't just about what you said. Yeah, what you said hurt. But it's more than that. Since the very beginning, it's been me who's been giving all the support in this relationship. You lap it up, but whenever I need *you* to back up *me* on something, you don't."

"You wanted me to support you approaching a clearly dangerous dog?" She could see that he was genuinely missing the point. If he had been anyone else,

she would have mistaken his response for pure ignorance. But it was like he once told her: he'd been on his own for so long that sometimes he could be self-centered without even realizing it. "I expected, no matter how much your instincts were telling you to protect me, for you to acknowledge and appreciate that I was doing my job."

He didn't respond until they were through the perimeter gate of pack territory. "You were putting yourself at risk, and that's not acceptable to me." In a mockingly sweet voice, she said, "I'm sorry. After all, your job isn't *at all* dangerous, so I have no right to expect you to let me do mine without trying to hold me back and get in my way."

"That's different."

"Why? Because it's you?"

"Yes. No." It was more yes than no, if he was honest with himself. Not that he was in any rush to tell Jaime that, though he suspected she already knew through their bond. Sometimes that link was a pain in his ass. "You have no sense of self-preservation, so is it really any wonder that I try to protect you?"

"But you didn't try to protect me today. You tried to dominate me into doing what you wanted."

How is that fair? For a minute there, you were Beta, and I was just a packmate. Not Beta female, not your mate, just another pack member to whom you give orders." His expression told her that *now* he got her point.

"That wasn't what I was doing." But it was. Maybe he hadn't meant to undermine her and her ability to take care of herself, but he had. If *she* had gone all Beta female on *his* ass and tried to use that authority to boss him around or crush his opinions, it would have sincerely pissed him off. Unless it happened in the bedroom.

When he parked the car in the lot, Jaime turned to him. "Look, I know that this whole overprotectiveness thing is part of who you are and is so much worse now that we're newly mated, but you can't try to dominate me into doing what you want."

"I'm sorry, okay." He reached out and cupped her nape, rubbing it soothingly. "I

believe we both agreed that I was going to fuck up a lot.” Pulling her to him, he gently meshed his lips with hers, relieved when she didn’t tense. “But I can’t apologize for wanting to protect you. I’ll always want to do that, and I’ll always try to, even when you don’t need me to.” Sighing, she relaxed into him. “I know. But I’ll still get pissy with you every time.”

“That’s okay. You’re hot when you’re mad.”

Growling, she shoved him away, ignoring his laugh, and hopped out of the SUV. He was at her side before she could progress more than three steps. Then, still laughing, he was kissing her, curling his arms around her. When she playfully struggled, he caged her wrists with his hands and backed her into the SUV, pinning her hands above her head. His cocky smirk made her growl.

“Now this looks familiar.”

“Yes, I remember that night when you used my lust to punish me.” He brushed his lips against hers. “No, baby, that wasn’t about punishing you. That was me losing control. I’d wanted you since the second you came here, wanted this mouth and this delectable body. The idea of you with another guy was torture, and I snapped.” Deciding to put him out of his misery, she said, “I wasn’t actually dating Shawn, you know.” He stilled. “What?”

“Well, I had *years* ago, and he wanted us to start things up again, but we didn’t actually do it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Because it was more fun to watch you hyperventilate.”

Smiling, he nipped her bottom lip. “I should spank you for that, but I’m too glad to know you hadn’t let him touch you again to care.” The *again* part had his mood souring a little. He saw by her expression that she’d sensed it.

“What is it?”

He let his forehead rest against hers. “I wish I’d known who you were to me sooner. That way no one else would ever have had you. Because of the way my brothers always treated me, I erected some pretty tough emotional barriers when I was a kid. Not so much to protect myself, but as a way of fighting back.

Building those walls meant that the assholes could do whatever they liked, but they'd never break me, never hit me where it truly hurt. The hell of it is that if I hadn't been so emotionally guarded, I might have been more open to you back then, might have recognized you for who you are to me." He'd felt protective of her, intrigued by her, but he hadn't ever considered that she might be his mate. "I'd have had you with me all this time. I'd have been the first and only person to ever touch or be inside you. Maybe I could have even protected you that night from those wolves."

"Hey," she said softly, "I didn't realize either."

"How could you have? My guardedness would have blocked you from sensing it. You might be a little walled off now, but you never were as a kid."

"Did I give you permission to beat yourself up? Look, you're not the only one who wishes we'd known back then. Just as you'd have been my first and only, I'd have been yours, which means you would never have half mated with Bitch Face and I wouldn't be having homicidal urges. But...

you would also never have become part of the Phoenix Pack. No matter how much you objected to Trey's banishment, you never would have left with him if it meant leaving me behind. Can you honestly imagine never having been a member of this pack? Never being Beta?" He lowered his head, sighing. "Some things happen for a reason, Dante."

"You're more important to me than a position. I hate that I've been without you all these years." Never would he be without Jaime again. Never.

"I'm here now."

"And you're staying. Even though I'm going to mess up repeatedly, and even though I still keep tripping over your damn shoes, you're staying."

"Hmm, I'm not so sure. Maybe you could convince me by finishing what you started right here a few months ago."

His playful smile matched hers. "Now that sounds—"

"Dante!" called a voice that had both him and Jaime cringing.

He didn't move his gaze from Jaime when he replied. "If there's something you want, go to Trey or Tao." The idiotic woman didn't. Still, Dante didn't move from his position against Jaime, refusing to let this female take his attention from his own mate.

"Sorry to interrupt." She didn't sound sorry. "I just wanted to ask if you—"

"Look," began Jaime, wanting to be rid of Laurie and wanting to rub reality in her face,

"unless you get off on watching, you might want to scamper. As you can probably tell, we're both hot and horny, and Dante's about to Google my Yahoo and Twitter my cli—"

"I'll, um, I'll catch you later, Dante." She was gone in seconds.

Shaking with laughter, Dante kissed Jaime softly. "Google your Yahoo, huh?"

"Oh yeah."

"I'd like to try out the whole 'Twitter your clit' first. I remember wanting to taste you last time right here, like this." He dropped to his knees, tugged down her jeans and panties, and proceeded to make her come four times before finally thrusting inside her and taking what was his, growling her name when she marked him again.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dante wouldn't have guessed that Laurie had developed suicidal tendencies since they parted, but apparently she had. Why else would the odd female have repeatedly leaned across the table toward him at breakfast, trying to engage him in conversation? She had been careful not to touch him, but only barely. Anyone could tell that Jaime was close to snapping her in half, yet she persisted. He could have spent some time alone with her to try to figure out her game, but he knew that would be hard for Jaime, and he didn't want to be around the confusing woman anyway.

When he and Jaime had returned from the animal sanctuary after he'd worked

another shift with her, Laurie resumed her odd behavior throughout lunch and was doing it again now as they sat in the living area where most of the pack was congregated. Even though he wasn't giving Laurie any encouragement, he could feel that the whole situation was hurting Jaime. When she hurt, he hurt.

His protective instincts were going crazy, and it had become automatic to pretty much curl himself around Jaime whenever Laurie was near, just like he was now on an armchair. One thing he wouldn't allow the female to do was make his mate doubt his commitment to her. So whenever Laurie reached out to him, he drew back and avoided her touch. Whenever she spoke to him, he responded politely and then turned his attention to Jaime. At no point would he add to the hurt that his mate was already going through.

Burying his nose in the crook of her neck, he took that caramel-and-honeysuckle scent into his system. His dick twitched instantly. He licked at his claiming mark before whispering into her ear,

“You're too tense.” When he sucked the lobe into his mouth, a tremor ran through her and she squirmed in her seat, making him smile. He loved that he had such an immediate effect on her.

Quietly, she explained, “I'm just worried for Shaya.”

So was he. Taryn's uncle Don, his mate, and Nick—as he was their Alpha—were due any minute now to visit Kye. “Originally I decided that if he ever ignored my warning and tried coming here again, I'd tell Trey everything. But it's hard to not feel a twinge of sympathy for him.” Jaime nodded. “Maybe we should give the guy one last shot to do the right thing.”

“If he doesn't, well, we'll make sure he understands that this is his last visit.”

“Sounds fair.” Jaime sighed. “I still don't like the idea of Shaya being in pain.” He pressed a calming kiss to her temple. Not that he thought it would truly work. Jaime was very protective of those she considered hers, and now that she was Beta female, they were all her wolves to look out for. As such, not much could soothe her right now.

“Hey, Dante, do you remember that time when you and I went ice-skating and I got a concussion after falling?”

He sighed inwardly. Laurie liked to talk about “old times” a lot, something that agitated the hell out of Jaime, who was now stiff in his arms. Ignoring Laurie, he curled himself even tighter around his mate. “You’re doing so much better than I would be if the situation was the other way around,” he said quietly.

“No, I’m not. I just know perfectly well that the best way to annoy an attention seeker is to not give them a reaction.” That wasn’t to say that Jaime didn’t often visualize cutting off the bitch’s air supply until she resembled a Smurf. And it would be so easy to do it now that Bitch Face had moved to the end of the sofa, putting herself within arm’s reach.

Laurie continued, “Do you remember how you picked me up and took me to—”

“It won’t work,” Greta told Laurie with a huff, gaining the attention of most in the room.

Laurie smiled nervously. “I’m sorry?”

“You want to cause a little rift between my Dante and Jaime. It won’t work. They’re solid.”

“I’d never hurt Dante like that.”

Dante almost laughed as snorts erupted from both Greta and Jaime, who gave each other looks that said, “Is this female for real?” Apparently, they were prepared to band together against a common foe.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you did to him all those years ago,” Greta snarled. “You and Blane deserve each other, in my opinion. You could never have made a good Beta female. That requires loyalty, you see. That’s something you don’t know anything about. Not like Jaime. No. Our Beta female could wipe the floor with you any day.”

Jaime exchanged a stunned look with Taryn, who was on the reclining end of the sofa, chuckling silently. “Thanks, Greta.”

“No problem, sweetheart.”

“She’ll be vile to me again when Bitch Face is gone,” Jaime whispered to Dante.

“Yep,” he agreed with a smile before reading the text message he’d just received from Ryan, who was guarding the gate. “They’re here.”

Wanting to give Shaya a warning so that she could be as prepared as possible, Jaime looked over to where she was seated next to Taryn and gave her a subtle nod. She responded with a tiny, but grateful, smile.

A few minutes later, Don entered the living area with Tia, Nick, and Nick’s Beta behind him.

Their eyes ran over everyone in the room as they smiled, and everyone exchanged polite greetings—

other than Nick and Shaya.

“Where’s my nephew?” Don gave Taryn a gentle kiss on her cheek and peered down at the sleeping baby in Shaya’s arms. His smile was filled with pride. “Look at the little guy. He’s so tiny.

Can I have a hold?”

“Sure.” Shaya carefully handed him to Taryn’s uncle.

“Meet Kye River Coleman,” Taryn told Don.

“His name suits him. I like it.”

“Give him here,” said Tia excitedly. Disgruntled, Don handed the baby to his mate. “Aw, he’s so gorgeous.”

“Don’t you be getting broody,” Don told Tia. “The girls are hard enough to deal with.” Nick shook Trey’s hand and gave Taryn a smile. “Congratulations.” Peeking at Kye, his brows arched. “Wow, he’s just Trey with Taryn’s hair.”

Tia nodded in agreement. “Want a hold?”

“Um—” But Tia was already placing Kye in his arms. A little awkwardly, Nick cradled the baby and a little smile surfaced.

He peered over at Shaya, and what passed between them was a longing so deep

and so primal that it made Jaime hitch in a breath, bringing back a lot of memories. It had been pain and pleasure.

She had no idea how they'd both ignored it for so long. Jaime wondered if this moment might do to him what it had done to her and Dante: strip him of his defenses and doubts and give him a moment of pure clarity.

Apparently it did, because quickly Nick looked away and handed Kye over to Grace, who was waiting impatiently for her turn. "Um, I have some things I need to get done. Don, I'll send an enforcer to pick you and Tia up in a couple of hours." In other words, he needed to get out of there and away from Shaya fast.

Looking confused, Don said, "Okay." Then the Alpha and his Beta were gone.

Tears immediately pooled in Shaya's eyes, and it was a blow to Jaime's gut. Using the distraction that Kye created, Shaya stealthily left the room.

"I need to go see she's okay," Jaime told Dante, who nodded and allowed her to stand.

When she found Shaya sitting on the edge of her bed sobbing her heart out, Jaime sat beside her and curled an arm around her. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry."

"I'm not entirely surprised that he left again without speaking a single word to me," said Shaya through her tears. "I know why he can't claim me. Nick's in high demand with the females—I'd be challenged by a different one every five minutes if I tried to hold a position as Alpha female. I guess I just hoped that if fate had matched me up with an Alpha, then there was a reason for it, a way to still be bonded to him."

"There still could be."

"Yes, *if* he gave up his position as Alpha. I know that's selfish for me to want that." Jaime tightened her arm around her. "Hey, you have a right to be selfish when it concerns your mate."

She sighed. "I guess I just thought that I'd be more important. It's clear that I'm not." Jaime was about to speak again when Taryn suddenly walked in. "Shaya? Shaya, what is it?" When her best friend didn't respond, she crouched in front of her. "Shaya, talk." Taking in a preparatory breath, she admitted, "I found my

mate.” First Taryn looked relieved, thinking this should be good news. Then, expectedly, confusion crossed her face when she realized that it clearly wasn’t good for Shaya. “I don’t understand.”

“I found him, but I can’t have him.”

“You can’t have him? Why? And who is he?”

Shaya shook her head as if unable to speak the name.

“It’s the bastard who just left,” Jaime revealed for her.

Taryn gaped. “Nooooooooo. How long have you known, Shaya? You knew at my mating ceremony,” she quickly surmised.

Shaya nodded, still avoiding eye contact.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“You know why. I want him to claim me because he *wants* to.” She shrugged. “He doesn’t.

He’s not going to claim me.”

Taryn shot to her feet and began pacing. “The son of a bitch is, *believe me*. I’ll make sure of it.”

Finally Shaya looked up. “And if the only reason Trey wanted to claim you was because someone else bullied him into it?”

Taryn paused briefly in her pacing. “Damn it, Shaya.”

“I understand why this is complicated for him, but I thought that maybe he’d give up his position. I can’t be his Alpha female. You know that.”

“You’d make a better leader than any of the females I’ve ever seen him with.”

“But I’m not an alpha, and nothing will change that.”

“Well, let me assure you, he’s banished from here. He does not set foot on our territory again.

And he can go shove his alliance up his arrogant ass.”

“That won’t be enough,” said Shaya quietly. “You’re mated to an Alpha, Taryn. You know how they work.”

It was obvious by Taryn’s pained expression that she knew where this conversation was heading. “So we’ll make it damn clear that he is *not* to go near you.”

“Are you going to stop him from going near any guy I decide to date?”

“He confronted Dominic when he thought he was dating Shaya,” Jaime told their Alpha. She didn’t want Shaya to leave any more than Taryn did, but this was about Shaya, not them. “He told him to break it off.”

Shaya sounded so tired and defeated when she spoke, yet there was steel in her words. She intended to make Taryn understand. “He wouldn’t even have to do that to every guy who’s interested.

After two or three times, the rest will make it a point to stay away from me unless they have a wish to piss Nick off.”

Taryn shook her head vehemently. “No, Shaya. If he doesn’t want to claim you, then he should stay out of your business.”

“But he won’t.”

“Shaya, please don’t ask me to sanction this.” It was a genuine plea from this very strong female who they all knew could order her friend to stay if she wanted. “I can’t.”

“It’s the only choice I have.”

“No, it’s not!”

Shaya got to her feet, her expression apologetic but determined. “If I want a life of my own, a connection with another guy, then yes, it is.”

Shaking her head again, Taryn stated in an unsteady voice, “You can’t leave. I need you here.

And what about Kye, huh? I picked you as his godmother, you can't leave!"

"I don't want to, but—"

There was a knock at the door followed by Trey speaking. "Taryn, what is it?" Clearly he'd felt his mate's distress through their bond.

"Nothing. It's nothing, I'll be right out."

Apparently, Trey didn't accommodate "alone time" any better than Dante did, because he barged in. "Taryn?"

She turned to him, her lips wobbling. "Shaya's going to leave."

"What?"

Instead of elaborating, she dived at Shaya and wrapped her hands around her. "When?" whispered Taryn, tears streaming down her face just as they were streaming down Shaya's.

"Not until after Jaime and Dante's mating ceremony. I'd never miss that." Even in this agony, the female was prepared to sit through a mating ceremony that wasn't her own and be reminded of what she was missing out on. Jaime couldn't allow that. "Shaya..."

"Don't." She gave Jaime a hard look over Taryn's shoulder. "I would never be envious of you having that."

Taryn's shoulders shook as more tears flowed. "You deserve better than him. Fate is a bitch."

"Yeah." Shaya laughed shakily, hugging her friend even harder.

Jaime was close to crying herself, even though she wasn't one who was prone to having emotional outbursts. Hearing Shaya's pain, Jaime had to wonder if that was how Dante had felt when she denied him. She wished she could have told Nick to put Shaya first, to claim her and trust that together they could work through what came next. They would always be stronger together than apart.

So why wasn't she practicing this herself?

Maybe Dante was right and the bond would help stabilize her wolf. Maybe he wasn't.

Although her wolf recognized him as hers, she was constantly watchful and wary, perhaps recognizing that he was the biggest threat because he was the only one who could truly hurt them.

There was a chance that in time her wolf would come to recognize that Dante, despite the power he had over her emotions, was, in fact, a safety net. Of course there was a chance that she wouldn't. But there was no chance at all as long as Jaime held back, was there? So maybe it was time to take that risk and stop hurting her mate.

Jaime turned to the fretting male beside her who obviously wanted to ease his mate's pain and was frustrated that he had no idea how. "I think we should give them a minute alone." Trey merely spared Jaime a tiny glance. Well, there was another way to get him moving. "Who has Kye?" Instantly he stiffened as his parental overprotectiveness took over and he had a need to know exactly where his son was.

"Go make sure he hasn't woken yet," Taryn told him. "He'll be hungry soon." Eventually he nodded and left the room. Taryn mouthed "thank you" to Jaime just before she, too, left the two best friends alone. There was someone that Jaime needed time alone with right now.

He wasn't in the living area, which meant that he could only be in his office. As she swung the door open, an offensive scent hit her nose and she halted. Her wolf growled and flexed her claws.

"...I know, but like I said, you'll have to come back when Jaime's...Oh, there you are, baby." The curved smile he gave her from his chair behind his desk was warm and had a hint of relief to it.

"O-oh, h-hi," stammered Bitch Face nervously. It was wise of her to be nervous. Having heard Dante's words, it wasn't difficult to guess that Bitch Face had obviously hoped to get him alone.

Jaime loved him all the more for the fact that he'd been telling her to leave until

Wait, she loved him. When the hell did that happen? Okay, it could be said that if they were mates, then it was only natural. But even between mates, love was something that grew over time. It wasn't automatic. She was surprised that Dante hadn't sensed it yet. God, she hoped he hadn't. What greater power could a guy have over a woman than to know she loved him with everything she had when he didn't love her back?

Or, at least, she was assuming that he didn't love her back. If she wanted to know for sure, all she had to do was tap into their bond. But she didn't. That would be the ultimate invasion of his privacy. Okay, fine, she didn't look because she was a goddamn coward; she was scared to look and then find that he didn't love her back. It was better to live in a delusional land where love didn't enter the equation on either end.

Right now, Jaime really wasn't emotionally equipped to deal with the female in front of her who, for whatever strange reason, wanted to come between her and Dante—which was so not going to happen. “Get out.” When Bitch Face went to speak, Jaime held up her hand. “I don't want to hear it, I really don't. *Out.*”

The female looked at Dante, clearly expecting him to intervene on her behalf, though he had no idea why. When he didn't, she marched out of the room and slammed the door behind her. He felt his smile deepen as his gorgeous mate approached the desk, hands on her hips. Jaime in full-on Beta female mode was unbelievably hot.

“And the reason you were in your office alone with your ex-half-mate was what, exactly?”

“She came in here to talk about Greta. Apparently, the old woman is giving her a hard time, and she wanted to know if I'd deal with it.”

“That was just an excuse to talk to you. If you hadn't been trying to make her leave, you'd be in deep shit for being alone with her.”

As much as he disliked that she was hurting with the jealousy he could *feel* running through her, he couldn't deny that it turned him on. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his desk. “Come here.”

Jaime almost jumped. He hadn't raised his voice or snapped at her, but his tone had made that subtle change from normal to deep and dominant.

“Come here.”

There it was again. It sent a bolt of electricity through her, making her clit tingle. But she simply arched a challenging brow at him.

“I want your taste in my mouth.”

Now that sounded interesting. Slowly she walked around his desk, as alert and aroused as her wolf. When she neared him, he reversed his chair slightly and gestured for her to stand between him and the desk. Then he shoved some of his files aside, causing some to fall to the floor. If he expected her to clean up that mess afterward, he was so wrong.

“Lie back.” When she didn’t, Dante wrapped his fist in her hair and yanked her face to his, taking her mouth with a force that made her instantly wet. Then he got rid of her T-shirt and bra, gripped her by the hips, and lifted her onto the desk. “I said, lie back. I want your taste in my mouth.” Finally she did as he’d asked. He removed her boots and peeled off her jeans and thong—all of which joined the rest of her clothes on the floor. He took a moment to drink in that amazing body that belonged to him and only him. He really was a lucky son of a bitch.

Curling his broad body over hers, Dante kissed her hard again, growling when she sucked his tongue into her mouth. He relished the moans she made as he kissed, licked, and nibbled his way down her body, pausing briefly to suck and bite each nipple. When he returned to his chair, he brought it closer to the desk. “Spread your legs for me.” Without a hint of defiance, she did.

At the sight of her pussy, a low, territorial growl rumbled out of him. He wanted it. Needed it.

It was his. It belonged only to him. He wanted to lick it, suck on it, drink from it, sink his tongue into it, bite it, fuck it...He was seriously at risk of becoming obsessed with it, if he wasn’t already. Her incredible, sinful scent assaulted him and was like a narcotic to both him and his wolf.

“Are you just going to stare all day or—” She broke off and gasped in outrage at the hard slap to her clit. “Oh you did *not* just spank—”

“Of course I did. I can do whatever I want to this pussy, baby. You’ll let me have

it whenever I want, however I want. And if I want to spank it, I will.” Ignoring the curses that she spat at him, he slid his hands beneath her to cup her ass, then leaned down and lightly fluttered his tongue through her folds. Her intoxicating taste zinged through him, inciting and inflaming him. He needed it on his tongue, needed it in his mouth, needed it burned into his system.

Jaime bucked as his tongue *finally* got to work. Surprising her, each lick or stab of his tongue was unhurried, casual, like he had no objective at all and simply wanted to taste her. She tried moving her legs to hook them over his shoulders, but he must have thought she was attempting to pull away, because he growled warningly and it reverberated through her. God, a growl almost had her climaxing.

Soon she was shaking and squirming as her orgasm began to creep up on her, asking him to hurry up and fuck her, but the absolute bastard continued his leisurely movements. “Dante, seriously, I can’t take any more.” And she meant it. But it was like talking to a freaking wall because he was so completely absorbed in tasting her. Even when she bucked hard enough to get his attention and dislodge him, he simply grunted and returned to what he’d been doing. “I want to be fucked!” Nothing. Fine, if she wanted to distract him and get him as irritated as she was, she’d just have to play dirty, wouldn’t she.

Faking a bored tone, she asked, “Are you okay down there if I just make a few calls?” His response was a growl. “I was thinking we could order pizza. Maybe pepperoni.” Another growl. “By the way, which one of us smells like fish?” A louder growl and a nip. “Um, I hate to bother you again, but...when is this supposed to start feeling good?”

Instantly Jaime regretted that one, because instead of punching his cock punishingly inside her as she’d hoped, he abruptly sucked her clit between his lips so hard that she cried out. He sucked unrelentingly on her clit, occasionally nipping it or flicking it with his tongue before sucking it between his lips again.

Her inner muscles were clenching, wanting something inside her—which was obviously why Dante was doing this instead! He continued his assault until finally her body tensed and she came hard, quivering. When she was able to pry her eyes open, it was to see him staring down at her and licking his lips clean. *Shit-stain.*

“I’m going to fill you up and fuck you now,” he rumbled. And then he was going to fulfill that fantasy they had both been sharing for a while, but he wouldn’t mention that just yet.

Jaime didn’t like the wicked, lopsided “I know something you don’t” smile that surfaced on his face, but her intention to comment on it went straight out of the window when he unsnapped the button of his fly, lowered his zipper, and his cock sprang out. He spread her thighs wide, gripped her hips, and tugged her body toward him so that her ass was hanging off the desk. Jaime wrapped her legs around his waist and gasped at the feel of his cock probing her entrance.

“Ready?” In a sluggishly slow movement, Dante sank his cock inside that perfect pussy that was made only for him, filling her with every inch of him. Then, in a movement just as slow, he withdrew until only the head was inside. Any other time he would have given Jaime a series of slow thrusts just to tease her, but he wasn’t in the mood for playing. He needed to fuck her, needed to feel her come apart around him. Needed to hear her beg. Needed to know that his mate wanted him so much she would do this. Yes, she’d done it during their claiming, but that was because she’d been pretty delirious. “I’m going to fuck you so hard you can’t walk,” he promised her. “Just as soon as you beg for it.”

Jaime’s mouth fell open. “What?”

“You heard me. Beg for it.”

“Oh you sack of shit!” When she tried to lift her upper body from the desk, he brought his weight down on her, caging her there. She wasn’t sure whether he ignored her struggling or simply didn’t notice, but in any case, it galled her that her struggles came to nothing.

“Beg me, Jaime. Beg me, and I’ll fuck you as hard as you want.” She stopped writhing. “As hard as I want?” she echoed, suddenly not so averse to the idea. No matter how many times she told him she could take his roughness, he always held back a little. The only time he hadn’t was during their claiming, and she wanted it again.

“I’ll fuck you so hard you’ll think I hate you. Beg me, Jaime.” Now that did sound intriguing. After a moment of silence, she finally said, “Please fuck me.” She cried out as, with their gazes locked, he abruptly thrust forward and drove his entire length back into her. “Oh God,” she breathed as he began pounding

into her with ruthless, intense, stretching thrusts that gave her that full, stuffed sensation she loved. His pace was frenzied, as though he couldn't fuck her hard, fast, or deep enough. This was exactly how Jaime wanted him: barely restrained, poised on the brink of violence. The fact that she could drive him to the edge of his control thrilled her like nothing else.

"You're so tight." He lifted her leg and hooked it over his shoulder, allowing himself to go even deeper with each thrust. Growling, he sank his fingers into her soft, pliant breasts. "I love these.

And these pretty nipples." He pinched the pert buds hard, knowing she loved it. "And you have the most gorgeous ass. I can't wait to have my cock inside it." Seeing that she was about to protest, he quickly stated, "It is going to happen, baby."

"Maybe in your wet dreams, Popeye, but that's all."

Jaime gasped as he suddenly withdrew, brought her to her feet, spun her around, and then bent her over the desk. "What are you—"

"Don't worry, baby, I'm not finished with this pussy yet." Dante gripped her hands and placed them at the edges of the desk. "Keep them there."

"This position stinks a little bit too much of complete submission for my liking," she snapped indignantly.

"Really?"

She gasped again at the hard slap to her ass. "What the—?! Did you just spank me *again*?"

"Yep."

She didn't care for his blasé attitude. "Why?"

"I felt like it."

Another sharp slap to her ass. Jaime growled her irritation. She wasn't sure what irritated her more, that he was spanking her, or that she liked it. "Bending me over is one thing, Popeye. But smacking my ass is—"

“Not *your* ass, baby. *My* ass. I love the look of my handprints on it.” His wolf growled his approval at the sight of the handprints; he saw them as brands. “Whine all you want, but you like it, and you know you do.”

Jaime would have growled at his self-assured tone if at the same moment he wasn't prying her feet apart with his and the head of his cock wasn't thrusting against her clit. *Thank God*. She needed to come so badly—so much so that she was pushing back to take him inside her. Okay, she was *trying* to push back, but his big freaking body was as unmovable as a building.

“Want me to make you come?”

“Well, duh.”

“Then you know what to do.”

“Please.”

“Good girl.” With that, he slammed into her in a smooth, hard stroke. Then he was hammering into her so mercilessly it was animalistic.

Jaime was in absolute heaven. She had been lucky in that all her sexual partners had known exactly what they were doing in the bedroom. But Dante...Not one of them even came close, and not just because he was her mate. Everything about the way he fucked her—his pace, his intensity, his rough touch, his words, his dominant tone, the way he felt inside her—answered to every hunger and craving she had, driving her closer and closer to climaxing. “Dante, I need to come.” Dante tangled a hand in her hair and snatched her head back. “Come all over me, Jaime.” As if his harsh command acted as a trigger, a scream erupted from her throat as her body began to convulse and her muscles clamped around his cock. Unable to hold back, Dante growled her name as jets of come burst out of him and into his mate, filling her. Then it was as though every bit of energy he had abruptly vanished, and he sagged.

Burying his face into the crook of her neck, he inhaled deeply. His wolf growled, immediately noting something that took Dante's fried brain a few more seconds to realize. “Your scent's changed.”

“Huh?”

“So has mine. Our scents have mixed.”

Knowing he was wondering what had brought on the sudden development in their bond, she told him, “I decided that you were right.”

“I’m always right, baby. What am I right about this time?” He grunted when her elbow jabbed his chest.

“I decided it was time to drop the walls,” she said simply.

Surprised and relieved, Dante slid both arms underneath her and hugged her tight. Satisfaction roared through him with the knowledge that everyone would know from her scent that she was taken, was his. He knew she liked that it worked both ways. “No more keeping parts of yourself from me. I want all of you.” That reminded him of something.

When Jaime felt Dante sliding out of her body, a moan of complaint involuntarily left her. As she went to stand, a hand on her back stayed her.

“Don’t move.”

Whatever. It wasn’t like she’d be able to stand on her own steam yet anyway. That relaxed attitude changed somewhat when she felt a wet finger probing her ass. “What the—”

“Shh. Stay nice and still for me.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t see this coming, Jaime. You knew when I bent you over this desk what would happen next.”

She had known. In a state of extreme arousal, where her inhibitions weren’t important, she hadn’t wanted to fight it. Even now she didn’t want to, but she felt like she had to. She was a dominant female. Bending over so someone could ream her ass felt kind of weak.

But it wasn’t just someone, was it? It was her mate. He was the person who—though she very rarely admitted it—she belonged to in every sense. Naturally, he would want to claim every part of her, and she had to admit that she wanted him

to. Throughout most of their relationship, she had fought him on one thing or another, had persistently held back from him. She'd told herself she wouldn't any longer, and she'd meant it.

When Jaime went slack against the desk, Dante groaned. Christ, she was submitting. The sight made his wolf growl in approval. Leaning over, Dante kissed her shoulder and licked over one of the marks he'd left there. "That's my good girl. It'll feel so good, baby, I promise." Jaime found herself moaning as, lubricated with what was presumably both his come and hers, a finger repeatedly thrust in and out of her ass. Soon there was another one. But it was when he slid in a third finger that it stung. If she was honest, though, she really couldn't give a crap. The pleasure very much outweighed the dim pain that quickly became pure pleasure. The entire time, he whispered words of encouragement, told her how amazing she was and how hot it was that she'd submitted to him.

Dante loved those throaty moans she made. God, she was tight, and if she wasn't his mate—the female made to take him—he'd think he'd never fit in there. When she was writhing and pushing back to counter his thrusts, he decided she was ready. Slowly he withdrew his fingers and replaced them with the head of his cock. As he'd expected, she tensed. "It's okay, baby. Relax for me." Jaime couldn't help hissing as he began to push into her. She wasn't so sure about this now.

"Dante—"

Feeling her anxiety, he smoothed a hand up and down her spine. "Shh. Remember, you were made to take me, Jaime—anywhere and everywhere. This ass is mine; let me have it, baby. Push out as I push in." Dante was pretty sure that nothing could have made him look away from the sight of his cock sinking into her. He was surprised he didn't come just watching it. "So fucking hot." Finally, he was fully sheathed. "Baby, that feels amazing."

Jaime had to agree with that. Once she'd begun to relax, her body had quickly adjusted and accommodated him. Now if only he would move a little...

"Ready, baby?"

"Uh-huh." When he withdrew with a slow, smooth slide and then thrust forward, Jaime groaned. Again and again he did that, pulling more groans from her. Why had she been fighting him on this? Damn, she'd been missing out big time.

“God, baby, your ass is so tight. It looks like you shouldn’t be able to take me. But you can, because you were made for me. All for me.” He thrust forward, and she groaned again. “You like that, huh? What about this?” He punched his hips abruptly, and she cried out in pure pleasure. Picking up the pace slightly, he also hardened his thrusts, giving her what she wanted.

A loud knock on the door made them both freeze. When Jaime looked over and realized it was unlocked, her eyes widened. *Shit*. She expected Dante to quickly move and cover her up, but instead, he laid his weight on her, caging her against the desk, and put a finger to her lips.

“Who is it?” he asked, making sure he sounded grumpy and impatient. Unless he called “Come in,” no one ever simply walked inside other than Trey. But then, Trey wouldn’t have knocked in the first place.

“Me,” called Marcus. “I just wanted to ask a few questions about that call you had earlier with Josh.”

Of course Dante could tell Marcus that he’d answer his questions later. But this was kind of like a carnal dare. He had the urge to piston into Jaime and test whether she could remain silent. “Ask away.” Pinning her still by her hips, Dante gave her one hard thrust before speaking quietly into her ear. “You’ll have to be quiet, Jaime. If Marcus thinks anything sexual is going on in here, he’ll walk right in. Walk right in and see me claiming your ass.”

He was taunting her, Jaime knew. But he was also right. All shifters liked a little voyeurism, and there was no way Marcus would miss out on the chance to have a peek. She swallowed a gasp as Dante again drove his cock into her. Then he was pumping his hips and she was biting into her arm to muffle the cries she couldn’t hold back.

Meanwhile, he answered each of Marcus’s questions in a clear voice that didn’t hint at what he was doing to her. That pissed her off. Here she was striving to keep quiet, and he sounded about as animated as a broomstick. Hoping to even the playing field a little, Jaime clenched around his cock.

His words faded into a low growl, but he quickly recovered and continued his conversation. Oh yeah? Now she was absolutely determined to unsteady him—and irritate the cheeky fucker for starting this game.

Giving him a sideways glance, she whispered, "I'll tell you who I'm fantasizing about if you tell me who you're fantasizing about." He stopped midsentence and dug his claws into her hips before speaking again. It was a warning she intended to ignore. "I have to take a shit." His claws dug harder, breaking the skin, and the scent of blood drifted to her. Ha—like a little blood would stop her. "How about some role play? You can be Fred, I'll be Daphne, and we'll pretend Marcus is the Lake Monster coming to get us. What, too soon?" He growled low in his throat. Still the epitome of self-control, he continued talking. Fine. There was only one thing for it. She threw her head back and howled, "Scooby Dooby Doo!"

The crazy bitch, Dante thought as he stilled. Part of him wanted to laugh and part of him wanted to spank the life out of her.

"I didn't realize Jaime was in there with you," said Marcus.

"Well, yeah, I am," she said. "Listen, is there any way you could wrap this up, because Dante's got a big job to finish and he's getting very anal about the details."

"Sure. I'll talk to you guys later."

The second he was certain that Marcus was out of earshot, Dante slammed his cock into her ass, yanking a loud cry from her and cutting off her wicked giggle. "Think you're funny, huh? Let's hear you laugh now." Growling, he folded over her and began pounding into her with deep, hard thrusts. His pace was relentless, giving her no mercy, no reprieve. How could he when he'd lost all control anyway? There were no games or jokes now. Only a desperate need to come.

He relished seeing her there beneath him, accepting the rough fucking he was giving her.

Snaking one hand underneath her, he speared two fingers into her pussy and she cried out. "I want you to come for me, Jaime. Right. Now." He bit hard into her shoulder and groaned as her ass tightened around him. *Feeling* as her orgasm crashed into her and pure and utter bliss blasted through her, Dante couldn't hold back any longer. One, twice, three times he rammed into her and came. And came. And came. And realized something that Jaime would probably never have told him, *felt* it.

Jaime loved him.

He realized something else, too. He loved her right back.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jaime grumbled as she let Shaya and Taryn lead her to the oval full-length mirror. “Can I open my eyes now?” she asked when they finally halted.

“Yes, now,” urged Shaya excitedly.

Opening her eyes, Jaime couldn’t help smiling at her reflection. Lydia had been right—the dress she had designed for Jaime was amazing. Showing a hint of cleavage, the knee-length silk dress was an unusual shade that was somewhere between ice-blue and violet; the color deepened or lightened depending on how the light captured the material. The back was V-shaped so it exposed a fair amount of skin but stopped at her lower back, hiding the tattoo she’d had done as a surprise for Dante.

The tattoo wouldn’t have been a surprise for long if they were ending their ceremony with a chase, but as there was no way Jaime could shift into her wolf form, Dante wouldn’t be able to claim her in front of the pack anyhow. Looking at the beautiful dress, she was glad of that now. It meant it wouldn’t be torn from her body and ruined.

“Well?” Lydia looked like she might combust.

“I love it.”

Lydia clapped her hands twice. “I knew you would.”

“You look beautiful, Jaime.” Grace wiped a tear from her eye.

Shaya kissed her cheek. “There’s no way Dante will be able to concentrate on a single word Trey says in the ceremony.”

Taryn chuckled. “I was like that. The ceremony was pretty much a blur. I was too busy staring at Trey and imagining getting down and dirty.”

“I was going to offer to put your hair up in some kind of fancy arrangement, but it’s too beautiful to be all scrunched up,” said Shaya. “Leave it down.” A knock on the door was soon followed by Gabe’s voice. “Are you all dressed yet?”

“Yes, come in,” called Grace.

On entering, her brother, who was planning to give her away, gasped. “Wow, sis, you look amazing.”

Lydia smiled proudly. “She does, doesn’t she.”

“I hope you’re ready,” he said, “because it’s nearly midnight.”

“She is.” Shaya placed her hands on Jaime’s shoulders and held her gaze. “Now stop being nervous and enjoy this. It’s not like there’s any chance of him not turning up.” Perhaps that was true, but every insecurity Jaime had was taunting her that just maybe he’d realize what a big risk she was and decide to call the ceremony off, even if only for a while. Those same insecurities teased her that he might even decide that he still felt a connection with Bitch Face and would rather go back to her. Speaking of Bitch Face... “Has she been to his room yet?” They had all wondered if she might.

Gabe suddenly looked a little awkward. “Okay, yes, she did. But don’t let it get to you.

Dominic has been manning the door and sent her on her way. Plus, Hope’s keeping an eye on her, too.”

“I can’t work out what she’s doing here.”

Shaya shrugged. “Maybe she just doesn’t like that the person she thought was forever pining after her no longer wants her and has totally moved on. She’s vain enough for that to bother her. Some women get off on luring away other women’s guys. Glory’s like that, too.” That just didn’t add up for Jaime, though. “But she’s mated.” Shaya gave her a look that said, “And?”

“Shaya’s right,” said Taryn. “Being mated won’t change her nature.” Jaime held up her hands. “Let’s stop talking about her. This is my day, not hers.”

“Exactly. That’s the right attitude.” Shaya kissed Jaime’s cheek again. “We’ll see

you down there.” Quickly the girls all scampered away.

“He’s ready for you, sis.” Gabe held his arm out, a gesture that asked if she herself was ready.

She was. With every step that they took as they exited the caves and descended the steps of the cliff face, Jaime felt herself calm more and more. Strange. She’d kind of expected the opposite response, but then, she would naturally feel calmer the closer she got to her mate, wouldn’t she? Her wolf didn’t totally understand what was happening, but she knew that her mate was near, and that was enough to halt her pacing, though she remained as watchful as ever.

Once they were at the bottom of the mountain and heading through the trees toward the lake, excitement began to fill Jaime. When she was a little girl, she had constantly imagined this day, just as most little girls did. But when it seemed that her wolf would never heal, Jaime had believed that she would never have her mate or experience this ceremony. It made this all the more special and all the more moving. Damn if she’d cry in front of everyone, though, even at her own mating ceremony.

As the trees began to thin out, Gabe stopped and howled. It was answered by several other howls—an announcement that they were ready and the ceremony was about to start. She and Gabe then proceeded through the final few trees until they arrived at the clearing. All her packmates had made a huge circle that Jaime knew centered on Trey and Dante.

She had to grit her teeth at the sight of Laurie, but maybe it was a good thing that she watched the ceremony; maybe she would then understand that Dante belonged to Jaime and that was that. There were some gasps and murmurs of appreciation as they saw Jaime—well, as they saw the amazing dress. The only other sound was the occasional cry from Kye, who was nestled comfortably in Taryn’s arms.

As Jaime and Gabe neared the circle, Dominic stepped aside to give Jaime room to walk through. It was only then that Gabe released her. Giving him one last smile, she turned and her eyes immediately landed on Dante. He swallowed hard, gazing at her hungrily, possessively, and almost deferentially. She imagined that her own gaze was pretty much the same. He looked unbelievably hot in his silvery-gray shirt—that wouldn’t stay buttoned for long if she had

anything to do with it—and black chinos. They wouldn't be on for long either.

When she came to stand before the two males, staring deep into her mate's brindle-brown eyes, she felt a sense of total rightness wash over her. He was hers, he was safety and security and home. Her wolf wasn't so at ease. In fact, Jaime's sense of calm seemed to agitate her. She was suddenly anxious, perhaps feeling vulnerable to this male. The more power he had over her, the more of a threat her wolf considered him to be.

Sensing Jaime's wolf's nervousness, Dante gently snaked his hand around her throat and leaned in to brush his lips against hers. "It's okay." He couldn't help feeling a twinge of hurt that her wolf was still wary of him, particularly since he knew that until her wolf accepted him, the bond would never be fully developed. But Jaime, the woman he loved—he hadn't yet told her and was hoping she'd say it first—had fully accepted him. She was here, too beautiful for words, looking at him with complete trust. That was more than enough for Dante and his wolf.

Jaime nodded, still smiling. "I know."

Dante released her as Trey began to speak the ritual words. He knew that the short ceremony was merely a gesture from a shifter to their mate that they were totally committed and wanted to publicly announce it to those who mattered to them. There was no magick or power in the ceremonial words being spoken by Trey, Dante, or Jaime, but just the same, he felt goose bumps spread across his arms and nape.

All too soon, the rest of the pack was joining in, echoing the words that Trey had said, and Jaime knew the ceremony was almost over. Good. Although she loved this moment, the intensity and sacredness of the event was heightening her arousal. She sensed that it was having the same effect on Dante, and that knowledge only fed her aroused state.

Once the last words had been spoken, Dante closed that small space between him and his mate and curled his arms around her. The kiss he gave her was soft, reverent, and loaded with more emotion than he wanted to reveal. Ready to mark her for all to see, he bit down hard on her lip.

People usually bit the neck or shoulder, but she had a mouth made for biting—among other things—

and he knew how much she and her wolf loved it when he did that. Smiling, she returned the bite and sucked his lower lip into her mouth to soothe the sting.

Dante pulled back, giving her a wicked grin, but then her eyes widened in horror and he knew why. Trey, Taryn, and the enforcers must have also sensed it, because Dante had barely yelled,

“Breach!” before they had all shifted into their wolf forms, followed closely by Rhett, Cam, and Gabe. “I have to shift, baby,” he told Jaime. “Go.” Then he gave his wolf his freedom.

Yeah, like she’d leave her pack when there was danger. Jaime joined the ten wolves in circling the rest of the pack protectively. Seconds later a large number of wolves—fifteen, her mind quickly calculated—came barreling through the trees. A black one launched itself at Jaime, but one hard, preternaturally fast punch to the muzzle sent him sprawling with a yowl. A gray-black wolf with a white undercoat—her mate—tore out her attacker’s throat before he even had the chance to rise.

Then he was on top of another wolf, clamping his paws around his neck and wrestling him to the ground, where he slashed open the intruder’s belly.

The sight was too much for her wolf, who was suddenly thrown back to all those years ago when she and Jaime had been surrounded and attacked. In her confused, enraged, fearful state, the need to surface was worse than ever for her wolf. She struggled madly within her cage—she clawed it, leaped at it, slammed into it over and over. Calling on everything Dante had taught her, Jaime ignored her wolf and slipped into that zone where the only thought in her mind was survival.

Each time another wolf came at her, Jaime fought using every technique she knew—she fought dirty, she made them bleed, she broke bones, she even attacked from behind when she had to. This wasn’t a moment when fairness counted. These wolves shouldn’t be there and would hurt or kill her pack if she didn’t hurt them first. That was all there was to it. Naturally, it would have been a lot easier to battle in wolf form. Thank God Dante had trained her for this, should it ever happen.

All around her there was growling, barking, yelping, the sounds of bones breaking and bodies slamming into one another. She was covered in scratches,

bites, blood—some hers, some not—and was pretty sure that she'd fractured her wrist and had a few broken ribs. She ignored all of it—the noises, the agony, the worry, the struggle that her wolf continued to put up. But there was a certain noise coming from behind her that she couldn't bring herself to ignore, particularly when it was accompanied by her name. Turning her head slightly, she saw Shaya clutching a screaming Kye tightly in her arms.

“Taryn told me before she shifted that when the number of wolves was low, I should ask you to escort Kye and me back to the caves.”

Damn it. She couldn't ignore what was, effectively, an order from her Alpha female, but Jaime didn't want to leave the fight, didn't want to leave her mate's side. Looking around, she noticed that the number of intruders was now at eight. Although Rhett, Cam, and Marcus were badly injured, they were still battling hard, totally high on adrenaline. The intruders were therefore outnumbered, and there was no excuse to wait any longer.

Suddenly it felt as though a car crashed into her back, and she found herself flat on her stomach while sharp teeth dug deep into her shoulder. She screamed through her clenched teeth. Breathing and thinking through the pain, she reached back with her good arm, gripped a foreleg, and yanked hard. It was enough to make the wolf above her release her shoulder with a yelp. This time she yanked even harder on the leg, unbalancing the wolf, who ended up sprawled at her side. Growling, he looked ready to sink his teeth into her other shoulder when a huge gray—and very feral Alpha male—wolf barreled into him. Then the gray wolf was on top of her attacker, ripping out his throat.

“Jaime, come on!” pleaded Shaya.

The feel of a cold nose nuzzling her face made her turn her head. Her mate nudged her with his head, growling. He wanted her gone.

“Fine.” Besides, Kye and Shaya needed help. Dragging herself to her feet, she ran to the panicky redhead. Lydia, Grace, Hope, Greta, Leif, and Bitch Face—did she really have to help that venomous woman?—were also waiting. “Come on. Laurie, stay at the rear.” She was a dominant female after all, so she should have joined the fighting. Jaime went to lead them out of the circle, but stopped dead as three of the intruders gathered near the path that Jaime intended to take.

The normally playful salt-and-pepper wolf—Dominic—followed closely by a

jet-black male wolf—Tao—and their creamy blonde Alpha female charged at the three wolves blocking Jaime’s path. Not bothering to stick around to watch the intruders be ripped to shreds, Jaime took advantage of the situation and led the group of females and two pups through the trees toward the caves.

Conscious that going too fast would quickly tire Greta and Leif, Jaime kept at an even, doable pace.

But that soon became a problem when she heard the sounds of menacing growls closing in on them.

“Shaya, you know the way. Go.” With that, she hung back as the females continued to run toward the caves. Jaime stood in wait, determined not to let the approaching wolves pass. Bitch Face, strangely, remained with her. Well, whatever. Common enemies and all that stuff.

As a large wolf came darting toward her, she forgot about Bitch Face and dropped into an offensive stance. But she didn’t have the opportunity to attack, because no sooner was the approaching wolf leaping in the air than a black wolf with creamy markings—Ryan—smashed into it, sending it colliding into a large oak. Then suddenly two gray-brown-yellow wolves—Marcus and Trick—joined him, growling at her and Bitch Face. Jaime understood; they wanted her to concentrate on protecting the other females and the pups while they took care of the remaining intruders.

Nodding, Jaime raced toward the caves, conscious that Bitch Face was close behind her. It was as she reached the foot of the mountain that she smelled a familiar scent that both she and her wolf instantly recognized as a threat. She immediately halted and watched as a dark-skinned, curvy female appeared out of the shadows. Glory.

“You took your sweet time,” the female said, huffing. Turning her attention to Bitch Face, she grinned. “I wasn’t sure if you’d really come through for us. I guess you must want her dead as much as I do.”

Jaime flicked her gaze between the two females. “What does she mean?” she demanded, snarling at Bitch Face.

Glory answered for her. “I mean that she agreed to create an opening in the perimeter fence so we could get inside pack territory. Your ceremony provided

the perfect distraction.” Jaime shook her head at the female who was edging away from her. “You weren’t satisfied with betraying Dante once? You had to do it all over again?”

“It would have been a lot easier if you’d just died from that bullet,” she replied.

Suddenly it all became clear. “You were the one who hired that lone wolf.”

“I want Dante, and you’re in my way. As Glory and I had a common interest—getting rid of you—we decided to band together.”

Jaime frowned, incredulous. “How can you band together with someone who also wants him?” Glory gave Jaime a pitying smile. “No, honey, I don’t want Dante. Not really. But nobody gets to disregard me the way he did. It seemed a fun idea to put my brothers on his tail. Then I saw him with you and realized that an even better mode of revenge would be to scare you off. That was all I’d really wanted. But instead, you attacked me. You drew blood. What kind of dominant female would I be if I let the shifter community believe that a submissive wolf could take me? I’d be targeted for the rest of my days. That can’t be allowed.

“Once everybody hears how my brothers, my cousins, and I all penetrated the Phoenix Pack’s defenses and I killed their Beta female, I’ll be basically untouchable. And admired. And wanted by just about every alpha male around. Maybe I’ll even earn myself a position as Alpha female of a pack. Imagine that.”

Jaime’s tone was dry. “I can’t. It’s too unrealistic.”

“Glory, just get on with it already before the others come,” urged Bitch Face, glancing around.

“Your relatives aren’t going to keep them distracted for long.”

“You do realize that if I’m killed, it’ll kill Dante too, right?” Jaime asked Bitch Face, who waved a hand dismissively.

“The bond isn’t complete, Dante will easily survive it. Especially when he has me to pick up the pieces. He still loves me, he never stopped. But he’s too honorable to admit it and leave his mate.”

The woman was insane. “What is your damage?”

“I still can’t work out what it is about you that made him move on,” she said, looking at Jaime like she was a bug. “You’re nothing like me.”

“What, you mean someone who would betray a guy they’re partially mated to and then relish the idea that this guy is hung up on her?”

Ire flashed across her face. “There was no way I could’ve resisted that pull to go to Blane.”

“Bullshit. Being partly mated to Dante meant there was no way you could have felt that pull.

You cheated on him because you wanted to, because you’re selfish and wouldn’t know the meaning of loyalty if it bit you on your conceited ass.”

“You never would have kept him anyway, you know. Dante needs someone like me. Someone who won’t fight his need for control despite being a dominant female.”

“You and Blane aren’t together anymore, are you? That’s the real reason you’ve showed up.

You thought you could get Dante to take you back.”

Bitch Face growled. “He was mine before he was ever yours.”

“Now, see, that’s where you’re wrong. He’s been mine since the second I was born. It just took a while for us to figure it out.”

Her smile was ugly. “Just think how easily he’ll recover from your death when he finds out about Leif. Dante would fight to stay alive for his son.”

Jaime gave her an “Oh please” look. “He’s not Dante’s, and we both know it. He would have scented the pregnancy before you skipped off with Blane.”

The dumb bitch blushed. “Dante will still raise him as his own.”

“Sure, sure. I almost feel sorry for you. I say *almost*.”

“All right, all right,” interrupted Glory. “As much as this is fun, Laurie’s right—

the others will soon get here. Let's get this over with, Jaime."

Jaime really didn't like that Glory was so confident that she'd win. "You didn't say pretty please."

She smirked. "Since you're already badly injured, I'll go easy on you."

"Your kindness overwhelms me."

She shot at Jaime like a bullet out of a gun. If her senses hadn't been so attuned to Glory, Jaime might not have been able to sidestep her in time. Just that one simple dodge left Glory skidding along the ground in an effort to halt her forward momentum. Jaime smiled sweetly at her.

Glory came at her again, this time with a series of backflips. Heaven knew what she intended to do once she'd reached her. Jaime didn't wait to find out—though she was curious. Her timing just right, she darted at her so that in that small millisecond when Glory's body was upside down—

midflip—Jaime wrapped an arm around her waist and slammed her down, face-first, onto the ground.

To Glory's credit, she recovered quickly, jumping upright, flexing her facial muscles, and wiping away the blood that trickled from her nose.

"You're fast," Glory admitted through her teeth.

"Please don't follow that up with some sort of cheesy line like, 'But are you fast enough?'"

"I don't need to ask you that. I already know the answer."

"Does that mean you surrender?"

She curled her upper lip at Jaime. "I'd sooner fight to the death than surrender."

"Do your brothers know about this suicidal streak of yours?" Glory flew at her with such speed that she almost clipped Jaime with that big fancy kick, but her movement was fueled by anger, and Dante had taught Jaime that acting on anger always resulted in mistakes. Dodging the kick, Jaime slammed her balled-up fist

into Glory's jaw and followed it up with a kick to the knee.

Looking dazed, Glory staggered and easily lost her balance when Jaime then swept out her foot and took both of Glory's legs out from under her. She hit the ground with a loud thud, cradling her knee. Seconds later, however, she sprang upright and lunged at Jaime with a flurry of punches, kicks, strikes, and overhands.

As much as Jaime hated to admit it, Glory was good. Just as Dante had predicted, the female had moves of her own and liked to fight dirty. Jaime managed to block or dodge most of the blows aimed at her while landing plenty of blows of her own, but it was fair to say that they were evenly matched. Although Glory was tiring, so was Jaime. If it hadn't been for Dante's training, the female would have easily overpowered her.

After a particularly hard palm-heel strike from Jaime, Glory stumbled backward and blood gushed from her nose. The sight pleased Jaime's wolf, who was lunging at her confines, wanting the freedom to defend and attack. Growling, Glory rocketed at Jaime and again delivered punch after punch, kick after kick, and dirty move after dirty move.

A fast, hard uppercut sent Glory staggering backward and into a tree, but quickly she righted herself and dealt a hard blow to Jaime's solar plexus, right where her broken ribs were. Jaime sucked in a breath and fell to her knees, gritting her teeth against the pain. Almost failing to notice the kick aimed at her face, Jaime quickly captured the foot and unsheathed her claws, slashing at Glory's Achilles tendon. With a loud, stunned cry, Glory swayed on one leg and quickly ended up flat on the ground. With effort, Jaime got to her feet, taking a moment to regulate her breathing.

"Glory, they're coming!" declared Bitch Face. "Fine, I'll take care of it myself." Jaime turned in time to grip the hand that had been aiming for her throat. Bending it backward and ignoring Bitch Face's squeal of pain, she demanded, "Retract your claws." But that distraction cost her big time. The breath whooshed out of her as a hard, painful impact smacked into her body, making her back hit the ground hard. Then Glory was on top of her, shimmering as bones cracked and her body reshaped. Milliseconds later a russet wolf was growling down at her, eyes fixed on her throat. Knowing what was coming, Jaime did the only thing she could do. She shifted.

Dante sensed the exact moment that Jaime changed into her wolf form; he sensed her wolf's rage, pain, anxiety, and determination, and knew she was battling someone and battling hard. He looked at Trick, who was helping him hold up Tao—although back in human form, the Head Enforcer was passed out and had a broken leg. “Can you hold him up without help?”

“Sure. Whatever it is, go.”

Dante wasn't sure what it could be. The intruders had all been defeated, and most of them were dead, except for the three who had surrendered. So who was she—?

Glory! How could he not have considered that she might have sneaked in too? Fuck.

Remaining in human form and ignoring the shards of pain knifing through him from his wounds, he sprinted ahead and let the bond lead him to Jaime. Clearly sensing that something was happening, Trey, Taryn, Ryan, and Gabe followed behind him. He caught a glimpse of two balls of fur wrestling when suddenly Laurie launched herself at him from nowhere.

“Oh God, Dante, I'm so glad you're here. I was so scared. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to leave Jaime behind, but—”

Forcibly he pushed the female away and handed her to Ryan, only concerned for the black wolf with a tail tipped with gray. His mate. He watched as she slashed the muzzle of a russet wolf, spraying blood onto the ground. The bleeding wolf leaped at the black wolf, attempting to clamp her paws around her neck. Dante stiffened in fear, knowing that if she managed that, she would wrestle the black wolf to the ground, and his mate would then be vulnerable.

But the russet wolf didn't manage that. His mate bit down on her ear and yanked hard enough to make the russet wolf whine loudly and jump away. Relief filled him, but he didn't relax. Then the two wolves were leaping at each other, bodies slamming, claws clashing, teeth sinking into fur and flesh. Dante wanted nothing more than to intervene and help his mate, but he couldn't. This was her fight, and he couldn't take this from her. “Come on, baby,” he murmured.

Finally the black wolf was able to get her opponent flat on her back on the ground. Quickly she straddled the russet wolf, but before she could pin her

down, claws came swiping at her muzzle.

Feeling her pain, Dante winced, but she didn't react to the pain at all—she was too focused on her need to kill her opponent.

His mate sank her teeth into the offending foreleg, wrenching a loud yelp from the other wolf.

Dante sensed his mate's satisfaction—a satisfaction he shared until the russet wolf used her other paw to tear a strip into his mate's shoulder. The pain and surprise of it made the black wolf bounce back, inadvertently giving the other a chance to right herself. "Little bitch," he muttered.

Dante clenched his fists and ground his teeth against his wolf's constant attempts to resurface.

His wolf wouldn't involve himself in the fight, he understood the dynamics, but he wanted to be near his mate now that she was finally in wolf form. He wanted to bring her back from the dark place she was in right now. Both his wolf and Dante could feel her emotional state through the bond. It wasn't good at all.

The black wolf was so far gone it was actually frightening. He remembered Jaime's fear that if her wolf got control again, she wouldn't let Jaime come back. He hoped to God that her fear was unfounded, but as he looked at the black wolf now, he realized that calming her was going to be the main battle tonight.

He inhaled sharply as a well-aimed body slam from the russet wolf sent his mate sprawling.

"Get up, baby." To his relief, she was quickly on her feet again. Growling, she bounded at her opponent, crashing into her hard. He winced, flinched, snarled, cursed, and grimaced as he watched the two wolves continue to battle.

After a series of struggles, the black wolf again forced the other to her back. "That's it, baby, end it." His mate pinned the wolf down by pressing her paws down onto her shoulders. Then, in one sharp move, his mate slashed open the other wolf's belly at exactly the same moment that she clamped her jaws around her throat. With an abrupt yank, the black wolf had ended the fight. Won.

Thank God for that. His wolf's relief was just as profound. But the hard part had

only just begun, Dante knew. “Jaime? Jaime?”

The black wolf swerved, hackles raised and ears flattened outward, growling threateningly at him with her lips peeled back, showing teeth and gums. Not good.

“It’s okay,” said Dante in a gentling tone. He knew that the wolf wouldn’t understand the words, but his hope was that she would find his tone soothing. What she needed now was to calm down and pull back so that Jaime could resurface. So far it didn’t seem as though there was a chance of that happening as her eyes darted from person to person, curling her upper lip at them.

He knew what the wolf was feeling: rage, pain, fear, confusion, and a belief that danger was all around. Everything she saw and heard she was interpreting as a threat. Even him. Shit if that didn’t hurt. Remembering the time that Jaime approached the Doberman at the sanctuary, Dante crouched down to her wolf’s level of height so that he didn’t seem so intimidating. “It’s okay. It’s safe now.” She growled at him again, a chilling, menacing growl that said, “Mate or not, stay the fuck away.”

“Jaime, please fight this,” pleaded Gabe. The wolf snarled at him, despite recognizing him as family. Her frightened gaze darted between each of them, expecting one of them to attack her any second now.

Dante tapped the ground with his hand to get her attention. It worked. Again she growled at him. “Shh. It’s okay.” Another growl. “Come on, Jaime, fight her for me.” He could sense Jaime, sense her frustration and helplessness. But she wasn’t giving up as she once might have, believing she was succumbing to the inevitable. She was battling for freedom. Unfortunately, her wolf was too sure that they were still in danger for her to even entertain Jaime’s struggles as important.

“Dante,” said Ryan quietly. “I think she’s lost it.”

“No. She’s scared and she’s on the offensive, but she’s not feral.”

“But—”

“Dante’s right,” said Trey. “I know feral. That’s not feral.”

“Maybe we should all back up, give her some space, and make it clear we’re not here to hurt her,” suggested Taryn.

“Or maybe I should shift into my wolf form. I’m her Alpha. She’ll respond.”

“I don’t think she will, Trey.” Dante shook his head. “Right now, she doesn’t see her pack. She sees threats. She doesn’t even trust me near her or I’d shift and let my wolf try his luck with her—

God knows he’s eager to try. Jaime told me that whenever she shifted and another shifter was around, her wolf would attack them, believing that she was eliminating a threat before that supposed threat had the chance to harm her.”

Trey was quiet for a few moments, but when the black wolf growled again he sighed. “I’m going to try it.”

“Trey, I’m asking you not to—”

“Just trust me on this, Dante. I think it will work.”

Before Dante could again object, Trey was shifting into his wolf form. As Dante had expected, his mate immediately froze and released a loud, lengthy “stay the fuck back” growl. He felt as her level of fear spiked. Simultaneously, though, her anger also increased, and Dante knew right then that he’d been right. This would only make her mood worse.

The huge gray wolf advanced a step toward the black wolf, ignoring her cautioning growl.

Dante and the others flinched as dominant vibes poured from the gray wolf, aiming to direct and control the black wolf. Instead, her growl deepened in an unnatural way, and she took a challenging step forward. Quickly Dante situated himself between the two wolves. “No.” He picked up on his mate’s surprise. She interpreted his behavior as protective. Good. He wanted her to regard him as an ally, if nothing else. “Taryn, I need you to bring Trey back before the situation worsens.”

“Already on it,” she assured him.

Again Dante crouched down and patted the ground. “Come on.” The black wolf

stiffened and growled at him once more. It occurred to him then that maybe his best option was to go to her, to move away from those she thought of as potential threats. “All of you stay exactly where you are. I’m going to move toward her.”

“Dante, that might not be wise,” said Ryan.

“Maybe not. But she’s my mate.” Nothing more needed to be said. Still crouching, he very slowly inched toward her at a sideways angle, just like he had seen Jaime do with the Doberman. As he’d expected, she growled, but it wasn’t as fierce and threatening as before. It was more “mind how you behave” than “I’ll kill you if you come any closer.” She wasn’t exactly welcoming him, but she was at least considering him as more of a potential ally than a potential threat.

With long pauses in between each step, Dante slowly moved toward the black wolf. She never moved her eyes from him, but he knew her senses were also attuned to those around her. Occasionally she growled, but they were still sounds that told him he was on thin ice and needed to tread carefully.

Optimism filled him and his wolf each time he got that little bit closer to her. Not that Dante was relaxed or sure of his safety. He doubted that she would kill him, but she’d certainly hurt him badly if she believed she needed to in order to protect herself and Jaime.

When he was only a few feet away from her, she stuck her head out at him and her nostrils flared. Then suddenly she was baring her teeth and growling loudly at him. Instantly he stilled, wondering at the abrupt change. It took a moment for it to occur to him. Not only was he covered in blood—not exactly a calming smell—but he had Laurie’s scent on him from when she’d thrown herself at him just moments before. *Shit*. From the wolf’s perspective, her mate had come to her with his skin smelling of another female.

“It’s okay,” he drawled soothingly. It didn’t work. Anger surged through her wolf. Anger, betrayal, and a sense of isolation now that she was again without allies. Jaime’s mood wasn’t much better. “You know I only want you.” The words were for Jaime. He sensed that she believed him, but this didn’t matter to her wolf. To her wolf it was a simple equation: he’d hurt Jaime, which meant he was a threat that she needed to be protected from.

His instincts—not to mention sheer common sense—told him that the best thing

to do would be to back away from her. To give her some space and a chance to calm a little. But this was his mate, damn it, and he didn't want her feeling like this. Although Trey's wolf had a tendency to turn feral during battles, Taryn was always able to bring him back from that state. It stung that Dante couldn't do the same here.

Desperate, frustrated, and exasperated, Dante moved toward her again. "I'm not going to hurt you, I—" He stopped as a cold, unnerving growl emitted from the black wolf as she bowed down, sticking her rear in the air, preparing to pounce on him. "No, st—" Ignoring him, she sprang.

Dante braced himself, ready to bear the impact and do his best to restrain her before she did much damage. Midleap, her body jerked and a loud whine thick with pain filled the air. He caught her as she fell on him. Rather than attempting to claw at him, she tried only to rise and escape. He locked his arms tight around the wolf, but she didn't put up much of a fight. A second later, he realized why

—there was a fucking dart sticking out of her flank. Already the tranquilizer was working and she was close to limp in his arms.

Swerving his head to the direction that the dart had to have come from, Dante found a sight he wouldn't have expected. There in the trees was Shaya, sobbing, with a tranquilizer gun in her hand.

"Shaya, what the fuck?"

"It's not like I wanted to do it," she cried as she cautiously approached. "She made me promise."

"Huh?"

"Jaime came to me one night after she'd decided that she was going to challenge Glory. She was worried that when it happened she might have to shift. She said that there was a chance her wolf wouldn't let her come back, and that if it looked as though she might attack someone I had to shoot her with one of these."

Dante felt himself blanch. "Christ, Shaya, she could have been lying to you! It could have been fatal!"

She rolled her tear-filled eyes. "I'd already thought of that. I made her shoot me

with one of them to prove they weren't. When I looked out of the window and saw what was happening, I grabbed the gun and came down. And I brought this." She opened a bag that he hadn't even realized she was holding and handed him something he never would have guessed was in there.

"No way. No fucking way."

"It wasn't my idea. She made me promise to give it to you. She wanted to be sure that her wolf couldn't bite you."

"I am *not* putting a muzzle on my mate." He continued stroking a hand down the short, coarse fur of her graceful neck.

"She said you'd say that. She also said to tell you that you can take it off again once you've put her in the cage."

Dante shook his head, setting his jaw. "I'm not putting a muzzle on—Wait, what cage?"

"Well, she calls it a crate, but it's a cage. Apparently, it's from the sanctuary. The workers use them to transport any animals they rescue to the sanctuary"

"I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"But don't you see that this is a good thing?"

He looked at her disbelievingly. "How could this possibly be a good thing?"

"It means she doesn't intend to give up, she intends to fight her wolf. But she won't have much luck with that until her wolf has calmed down a little. Jaime wanted you to have somewhere that you could put her while her wolf calmed."

On one level, Dante could acknowledge that Shaya was right. Still, how was he supposed to put her through this? It seemed cruel. Her wolf wasn't acting out of a wish to cause pain, she was frightened. She was traumatized enough, and he didn't want to add to that.

Gabe stepped forward and lightly stroked her between her ears. She didn't move at all.

“Dante, I don’t like this any more than you do. But it’s move her and confine her so that she has a chance to calm down, or risk her hurting someone or running off. Unless her wolf calms, Jaime will fade until eventually she’s gone, and her wolf will turn rogue.”

“He’s right,” said Trey, his voice uncharacteristically sensitive. “The tranquilizer will wear off soon. If we’re going to move her, it has to be now. I know you don’t want to do this, Dante, but you have to. Do it for Jaime. Give her an opportunity to come back from this.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

It had only taken an hour for the tranquilizer to wear off. Now—looking angrier than before—the black wolf paced in her crate, which was only twice as long and wide as her body. Several times she’d attacked it, looking for a weakness in the metal, and Dante had cringed every time her slender, graceful body smashed against it. Never had he felt more helpless or more like a bastard. For the past four years, her wolf had been caged, and now that she had finally surfaced again, she was back in a cage. And he’d been the one to put her in there.

She looked out at him with accusing, judgmental eyes. Guilt twisted his insides. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, although he knew she wouldn’t understand the words. Her response was a snarl that swore revenge. He heard as the door to the examination room opened behind him, but he only gave the visitor a sideways glance.

“Did she eat the meat?” asked Grace.

He shook his head. The wolf had snuffed at it.

“Does she recognize you?”

He was getting real sick of people speaking of his mate as though she was unbalanced. “Yes. I keep telling everyone—it’s not that she’s feral. She’s just scared and confused.”

“Sorry. It’s just that I heard she tried to attack you.”

“She smelled Laurie on me.”

“And why would she smell Laurie on you?” snapped Grace, giving him an accusatory look that was quite similar to the one his mate was wearing.

“See, now, if you’re reacting that way and I’m not your mate, is it any wonder that she wanted to draw blood?”

“I guess not. But you didn’t answer my question.”

He sighed. “Laurie threw herself at me when I was trying to get to Jaime’s wolf. She was afraid because of the duel between Jaime’s and Glory’s wolves, and she didn’t know what to do.” His wolf snarled at the memory.

“Afraid? Really?”

In response to the skepticism in her voice, he arched a brow questioningly.

“You don’t think that she did it on purpose?”

“Why would she?”

She gave him an impatient look. “Dante, honey, for a very observant person you have such a blind spot. The woman is jealous. I don’t know whether it’s because she’s still slightly possessive of you because you were once mated—”

“*Partially* mated.”

“—or whether it’s something else, but it wouldn’t surprise me if she did it on purpose so that there was no way Jaime would let you near her.”

“But she stayed with Jaime to fight when she could have just gone back to the caves with the rest of you.”

Grace shrugged. “I didn’t say I had all the answers. I just know the woman is jealous and doesn’t want you with Jaime. Did you know she came to your room just before the mating ceremony?”

She wanted to see you alone. Dominic chased her off, and then Hope did her best to keep her away from you.”

He hadn't known that, but at the moment he didn't care to try to understand it. "Grace, I really can't think of all this right now. All I care about is Jaime and making sure that she comes back."

"Can you sense her?"

"Yes. She's tired and irritated. Her wolf isn't being very receptive to her right now."

"She still feels unsafe. Unless that changes, she won't pay much attention to what Jaime thinks or feels."

He nodded. "I know. I've kept the number of visitors to a minimum. I figure the fewer people and scents around her, the better. It might help if she doesn't think strange shifters are going to be hanging around what's now effectively her den." Only Taryn, Shaya, and Gabe had been inside the room. None of them had received a welcoming greeting from the black wolf. "I tried giving her one of my T-shirts that Jaime wears to bed, thinking she might find it comforting the way Jaime does. She ripped it to shreds." Hearing Grace's heavy sigh, he looked at her curiously. "What?"

"It's just that seeing her like this...it reminds me of..."

"Louisa," he easily supplied, since he'd been thinking the same thing. "Jaime won't turn rogue." It was an adamant statement, but he wasn't sure who he was trying to convince more—himself or Grace.

"I hope not, honey. I really hope not."

Dante spent the rest of the day simply talking to the black wolf. Most of the words were for Jaime, but the gentling tone was for the wolf. She didn't calm as he'd hoped. When she wasn't pacing or attacking her cage, she was huddled in a ball growling at anyone who came even remotely close to the crate—him included. So far he could only get three feet from the cage without the wolf growling and baring her teeth. *Two feet*, he promised himself before he went to sleep that night on the chair in the examination room. *I'll make it to two feet away tomorrow.*

But he didn't. The wolf's state was worse in the morning rather than better, though she did actually eat the food Grace brought for her. Again he spent his

day with her, talking to her, remaining at her side in a gesture that said he was there for her, only her. The fact was that he had no idea how to win her wolf's trust. Trust was something that had to be earned, but how did he earn it in such a short time without being in a situation where he was tested? He had no freaking idea.

The only plan he had been able to come up with was to become a permanent fixture in that room, and one that was never once threatening or frightening. He ate his meals in there, he showered in the en-suite bathroom when he needed to, and he slept in either the chair or the bed. He also ensured that he was the one who fed her and cleaned her cage—though she had to be tranquilized each time they needed to clean it. *He* would see to her every need, would make the wolf see that he could and would care for her.

Day three was also a bad day. The wolf jumped at every noise, every voice, every unexpected movement. It broke his heart to see her so frightened and anxious. He understood then why Jaime had been so compelled to sit with that little dog, Ben, in the sanctuary—that was all Dante wanted to do right now. Just sit with her and hold her, pet her, and comfort her. The problem was that each time he went near the crate, she attacked it. Answering his wolf's desperate need to have contact with his mate, he had shifted forms. That hadn't worked well. Her wolf had recognized him as her mate, but she didn't associate him with safety or security, so she hadn't wanted him close.

Days four, five, and six went pretty much the same way. Thankfully, Ivy and Riley had provided more tranquilizers so that he could keep knocking the wolf out whenever he needed to clean her cage. Both women had also asked to help care for her while she was in this state, claiming that they were experienced with traumatized animals. While that was true, he refused their offer. He wanted few scents in that room, and he wanted to be the one to heal her. He *should* be the one to heal her.

Day seven had been a truly bad day. She'd attacked the cage so hard that she'd cut open her paws. After giving her another tranquilizer shot, he and Grace had seen to the injuries. As soon as the wolf was aware and alert again, she'd torn off the bandages with her teeth and attacked the crate even harder than before. Still, Dante stuck to his plan of remaining with her and being the one who saw to all her needs. The problem was that whereas before she had more or less tolerated his presence, she was now angered by it rather than comforted.

The days began to blend and blur until, before he knew it, it had been another seven days and Jaime's wolf was showing no signs of retreating. *Agitated* would be a mild word to describe how Dante was feeling. Occasionally he had snapped or shouted at the wolf, frustrated that none of his efforts were making her even slightly associate him with safety. Each time he snapped, her wolf would practically jump out of her skin and cower. And didn't that make him feeling like a cruel son of a bitch.

As for Jaime...The truth that he hadn't told anyone was that he couldn't sense her very well anymore. He knew that she wasn't weakening in spirit or admitting defeat. It was simply that her wolf's state was so prevailing now that she practically drowned out Jaime. In short, she was truly at risk of turning rogue. His wolf was constantly fretting and anxious, which only made Dante's mood worse. That was most likely why Shaya had encouraged him several times to go get some air or go for a run, but he wouldn't leave his mate. He'd stuck to his plan so far, and he was going to continue sticking to it.

The trouble was that with each day that passed, he sensed Jaime that little bit less. A sense of defeat soon began to creep in and slither through him, tempting him to accept that she wasn't coming back, that the wolf would soon turn rogue. There were times over the next week when he almost did, but then he would catch himself succumbing and would give himself a mental slap, praying that Jaime hadn't sensed through their bond that he'd almost given up on her.

It was day twenty-three—or was it twenty-five? Dante wasn't even sure anymore—when Trey came in the room for the first time. They had all agreed that since the Alpha had angered the black wolf by trying to dominate her, it might be better if he stayed away. Dante watched his mate, looking for her reaction to Trey's presence. Nothing. She simply remained curled up in a ball, peering out of the cage through depressed, confused eyes that plucked at his heart. Some days she was like this.

Others she was a ball of fury. He never knew what he'd be dealing with when he woke in the morning. In either state, she was unreceptive to him and everybody else.

“Hey,” he said to Dante. “How's she been today?”

“She's been quiet, but she hasn't eaten and she's jumpy.” Even he could hear the

hopelessness and fatigue in his voice.

Minutes of absolute silence passed before Trey spoke again. “Dante, maybe it would be kinder if—”

“No.” He’d known this was coming the second Trey entered the room. It had only been a matter of time before someone suggested it. Trey was the only one who ever would have done so, and for very personal reasons. While Dante understood those reasons, it didn’t ease his ire.

“Dante—”

“I said no.” His voice was barely controlled.

Trey sighed. “You’re not thinking of Jaime. Imagine how she’s feeling right now.”

“I don’t have to. I know how she’s feeling.” Well, on some days he did—just a little.

“I know what it’s like to be nothing but an observer while your wolf takes the front seat and does things you would never do. Sometimes I think that it’s how a ghost would feel, if there are such things. You can see and hear all these people you care about, you know everything that’s going on, but you can’t be part of any of it, you can’t talk to any of those people. You’re stuck. Trapped. Alone.

Helpless. Jaime’s been trapped like that for twenty-eight days now.” Twenty-eight? Huh. Longer than he’d thought.

“You told us that when this happened the first time, it was three weeks later that her wolf retreated. It’s been four weeks, and her wolf isn’t showing any signs of doing that, Dante. Unless her wolf’s state somehow improves, Jaime can’t push for the surface. It’s looking very unlikely that she’s going to be able to.”

“Jaime’s strong enough to do this,” he insisted. “I know she is.”

“Yes, she’s strong, but so is her wolf. She was even strong enough to ignore my order to back down. Her wolf has spent a long time all locked up, and instead of accepting that she was confined, she fought it. She didn’t stop fighting, and I don’t think she’ll stop fighting this either. Maybe it’s time to—”

“I can’t kill her, Trey. I won’t.”

“It wouldn’t be killing her,” Trey said quickly, ignoring the vehemence in Dante’s voice. “It would be giving her and her wolf some peace. Jaime has spent a lot of her life fighting. If anyone deserves some peace, it’s her.”

“And if this was Taryn we were talking about?”

Trey’s expression hardened. “Dante—”

“If this was Taryn?” he persisted, louder this time.

“The God’s honest truth? I’d be giving myself the same advice that I’m giving you. I wouldn’t want her to suffer in any way, especially just because I’ll miss her. You have to put Jaime first. It’s what mates do.”

“He’s right, Dante.”

The second that feminine voice spoke—a voice he couldn’t say he’d in any way missed over the past four weeks—his mate leaped at the crate, growling and snarling at the visitor. His own wolf wasn’t pleased either.

“This would be the kind thing to do,” said Laurie, her face sad and painted with sympathy. “I mean, look at her. One minute she’s huddled in a corner, and the next thing she’s like this. I’d say it’ll only be a day or so before she turns rogue. It’s not fair to Jaime.” When Laurie went to place her hand on his arm, Dante jerked away from her and snapped,

“*Don’t touch me.*” He noted that Jaime’s wolf eased a little at that, though she was still growling.

“Dante, don’t be like that.”

“Like what? What is it you actually expect?” He still couldn’t work out what this female wanted. She was supposed to have left by now, but had apparently come up with excuse after excuse for staying longer.

“Look, I know it will be hard when she’s gone, but we’ll all be here for you.” *I’ll be here for you*, she didn’t say, but he heard. Everything Grace had said came swimming back to the forefront of his mind.

“You think that if I lose Jaime, I’ll go back to you, is that it?” Surely it wasn’t.

“The bond isn’t fully in place. You could survive her death, and we could—”

“Are you fucking insane? I would *never* go back to you, never—Jaime or no Jaime.” Her face crumpled a little. “I understand if you hate me—”

“I don’t hate you, don’t you get it? I don’t *anything*. You are nothing to me. Understand?”

Nothing. She”—he pointed at the wolf who was now still and watching, quiet and curious—“is everything to me. *Everything*. Healthy or traumatized, she’s all I want, and she’s mine.” He turned to Trey then. “So no, I won’t kill her. I refuse to give up on Jaime or her wolf. Jaime won’t give up fighting, I know she won’t. Neither will I. Now, both of you get out.” When Laurie reached out to him, he yelled, “Get out!”

The black wolf watched her mate, surprised and curious. He had rejected the female who coveted him. He had moved away from her touch. He had ordered her to leave. What the wolf found just as surprising was that he had ordered away their Alpha. The memory of the Alpha attempting to dominate her made a low growl involuntarily slip out.

The sound made her mate turn. He moved toward her prison. His movements were slow and unthreatening. The wolf felt his emotions, some of which she understood—sadness, worry, anger. He spoke to her. The words were undistinguishable, but she watched him silently.

“Maybe they’re right.” He cocked his head. She copied the move. His voice was different, uneven. “Maybe I’m being a cruel bastard. But I can’t do it. Even though I can feel you slipping away from me, Jaime, I can’t. I love you, you know. I didn’t tell you that, did I? I was too fucking proud to say it first. Please, baby, you have to come back to me. You said you wouldn’t leave me again, and you can’t. You promised.”

A strong smell of salt filled the air, out of place in the room.

The wolf sensed Jaime strongly then. Knew Jaime wanted dominance. Knew Jaime was sad.

But those details were unimportant to the wolf. While they were unsafe and imprisoned, those details did not matter.

Surprising the wolf again, her mate left. He never left. Her mate was supposed to stay with her. He had gone. Left her and Jaime alone. A whine escaped her and she lay down again, uncertain and wary.

She lifted her head when the door suddenly opened. But it was not her mate. It was again the female who coveted him. The wolf growled, wanting her to leave. The female halted and the wolf smelled her fear, but the female didn't go.

"I know you don't want me here, but I've come to let you free. Won't that be fun? I know you can hear me, Jaime, and you're probably wondering why I'd free your wolf. The answer's simple.

Dante doesn't seem to have any intention of killing you. So I figure I'll let you out, let you attack someone, and then they'll have to kill you, won't they? Imagine how much fun it will be for you to watch while your wolf tears apart one of the people you love." The wolf growled again when the female moved. Still, she came close and picked up the object beside the prison. The female touched the prison with the object. There was a noise, a click.

The wolf growled louder, curling her lip to expose teeth and gums. The female quickly moved away.

"Done. Try not to attack Dante if you can help it. He's gone off to cry, poor guy." The female left, but did not close the door. The wolf saw freedom. Instantly she attacked the prison again and again and again. A wall of the prison opened. The wolf was out.

Instinctively the wolf was quiet, fearing the unknown, fearing the scents, though they were familiar. The scent of her mate was heavy, tempting. But there was another scent that was tempting. A scent, a...presence. Familiar and inviting. It promised safety. Comfort. The wolf needed safety.

Silently, the wolf padded through the large den, following the scent. Midway through a tunnel, she heard voices in the room nearby and slowed her pace. Her mind recognized the voices, linked them with names "Grace" and "Shaya." She recognized the scents coming from the room—food. The scents were appealing, but not as appealing as the other scent. It was stronger now. Safety was close.

The wolf passed the room slowly, quietly, stealthily. Jaime approved, she sensed. The wolf continued to follow the inviting scent. She silently went through more tunnels, careful to avoid detection. Turning a corner, she stopped. *Packmates*. She reversed until only her head was visible, observing those she scented as her Alphas and “Dominic.”

They were threats, danger, they made her frightened. Instinct said “flee.” But safety was so near now. So tempting. As the packmates spoke, facing the other direction, the wolf lowered her body and moved forward. She stayed close to the wall, pausing when the words stopped. Always silent, careful, and stealthy, the wolf moved until the scent was overwhelming.

The packmates were still speaking when she followed the scent into a room. Slowly she padded along soft ground. There was another strong scent here. “Cat,” she knew. “Hunk.” It hissed when she neared the large object that contained safety, but it made no threatening move.

The wolf knew that she needed to climb to get to safety. There was another object. It smelled much like a tree. “Chair.” She hopped nimbly onto it and saw that the large object containing safety was like her prison. But there was no wall at the top. The wolf looked inside and inhaled deeply. A pup. “Kye.” Just like when Jaime had held him, the pup smelled to the wolf like safety and—

Movement caught her eye. *Packmates*. She froze. They froze.

“Dominic” spoke. “Trey...Tell me that’s not Jaime.”

“She must have attacked Dante and gotten out.”

The Alpha female spoke then. “I don’t smell blood.”

“Dominic” scented of nervousness. “What do we do? I don’t want to hurt Jaime, I really don’t, but what if she hurts Kye?”

“I wonder what made her come here.”

The Alpha male growled at his mate. “That’s not the important part of the situation we have here, Taryn.” He put an object to his ear. “Dante, you okay? Jaime got out. She’s in mine and Taryn’s room, hanging over the crib.”

The wolf didn't like that the Alpha male's voice was now loud and angry. She growled warningly. He growled back.

"Hurry, Dante." He put the object away.

The wolf knew the scent coming from the Alpha male—panic. When he moved toward her, she growled again. This male who had challenged her was dangerous. Would attempt to dominate her, would hurt her and take her away from safety. From the pup, from "Kye."

"Dominic, we can't wait for him. On the count of three, I'll dive at the wolf. You dive at the crib and protect Kye."

The Alpha female's voice lost its softness. "What am I, chopped liver?"

"I don't want you near her. She's unstable. You didn't see what my mother did to Marcus."

"Jaime isn't rogue."

"She almost is. There's not much difference between the two, trust me." He turned to the male.

"On the count of three, Dominic. One...two...thr—"

"No!"

The wolf flinched at the noise, surprised. Her mate was there now. He was in front of her. The Alpha couldn't reach her. Her mate had protected her. Again.

Dante had never been so damn scared in his entire fucking life. Who could have blamed Trey for attacking the wolf before she had the chance to attack his son? But Dante just couldn't allow any harm to come to Jaime. He couldn't. Everything inside him rebelled against it, balked at it.

"Dante, move," gritted out Trey.

"I can't," he said in an agonizing whisper.

"Hey, look." Taryn sounded surprised, intrigued, and amused all at once.

Dante turned to look at his mate, who had now hopped down from the chair. She gave Trey a disgruntled look and settled beside Hunk at the base of the crib.

“I can’t believe I never thought of it before.”

He turned back to Taryn. “What?”

“My grandmother was the same.”

“Taryn, what the hell are you talking about?” demanded Trey.

She rolled her eyes at his tone. “Our son’s a healer.”

“A healer?”

“My grandmother was a healer, but she could only heal psychological wounds. She was the only reason my father survived my mother’s death. She didn’t help me with it because the other person has to want her help, and I didn’t want help from anyone. I was too deep in grief.” Dante frowned, still a little confused.

“So...Kye’s an empathic healer?”

“No, that’s different. He won’t be able to help with emotions. Only mental scars. I thought Hunk followed him around because he was being protective, but Hunk was an abused cat, right?”

Clearly he’s still got a little mental trauma, and so he’s drawn to Kye. It’ll make him automatically protective of Kye, too. That was how it was for my grandmother, anyway.” For the first time in a month, optimism flowed through Dante. “You’re saying he can heal Jaime’s wolf?”

“Um...no.”

“No?”

“He’s just a baby, Dante. But clearly, Jaime’s wolf finds his presence soothing, calming. You need to take advantage of her lucidity and try to gain her trust now while she’s receptive to you.” Trey shook his head. “No chance will I let her anywhere near my son while she’s in that state.

I’m sorry, Dante, I really am, but just as you need to protect Jaime, I need to

protect Kye.”

“That’s the thing, though, Flintstone—she’s not in a state anymore. If there’s one thing I can guarantee she won’t do, it’s hurt Kye. Like Hunk, she’ll be protective of him.” Trey ground his teeth, scowling at Taryn. “We can’t—”

“Zip it, Trey. If that was me needing help, you’d be singing a different tune. Do you really think I’d do anything that would put our son in danger?”

Seeming to accept her point, albeit begrudgingly, he turned back to Dante. “We’re not moving from the room, and if she tries to hurt Kye, you won’t save her from me. Understand?” Dante gave him a curt nod, though he had no intention of letting Trey harm her. He looked at the wolf and then back at Taryn. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Sit with her. Talk to her. Touch her.”

“She never wants me near her.”

“Probably because she didn’t feel safe before. You can’t expect her to feel safe when she’s in a cage—it totally negates the chance of it. I’m not judging you for it—you didn’t have a choice. She wasn’t in a state that meant you could free her. Now she is.” Still unsure and off-center, Dante scrubbed a hand down his face and inhaled deeply. Taryn was right, though: the wolf did find Kye’s presence calming. Well, that was a start.

Slowly he crouched down, expecting the black wolf to growl and warn him away from her.

She didn’t, to his utter shock. She just watched him with alert eyes, keeping her chin resting on her forelegs. Hunk, on the other hand, hissed loudly at him. Dante was so close to hating that cat.

Feeling reassured, he sat cross-legged in front of her. The wolf continued to watch him, but she didn’t move or make a sound. It was strange not being growled at after four weeks of it. “Hey.” No more words came to him, most likely because there were other people in the room. He felt awkward and stupid. But they weren’t important, he told himself. All that was important right now was his mate.

He concentrated solely on her, blocking out everything else around him. “So you got out, huh.

I’m looking forward to hearing the story behind that. I know why you still haven’t retreated. I know you still feel like you have to protect yourself and Jaime. But you don’t. Not anymore. All the danger...it’s gone. It’s all over now. And I’m right here. I’ll keep both of you safe. Jaime knows that.

She trusts me, and now you need to, too. Because I miss her. Really, really miss her. Miss waking up with her and holding her and having her ignore every word I say. You have to trust that I’ll protect you both. You have to let her come back. I love the stubborn, willful, hotheaded bitch.” Dante might have felt embarrassed about the tears trailing down his cheeks if it hadn’t been for the fact that he wasn’t the only one sniffing. He was surprised when her wolf whined, even though he could sense a hint of sadness from her. He could also sense something else quite strongly. Jaime, he could sense Jaime. She was a contrary mixture of hopeful, sad, and content. The feeling was so fucking amazing that more tears filled his eyes.

What surprised him even more was that the black wolf lifted her head from her paws and placed it on his lap, peering up at him with eyes that were slightly guarded but no longer fearful and angry. In a cautious movement, he moved his hand to the spot between her ears and scratched lightly.

She didn’t growl or flinch or snap at him. Instead, she relaxed a little at his touch, half closing her eyes. For him, it was the equivalent of a miracle.

Dante stayed like that with her for hours, not daring to move for fear that the moment would be broken. When it came time to feed Kye and the baby had to be moved, Dante had expected the wolf to change back into her fearful, defensive state. Instead, she watched Taryn carefully as she scooped Kye from the crib and took him to the bed to feed him. The wolf remained at the foot of the crib with Dante, apparently content enough to simply be around Kye.

Thankfully, Taryn and Trey agreed that Dante could sleep in their room later that night. Not that he would have moved from that spot no matter what anybody said, but it was easier that they were okay with it. Being cautious, Trey insisted that Kye sleep in the huge bed between him and Taryn, but the wolf was happy to stay near the crib and Dante. So, leaning back against the chair near the crib,

Dante fell asleep with his mate's head still resting on his lap.

A huge impact to his chest and head woke him with a start later. But, strangely, there was no pain whatsoever. A millisecond later, he understood why, and he also realized that there was a naked woman on his lap wrapped around him. Instantly his arms were locked around her so damn tight he wouldn't be surprised if he broke a few ribs. He'd promised himself that the second he had Jaime back in his arms, he'd tell her how much he loved her, but he couldn't say a word because he found himself sobbing into the crook of her neck just as she was sobbing into his.

He didn't need to ask how the bond had clicked right into place. He could feel why. Could feel her wolf's trust, her clarity, her total acceptance of him, and her faith in his ability to protect her. He could also feel Jaime's heartbeat totally in sync with his own, feel her *inside* him, a part of him.

He didn't remember moving, but soon he was carrying her back to their room, wanting nothing more than to be alone with her. It wasn't until they were inside the room that he finally lifted his face from the crook of her neck, searching out that smoky-blue gaze he'd missed so fucking much. Then his mouth was on hers, taking it almost violently. He clutched her to him, running his hands over every part of her, unable to stop touching her.

Not a word was spoken as he pressed her against the wall, reached down to snap open his fly and free his cock, and then slammed into her. It didn't last long. It wasn't about pleasure. It was about a need to reconnect, to know it was real, to know that she was really with him and he had her back.

Maybe that was why when his climax hit he came harder than he ever had before in his life. He had his crazy, stubborn bitch back.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Opening her eyes the next morning, Jaime found Dante wide-awake and staring at her. The fatigue on his face told her something she already knew through their bond—he hadn't fallen back asleep after he brought her to their room. All night he'd watched her sleep, frightened that if he closed his eyes, she'd be back in her

wolf form before he could do anything to stop it. Softly, she ran the tips of her fingers across his jaw. “You needed the sleep as much as I did.” His voice came out gruff. “Don’t care. I wanted to look at you. I’ve missed looking at you.

And I’m not moving from right here unless I absolutely have to.” She gasped when he flexed his cock inside her. After taking her against the wall last night, he hadn’t pulled out of her. Instead, he’d lain down in bed, still joined with her, which had suited Jaime just fine. Then—absolutely exhausted—she’d gone straight to sleep like she’d been dealt a blow to the head.

“You don’t have to worry so much,” she told him. “My wolf...She’s not healed, but she thinks of you as safe, as ‘home.’ The bond...she’s letting it center her now. Before, she was content with it, but she wouldn’t relax into it. I think if anything can heal her, it’s the bond, *our* bond.” That very bond allowed Dante to know these things were true. After having her wolf distrust him for so long, it was the biggest relief to know that she now regarded him as safe. “It’s weird to think that just a little time around a baby could change everything.” Jaime shook her head. “No. It started when you rejected Bitch Face. We’ll be having a separate conversation about her in a minute, by the way. My wolf saw it as a demonstration of loyalty. When you slung Bitch Face out of the room, you also slung out Trey. I know it was because they were suggesting you put me out of my misery—I’m not feeling good about Trey right now. But what my wolf saw was you chasing away two people who she regarded as threats to her. The fact that you protected her went a *long* way. You might have realized that if you hadn’t walked out in a huff.” He ran a hand over her hair, wanting, no, needing to touch her. He still couldn’t quite believe she was back. “I just needed to have a minute somewhere alone to pretend that none of it was happening.”

She kissed him lightly. “I know. She was intending to follow your scent and find you, but then she scented Kye. It’s hard to explain...his scent was like a calling for my wolf. It’s comforting and inviting. When I first held Kye, my wolf felt drawn to him, but I hadn’t wondered about it. Anyway, when you protected her from Trey a second time while we were in his room, she again saw it as a demonstration of loyalty. She saw you as someone who would protect her. If it hadn’t have been for any of that, no amount of time around Kye would have made her very receptive to you right then.

Kye...He oozes safety. At that moment, she felt safe, and it meant that she wasn’t defensive or feeling too threatened by everyone else to be open to you.”

He joined his forehead to hers, tightening an arm around her. “I was so scared that you wouldn’t come back.”

“So was I. Thank you for not giving up on me or my wolf.”

“I would never have given up on either of you. Don’t be too pissed with Trey. What he suggested might have seemed cold, but Trey’s a guy who functions on logic. You’re one of his wolves, he felt some of your pain, and he could relate to what was happening to you. Logic told him that you were suffering and that it was fairer to you to put that to an end.” She huffed, though she did see his point. She never used to huff. Greta must be rubbing off on her—a scary thought. “Whatfreakingever.”

“You’ll be pleased to know that Laurie’s gone.”

Both Jaime and her wolf growled. “What? I can’t believe you let her leave! She was the one who—”

“Let your wolf out of the crate,” he finished, stroking her cheekbone with his thumb. “We know. Dominic smelled her scent on the key and then caught her trying to sneak out in the middle of the night with Leif, so she’d most likely heard you were alive and calming. There was no way she was going anywhere. Trick and Ryan found out from one of Glory’s relatives who we kept captive that Laurie had conspired with them. Apparently, when Taryn and Trey confronted her about everything, she eventually admitted it, hoping it would lighten her punishment. Did you know she was also the one who hired the lone wolf?”

Jaime nodded. “What punishment was decided?”

“I think it would have been death if it wasn’t for Leif. The poor kid’s already lost one parent.”

“Blane’s dead?”

“No. But he was involved in a bar fight with a human, so he was dealt with by human laws.

He’s in a maximum-security prison, where he’ll stay for a very long time. Laurie’s parents spoke with Trey over the phone. They asked if he’d accept her punishment as being isolated to a cabin on the border of their territory, where

she'll be away from her pack but Leif can still visit. It gives her the opportunity to try to earn a place in her pack in a few years, but she'll forever be confined to pack territory."

Jaime winced. Being confined was one of the worst punishments that any shifter could have.

"Who'll be caring for Leif?"

"His grandparents. They're good people, and he loves them. They'll give him the stability that his parents could never have given him. From what I understand, he more or less lived with them anyway. They've got no problem with me staying in contact with him." That was good news. "I really need to take a bath." When she felt his arm contract around her, she rolled her eyes. "I'll only be in the next room."

"I know. But I don't want to let you go yet."

"I know. But I desperately need one, and then I need food." He nipped at her mouth. "I'll ask Grace to bring some breakfast for us."

"Why? We can go to breakfast with everyone else."

"I don't want to share you with everyone yet."

That made her smile. "I have to at least see Gabe. He'll be a mess until he knows I'm okay." Dante couldn't deny that. He'd received several text messages from her brother in the past hour—among many more from others within the pack, all of which he'd ignored. He would bet that the only reason Gabe hadn't barged in was that he knew his sister needed rest. "Fine." Smiling, she kissed him. "Thank you."

"But can we do something about this first?" He flexed his cock inside her again, grinning wickedly at her loud moan.

"Oh yes, we certainly can." At that moment, there was a knock at the door. "Or not."

"Who is it?"

“I just need a quick word,” called Trey. “Of course if you’d have just answered your phone, I wouldn’t have had to come here.”

Frustrated in every sense of the word, Dante carefully pulled out of Jaime, dabbing a kiss on her mouth. Once he’d buttoned up his fly, he opened the door. “What?” he griped.

Trey arched a brow at his tone, but his expression was amused. “I didn’t want to interrupt,” he said quietly. “I just thought you and Jaime should know something.” The way Trey’s expression quickly became serious made Dante’s hackles rise. He stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him. “What is it?”

“Shaya’s leaving in an hour.”

“Leaving?”

“You must have seen this coming.”

Yes, he had, and so had Jaime. It didn’t mean this would be any easier for either of them, particularly Jaime, as she had grown quite close to Shaya.

“Taryn thought you and Jaime might want to stay in your room all day doing that reconnecting thing. I wanted to tell you about Shaya so that you at least left the room to say good-bye to her. Plus, I figured Jaime would do better with the news if she had prior warning.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you soon.” When he reentered his room, he saw that his mate was gone from the bed. He found her in the en-suite bathroom, lying in a bath that wasn’t even a quarter of the way full. Approaching with a smile on his face, he asked, “You couldn’t wait until there was some water in it?”

No, thought Jaime, she couldn’t, because then he would have seen the tattoo that she’d had done as a surprise. He’d been so distracted by their reunion that he hadn’t noticed yet. “Shh. I’m trying to relax.” When he squatted and dipped his hands into the shallow water, skimming them over her legs, she guessed, “You’re not going to leave the room, are you?” Nope, not at all. Maybe it was unreasonable, but Dante didn’t want to be away from her. He’d only just got her back, and the fear of losing her was still fresh in his system. Feeling her skin against his and smelling the unique smell of their combined scents were the only

things keeping his anxiety at bay. He couldn't let her out of his sight yet. Didn't want to.

"So what did Trey want?"

He breezed his thumb over that mouth he loved. "I'm sorry, baby, but Shaya's leaving today." It had only been a matter of time, hadn't it? "When?"

"In an hour."

"Okay, I'll make this bath a quick one. Could you go get me some clothes and lay them on the bed for me?"

"I'd rather wash you," he said with what he knew was a devilish smile.

"So would I, but then we wouldn't get out of here for a while."

"True." Still, even leaving her to go to another room was hard.

"I'll be fine."

"I believe you. I just don't want to be away from you. I want to be able to see you and touch you and smell you. I've missed you."

There was that talented mouth again. "And I've missed you." Jaime moaned when he mashed his lips with hers, knotting a wet hand in her hair. The kiss was slow, wet, and almost like liquid. "I promise I'll be quick."

Getting dressed in front of Dante without him noticing the tattoo had been a lot easier than Jaime had anticipated. He'd been so distracted staring at her breasts that her lower back hadn't held any appeal to him. Once in her black denim jeans and red cashmere sweater, Jaime dragged a brush through her wet sable hair and tied it up into a ponytail. Then, with his arm curled around her, they proceeded through the tunnels toward the kitchen.

Occasionally he'd kiss her hair or temple, driven by a need to keep touching her. Jaime could feel the strength of that need through their bond, and tears stung her eyes as she once again remembered him saying that he loved her. Sure, it could have been just one of those things people say in desperate moments, but Jaime would prefer to believe that it was true. In any case, she was resolved that she

would give him those words back later today. After the way he hadn't given up on her or her wolf, he had earned them. It was selfish to hold them back any longer.

Just as Dante had expected, no sooner had they entered the kitchen than Shaya was wrapped around his mate like a clinging vine. Dante released several impatient sighs as each of the pack—

other than Greta, who was holding Kye—hugged Jaime and told her how glad they were that she was fine.

Dominic's hug was extra tight. "We missed you around here." He studied her face and sighed, smiling. "You're so beautiful you've made me forget my line, but I was thinking—"

"Dominic," bit out Dante, shaking his head.

The pervert's shoulders slumped. He smiled again at Jaime. "I know, I know: lines are for people who are sad and pathetic. Let's just fuck." Dante whacked him over the head, but Dominic just laughed.

"Can't breathe," rasped Jaime as her brother practically folded his body around her.

"Sorry," said Gabe, but he squeezed her even tighter. "You have no idea how worried I was.

My wolf was going insane because your wolf wouldn't respond to him." He pulled back and scrutinized her face. "How's she doing?"

"She's not healed, but she's healing. She's fully accepted Dante and the bond, and it's anchoring her."

"Just like I said it would," Dante chipped in before he took Jaime's hand in his in a possessive hold and pulled her to him. "Okay, okay, you've all had your moments with her." As he'd told her, he didn't want to have to share her yet.

Jaime rolled her eyes affectionately at her mate's behavior and allowed him to lead her to the table. To her delight, Shaya sat at her other side. "I wish you didn't have to go." The words were so heavy with emotion that they came out in

a whisper.

Shaya smiled; it was sad, but there was no hint that she was at all torn about her decision. “I needed to stay long enough to know you were okay. But now...”

“Where are you going to go?”

“Don’t worry about me. I know exactly where I’m going, and I’ll be fine.”

“You have to keep in touch.”

“I will. You guys definitely have to come visit me—slyly if it turns out that Nick doesn’t react too well to not knowing where I am anymore. If he does explode over this, don’t let him intimidate anyone into telling him where I am. He can’t know. He can’t find out, Jaime.” Jaime gripped her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “I promise you, he won’t. I understand why you feel you need to go. But if something happens, Shaya, if you need any kind of help, you call me. Okay?”

“I’ve already made her promise to come to us if she needs anything,” said Taryn, giving Shaya a pointed look that said she was holding her to that promise.

Shaya raised her hands in surrender. “I will, I swear.” Turning back to Jaime, she squeezed her shoulder. “I’m so glad you’re okay. I can’t believe baby Kye’s a healer.” Greta, who had obviously been eavesdropping, huffed. Her scowl was solely for Jaime. “If you think you’re going to use my great-grandson as some sort of safety blanket, you’re wrong.”

“Greta, could you not go hatch somewhere else?” Jaime gestured to her plate. “I’m trying to eat here.”

“I see you’ve still got that bad attitude.”

“It’s obviously not that bad or you’d be holding in all that hot air. I’ll work on it.” Although Shaya’s leaving hung over everybody’s head, breakfast was an unusually cheery event. That cheeriness swiftly disappeared when everyone was gathered in the parking lot, saying their good-byes to the bubbly redhead. Taryn said her good-bye last, and honestly it was like watching the end of *E.T.* —there was no parting the two friends as they stood hugging one another.

“I’m really going to miss that girl,” Jaime said to Dante as they watched Shaya drive off.

“Nick will be utterly pissed, won’t he?”

Pulling her even closer to him with the arm that he had locked around her, Dante nodded. “He won’t let it go when he finds out she’s gone. He’ll track her down as best he can. Luckily, she has Ryan, Trick, and Marcus working on erasing her trail.”

Setting aside her concerns for Shaya, Jaime gave her mate a mischievous smile. “Think *you* can track *me*?” She was gone before he could respond.

Figuring it was only fair, Dante gave his mate enough time to get into the forest before racing after her. Excitement, anticipation, and amusement swirled around inside him. Only yesterday he had been nearing a state of depression, tired and exasperated and faced with the frightening prospect that he might never get to hold his mate again. Now here she was playing with him, using every single trick and technique he taught her to evade capture. He doubted that there was anyone who appreciated what he had more than Dante did at that moment. Doubted that—

Motherfucker. His peripheral vision had warned him of the movement coming from his right-hand side, but it hadn’t warned him fast enough. He was now flat on his back with a hot female straddling him. Not that he was at all complaining. He slid his hands up her thighs to shape her waist.

“I taught you too well.”

Smiling smugly, Jaime bunched up his T-shirt in her hands. “I want this off.” He arched a brow. “Oh, you do?”

“Oh, I do.”

He had no problem with that. Springing upward so that he was sitting upright, Dante allowed her to slide the T-shirt over his head. Then his mouth was on hers, urging her into him, as he slid a hand into her hair and gently tugged off the tie holding it up. Long sable hair that smelled of vanilla tumbled down, sweeping over both their shoulders and down her back. He fisted his hands in it—

something he'd missed over the past month. He crushed her body to him, growling at the feel of her pebbled nipples stabbing into his chest through her sweater. He loved the way she fit him just right. It drove home that this female had been made especially for him, was all his in every way.

“Lie back.”

He gave her order a mock frown. “You didn't say please, baby.”

“Why would I, Popeye?” When she pressed a hand against his chest, he allowed her to push him to his back. The man really did have an amazing body. A body that she'd missed and intended to bite all over. Other than her claiming mark, all her previous brands had healed. That would never do.

Leaning over him, Jaime brushed her nose under the line of his jaw. His scent—a mix of his and hers—swam into her system, tickling her senses, comforting her and arousing her. When she bit down on his neck, he growled, but it wasn't a sound of complaint. He tangled a hand in her hair and pressed her closer to him. Taking the hint, she bit harder and sucked. He growled his encouragement.

She kissed, licked, and bit her way along and down his chest, running her tongue between the grooves of his abs and scoring her nails down his sides. With her touch, teeth, and claws, she marked her mate over and over.

When she came to the waistband of his jeans, Jaime tugged them open and smiled at the long, hard cock that sprang out. How could she not? Holding Dante's heated gaze, she licked him from base to tip, sweeping up the bead of precome there. She bit his inner thigh hard, replacing a mark that had once been there, and smiled at the way his cock twitched. Then she took him into her mouth.

“Christ,” rasped Dante, knotting both hands in her hair. Just the sight of his mate with his cock in her mouth was enough to make him want to come. He didn't though. He planned to come inside her, to fill her up with his cock and come, marking and claiming her all over again.

“Suck me deep, Jaime.” He growled when she swallowed him whole. “Fuck, baby, I love it when you do that.” Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked hard, rubbing her tongue along the underside each time. The feel of her hair over his thighs only added to the sensations. But *feeling* that she was enjoying doing this

for him, enjoying tasting him and pleasuring him...not much could beat that. He tugged on her hair to lift her head. "I want to come inside you." Jaime gave him one last lick before standing. As Dante, who was still lying down, tugged off her boots, she unsnapped the fly of her jeans and shoved them and her panties down to her ankles.

Dante helped her step out of them and threw them aside as she removed her sweater and bra and tossed them to join her other clothes. Jaime quickly got to her knees above his cock, letting the head dance between her folds. Suddenly Dante was again sitting upright, biting hard into her shoulder as he sank two fingers inside her.

"You're already wet for me." He curled his tongue around her nipple, suckling and nibbling.

Slowly he fucked her with his fingers as he scattered kisses and bites from breast to breast. When she was moaning and squirming restlessly on his hand, he replaced his fingers with the head of his cock.

"I want inside that pussy, Jaime." With those words, he pulled her down forcefully on him, making sure she took every last inch.

Jaime cried out and arched her back at the sudden sensation of being stuffed and stretched.

That first deep penetration always hurt, but it hurt in the best way. She'd missed it.

Dante lay back again, loving the picture she made, naked on his dick with her lips parted, her hair tousled, and her eyes drowsy and heavy-lidded. "Fuck yourself on me, Jaime." That was fine with her. Gazes locked, bodies joined, Jaime repeatedly slammed herself down on him just as he raised his hips to thrust upward. His fingers dug into her hips, claws drawing blood and marking. She dug her own claws into his shoulders as she rode him hard, knowing he loved it.

When he suddenly tightened his hold on her and held her still on his cock, she growled in complaint.

"Tell me that's my pussy."

She might have snorted at the possessive demand if she couldn't sense the fear, anxiety, and insecurities still lurking in his mind. He needed to feel that she was irrevocably his, that she was going absolutely nowhere, and that she accepted every part of him—even the controlling and possessive streaks. “It’s yours.”

“Good girl.” He bucked his hips, ramming his cock into her once. “Tell me that you’re not going to leave me again.”

“I won’t leave.”

Again he rammed into her rewardingly. “Have you missed this?” She nodded, but when he went to thrust up into her again, she shook her head. “Wait, let me up.”

His hands flexed possessively on her hips. “No.”

“Let me up. I have a surprise for you.”

Intrigued, he felt his lips curve into a smile. “A surprise, huh? Okay, go get it.” He expected her to dash to where her clothes lay and take something out of one of her pockets. Instead, she simply got to her feet and turned. And that was when he saw it. Stunned and amazed, he drew in a sharp breath. Just above the small of her back was a miniature but detailed phoenix with its wings outstretched. Across the wings and body in fancy, bold, italic ink was his name.

“It was supposed to be a surprise for the night of our mating ceremony, but we kind of missed that. I hope you like it, Popeye, because that’s the closest you’ll ever get to having your name tattooed on my—” She broke off as she felt a tongue flutter along the design.

Drawn to the tattoo like it was a magnet, Dante repeatedly danced his tongue over it. He couldn't believe she'd done this for him. It was so fucking hot seeing his name right there. Yeah, okay, it meant he was probably unhealthily possessive to be so turned on by the sight of his name on his mate's skin like a brand, but so what? She accepted him as he was, cared for him as he was, and that was all that mattered to Dante. “I absolutely love this, baby.” Jaime cried out as the two strong hands that were clamped on her hips tugged her to her knees and then pulled her roughly down onto a long, thick, rock-hard cock. Just like that, she was stuffed full again. When she tried to ride him, he locked his teeth on her shoulder in sexual warning.

“No, baby, I’m in control here.” He raked his teeth over her shoulder in a dominant move that dared her to rebel. Of course his Jaime rebelled. She bucked against the move, growling. He dug his teeth harder into her skin and reached around, cupping her breasts roughly and pinching her nipples.

Again she tried to dislodge his teeth, and he sensed that it was her wolf as much as her who was rebelling now. Whereas once her wolf might have done it out of anxiety, she did it now only to challenge him playfully. The thought of that made him smile around her shoulder. He knew just how to deal with her wolf.

Jaime growled as Dante’s hand snaked around her throat and squeezed. “You sack of shit.” She gasped as he bit her ear.

“You love it when I hold you like this. I know you do, because your pussy ripples around my cock every time I do it.” With one hand collaring her and the other still locked on her hip, he moved her body up on his cock and then slammed her down, groaning. “Like that? Want me to do it again?”

“Yes,” she bit out, pissed that he was right and she perversely liked the dominant move. Again and again he impaled her on him until she felt her climax approaching. Then he stopped.

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” she growled.

“How bad do you want it?”

Not bad enough that she was going to beg again, if that was where this was heading. Okay, in truth, she would beg if she had to, but a female had her pride. As she knew from experience, there were effective ways to distract Dante. She made a show of sniffing the air and asked in an animated voice, “What’s that smell? God, was that you? Well, it wasn’t me.” Knowing what she was doing, Dante flexed his hand around her throat. “Jaime.”

“Did I remember to tell you that I got worms from the cat? Poor Hunk.”

“Jaime.”

“This would be more fun with a few more people, wouldn’t it?” That got a

reaction from him, joke or not. Growling, he slammed her down on him and moved the hand on her throat to her hair. He snatched her head back so that he could see her face. “No one touches you except me, Jaime. *No one.*” Over and over he impaled her on him, driving his point home. He continuously flicked his gaze from the sight of his name branded on her flesh to her beautiful face to watch the range of expressions that flashed across it. She moaned, groaned, whimpered, and grunted, clawing his legs. He knew exactly what she liked, knew how fast and hard and deep she liked it. “You’re mine and only mine.”

“And you’re mine, you possessive, overprotective, controlling bastard.” He smiled. “All yours, baby.”

As she felt her orgasm ready to wash over her, Jaime moaned, “Dante, I love you.”

“Fuck.” Those words sent white-hot pleasure scorching through his body and brought his climax crashing into him. “Come, baby.” He locked his teeth onto her shoulder again and thrust his hips, jamming his cock up into her. Her pussy tightened and spasmed around him as she screamed his name.

When he could finally move again, he combed his fingers through her matted hair. “I love you too, baby.”

She smiled. “Good, Popeye. I’d hate to have to get that tattoo lasered off. It hurt enough getting it done.”

He locked both arms around her. “The tattoo stays, it’s hot. Want me to get your name inked on me?”

She opened her mouth to say no, but she’d be lying if she said her name on his skin didn’t hold some appeal. God, she was getting as bad as he was.

“How about on my arm?”

“No. That’s boring.”

“How about over my heart then?”

“No. That’s corny.”

He frowned. “Is not.”

“Is too.”

Stubborn bitch. “We’ll discuss it later.”

Jaime turned her head as she cautiously suggested, “How about we go for a run in our wolf forms?” As she’d expected, Dante froze and tightened his hold on her.

“Jaime, I don’t think your wolf is ready for that yet.” He wasn’t ready for that yet either.

“There’s only the two of us. She feels safe with you. You said that yourself.” His voice came out small. “What if she doesn’t let you come back again?”

“Don’t think I don’t know that the fear of that taunts you as much as it taunts me. I don’t want it hanging over us like a cloud. We won’t know until we try.”

Although he knew that she was right, he was too damn scared to even seriously consider it.

“Jaime, I—”

“I truly think she’ll let me come back. The fear is there that I’m wrong, but I don’t think I am. I wouldn’t suggest it otherwise.” Plus, it was best to find out now.

It took an entire hour to coax Dante into trying it. Jaime was later glad that she had, because it turned out that she had been right. As her wolf and Dante’s wolf went on their own private run, they played, tussled, raced, and chased each other before finally shifting back into their human forms.

Although her wolf had enjoyed the freedom and time with her mate, she didn’t fight when Jaime wanted to resurface because she felt safe. She was confident that her mate could protect her if necessary and that he would fight at her side.

Jaime suspected that her wolf might still be slightly wary around other wolves if she was without her mate, but not to the extent that she would see them as threats and attempt to attack. Jaime could—for the first time in a long time—

coexist peacefully with her.

“If only I could coexist as peacefully with you as I do with my wolf,” Jaime said as they walked back to pack territory hand in hand.

Dante frowned at her. “We coexist peacefully...when you’re not making a mess of our room and ignoring what I say.”

“Maybe you could stop being a neat freak and ease off with barking orders at me.”

“I resent the neat-freak statement. And I do *not* bark.” She snickered. “Sure you don’t, Popeye.”

“And it wouldn’t kill you to use the shoe rack. I mean, it’s right by the door.”

“Stop putting my CDs in chronological order, and I’ll work on the shoe rack thing.” A short pause. “How about alphabetical order?”

“How about you go to therapy?”

A frustrated growl escaped him. “How about I just shove my cock in your mouth? That should shut you up. Hey!” he whined when she drummed her fingers against his temple. “What’re you doing?”

She shrugged. “I just felt like tapping some ass.”

His mouth dropped open. Her smirk had him growling again. “Bitch.”

“Jerk.”

“Love you, baby.”

“Love you, Popeye.”

THE END



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to my husband for his support and help and, of course, for accepting that I hear voices in my head. I'd also like to thank my two amazing children. Demanding though they are, they're also my biggest inspiration.

A big thanks to everyone at Montlake Romance, but especially to my editor, Eleni Caminis, and to Melogy Guy, and Sara Brady—all of whom are fantastic at their jobs.

Last but not least, I have to say a massive thank you to all those who have taken the time to read my book. I really hope you enjoyed it!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo by Steven Wright, 2012

Author Suzanne Wright, a native of England, can't remember a time when she wasn't creating characters and telling their tales. Even as a child, she loved writing poems, plays, and stories; as an adult, Wright has published three novels, *Here Be Sexist Vampires*, *From Rags*, and *Feral Sins*, the first book in the Phoenix Pack series. Wright, who lives in Liverpool with her husband and two children, freely admits that she hates housecleaning and can't cook but that she always shares chocolate.

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