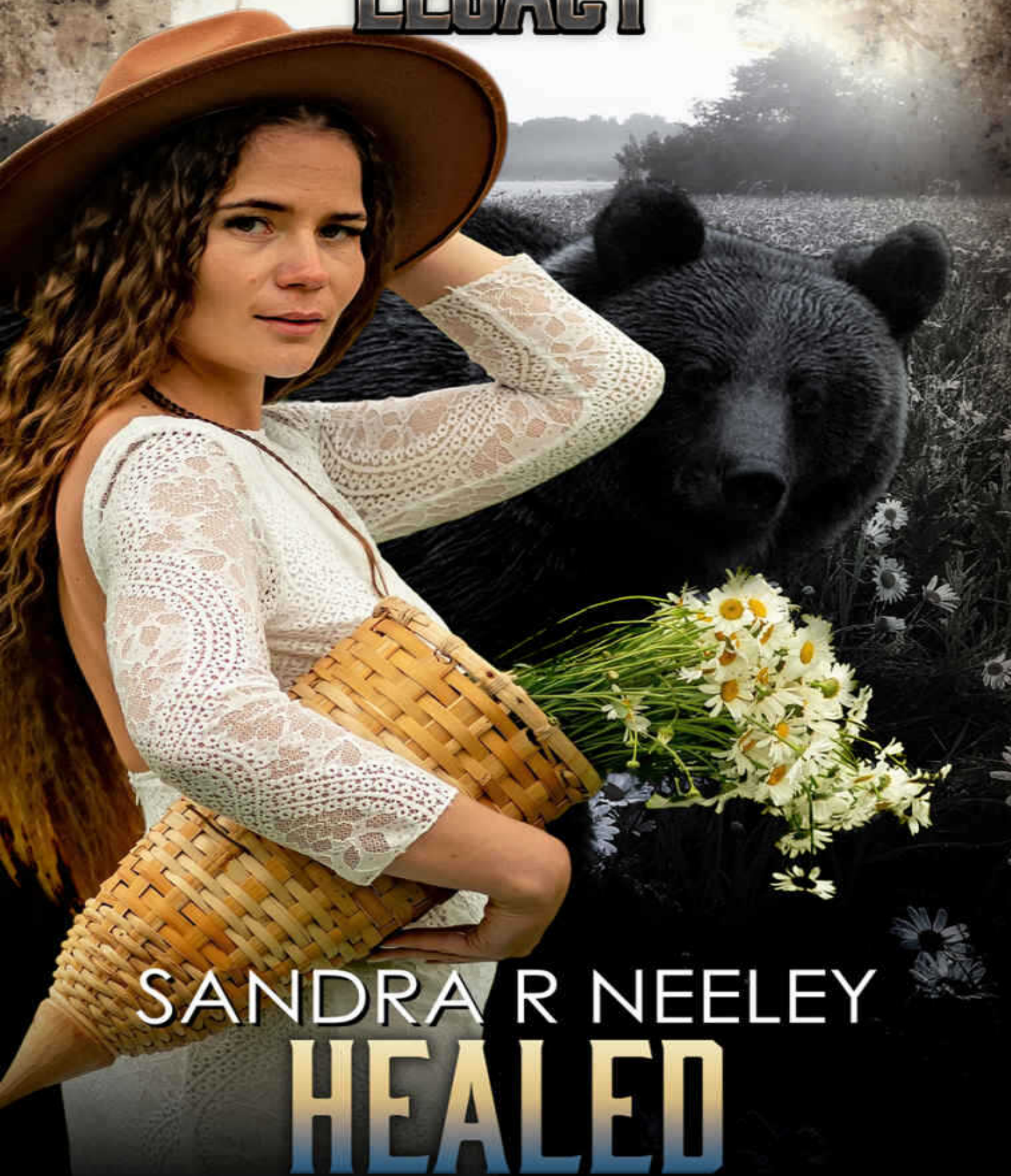


AVALEIGH'S BOYS
LEGACY



SANDRA R NEELEY
HEALED

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Cover Credit

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darkandstormyknight.com

Thank you for creating such wonderful covers from the bits and pieces
that clutter my mind.

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Independently Published
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Healed

A Legacy Novel

by Sandra R Neeley

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For Christopher — Having the courage to heal is the first step of the best things happening when you least expect it.

About This Book

While many of the Legacy Clan of shifters have found their happily-ever-after, there are a few who struggle to see beyond their own traumas long enough to even consider another, much less themselves.

There's Daisy, who once brought light to everyone who knew her, but now does all she can to remain unnoticed. A man who should have guided her and nurtured her developing mind and talent as a naive young woman, manipulated her into a situation that has just about stolen every bit of pride she ever had. Her humiliation was so great that she ran home to lick her wounds, and hasn't had the courage to move beyond that. She's built thick walls to keep everyone out. But unbeknownst to her, a new man has taken notice. He wants nothing more than for her to see him, as he sees her. He's offering everything she's ever dreamed of. But she'll drive him away, as she does everyone else. Or will she?

Then there's Remi, always steady, dependable, and kind, until a broken heart sends him spiraling into self-doubt he's kept buried since he was a boy. All his life he's kept the fears of his lack of self-worth shoved down deep inside. But losing the girl he loves, and his destined mate both within the same week has those doubts raging to the forefront. His life is burning down around him, and he's so lost within his own self-pity that he can't find the strength to care. Hopefully, someone — anyone — will find a way to make him see all that he truly is, and realize that he's only hurting himself. But who? A mate, maybe?

And Angelle, who has lived her entire life quietly on the perimeter of everyone else's lives — intentionally. She prefers being alone — camping, fishing, sketching, nature. People make her nervous. And too many people mean a lot of activity. When submerged in that atmosphere, she becomes an overstimulated mess. She once dreamed of children of her own, but she'd need a mate for that to happen. Convinced that no male is going to understand her needs, she's resigned herself to being alone for the rest of her life. And that's okay with her, at least her life will be peaceful. The Fates just didn't create her with a mate in mind. Or did they?

For these few individuals, the pain of loneliness seems a likely future. But fate has other plans for them. All they need is a little bit of healing, each in their own unique way. And while that healing is taking place, life goes on around them, bringing the Legacy Clan together as a whole, for what may be the last time.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, plots and circumstances, situations, and everything it entails are products of the author's imagination, except for the actual places and organizations mentioned. All else is human-dreamed, human-imagined, and human-created.

Warning: This book is intended for mature readers. This book contains situations, sexual and otherwise, as well as violence both real and implied that may be disturbing for some readers. If you are offended by these subjects, please do not buy this book.

A Note to the Reader...

This story is not only the continuation of the stories of the kids of Avaleigh's Boys, it is a crossover between the worlds of Avaleigh's Boys and Whispers From the Bayou. It was not an intentional decision, it just kind of happened as I started writing. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I do. For those who are a little foggy on the characters of both, I've included a Character Listing and their connections.

Characters and Connections

These characters are grouped and identified with their siblings first, then their parents, as this book is a look into their lives, not their parents.

From the Avaleigh's Boys' World

(Marchande' Siblings (Bane is their father, and is also Bam's brother))
Brandt Marchande', 23, Black Bear Shifter, and Alpha of the Legacy Clan.

Daisy Marchande', 26, Black Bear Shifter, she's a Healer.

Their parents are Bane(Black/Grizzly Bear Shifter) and Janie(Human) Marchande' from Avaleigh's Boys series.

(Sanders Siblings)

Barron Sanders, 24, Grizzly Bear Shifter with a few extra abilities courtesy of his mother.

Tessa Sanders, 13, Ice Dragon Shifter.

Their parents are Kaid(Grizzly Bear Shifter) and Delilah(Ice Dragon Shifter) Sanders from Avaleigh's Boys series.

(GreyStorm Siblings)

Remi (Remington) GreyStorm 28, Fire Dragon Shifter.

Angelle GreyStorm, 20, Human.

Both Remi and Angelle are adopted.

Their parents are Daniel and Avaleigh GreyStorm from Avaleigh's Boys series.

(McCullen Siblings)

Hellen McCullen, 24 (Havoc's twin), Wolf Shifter, with a bit more Lion blood in her than the rest of her siblings.

Havoc McCullen, 24 (Hellen's twin), Wolf Shifter, and Harley McCullen, 6, Wolf Shifter, and Havoc's daughter.

Ronan McCullen, 19, Wolf Shifter.

Hellen, Havoc, and Ronan's parents are Maverik(Wolf Shifter) and Valerie(Lion Shifter, and Vince's sister) McCullen, from Avaleigh's Boys

series.

Maverik has two other children from a previous relationship who are mentioned. Maia, from Riley's Pride, and her brother Matty. He's shown in several of the Riley's Pride and Avaleigh's Boys stories.

(Marchande' Siblings (Bam is their father, and is also Bane's brother))

Analise Marchande', 23, Fox Shifter.

Emmalyn Marchande', 21, Bear Shifter.

Their parents are Bam (Black/Grizzly Bear Shifter, and Bane's brother) and Everly (Fox Shifter) Marchande'.

(Goldstein Family)

Jobe, 40, Human, and his wife, Maggie Johnson-Goldstein.

Jenn (Human) Johnson-Goldstein, 12, Daughter.

Jobie (Human) Johnson-Goldstein, 11, Son.

Jobe's adoptive parents are Goldy (Lion Shifter) and Sadie (Human) Goldstein.

(Nobles Siblings)

Christian Nobles, 23, Lion Shifter.

Jonah Nobles, 17, Lion Shifter.

Raeann Nobles, 15, Lion Shifter.

Their parents are Vince (Lion Shifter, and Valerie's brother) and Natalie (Human) Nobles from Avaleigh's Boys series.

(Other)

Marie-Claire, 24, (Human), the mother of Havoc's daughter.

From the Whispers From the Bayou World

Tempest, carries a Dragon inside, but also has the magics of the original elementals through her mother.

Her parents are Lily (Ancient Elemental) and Carrik (Dragon) from Whispers From the Bayou series.

Lily, possesses the magics of the elementals, and is the strongest of them all.

She is Tempest's mother, and Carrik's wife.

Her parents are Carnage (Gargoyle) and Carolena (Human), from Whispers From the Bayou series.

Carrik, (Dragon shifter).

He is one of the original ancient Dragons.

He is Tempest's father, and Lily's mate, from Whispers From the Bayou series.

Carnage, (Gargoyle).

He has a severe speech impediment.

He is Lily's and Boon's father, and Tempest's grandfather.

He is Carolena's mate, from Whispers From the Bayou series.

Carolena, (Human).

She is Lily's and Boon's mother, and Tempest's grandmother.

She is Carnage's mate, from Whispers From the Bayou series.

Boon, Gargoyle.

He is Lily's brother and Tempest's uncle.

He inherited the appearance of the Gargoyles, yet has slightly more human features.

His parents are Carnage and Carolena.

Gargoyles age much more slowly than most other species, and when mated, their mates' life spans become tied to theirs.

Original to the Legacy World

Elijah Brandt Marchande', definitely not human.

Son of Brandt and Tempest Marchande'

Bailey, Human, she owns the coffee shop and she's Tempest's new best friend.

Kiernan, Fox shifter, adopted by the Legacy shifter clan.

Mate to Abby, father to KJ and a new baby girl, brother to Shaun.

Abby, Fox shifter, adopted by the Legacy shifter clan.

Mate to Kiernan, mother to KJ and a new baby girl, sister to Addie.

KJ, Fox shifter, adopted by the Legacy shifter clan
His parents are Abby and Kiernan.

Shaun, Fox shifter, adopted by the Legacy shifter clan.
Brother to Kiernan, mate to Bailey.

Addie, Fox shifter, adopted by the Legacy shifter clan.
Sister to Abby, mate to Christian Nobles.

Lucien, Gator shifter, mate to Hellen McCullen.

Charlie (Charles) Blessey, human, mate to Daisy Marchande'.
Carson Blessey, human, about six or seven years old, Charlie's son.

Olivia, Human, new love interest of Remi GreyStorm.

Giada Capelli, Human, mother to two boys.
Lives at, and now manages the homeless shelter for the shifter clan.

From Riley's Pride World

Maia Colter, Wolf shifter, Riley's mate, Maverik's adult daughter,
Havoc, Hellen, and Ronan's older sister, and Reina of Riley's Pride.

Riley Colter, Panther shifter, Maia's mate, Alpha of Riley's Pride.

Cristie Colter, 26, Panther shifter, Riley's daughter, Maia's step-daughter, Sebastian's sister, member of Riley's Pride.

Sebastian Colter, 20, Wolf shifter, Maia and Riley's son, Cristie's brother, member of Riley's Pride.

Lazarus, Panther shifter, Alex's mate, member of Riley's Pride.

Alex, Human, Lazarus' mate, member of Riley's Pride.

Amanda, 14, Panther shifter, Lazarus and Alex's daughter, member of Riley's Pride.

Roman Lyakhov, Silverback Gorilla shifter, Talie's mate, member of Riley's Pride.

Talie Lyakhov, Human, Roman's mate, member of Riley's Pride.

Cruz Lyakhov, 18, Gorilla shifter, Roman and Talie's son, member of Riley's Pride.

Darcie Lyakhov, 28, Human, Talie's daughter, member of Riley's Pride.

Chapter 1

“Open the damn door!” Brandt yelled. Clenching his jaws in irritation a small grumble left him as he started around the house, looking for a way in.

“Hey,” Abby said, from her front porch as he stepped off Remi’s porch and into the grass.

Brandt glanced her way. “Hey, Abby.”

“Can I help you with something?” Abby asked.

“Only if you can get Remi to get his ass up and to go to work,” Brandt snidely answered.

Abby smiled. “Afraid that’s not quite something I have any control over.”

“Yeah, me either. And I’m supposed to be all about the control.”

“If it’s any help, he was up just a few hours ago.”

“It’s 10:00 A. M.! He should still be up.”

Abby kind of shrugged a shoulder and looked away as she pressed her lips together.

Brandt stopped splitting his attention between Remi’s house and Abby and concentrated on her. Everything about her indicated she knew something he didn’t. “What aren’t you telling me?”

She seemed hesitant to tell him whatever it was she knew, but sure enough to not go back inside.

“There’s obviously something on your mind, Abby,” Brandt said, walking slowly toward her.

“I really don’t know anything exactly,” she said, her gaze bouncing back to Remi’s house before landing once again on Brandt.

“Okay. What is it exactly that you don’t know?”

“It’s not my place to speak about something I don’t know for sure,” Abby said.

“But you know enough to feel bothered about it.”

Abby sighed. “He lives right here, Brandt.”

“Doesn’t matter. Nothing’s going to fall back on you.”

“I don’t know for sure. It’s just a feeling.”

“People have been saved on just a feeling,” Brandt said.

She looked at Remi's house again, then lowered her gaze to the ground. "I worry about him. He's not himself."

"No, he's not. I can't even make him get up and come to work before noon anymore. I thought maybe he was working on the accounting side of things before coming in, but when Angelle checked for me, she said it looks like he hasn't signed in in weeks."

Abby nodded. "I think maybe he's been keeping late nights. He had a few different friends over all night, but the last couple of weeks, it's the same friend. Lots of loud music, lots of drinking, all kinds of things happening right up until dawn."

"If he's keeping the kids up, tell him to turn it down!" Brandt said.

"I have, and he does. I don't think his new friend likes it very much, because it's not very long before the music is up loud again."

"Maybe he just forgets."

Abby shook her head. "No, from the looks I get from her when I knock on the door. And then later when I see her out and about while me and the kids are walking or playing outside, I'm pretty sure it's her, not him."

"So, you're getting shit in your own home, in your own yard, from somebody that has no right to be here, and he's doing nothing about it."

"To be fair, I don't think he's even aware. He's not exactly clear minded. And he's not really with her when she's stumbling out of the house to go wherever she goes."

"Have you tried to talk to him without her around?"

"No. I'm not going to cause any trouble. We've got it better here than we've ever had it. A little loud music can be ignored while it lasts."

"No, it can't. Not all night long. And certainly not outsiders making my people uncomfortable in their own homes." He turned back to Remi's house and strode across the yard to the front door again. He pounded on the door almost hard enough to splinter it. "Remi! Get the fuck up now or I'll take this damn door down!"

Brandt waited barely a full minute before he attacked the door, punching and kicking at it.

Suddenly the door was opened and a disheveled female stood there, scowling at Brandt. "What is your problem?" she demanded. "We're sleeping in here!"

“Get out,” Brandt demanded, pointing at what he assumed was her car in the driveway.

Immediate outrage colored her face. “This is not your house! You can’t tell me what to do.” She slammed the door and started back toward the bedroom.

The door splintered, and pieces of it just barely held on by its hinges, as Brandt stepped into Remi’s house. “Get in your fucking car and get the fuck off my property, before I bury you on it and make you a permanent part of the fucking scenery!”

“This is Remi’s house!” she shrieked at Brandt.

“Which is on my property. Get the fuck out of here now,” he snarled, advancing on her, just barely holding onto his human form.

“What the hell is going on?” Remi asked groggily as he stumbled into the living room. “What happened to my door?” he asked, as he squinted from the sunshine coming through the place the door used to be.

“Get off my fucking property,” Brandt ordered, his voice deep, growly, and deadly as he stood so close to the female that she surely felt the threat rolling off him.

“Hey! What’s the problem, Brandt?” Remi asked, as he moved to stand between Brandt and the focus of his anger. “She’s a friend of mine. Don’t treat her like that.”

“She’s disrespecting me. She’s disrespecting your neighbors, and she’s a fucking bitch. She’s goes. Now, or I’ll remove her myself.”

“Livi, maybe it’s best if you go for now. I’ll call you later after I straighten all this out,” Remi said, his gaze locked angrily on Brandt the whole time he was talking to Olivia.

“I’m not leaving so he can badmouth me while I’m not here to defend myself!” she snapped, glaring at Brandt. “You think you can come in here and break down a door and make me run? I don’t think so! I have 911 on speed dial and I’ll file charges on your ass so fast your head will spin.”

Brandt smiled coldly as he shoved Remi out of the way and started for Olivia.

“No! No, Brandt! You’re not hurting her!” Remi yelled, forcing his way between them again.

“You get her out of here, or I’m going to handle it,” Brandt said.

“And, please. Please ignore me so I get to handle it.”

“Olivia!” Remi yelled.

She jumped in response to Remi shouting her name, and turned her angry gaze on him. “Do not yell at me! You will respect me! I won’t take disrespect from anybody!”

“You need to go home. I’ll call you later.”

“You said I should consider your house home! Now he’s saying this is his property. You need to get things straight because I don’t play games like this! Either I belong here or I don’t!”

“Go home. Leave! I’ll explain everything later.”

“Leave? Okay, I’ll leave. But don’t expect me to come back here later!”

“Oh, we don’t. Because if you come back here, he’s out, too. Neither of you will be allowed back!”

“Oh, really? Well, we’ll just sue you for all you’ve got!” Olivia threatened, yelling at Brandt over Remi’s shoulder.

Remi managed to force her out of the house and get her in her car. He shoved his hand in his pocket and withdrew a handful of cash, handing it to her through the open window before he spoke to her and nodded at whatever she was telling him. He stood in the driveway and watched her as she rounded the corner at the end of the street and waved at her as she finally drove out of sight, then he walked back toward Brandt, locking eyes with him angrily as he approached what used to be his front door. He slapped at the broken, splintered traces of wood hanging onto the hinges. “Really, Brandt? What the hell were you thinking? You destroyed my door!”

“Then answer the fucking door! What the hell is wrong with you?” Brandt demanded.

“Nothing! There’s not a damn thing wrong with me.”

“It’s 10:30 in the fucking morning, Remi! You haven’t been to work before noon in the last three weeks, on the days you happen to show up at all!”

“I already told you I’ve been doing accounting from home!” Remi said, angrily as he snatched up pieces of his door and tossed them through the opening it used to seal.

“No, Remi. You haven’t. You haven’t logged into the fucking program in at least that long.”

“Bullshit!” Remi yelled.

“I already had Angelle pull up the log in history. The only person working in the books is her.”

“You know what? Leave my sister out of this. This is nobody’s business but mine. As a matter of fact, you stay out of my fucking business, too!”

Brandt’s chest rumbled as he stalked over to Remi. They were very close in height, with Remi being slightly taller, but there was no question who the Alpha was. Brandt pressed his body against Remi’s bumping into him, daring him to stand his ground as he let go of the hold he kept on his Alpha powers.

Remi winced as a high pitched noise began to ring in his ears. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to resist the urge to curl in on himself.

“You will abide by my rules, or you will get the fuck off this property. The rules are anyone you bring onto this land will respect all of your clan members. They insult or treat anyone with disrespect, they don’t get to fucking come back, if I don’t decide to feed them to our resident alligator. You get me?” Brandt demanded.

“You can’t...”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want to do. You might have paid to have your house built here, but I own this fucking land. Not only that but it is my place as Alpha to keep them all safe, keep them all happy, and keep them all thriving. You having fucking drug parties over here all goddamn night, keeping up the families next door who not only have little kids, they have to get up the next morning and go to work — where you’re supposed to fucking be.”

“I turned the music down!” Remi yelled defensively.

“Yes, while your little fuck toy is shooting dirty looks at whoever dared to ask you to turn it down. That shit ain’t right, Remi!”

“She didn’t do that! She’s a nice girl.”

“To who? She’s a selfish, confrontational bitch, who will drop your ass the moment you stop feeding her whatever it is she’s in need of.”

“You will not talk about her like that! She’s good for me! So good for me! She loves me when...”

“She’ll milk you dry, Remi. Why are you falling for her shit? Why are you looking the other way when she’s treating your people like shit? Why are you allowing it? If your idea of happy is to put distance between you and everyone you’re close to, you’re doing a hell of a job.”

Remi tossed the last piece of wood out onto the front lawn and stood by the door frame the door used to be in. "Can you just leave?"

"No. I came here to find out what the hell is going on with you. You think I haven't heard about you running around town with a different girl every night? I've heard. And I looked the other way until you hooked up with this one."

"She cares about me. You just don't know her!" Remi insisted.

"Remi, she's not even met us and she's causing trouble. She's threatened me and shot dirty looks at your neighbor and her little babies. What the fuck kind of woman tries to intimidate a woman and her little kids?"

"She was just tired. We stayed up all night."

Brandt nodded. "What night was that?"

Remi grinned, like he thought it was funny. "All of them?" he asked with a laugh.

"That's not funny. It's not cute and it's not even slightly amusing. What the fuck are you doing to your life?"

"What life?" Remi bellowed at Brandt. "You want to stand there and lecture me about my life? I have no fucking life! None! I lost the woman I love because fate decided to give me a different mate! And now she's dating my fucking neighbor! And the mate... the mate won't even fucking talk to me, because I still love my girlfriend! I'm alone, Brandt! I'm fucking alone, and I'm so, so, so fucking miserable that I can barely breathe! Do you understand that everybody else gets to go home to their happy little houses with their happy, perfectly loving fucking mates and I come home to this miserable fucking place with nobody! Nobody, Brandt! And when I do I can't even fucking get drunk for longer than an hour before I'm sober again! What kind of fucking relief is that? None! Then I get to wake up bright and early the next morning and go to work where I'm surrounded by all you happy, glowing, can't wait for every hour of your fucking days to get even happier motherfuckers again! What the fuck did I do that I get to be so fucking miserable every moment of my fucking life? I'm good to every fucking body! I'm kind, and I'm patient, and I do anything for anybody - family or not — and I get ripped apart coming and going! I've had efuckingnough! I can't do it anymore! I'm not okay! And nobody fucking knows or takes the time to even pretend to care except Olivia!"

"We are your family, Remi. We love you. We're trying to help you."

“No, you’re not. All you want is to be sure your peaceful little lives aren’t interrupted. That’s fine. There won’t be anymore interruptions.”

“That’s not the point, Remi. How can we help you if you don’t turn to us? You keep all this shit inside and when we ask you pretend everything is just fine and you’re enjoying your bachelorhood. You tell me what you want me to do to help you and I will.”

“By leaving me alone. Just leave me the fuck alone.”

“You have a lot of responsibility to this clan. We depend on you. We need you to be a present and fully functioning part of it.”

“I am doing my best. Right now all I can manage is to barely keep my head above water and Olivia helps with that.”

“You don’t need Olivia. You need to lean on your family.”

“Don’t feel like I’m supported much by family, Brandt. Why don’t you do us both a favor and get out of my house and back to work.”

“Because the minute I leave, you’ll have her back over here. She’s not welcome on our property. I’m warning you.”

“Then I’m not welcome on your property.”

“Don’t do this, Remi. Don’t draw your line in the sand over a convenient piece of...”

“Do not call her that! She gets me! She cares about me! She is at this point the only future I have! If you cared about me, you’d understand that!”

“I understand that you’re feeling alone and lost. The easiest most convenient answer is not always the right answer.”

“Bye, Brandt.”

“I expect you to be at work within the hour.”

Remi huffed a sarcastic laugh. “Sure thing.”

“We care about you, Remi. You’re family. We can help you through this.”

“I got things to do,” Remi said, walking away from Brandt.

“Yeah, you do. We’ve been working since 7:00 A. M.! What time are you starting?”

The only answer he got was the slam of Remi’s bathroom door.

“I’ll see you at work!” Brandt yelled. He shook his head as he walked out of Remi’s house, carefully picking his way through the pieces of wood that used to be a very nice door. “So fucking stubborn,” Brandt muttered as he got in his truck and drove away.



Remi waited only long enough for Brandt to leave his house, then he quickly changed clothes, ran his fingers through his hair and minutes later was speeding down the street he lived on. He pressed the button on his steering wheel and waited for the hands free assistant to speak to him. “Who do you wish to speak with?” a mechanized female voice asked through the sound system in his car.

“Call Olivia,” he responded.

“Calling Olivia,” the voice answered, as the sound of a ring tone sounded.

The connection barely finished the first ring and she was answering by yelling into her telephone. “I’m gonna tell you what! You are not going to just stand there and allow that man to disrespect me that way!”

“Sorry, Livi. He’s been our leader for so long that nobody goes against him. It’s kind of an agreed on thing that he leads our generation.”

“I don’t care who he is, or what he thinks he leads. He disrespected me. I will not accept that kind of behavior! It’s him or it’s me. You decide!”

“You know it’s you.”

“I don’t need this,” she grumbled.

“I know. Just calm down and we’ll work it out, okay?”

“It’s not okay! I will not stand for it and you will cut everyone who doesn’t treat me with respect out of your life, or I won’t be a part of it!”

“I know. I do know. I’m sorry for the way he treated you. It’s unacceptable and I will talk to him about it.”

“Hmpf! You better.”

“You know I will.”

“Where are you now? It sounds like you’re driving. Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“Where? I thought we decided no secrets.”

“No secrets, baby. I’m coming to find you.”

“I deserve better than being disrespected endlessly.”

“I know. And that’s why I’m coming to find you so you’ll know that it’s you I support. If I have to cut them all off, I will.”

“He’s not even your family.”

Remi hesitated.

“Did you hear what I said?” she snapped.

“I did. And he is my family. They all are.”

“I didn’t say they weren’t. But if I don’t count at all, then why are we even bothering to spend any time together?”

“You do count. More than you know.”

“We’ll see.”

“You do.”

“It’s okay if I don’t. There are plenty other men who’ll appreciate me and make sure that I know it. I do not have to put up with this.”

“I know. I do, and I completely understand. Don’t assume I’m like all the others. I know what it’s like not to be appreciated.”

“Good.”

“Are you hungry?” Remi asked.

“I don’t even know if I could eat. I’m still so offended, what I really need is a drink.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m already home.”

“Meet me at Vince’s? They have food and liquor.”

“I don’t feel like driving all the way back out there.”

“I’ll come get you.”

“That’s fine, I guess. But how do I know you won’t let someone else disrespect me?” Olivia asked.

“It’ll never happen. Come on. It’ll be fun. We’ll have more drinks than we should, maybe find room for some food, and then we’ll spend the rest of the day together.”

“Maybe. I did say I’m still offended.”

“I’ll make you feel better.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. What can I do to make you smile?”

“Nothing! I just have so much on my shoulders right now. I can barely pay my bills because the bank screwed up my account! It’s a lot to worry about!”

“You know what? Let me pay them for you. Then we can relax and enjoy the rest of the day.”

“No! I don’t like anybody to pay my way. I do it all myself. It’s a matter of pride!”

“I know. But consider it a gift. You don’t owe me anything at all.”

“I don’t know. I have to go find an outfit to go visit my sister this weekend, too. There’s just so much I need to do instead of drinking all day.”

“You pick out the outfit and I’ll buy that, too.”

“Oh, I couldn’t! I don’t want you or anybody else to think I’m taking advantage of you.”

“How can you be taking advantage of me when it’s me that’s offering?”

“Are you sure?” Olivia asked.

“Never been more sure,” Remi answered.

“Well, if you’re sure I guess it couldn’t hurt anything, just this once.”

“Great! I’ll be at your place in a few minutes.”

“You better not make me wait too long, or I’m not going.”

“I know. I’m on my way right now.”

Olivia ended the call on her end, then laughed and high-fived her roommate.

“Girl, you got him all kinds of tied up,” her roommate said.

“You gotta know how to work ‘em,” Olivia said with a smirk.

“Where’d you meet him again?”

“In a bar. He was drinking himself silly and whining about some stupid girl. I knew he’d be easy the minute I laid eyes on him. You just play sweet and loving long enough and they’ll give you everything.”

“Get what you can while you can, then dump him, huh?” her friend said.

“Oh, not this one. He’s pretty, and he’s got money, and he does whatever I tell him to. I’m keeping this one. At least as long as he gives me what I want.”

“Better watch out for that girl. If he’s all upset over her, she may work her way back in and knock you out of your comfy little place.”

“Oh, no, honey. I’m not taking that chance! She can’t take him back if he’s not allowed to speak to her. I got this! It’s not my first rodeo!”

Chapter 2

Brandt was still cursing Remi when he pulled onto the job site and got out of his truck.

Barron heard Brandt's truck as he pulled in and walked over to the edge of the roof to see if Remi was with him. He shook his head when he saw that Brandt was alone. "You find him?" Barron asked, looking down at Brandt as he approached.

Brandt looked up at him. "Oh, yeah. I found him."

"That bad, huh?"

"Could have been worse," Brandt said. "I could have killed his girlfriend."

"What?!"

"Don't what me. I didn't kill her."

"Who? When did he get a girlfriend?"

"He's keeping company with a string of them," Brandt said.

"That's my point. When did he get ONE of them?"

"Recently, the last three weeks apparently."

"Damn. Okay. Why you want to kill her?"

"Shooting dirty looks at Abby while she's outside with her kids. Giving her shit when she goes over to ask them to turn the music down in the middle of the night. Confronts me yelling and screaming at me about getting off their property when I go over there to find out where the fuck he is because he's sure as hell not at work."

"Oh, hell no!"

"Yeah. The bitch is lucky she walked away."

"Who is she?" Barron asked.

"I don't know. Olivia somebody or other."

"Is he coming to work?" Barron asked.

"Who knows?" Brandt asked, as he headed to the other side of the building Barron was standing on the top of.

"You hear that shit?" Barron asked as he went back to his crew that was re-tarring the roof they were standing on.

"Yeah. I feel bad for him," Shaun said.

"I do, too, to an extent, but at some point you gotta put your big-boy pull-ups on and get shit done," Barron said.

"Yeah, but his life is completely turned around from what he expected it to be," Shaun said.

"It ain't your fault," Kiernan said.

Barron and Kiernan shared a knowing look.

"He's right," Barron said. "It's not your fault, Shaun."

"I know that. But I feel like I'm contributing."

"It's been almost two months since they broke up. While you made your intentions known, you didn't go public with Bailey until just recently here. And even if you had, none of what happened with Remi and Bailey was your fault. You never said a word or gave even a hint about how you felt about her."

A loud noise sounded on the far edge of the roof as Brandt set foot on the roof from the ladder they had extended there.

"I know. But I still wish there was something I could do to help him climb out of this pool of misery he's stuck in," Shaun said.

"We talking about Remi?" Brandt asked.

"Yeah. Shaun feels bad for him."

"We all feel bad for him," Brandt said.

"I keep telling him it ain't his fault."

"It's not," Brandt said. "Kiernan, how bad has it been living next to him?"

"Until the last few weeks not bad. Then suddenly he hooked up with this new girl and they're having a party every single night. We just keep waiting for him to replace her with a new one and hopefully the next one will be a little less party-monster," Kiernan said.

"She rude to you?"

"A couple of times when I went over there, it ain't no big thing. Wasn't any need to stir things up. I just steer clear."

"Abby said she'd shot her a few hateful glances."

"Did she?! Well, I'll be checking into that when I get home."

"Why wouldn't she tell you?" Brandt asked.

"She's worried about not rocking the boat. She don't want to have to leave and go anywhere else. I ain't said anything about her attitude with me because I don't really care. She ain't worth nothing, and I figure as long as breathing rubs her the wrong way, I'll just be sure to keep doing it. But

giving my wife shit, I don't stand for that in any way, shape, or form. This is our home. Abby should be able to feel comfortable and welcome wherever she's living."

"Why is Abby worried about rocking the boat? Hasn't she figured out yet, y'all are supposed to be here?" Barron asked.

"Things weren't great before," Kiernan said. "This is the best any of us have ever had. I think she's still not convinced that she won't wake up to it all being gone."

"Kiernan?" Brandt said.

Kiernan looked up at Brandt.

"Y'all aren't going anywhere unless you want to. You're part of this clan. What can I do to make her understand that?" Brandt asked.

"Appreciate that, Brandt. It'll come in time. She's just grown up with no security. She'll figure it out. She's much better than she used to be about believing we're home finally. But I'm definitely going to talk to her about not taking shit from anybody. Especially somebody not of this clan."

"Maybe give Remi a break, though. Don't take it to him," Shaun said. Everybody looked at Shaun.

Shaun glanced up and found everyone looking at him. "What? I already said I feel bad he's having such a hard time."

"He's causing it to be more hard than it has to be," Brandt said.

"That much is true," Shaun said.

"You know? I really don't think it's Bailey he's grieving so much, and I don't think he even knows it," Barron said.

"What do you mean? You think it's Cristie?" Brandt asked.

"Yeah. I think his Dragon is grieving the loss of his real mate, and all he's doing is reacting to the misery of his Dragon. I have no doubt he's missing Bailey, but I'm thinking the total funk he's in is because his beast got a look at his real mate and Remi walked away."

"Sounds more understandable," Brandt said. "Maybe I'll talk to Havoc and see if he's heard anything from Maia about how Cristie is doing."

"If not, maybe he can call her and ask, point blank," Barron said.

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Daisy hummed to herself as she hopped out of her jeep and practically skipped her way into Vince's Place. She paused just inside the door,

blinking until her eyes adjusted from the bright sun outside to the interior of Vince's.

"Well, hello there, Ms. Daisy!" Vince called out.

Daisy grinned and went straight to him, leaning over the bar to kiss him. "Hi, Uncle Vince."

"What you doing in here this early?"

"I'm on my way to the studio. I have some students coming in this afternoon, but I'm thinking I need a milkshake to get me through."

Vince laughed, knowing full well she wanted her favorite flavor.

"Strawberry?"

"Yes, please!"

"Coming right up." Vince turned his back to her and started making her milkshake, just the way she liked, with extra strawberries.

As Daisy watched, murmuring voices from the far left of the place caught her attention. The murmurs were accented by drunken giggles and laughter. She focused a little more on the couple's voices and realized one of them was very familiar.

"Is that Remi I hear?" Daisy asked.

Vince glanced over his shoulder at her as he pushed the button on the commercial blender and nodded as he rolled his eyes. "They been in here all damn day. You'd think at some point he'd manage to get himself to work. Don't know what's going to happen with that boy."

"He's going through a hard time," Daisy said sadly.

"No, he's got his head up his ass. There's a difference."

Daisy smiled and shrugged a little as Vince poured her milkshake into an extra-large to-go cup and handed it to her.

"Maybe he's got his head up his ass because he's going through a hard time."

"He ain't the first. You can't let it wreck your whole world or where you going to be when things get straight again?"

Daisy just looked over toward Remi and whoever his friend was, then back at Vince. "Hope he figures it out soon. I feel bad for him."

"You're too sweet. Gotta toughen up some."

"My daddy says that all the time."

"He's right. You want some food or a snack or something?" Vince asked.

“No. This is it. I’m just a little addicted,” she said, handing him a ten dollar bill.

“Nah, it’s on the house,” Vince said, trying to hand her back her money.

“No, it’s not. You have to make money or you won’t be here next time I want a strawberry shake,” Daisy said, grinning at him.

“Let me at least give you change.”

“Nope!” she said, backing away from the bar. “It’s a tip. I love you! Bye!”

“Love you, too, baby. Drive safe,” Vince called out.

As the door closed behind Daisy, the girl Remi was with imitated Daisy. “I love you, bye!” she mimicked, laughingly. “He’s far too old for her. She should try getting somebody her own age.”

Remi, who was leaning on the table, doing his best to stretch out while still seated at the table, forced himself to a semi-seated position and kind of wobbled a bit as he looked toward the exit. “I think she might be my cousin,” he said, trying to focus bleary eyes on the door.

“You think? You don’t know?” Olivia asked.

“I didn’t look.” He lifted his nose into the air and sniffed dramatically. “Yeah, smells like Daisy.”

“Well, Daisy just stopped by a bar to buy a milkshake and tell the bartender she loves him. It’s pathetic really.”

“Pathetic?” Remi asked.

“She’s hitting on somebody old enough to be her dad. It’s gross.”

“He’s our uncle,” Remi said.

“The bartender is her uncle?” Olivia said condescendingly.

“Yeah, and mine,” Remi said. “I don’t think she meant it like in love.”

“Are you correcting me in public?”

Remi’s head wobbled as he swiveled back and forth looking for anybody else that might have heard him. “No. There’s nobody else here to be public.”

Olivia’s forced smile morphed into a flat line of pursed lips. “You will not correct me like I’m a child. I will not stand for that.”

“I’m not correcting you. We’re having a conversation,” Remi said.

“In which you are treating me like a child!”

“I didn’t treat you like a child.”

“Yes, you did,” she said, jumping to her feet as she glared at Remi. “I will not take this disrespect!”

Remi sat back in his chair and simply looked at her for several moments.

“Well?”

“Well, what?” Remi asked.

“Aren’t you going to say something?”

“Not really. I mean, I was wondering what your hangup is about respect, but I figure I’m not sure I really want to know after all.”

“How dare you?!” Olivia shrieked. “I demand respect at all times! But most especially from the men in my life!”

“Didn’t disrespect you, Olivia. All I did was point out facts that happen to be different than what you thought. If you think that’s disrespect, then maybe you should look it up and see what it really means. Because that ain’t it,” Remi said.

“I’m leaving! I will not sit here and take this!”

Remi didn’t say a word. He reached for the bottle of gin on the table — the fourth of the day — and poured himself a shot. He threw the shot back, swallowed, clenched his jaw as the burn went down his throat and slammed the shot glass on the table.

Olivia cleared her throat to get his attention.

Remi drunkenly gazed at her. “Thought you were leaving?”

“I am. Just as soon as you pay me for the outfit and the bills you promised to pay.”

Remi looked at her for several more seconds before he shrugged and shoved his hand into the pocket of his jeans. He brought out a wad of cash and looked at it, trying to determine how much he had with him. “Fuck it, take it all,” he said, tossing it in her direction.

Olivia quickly snatched up the money that fell to the floor and tucked it in her purse before she focused on Remi again. “So that’s it, you’re just going to let me leave.”

“You want to leave, leave. If you want to stay, sit. I really don’t care, Livi.”

Olivia yanked the chair back from the table then shoved it into the table to try to get a response out of Remi. In the process, she managed to cause the bottle of gin — or what was left of it — to fall, spilling all over Remi, and then to break when it rolled off the table and hit the floor.

“Hey!” Remi said irritably.

“Is there a problem?” Vince asked, as he approached.

“We didn’t ask for anything. You can go back to the bar,” Olivia snapped.

Vince laughed. His hand shot out so quickly it was a blur as he curled his fingers around her bicep, and started for the door.

Olivia started screaming, trying unsuccessfully to pry his hand off her. “Let me go!” she screamed over and over again. “Help! Help me, Remi!”

Vince opened the door and yanked her up to face him in the open doorway. “I’m Vince. This is my place. Daisy and Remi are my niece and nephew. Stay away from both of them, and stay away from my place of business. You’re not welcome here.” He shoved her through the open door and slammed it closed.

Olivia just barely managed to catch her balance, preventing herself from falling just outside the bar and grill, and turned around to shout at the man who’d just thrown her out, but he’d already closed the door. In a rage, she turned her fury on Remi’s car, grabbing handfuls of gravel and throwing it at his car, taking her house keys out of her purse and dragging them across the hood of his car as well as down the driver’s side door.

Vince, on the other hand, made a beeline for Remi after he threw Remi’s friend out. “What the hell is wrong with you?!” Vince demanded, as he stood right beside Remi.

Remi had laid his upper body across the table again, resting his head on his forearm. “Huh?” Remi asked, opening his eyes to see who was talking to him. “Uncle Vince.”

“Yeah, Uncle Vince. What the hell is wrong with you hanging out with somebody like that?”

Remi looked across the table he sat at, then around the part of the room he sat in. Confused at finding nobody there, he looked up at Vince. “There’s nobody here.”

“No, there’s not. She left! And don’t bring her ass back in here. I’ll throw you both out.”

Remi sat in his seat trying to figure out what Vince was talking about.

“Olivia? You called her Olivia,” Vince said, beginning to realize just how drunk Remi really was.

“Oh, shit! Yeah, Olivia. She’s my new girl,” Remi said, trying to stand up while he shoved the chair back so he could stand. He pried his keys out

of his pocket and held them loosely in his hand while trying to balance himself.

“Where are you going?” Vince asked.

“To get Olivia.”

“She just left. I’m pretty sure somebody like that can find her way home without much help.”

“No, I promised I’d help her do something,” he said, struggling to remember what they’d talked about. “Oh! I’m taking her shopping. I think,” he said, his memory kind of fuzzy.

“You gave her a handful of money. I think that’s enough.”

“Oh. Well, I gotta go anyway. ‘S’pose to be at work.”

“I don’t think so. Just sit right here for a while. You need to sober up,” Vince said, snatching Remi’s keys from his grip.

Remi flopped back into his chair, but shook his head. “Trying not to be sober. That’s when it hurts the most.”

“Tell you what. Sit here for a little while and I’ll get you something to eat. Alright?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Remi. You’re going to eat.”

“I’m not hungry. But I’ll take something else to drink.”

“Seems like a good compromise. Give me a second,” Vince said, going back to the bar and tossing Remi’s keys in the lost and found box before taking the rest of Daisy’s strawberry shake and pouring it into a glass and adding a tall straw to it. He carried it back to Remi and set it on the table in front of him.

“What’s this?” Remi asked.

“Looks like a strawberry shake, but it’s got tequila in it. Drink it up.”

Remi snickered. “Best kind of alcohol doesn’t taste like alcohol.”

“Exactly. When you run out of that one, I’ll get you another one.”

“Can the next one be chocolate?”

“Yep. I got some chocolate flavored vodka.”

“Don’t know why I didn’t think of this before,” Remi said happily, sipping on the milkshake that was just that, a milkshake.

Vince went back to the bar and shot a text off to Brandt. “Come get Remi before I whip his ass for being a dumb-ass.”



## Chapter 3

Brandt looked down at his phone when it pinged, letting him know somebody sent him a message. He swiped the screen fully expecting it to be Tempest.

“Fuck! I gotta go. You got this?” Brandt asked Barron.

“Is it the baby?” Barron asked excitedly.

“No. Tempest is still miserable and still pregnant. It’s Remi. Vince just sent me a text telling me to come get Remi before he kicks his ass for being a dumb-ass,” Brandt said.

“Great,” Barron said.

“Yeah, lovely, isn’t it?”

“Well, go save him. We got this,” Barron said.

“Alright. If I have time I’ll be back today. If not, I’ll see you later.”

“Take him to his mommy,” Barron suggested.

“You don’t know how much I’d love to. But no, he’s part of our clan, I’ll handle it,” Brandt said. “Even if I have to whip his ass myself.”

“Good luck!” Barron called.

Brandt didn’t even cleanup before he got in his truck to go after Remi. He just got in his truck and started it up. Speeding down the road ten minutes later he slowed down when he saw someone familiar walking along the shoulder of the two lane highway. “Fuck me,” he murmured as the person began wildly gesturing for him to stop as she suddenly appeared to be unsteady on her feet.

Brandt drove past her, then made a U-turn and pulled up right beside her. He rolled down the window and waited while she hurried to the truck.

“Thank you! Thank you so much for stopping!” Olivia rushed out between sobs as she stumbled to the window. She steadied herself with her hands on the window frame and looked up to see who’d stopped. Immediately her posture straightened and she stopped sobbing. “Oh. It’s you.”

“Yeah, good to see you again, too,” Brandt said.

Olivia stood there glaring at him.

Brandt lowered his mirrored sun-glasses and looked over the top rim at her. “Do you want a ride or not?” he asked.

“I’m not going to Remi’s. I’m going home to my house.”

“You can’t go to Remi’s. You’re not allowed there anymore. But if you want to go home, I’ll take you there.”

“Fine,” she said, opening the door and getting in the truck. She reached for the seatbelt, strapped herself in and then realized that Brandt was calling somebody while he waited for her to get situated. “Don’t bother calling Remi! I do not want to talk to him or see him again!”

“I’m not calling Remi.” He waited until a woman’s image filled the screen. “Hey, baby. I’m driving a friend of Remi’s home. Thought I’d keep you on video-call as a witness.”

“Why do you need a witness?” Tempest asked.

“Because it’s the same female I ran off from Remi’s this morning.”

“You ran somebody off from Remi’s?” Tempest asked.

“Yep.”

“He was very rude!” Olivia called out so Tempest could hear her.

“Who is she and why are you taking her home if you ran her off?” Tempest asked.

Brandt angled the phone so Tempest could see Olivia. “Happened to find her walking on the side of the highway.”

“Ah, and you can’t allow a woman, even this one, to be stranded on the side of the highway.”

“It’s one of the reasons you love me,” Brandt said, teasing Tempest.

Olivia had the good sense to get a sudden chill down her spine when her gaze met Tempest’s. “He was very rude, ma’am,” she said, this time with not half as much tone.

“I’m sure if he was rude, there was a reason. What is your name?” Tempest demanded.

“I’m Olivia. I’m Remi’s girlfriend. Or at least I was. If he wants to see me again he’s going to have to do some groveling after the way he disrespected me earlier. I will not allow anyone to correct me like a child. And then to promise to pay my bills and even something as simple as buy me an outfit to visit my family, and then not even remember! It’s disrespectful! And when I reminded him that he owed me for my bills, he just threw a handful of wadded up money at me! I just can’t even with him.”

“Why does he have to pay your bills?” Tempest asked.

“Because he wanted me to go get something to eat with him. Only instead of feeding me, all he did was order drinks.”

“I still don’t understand,” Tempest said.

“I told him I wasn’t in the right frame of mind after all the stress of being disrespected by your husband this morning, and because my bills are past due, and I had to go get a new outfit to wear to visit my family, and I just couldn’t make it today, so he promised to pay my bills and buy me an outfit. I mean, once he says he’ll do it, it’s his responsibility, not mine.”

“Ah, I understand. And for the record, you are aware that respect is earned, not demanded, aren’t you?” Tempest asked.

“If you don’t demand respect, you’ll never get it!” Olivia exclaimed.

“Bullshit. If you have to demand it it’s not real anyway. Your behavior will warrant respect or you don’t deserve it. Brandt? Keep me on video-call and angle me so I can watch her the entire time. I’m recording,” Tempest said.

“You got it,” Brandt said.

Olivia cut her eyes at the woman on Brandt’s phone, before rolling them and gazing out of the window like she didn’t care.

“Is there something you’d like to say,” Tempest asked.

“Nope. Not a word. Just anxious to get home,” Olivia snapped.

“Smart girl,” Tempest said.

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Vince looked up expectantly when the door opened. “Bout time,” he said, angling his head to the right to indicate where Remi was.

“Got here soon as I could. Had to take somebody home.”

“His friend, I’m guessing?”

“Yep. She do that to his car?” Brandt asked.

“Honestly, I haven’t gone to look. But wouldn’t surprise me. She was in a rage,” Vince said.

Brandt shook his head as he started toward Remi.

“If you could manage as little damage as possible...” Vince said, gesturing at the two or three tables he’d purposely sat on the opposite side of the room from Remi.

“Do my best,” Brandt answered. He walked up behind Remi, watching him sucking down a chocolate shake. From the looks of it, he’d had several

bottles of gin, and about five milkshakes. “How’s it going, Remi?” Brandt asked.

Remi stopped sucking on his straw and awkwardly twisted his body to get a look at Brandt. “Really? You’re going to hassle me here, too? I’m minding my business, enjoying my new favorite drink, and you’re going to come in here and fuck with me some more.”

“I’m not fucking with you, Remi. I’m just coming to give you a ride home.”

“Why? I got a car.”

“You got no business driving in this condition.”

“I am perfectly fine.”

“You know how much you have to drink to keep yourself drunk. At any point your liver is going to call it quits. Nobody, no matter who they are should ever drink this much.”

“None of your damn business, Brandt.”

“I’m not here to argue with you. Come on, let me get you home and I’ll leave you to it.”

“No. Go away.”

“I’m not going away, Remi. Get up and come on,” Brandt said, exerting just a little of the Alpha influence he usually maintained a tight hold on.

Remi hunched a little, but remained sitting.

“What is your problem, Remi? Anybody that’s tried to help you lately has done nothing but try to be understanding, and you treat everyone of us like shit. Not a single one of us is responsible for the situation you’re in.”

“I never said you were! What I said is leave me the fuck alone.”

“That’s not going to happen. You’re not only clan, you’re family. We care about you, and contrary to what I might prefer to do to you at this particular moment, I’m going to get you home safe.”

“I don’t want to be part of your clan, or part of your family. I just want to be left alone!” Remi bellowed, trying to stand and turn to face Brandt all at the same time, but he was unsteady on his feet.

Brandt seized that moment to exert not only all his Alpha influence, sending it in waves to wash over Remi to make him even more unsteady, but without warning, his fist shot out, connecting with Remi’s jaw, dropping him to his knees, where his body dipped over, face first onto the floor. Brandt shook his head as he hauled an unconscious Remi up off the floor

and tossed him over his shoulder. He unceremoniously stalked out of Vince's Place, throwing a wave toward Vince as he cleared the door.

Brandt yanked open his passenger side door and dumped Remi into the cab of his truck, then got in the driver's side and started it up. He glanced over at Remi as he put his truck in gear and punched him again just for good measure before he backed out and headed home. "Asshole," he grumbled, glaring at a still unconscious Remi once more.



Daisy smiled to herself when she heard a light tapping on the front door of her art studio. Five taps, then complete silence. She knew that knock. "Come in, Carson," she called out.

The door eased open and Carson cautiously looked around the main room of the studio. Several students had already arrived and started work. "Am I late again?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"You're not late. You're never late. You get here when you want to unless you want to take a particular class. Did you want to take a class today?" Daisy asked.

"No, ma'am. I just wanted to paint my own picture."

"I saved your favorite work station for you," Daisy said, smiling at the boy.

Carson looked over to the far left corner of the room, where the easel and small table already set with paints and brushes and a fresh cup of water sat waiting for him. He liked that workstation because it was right by one of the windows that let in the afternoon sun, and because he could see everybody entering the front door, as well as from the hallway that led to the other rooms. "Thank you, Ms. Daisy."

"You're welcome. I put some of your favorite colors on your table, but if you want anything different, go ahead and help yourself."

"I will." Carson didn't make eye contact with anyone else as he made his way carefully through the other workstations before setting his backpack on the floor, tightly pushed into the corner and out of the way.

"Hi," Charlie said from behind her.

Daisy had turned her back to the door to watch Carson as he moved toward his favorite station. She quickly looked over her shoulder while

stepping back from the door when Charlie spoke to her. “Oh! Hi, Charlie. I didn’t know you were there.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. I just wanted to say hello and ask if Carson needs anything before I head back to work.”

“No problem. It’s my own fault. I jump at my own shadow,” she said with a soft laugh. “But, no. He’s doing beautifully.”

“Has he participated in any of the classes? If so, then I owe you for more than his usual fees.”

“He’s taken a few of them. But he tends to wander back to his easel once a particular new technique is set in his mind. He’ll work on that technique for a little while until he masters it, then create an entire painting before he finally sits in on another class. He hasn’t finished an entire class yet. I’ll let you know when he does.”

“If I owe you anything other than his usual fee, please let me know. You have no idea what a difference this place has made in his life — in our lives. I’ll never be able to make you understand how grateful I am.”

“I have to admit, I adore Carson. He makes me smile. He’s made a difference in my life, too.”

Charlie shoved his hands in his pockets as he stood there awkwardly, trying to think of something else to talk to Daisy about. His gaze wandered over the other three students in the room. All were varying ages from preteen to late teens. “Is there a particular time that’s better for Carson to come, maybe with younger kids?”

“Not really. Everybody that comes to classes here are here for the same reason. They love art and being able to express themselves through it. Age has nothing to do with it.”

Charlie smiled and nodded.

Daisy lowered her voice. “Besides, I keep an eye on Carson. He’s fine at any time. And if he decides he’s had enough peopling, he’ll go set up an easel in the children’s art room.”

Charlie laughed. “Yeah, when he’s had enough, he’s had enough.”

Daisy lifted her cup in a mock toast and sipped her milkshake, as she looked around the room.

“Let me guess... herbal iced tea?” he asked.

Daisy looked at him, realized he was looking at her cup and grinned at him. “Oh, no. Strawberry milkshake. The best picker-upper there is! In my opinion, anyway. I’m afraid I’m a little addicted.”

Charlie grinned at her. "I'm a chocolate fan myself."

"Vince's Place has the best ones around. But it's a bar and grill, too."

"I've heard it's really good, but I haven't had time to try it yet."

"It is good! There are a lot of other restaurants around, but I still go there more often than the others."

"Bar and grill... burgers and fries?"

"Oh, yeah. Best burger you'll ever eat. Fries of course, but oh my goodness... their onion rings. And they have other sandwiches, and fried chicken, and some pastas, too. The usual appetizers and desserts and such. But I've been going there since it was just a bar, so I'm partial to it."

"It recently change over to a grill, too?"

"Oh, no. It's been a bar and grill for about twenty years."

Charlie's brows rose. "You looked old enough to get in a bar when you were a kid?" he teased.

Daisy laughed. "No. Vince is my uncle. All my cousins and I went in there with our parents to eat from time to time. And they'd bring it home to us if it was later in the evening when the bar was really hopping."

"So I'm guessing you spent some time there as an adult, too. Hopping right along with everybody else?"

Daisy nodded enthusiastically while she laughed. "You have no idea."

"Maybe you could introduce me to it sometime. I'd love to experience it."

Daisy's smile deflated instantly. "Yeah, maybe."

Charlie picked up on her mood change instantly. He didn't know what he'd said, but was sure whatever it was, it made her throw up an instant wall. "Alright, well, I guess I'll be getting back to work. I'll pick Carson up on my way home. Thanks again for letting him stay here after school. He loves it here."

"It's not a problem. I love having him here. He's taught me a thing or two!"

Charlie nodded and raised a hand in a wave. "I'll be back in a little while, Carson!" he called.

"I know," Carson said, not even looking up.

Charlie started to leave, but then turned back to Daisy. "Hey, if I said something to offend you or make you uncomfortable, I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention."

"What?! No! Why would you think that? I'm fine."

“You sure?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m absolutely fine.”

“Alright. I’ll see you later, then.”

“Bye! And be sure to check out Vince’s when you get some time.”

Charlie nodded and quietly made his way back out to his car. By the time he got in his car, Daisy had already closed the door to the studio. He sat there for a few minutes wondering what he’d said to set the pretty artist in defense mode. He liked her. He really did. And his son adored her. But for some reason, he couldn’t seem to get past small talk. Each time he tried to make their conversation a little more personal, she slammed him back into the business zone in the most polite friendly way he’d ever seen. Sighing, he started his car and backed out, his mind now shifted to the mountain of work waiting for him on his desk.



Brandt glanced several times toward a still drunk Remi riding beside him in the passenger side.

Remi’s eyes were closed, his head resting against the window, one hand over his eyes. He gave every indication of being asleep, but Brandt knew without a doubt that his Dragon was wide awake, though, Remi rested.

Remi’s phone buzzed for the second time since they’d started for home, causing Brandt’s hand to reach out and refuse the call yet again.

“Leave my phone alone,” Remi croaked in a scratchy, cracked voice.

“So, you are awake.”

“Been awake. Don’t touch my shit.”

“Thought I was doing you a favor, letting you get some rest, Remi. That’s all.”

“Yeah, right,” Remi mumbled.

“Look, I’m not sure how I became the bad guy in your pity party, but I haven’t done a damn thing to you that wasn’t called for.”

“You know exactly what you did.”

“Fine. For the sake of argument, enlighten me. What is it that you think I did?” Brandt said condescendingly.

“You came into my house — uninvited I might add — insulted my girlfriend and told her she wasn’t allowed in my own private fucking

house,” Remi growled, turning his head to stare at Brandt.

“I went to your home, which is built on land provided by me to each of our clan members to get your ass up and to work — you know, that thing we do to be able to continue paying the bills. Your friend decided to be completely disrespectful and insulting. At that point I most certainly did tell her get off our property and that she is not welcome there. For the record, and make sure you pay attention to this, Remi; if she continues to be rude and provoking of the rest of our clan members, she will answer to me. If she does it on our property, I will personally ruin any sense of self-confidence she might have ever thought she had.”

“She don’t even speak to any of them!”

“She makes offensive comments under her breath, making sure for them to hear. She shoots dirty looks at anyone whose eye she catches, and makes it her point to try to intimidate anyone connected to you.”

“You’re out of your mind. She’s kind, and she’s sweet and everybody loves her.”

“Remi, you’re completely blinded.”

“I won’t stand for it. You give her the same grace you give me or we won’t be a part of whatever it is you think you’re doing.”

“You are a part of what we’re doing. You were raised to be part of it. She was not. She will not be accepted into this clan, this family, or even a friendship among us. She is not trustworthy.”

“You just don’t know her!” Remi bellowed.

Brandt shook his head slowly, as he turned onto the road leading through the clan property. “Remi, you don’t know her. You’ve for whatever reason seized upon the idea of building a life with her, and you think we all have to accompany you. News flash... you can build a life any way you want, but no one else has to accompany you. She’s draining your bank accounts, driving wedges between you and your friends, and I’m pretty sure the last time you went to see your parents was the day after the night y’all met.”

“Don’t bring my parents into this. I’ve just been busy, they have nothing to do with it.”

“Have they met her?”

“No,” he answered sullenly.

“Listen, you can’t turn her into Bailey, or into Cristie. Going off the deep end with her isn’t going to fix things with either of them.”

“You sit there so high and mighty, telling me what I can and can’t do...”

“I’m trying to keep you from losing all you’ve got. You don’t even bother to pretend to come to work. The bank called me this morning about your account. You want to know why? Go on, ask me why...”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me even if I don’t ask.”

“They told me your account is overdrawn. Overdrawn Remi, as in no fucking money in it.”

“That’s impossible! I have it set up to draw from my savings account if it’s ever over-drafted,” Remi said, his voice falling silent at the end of his sentence as he realized that meant that his savings account had been drained as well.

“Who has access to your account, Remi?” Brandt asked.

“Nobody. Me, you, that’s it.”

“Then you need to go to the bank. Tell them your accounts were hacked, and stop on the way to make a police report and take a copy of it with you to the bank. Maybe they can get some of your money back. If not, at least maybe they can find out who stole your money.”

Remi pushed himself up, straightening up in the seat.

Brandt caught just half a shake of his head in his peripheral vision.

“What’s that for?”

“If it’s not one thing, it’s a-damn-nother.”

“That it is. Get yourself straightened out, Remi. The only reason I’m involved is to protect you, and to protect our clan. You know there are reasons we don’t invite just anyone in.”

“I know.”

“Another question,” Brandt said as he pulled up in front of Remi’s house.

Remi looked at Brandt, his short temper obvious in his expression.

“Where’s your debit card. Maybe that’s how all your money disappeared. You seen it lately?”

“Livia has it,” Remi grumbled as he threw open Brandt’s door.

“What was that?” Brandt asked innocently.

“You heard me! And you’re wrong! She wouldn’t do me like that!” Remi shouted, slamming the door to Brandt’s truck as he turned his back and walked toward his house.

Brandt sat where he was, watching the male who was once one of the most dependable of his clan. He was going down in flames now, a completely loose cannon, unable to see for himself what he was allowing his life to become.

Remi stopped halfway up the driveway and looked back at Brandt, his mouth moving as he waved his arms and shouted at Brandt.

Brandt heard every single word, but decided to play stupid. He pressed the button on his door, rolling down the window. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"You fucking heard me," Remi accused.

"Want to repeat it?" Brandt asked coldly.

"I said, where the fuck is my car?"

"Vince's. Where it's staying until you can stop drinking long enough to sober up."

"I'll call 'Livia. She'll come take me to get it."

"Make sure she picks you up on the highway. She's not allowed here. Call a locksmith, too. I got your keys," Brandt said, jingling Remi's keys for him to see.

"You're an asshole!"

"When I got to be," Brandt said, smirking at Remi.

Brandt rolled up the window as he drove away, but Remi wasn't finished.

He picked up a large rock out of the garden in the front of his house and ran out into the street, throwing it at Brandt's truck as it drove away.

The rock hit the back window, shattering it on contact. Brandt slammed on the brakes and threw the truck into park, jumping out of the truck while leaving it running and the door wide open in the middle of the street. He advanced on Remi.

Remi stood arrogantly in the street, his chin raised as he watched Brandt coming at him. At the last moment his Dragon considered surfacing, then felt the Alpha waves pouring off Brandt and thought better of it. Remi backed up his driveway, planning to go into his house and slam his door. But instead it was only a split second before Brandt was on him.

Brandt went from striding angrily toward Remi, to full out attacking in the blink of an eye. He hit Remi with such force that Remi's feet came up off the ground as Brandt gripped his shirt collar and his throat and slammed him against the brick column of his house. Brandt was half-shifted, barely

maintaining his human self, but having gained size and fur, his face elongated to accommodate the snout and brow of his Bear. When he opened his mouth to speak, his fangs were on full display. “You fucking challenging me?!” Brandt roared in his face. “Do not forget who the fuck you’re dealing with!” Brandt bellowed.

Remi winced, turning his head just enough to not have to look Brandt in the eye.

“I don’t care how you became a part of this family, born into it, joined it, dreamed it the fuck up in a goddamn nightmare. You disrespect it, you start tearing it apart, you disrespect me, if you’re alive after I’m finished, I will fucking ban you from the whole fucking thing for the rest of your fucking miserable drunken life. You get me?! ”

Remi’s jaw sharpened and it was clear he was struggling with the idea of half-shifting himself.

“Go ahead. Please shift. Please fucking challenge me!” he snarled. “Please fucking give me the reason to stop all the fucking drama that you self-pitying, weak excuse for a male keeps bringing to the rest of us.”

“You don’t understand. You don’t fucking get it! Nobody has had both their mate and the woman they love walk away! Nobody fucking cares. Nobody checks on me, knowing what I’m going through. Nobody fucking asks. So I found someone who does care, who does check on me. And what do you all do? You shut her out!”

“Nobody wants to fucking share space with the person you’re trying to force on us! Oh, poor me, I had a girl love me and then I found my mate, and I had two beautiful women to choose from, but I’m feeling so sorry for myself that I can’t pull my head out of my fucking ass!” Brandt shouted. “Clean up your fucking life, Remi, or get the fuck out of the clan. This is your last warning. If I see no progress, I’ll remove you myself.”

Remi tried to square his shoulders to Brandt, but Brandt just increased his hold on Remi, his claws sinking into the muscles at the top of Remi’s shoulders.

“I don’t fucking need you. I don’t want to be here! I don’t need any of you! I’m out! I never fucking belonged here anyway!” Remi screeched.

“Understood. Remember, you made the choice. You got three days. Get the fuck off our property.”

Remi’s mouth fell open in shock, not believing what he’d said, and how quickly Brandt had reacted. But he only had a second to think about it

before Brandt's fist connected with his jaw, knocking him out cold from the impact of Brandt's fist along with the alcohol still in his system.

Brandt's impulse was to continue beating him, but instead, he just left him where he fell, went back to his truck and went home. He knew Tempest would calm him, she always did.

Chapter 4

It was getting dark outside by the time Daisy had finished straightening and cleaning the art studio. She'd just about gotten to the point that she was going to call Charlie to see if he'd forgotten about Carson. It was unlike him to be late picking up the child, but she knew all too well that unexpected issues could sometimes make you be late.

"Carson? It's about time to start packing up for the day."

"But my dad's not here yet."

"No, but I'm sure he will be here soon." The moment the last words of her sentence left her mouth her phone started ringing. She hurried over to her purse and dug around for it, finally finding it in time for it to stop. She managed to unlock it and scroll past the lock screen and figure out she'd missed a call from Charlie. She glanced over at Carson, Charlie's son, who was busily cleaning up his work station and all his supplies.

She looked down at the phone again before quickly tapping the number to call him back. The line didn't even finish ringing once and Charlie was anxiously answering.

"Daisy! Hi!"

"Hey, Charlie. You tried to call?"

"Yeah. Listen, I'm running late. This meeting is running over and I'm having a hard time figuring out how I'm going to get there in time. I'm so sorry. I knew this was going to happen. It's the only reason I hesitated enrolling him," he said, his words running together as he rushed to get all his thoughts out at once.

"It's okay! It's not a problem."

"I knew you'd say that, but you have a life and things you need to do, too, and here you've still got my kid. I don't even know anybody I trust enough to pick him up for me. I'll be just a little longer and then I can rush right over..."

"No. Don't rush anywhere. The only thing I have planned tonight is going home. I'll just take him with me and you can take your time, finish up whatever it is you need to get finished up, and come get him when you're ready."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to be inconvenienced. I'm so sorry."

“I’m positive. And Carson is not an inconvenience in the least. I’ll text you my address and you can swing by when you’re done. Don’t give it a second thought.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Daisy. I promise this won’t become a regular thing.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll see you later.”

Charlie finally breathed easy on the other end of the line. “Thank you, Daisy. I’ll try to be as quick as I can.”

“You’re welcome. See you later.”

Daisy ended the call and quickly texted her address to Charlie before slipping her phone back into her purse. She turned around and was a little startled to find Carson standing silently just a few feet away from her, looking right at her. “Oh! I didn’t hear you come over here.”

“My dad’s not coming is he?”

“Sure he is, he’s just going to be a little late. So, you’re coming home with me and we’re going to have a nice night, and have dinner. Okay?”

Carson looked up at her, his deep brown eyes looking trustingly into hers also let her know he was feeling a little afraid. “Are you sure he’s coming?”

“I am absolutely sure.”

“He doesn’t know where you live,” Carson said.

“I just sent him my address.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Are you ready? Do you have your paints all sealed and your brushes cleaned?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good job!” Daisy exclaimed. She gathered her purse, and watched as he picked up his backpack. He walked over to where she waited at the front door, then walked out before her when she held it open for him. She glanced around the studio once more, then flipped off the lights before locking the door and taking him by the hand to lead him down the few steps to the ground and then over to her jeep.

Daisy took his backpack and settled it in the jeep before helping him climb up into the vehicle and buckling him into the backseat. She closed the door before walking around the front of the jeep. She took the time to make a funny face at him through the windshield as she went by.

Carson grinned at her.

Daisy smiled as she opened her door and got in.

"You're funny," he said.

"I'm funny?!" she asked.

"Yes. You're nice, too."

"It's easy to be nice to you. You're so nice yourself!" she said, winking at him in the rear view mirror as she slowly backed out before angling the front of her car toward the highway and pulling out, starting them on their way.

"Do you live by yourself?" he asked.

"No, I live with my mom and dad."

"Why?"

"Because it's home. I just haven't made one of my own yet."

"Why?"

"Because I haven't needed to. I have a piece of land, though. I could build one if I wanted to, but it's just me. I don't have a husband or any kids, so I like being home with my parents."

"So you don't get lonely?"

"Yes. They keep me from being lonely."

"My dad is lonely."

"Why do you think your dad is lonely?" Daisy asked.

"Because when I go to bed I can still hear him in the living room. And he's all by himself with just the television. And he changes the channels a lot, so I know he's not really watching anything, but when I ask him why he's still awake, he tells me he's watching a movie."

"Maybe he is watching a movie," Daisy said.

"Not changing the channel so much. He just doesn't want to tell me he's not tired yet. So he just sits there all alone until he falls asleep."

"You know what, Carson. I don't think your dad is lonely because he's got you. I think he's very happy because he's got you."

Carson thought about it. "Maybe." He watched everything going past through the darkness outside until Daisy finally pulled off the highway and drove them up a gravel driveway and into the woods. "You live in the woods?"

"Well, not exactly. I live in a house by some other houses, but this road certainly makes it look like we're going into the woods, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's kinda scary."

“It’s really pretty in the daytime. One day you’ll have to come see it in the daytime.”

“Okay,” Carson said, his little head on pivot as he tried to look forward through the windshield, then left, then right, all at the same time.

It wasn’t long before the lights on Kaid’s porch could be glimpsed through the darkness.

“Is that your house?” Carson asked, pointing toward the flickering lights through the trees.

“No, that’s my Uncle Kaid’s house.” Daisy kept driving until they cleared the trees and Kaid’s house was easily seen.

“Oh, I see it! Your uncle lives there?”

“Yes, and my other uncle and aunt live in that house right there, and my other uncle and aunt live in that one back there,” she said, as they very slowly made their way past Kaid’s, Avaleigh’s, and Maverik’s houses. She took a left, following the road and it was only a few moments before the other houses started coming into view.

“I see more houses!” Carson said.

“Yep. That’s my cousin, Jobe’s house, but he doesn’t live here anymore. And that is my Uncle Bam’s house, and that one,” she said, pointing to the only house on the right, “is my family’s house.”

“It’s pretty. I like the big stairs and the porch.”

“Me, too. It goes all around so you can sit anywhere on it you want to just enjoy being outside. We used to decorate it every year for each holiday.”

“You don’t decorate it anymore?”

“Not as much as we used to, but we decorate it a little.”

“I would decorate it all the time if I lived here.”

“You can decorate your house.”

“It’s an apartment. We got a lot of other people living in our building, too, and they don’t all like to decorate.”

“You could do your door.”

“We used to where I used to live, but we didn’t do it yet here.”

“I’m sure you will,” she said, pulling her jeep into her usual parking place in front of the house. “Okay, we’re home,” she said. She turned off the jeep and dropped her keys in her purse. “I’m going to come around and help you get out and then we’ll go inside. Okay?”

He was looking up at the warm glow of the amber colored lights in the fixtures on the porch. "Are your parents going to be mad because I'm here?"

"What?! Of course, not. Why would you ask that?"

"Because you didn't tell them I was coming."

"They won't mind. They love kids. And anybody I bring home is a friend of mine, and they're always nice to my friends."

He just looked at her, his eyes wide.

Daisy got out of the jeep, slung her purse on her shoulder and hurried around to get Carson out. She opened the door and reached for him.

"I can do it," he said.

Daisy stood back and allowed him to jump out of her jeep. Once he landed, he looked up and offered her a slight smile.

"Better than I can jump," she said, stretching to get his back pack out of the jeep. She took his hand in hers and led him toward the house.

A minute later Daisy was opening the front door and leading him inside. "I'm home!" she called out.

"I thought I heard you pull in," Janie answered from the kitchen.

Footsteps let them know someone was coming toward them, until Bane stepped into view. "I made ribs! Been smoking them all day," he said. The minute he saw Carson he smiled warmly. "Well, hello. Who are you?"

"I'm Carson."

"Hello, Carson. Welcome to our home."

"My dad was late."

"Oh, I see. Well, sometimes it can't be helped."

"Who are you talking to?" Janie asked, coming out of the kitchen to see who besides Daisy had arrived.

"This is Carson. He's my best student," Daisy said. "He's going to hang out with us for a little while until his dad gets here. He got caught up in a meeting at work."

"Are you hungry, Carson?" Janie asked.

"I don't know. I never had ribs."

"My dad's ribs are the best. He cooks them all day long and they're so tender and smoky," Daisy said. "And I didn't even introduce you, did I? This is my dad, Mr. Bane. And this is my mom, Mrs. Janie."

Carson nodded and smiled a little, mainly trying not to look anyone in the eye.

“We’ve also got macaroni and cheese, with lots and lots of cheese, and some corn on the cob.”

“I like macaroni and cheese,” Carson said.

“I’ll show you where the bathroom is so you can wash up and then we’ll have dinner. Is that alright?” Janie asked, slipping into grandmother mode so easily it was almost scary.

“I guess so,” Carson said, casting a quick questioning glance up at Daisy.

“I’ll be right in there, through that door waiting on you,” Daisy said.

Carson nodded, then shoved his hands in his little pockets and fell into step right behind Janie.

Bane watched Janie and Carson, then turned to look at Daisy. “That’s the little boy we met at the grand opening, right? The one you talk about.”

“Yes. He’s such a sweet kid. And so talented. I wish I had an ounce of his natural ability.”

“He seems like a nice boy.”

“He’s not really good with strangers and new situations. I’m surprised he’s even talking to you and Mom.”

“He knows we’re good people. Kids can sense that.”

“I suppose,” Daisy said, putting Carson’s backpack on the sofa before following her dad into the kitchen to get a look at dinner. “It smells so good, Dad.”

“It’s a good batch,” Bane said, pinching a piece off of one of the ribs to give her a taste.

Daisy took the sample from him and quickly popped it in her mouth. “Oh, yeah. I’m having seconds.”

“Help me get these plates served?” Bane asked.

“Sure,” Daisy answered, taking the plates of ribs, one at a time from him and adding macaroni and cheese, and buttered corn on the cob to each. They were just putting the last plate on the table when Carson and Janie joined them.

“Have a seat, Carson,” Janie said, gesturing at the table.

“Which seat?” he asked, looking at the table. It was a large table that accommodated a lot of people.

“Daisy’s dad sits there, I sit right beside him, and Daisy sits on the other side of him. Which of the other chairs do you want?”

"I'll sit beside Daisy," he said, walking over and pulling himself up into that chair.

"Good choice! See? I already put your plate there," Daisy said.

Carson nodded.

"Do you want tea, or water, or milk?" Bane asked.

"Milk, please. With ice."

Daisy laughed. "That's how I like my milk, too. Ice cold!"

Bane poured Carson's milk, tea for the rest, and everyone sat so they could enjoy dinner.

Carson ate almost all of his macaroni and cheese before he tried the corn, but had left the ribs untouched so far.

"Aren't you going to try the ribs?" Bane asked.

Carson looked up at Bane over his corn on the cob. "I never ate that before."

"They're very, very good," Bane said, nodding for emphasis.

"They smell good," Carson admitted.

"You should try one. If you don't like it, you don't have to finish it."

Carson looked down at the two smoked ribs slathered in barbecue sauce on his plate.

"They have bones."

"Yep. You use them like a handle. And bite the meat off them like you do the corn off the cob," Bane said. "Watch." He picked up a rib and demonstrated. "Oh, man, that's so good! It's so tender."

Carson smirked a little.

"What? What's so funny?" Bane asked, pretending he didn't know why Carson was smirking.

"You got sauce on your face," Carson said.

"Naw, I didn't do that, did I?" Bane asked, swiping at the sauce, but instead of wiping it off, he just made more of a mess by smearing it across his cheek.

Carson laughed. "Now you have it all over your face!" he said.

Bane laughed. "You know what? They're so good, I don't mind having sauce all over my face."

Carson looked down at the ribs before he poked one with just one of his fingers. The sauce stuck to his finger and he brought his hand up to his nose to sniff at it.

"Smells good, doesn't it?"

Carson nodded.

“Taste it. I promise you’ll like it.”

“What if I don’t?”

“Then you don’t have to eat it.”

Carson looked thoughtfully down at the ribs.

“And, I’ll keep the sauce on my face until the next time I see you just because you tried it, whether you like it or not.”

“People will think you’re silly.”

“If I can make my friends more comfortable, I don’t care how silly people think I am.”

Carson watched Bane for a little longer before he looked down at the ribs again, and slowly picked one up. He held it like an English lady holds a cup of tea when sipping from it, definitely not wanting to get the sticky sauce all over it. But to his credit, he did hold it up to his mouth and take a little bite. He chewed, turned the rib this way and that examining it, then brought it to his mouth again to take another bite.

“Huh? Huh? I told you it was good!” Bane said, taking another huge bite and making sure to get more sauce on his face.

Carson smiled at Bane and took a big bite, not caring, or maybe even proud, that he too had sauce across his face.

Daisy smiled as Janie winked at her across the table.

A knock at the door had Janie getting up to answer the door. Minutes later she was returning with Charlie.

“Hi!” Daisy said, when she saw Charlie walk into the dining room between the kitchen and the living room.

“Hi,” Charlie said. He chuckled when he got a good look at Carson and Bane.

“We’re having ribs,” Carson informed him.

“I see that. You like ribs?” Charlie asked.

“Yes, sir. Mr. Bane makes good ribs.”

“Have a seat,” Janie said. “I’ll get you a plate.”

“Oh, no, thank you. I don’t want to be any more trouble than I’ve already been.”

“It’s no trouble! Sit down,” Janie said, pointing to the empty place beside her chair.

“You may as well sit. You won’t get out of here until she feeds you,” Bane said.

Charlie glanced in the direction Janie had gone, which he assumed was the kitchen, then toward the front door. He held a single strawberry shake in his hand. "I, uh, I brought you a shake. When I drove past Vince's it was a spur of the moment decision. I didn't know you lived with your parents or I'd have brought more than one."

"That's so thoughtful of you," Daisy said. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," Charlie said.

"Dad, this is Charlie. He's Carson's dad. Charlie, this is my father, Bane."

Charlie stuck his hand out before he noticed that both of Bane's were sticky with sauce.

"I'll take a rain check on the handshake. Next time bring more just in case. I like chocolate. But for now, sit. We've got plenty of food," Bane said.

"I will remember you like chocolate. And thank you," Charlie said, pulling out the chair and having a seat.

"Here we go!" Janie said, placing an overloaded plate in front of Charlie.

"Oh, my gosh, Mom! That's a lot of food!" Daisy exclaimed.

"Sorry. I'm used to Bane and all the rest of our family. The men are really big eaters," Janie said, as she started in on her meal again. "And if everyone finishes their food, I have chocolate pudding for dessert! Well, everyone except for Daisy, she already has a strawberry shake. Did you know that strawberry shakes are her absolute favorite?" Janie asked.

"I found out earlier today when I dropped Carson off at the art studio. She was having one and telling me how much she likes them," Charlie admitted.

"Loves them. Not likes. She loves them," Janie said.

"Dad, are you going to get barbecue sauce on your face like me and Mr. Bane?" Carson asked.

"I might," Charlie said.

"You have to. It's how you do it," Carson said.

"Well, then, I'm sure I will," Charlie said.

"Mrs. Janie? Could I have some more macaroni and cheese?" Carson asked.

"You certainly can!" Janie said, dabbing at her mouth before she reached for Carson's plate.

“I’ll get it, Mom,” Daisy said.

“No, you finish eating. I like taking care of my guests. I’ll get it,” Janie said.

“So, tell me, Charlie. What do you do?” Bane asked.

“I’m a civil engineer. I’ve been working with the parish government on updating all the infrastructure in the rural areas of the parish.”

“I see,” Bane said, nodding his head in understanding. “You been at it long?”

“Yes, well, not here long. Moved here for the job and the only thing I’ve managed to get done so far is figure out that it’s like pulling teeth to get anything done.”

“Welcome to Louisiana and her politics. It’s not just this parish,” Bane said.

“Yeah, that’s what I hear. I’m not giving up, though,” Charlie said.

“So, your wife make the move with you?” Bane asked.

“I don’t have a mommy,” Carson said.

“She passed,” Charlie said, his voice softening a little.

“You know what that means, don’t you?” Janie asked, returning to the table with Carson’s plate with fresh macaroni and cheese and another rib on it.

Carson shook his head as he looked at Janie.

“It means that you and your dad have a very special angel in heaven watching over you both.”

“You mean my mommy?” Carson asked.

“That’s right,” Janie said.

Carson sat completely still while he thought about the idea that his mother was in heaven watching over him. “I don’t think so,” he finally said as he picked up his fork and started eating again.

“Why don’t you think so?” Janie asked.

“Because if she was watching me, she wouldn’t let the kids be mean to me,” Carson said.

Bane’s jaw twitched.

“We’ve been having some trouble with some of the older kids in Carson’s school. I’ve been successful at controlling myself and going through proper channels, but let me tell you, it’s not easy. But we’ll get through it. We’ve been working with the school,” Charlie said.

“Some kids were mean to Daisy in school when she was little, too. You know what we did?” Bane asked.

“Dad...” Daisy said, sending a clear warning to him not to tell the story of him and her Uncle Maverik terrifying the kids that had been picking on her.

Bane stared at Daisy as he finished. “We taught her to protect herself. So the next time they were mean to her, she knocked them on their butts and they left her alone after that.”

Carson kept eating, not seemingly engaged anymore. He ate every bite, and shortly after, Charlie had eaten all he could of the massive amounts of food that Janie had put on his plate.

“I’m stuffed. I cannot eat another bite.”

“Would you like dessert?” Janie asked.

“Oh, no thank you. I have no room for it,” Charlie said.

“I want dessert!” Carson said.

“I’ll be right back,” Janie said, gathering plates and heading toward the kitchen.

“I’ll bring my plate. It’s my job to take my dishes to the kitchen every evening,” Carson said.

“I’ll help, Mom,” Daisy said, gathering more dishes and following her mother.

With both women out of the room, Bane sat forward, his hands clasped on the table before him and looked Charlie in the eye. “So, what do you think of my daughter?”

“I’m sorry?” Charlie asked.

“Don’t pretend with me. I know you’re here to pick up your son, I know you were really kept late at work, but I also see the way you look at my Daisy. And you even thought to bring her her favorite treat. So, what are your intentions?”

Charlie sat forward, mimicking Bane’s position, and looked directly into Bane’s eyes. “I’ll be honest with you, sir. It doesn’t seem to matter what my intentions are. She blocks me at every turn. I can’t get much past small talk before she’s shoving me away.”

“But you want more than small talk?”

“I haven’t been interested in anyone since I lost Carson’s mother. And I thought I never would be, but everything about Daisy screams that I’ll never meet anyone else like her. She’s amazing. She’s smart, and talented,

and sweet, and kind. She's both gentle and strong and independent, though she makes me want to protect her. How do you protect someone that's so independent that you haven't even been able to get her to agree to a first date yet?" Charlie asked, sitting back frustratedly.

"Is that all?" Bane asked.

"No. She makes me want to be a better man. I don't even know her yet and I can't stop imagining what it would be like to have a life with her. And Carson adores her. And you got him to eat ribs. He doesn't eat ribs! He eats chicken nuggets, and pizza. Occasionally he'll get a vegetable or two down, but for the most part, it's not happening. And he's sitting here talking to you and your wife like he's known you all his life. He doesn't like strangers. I don't know what to think of this..."

Bane had listened to all Charlie had said, searching for lies, but found nothing but the truth. This man legitimately cared for Daisy. And she'd mentioned him and his son several times, so they'd obviously made an impact on her as well. Bane smiled. "You give them space to come to you in their own time."

"What?" Charlie asked, momentarily confused.

"How you protect a woman that's as independent as Daisy... you give them space to come to you in their own time. But whatever you do, don't give up on her. Daisy is so worth the effort. She's been hurt, and she's afraid to trust. But I think you could be a good thing for her."

Charlie nodded and sat forward again. "Unless she makes it clear she wants nothing to do with me, I'm not going anywhere."

"Good man," Bane said. "But just so you know, if you hurt her, I'll kill you. She kept the last one a secret and I'm still searching for answers. If you make the mistake of hurting her like the last one did, it'll be the last thing you do."

"Fair enough," Charlie said.

"Here we go!" Janie said, walking back into the dining room with a tray of individual bowls of chocolate pudding.

"If I finish my pudding, can you teach me how to defend myself?" Carson asked.

Bane reached out and put his sauce covered hand over Carson's. "You bet I will. It'll take a little while to teach you everything. But I can show you a few things tonight that will help you out real quick."

Carson grinned and started spooning chocolate pudding into his mouth.

Chapter 5

Standing outside an hour later, Charlie held Carson's hand in his as he stood at the foot of the steps looking up at Daisy and her family. "Thank you again, so much for welcoming us into your home."

"You're welcome any time, Charlie. You and Carson feel free to stop by any time you want to," Janie said.

"She's right. Y'all just come on whenever it occurs to you," Bane said.

"Thank you. I appreciate that. I don't want to be a pest, though," Charlie said, with a soft laugh.

"See? He doesn't want to be a pest," Daisy said to her parents with an incredulous tone in her voice.

"Oh, you're not a pest. We miss having a little one around," Janie said.

"Besides, you owe me a chocolate shake," Bane added.

"You didn't teach me a protection trick," Carson added to the mix.

"Oh! You're right. I didn't," Bane said, jogging down the steps quickly.

Carson pulled his hand free of his father's and hurried to meet Bane.

Bane squatted down to Carson's level. "Okay, now I'll teach you a lot more next time you come, but for now, put your hands right here," he said, taking Carson's hands in his and laying the boy's fingertips against the pulse on either side of his neck. "You feel my blood flowing through there?"

"Yes, sir. It feels like a heart beat."

"Exactly! Now, turn your hand like this," Bane said, holding his hand perfectly straight. "Hold your other hand out and practice hitting your palm with it, like this." Bane held his hand out just like he'd showed Carson and brought down the outer edge onto his own palm. He watched Carson repeat the action a few times before he nodded. "Good. That's good. Now, I'm going to pretend to hit you like that, but not really. So, you'll see how to do it."

"Okay," Carson said.

Bane moved very slowly, reaching out with both hands, gently bringing the outer edges of them down onto the arteries in Carson's neck. "See? You hit on the pulse in both sides of their neck, at the same time, as

hard as you can, keeping your hands straight and hard, like a piece of wood. And I mean, hit them hard!” Bane said, as he brought his own hands back to rest on his thighs.

“Okay!” Carson said, reaching out quickly and chopping his hands into Bane’s neck on either side.

“Carson!” Charlie exclaimed, horrified as he grabbed Carson and pulled him away from Bane.

Daisy laughed, as did Janie.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Bane!” Charlie said.

Bane was wheezing and Charlie really thought Carson had hurt him. But when Bane finally looked up, it was clear he was laughing so hard it was causing him to wheeze. “That’s it! That’s exactly how you do it!” Bane exclaimed, holding his hand up for Carson to high-five him.

Carson just looked at his hand not knowing what Bane expected him to do.

Bane took him by the wrist and slapped Carson’s hand against his. “High Five”

“Why is it called that?”

“Lift your hand, slap your friend’s, you got five fingers. High five,” Bane said.

“Wouldn’t that be high ten. If your friend has five fingers, too?” Carson asked.

Bane’s smile fell immediately as he thought about it. “Yeah. I think it would be. Okay, high ten!” he said, holding his hand up.

Carson slapped his hand against Bane’s.

“Okay, next lesson, but do not test it on anybody. Only use it if somebody lays their hands on you.”

“Yes, sir,” Carson said, waiting eagerly for whatever Bane would teach him next.

“Alright, place the heel of your hand right here,” Bane said, holding the heel of his hand against the underside of the tip of Carson’s nose. “You know how you used the outer edge of your hand to hit my neck?”

“Yes.”

“You use this right here, it’s called the heel of your hand. And you hit out and up at the same time, just as hard as you absolutely can, right under the tip of the person’s nose that was stupid enough to put his hands on you. I promise you he’ll start crying and won’t be able to see. You can go get an

adult, or you can get away, or you can keep hitting him with some other things I'm gonna teach you next time I see you."

Carson smiled and nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Bane."

"You're welcome. Am I going to see you soon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll look forward to it."

Charlie started loading Carson in his car, but Carson stopped him and looked back at Bane. "What do you do if somebody tries to trip you? Or knocks your books out of your hands?"

"Same person all the time?"

"Yes."

"Knocking your books out of your hands, you know where he's going to be, right?"

"Yes."

"You walk up to him like you don't remember what he's going to do. He stops you and reaches out to slap your books out of your hands. You know what's coming. You're ready, right? You snatch your books out of the way so he loses his balance just enough to lean forward, then you bring your books down on the back of his head. Drop your books after you hit him. Looks like you dropped your books on him by accident. Somebody trying to trip you. Same thing. Be prepared. Keep your eyes on the ground as you get closer. He sticks his foot out trying to trip you, you lift your foot and you stomp his right on top, right here," Bane explained, pointing to the arch in the top of his own foot.

Carson grinned at Bane. "Yes, sir. I think I can do that."

"No matter what, you hit, you kick, you fight for as long as they're trying to hurt you. Eventually they'll decide you're too much trouble and pick somebody else to be mean to."

"I'll have to help protect whoever they pick on next."

"Because you're a good man."

"I'm a little kid."

"Don't matter how little you are. You're learning to be a man."

Carson looked at Bane for a minute then nodded. "I am." He then allowed his father to put him in the car.

Charlie looked over at Bane as he turned to get in the driver's seat of his car.

“You know, he doesn’t talk to strangers, and he only eats chicken nuggets and pizza and macaroni and cheese. I get here and he’s having barbecued ribs, and talking to all of you like he’s known you all his life. I don’t know how, and I don’t understand it. But I’m so thankful. Thank you for taking time with my Carson. He struggles sometimes, and it breaks my heart.”

“He’s a good boy. He reminds me so much of my brother, Bam, when we were kids,” Bane said.

Charlie huffed a laugh as he thought about how he’d found Carson with all kinds of new attitude that evening. “I can’t get him to even wrestle with me, but he’s asking you to help him learn to fight a bully.”

“Hope it’s not too much. If so, I can tell him that there’s other ways to deal with bullies, but I’ll be honest, none of them work but whipping their asses. They already know he’s a soft target, so it’s not going to stop until he puts them in their place.”

“You know, there’s all kinds of opinions on how to address bullying. I’ve been trying to do it through the proper channels, the right way so to speak, up at the school, and nobody’s done a damn thing about it. Do I want Carson to fight? No. But do I want him to fold further in on himself as they take away what little self-confidence he’s got? Hell no. Like you said, he’s learning to be a man. I want him to be a man who can defend himself and anyone he loves.”

“That’s how we see it. Daisy and her brother, and all her cousins were raised that way. Peaceful, and respectful. But if somebody pushes it, they can handle it.”

“I’m thinking that’s the best way to be.”

“It is for some people.”

“I can see that,” Charlie said, lifting a hand in a wave as he opened his door.

“We meant it now, Charlie. Y’all come back and visit,” Bane said.

“We will, sir. Thank you for everything.”

Bane went back up the steps and stood there with Janie and Daisy, waving as Charlie backed out and drove away.

Daisy was the first to go inside.

Moments later her parents followed her in.

“He’s such a nice young man,” Janie said.

“Carson is a sweet little boy,” Daisy said as she picked up the last few dessert dishes and carried them toward the kitchen.

“I meant Charlie,” Janie said.

“Yep. I like him,” Bane said.

“What? You don’t even know him!” Daisy exclaimed.

“Don’t matter. I like him.”

“You should go out with him,” Janie said.

“Mom!”

“What? You should. He’s nice, and we like Carson, too.”

“Your mother’s right. He’s good for you. You should go out with him.”

“You don’t know him and you’re trying to set me up with him!” Daisy exclaimed.

“He’s a good guy,” Bane said.

“He is,” Janie agreed.

“Why? What makes you think that?” Daisy demanded.

“He brought you a strawberry shake,” Janie said, like he’d brought her a million dollars.

“A strawberry shake?” Daisy asked.

“Mmhmm,” Janie said, gesturing toward the now empty cup the shake had come in.

“Dad! You can’t seriously believe that because he brought me a strawberry shake I should mate him for life,” Daisy said.

“No. But I talked to him. There’s no lie. He really cares, Daisy. There’s no bullshit with him.”

“And I should mate him for that?”

“No. You should date him. Give the boy a chance. He’s good. And he’s kind, and he cares about you. Don’t let whatever it is you’ve been shoving down deep inside you steal the rest of your life from you. And I really like Carson.”

Daisy opened her mouth to respond, but closed it when she realized if she continued this conversation, questions that she didn’t want to have to address would come up. “I’ll think about it.”

“You do that. Besides, he’s promised me a chocolate shake, and I want my chocolate shake,” Bane said, winking at her as he walked past her.

Daisy headed into the kitchen to finish cleaning up from dinner, but her mind was on Charlie. Her dad was right. He was kind. And he was

gentle, and he was so handsome. At least to her he was. But that was part of the problem. She didn't trust her own judgment anymore. The very fact that she found him attractive was enough to send caution signals to her brain.

For the first time in a long time her Bear sat up alert in her mind. *Mate*, she whispered.

No! We've been that route once. Look what it got us.

Her Bear lay back down and curled up in the back of her mind again.

But the idea that Charlie might be more than a passing interest kept nagging at her brain, and her father's words replayed in her memory.

"There's no lie. He really cares."

Daisy closed her eyes and tried to sense anything about him herself, but her fear must have been blocking her senses.

"You still doing dishes?" Janie asked, walking into the kitchen behind her.

"Almost done," Daisy said.

"Here, let me help. What are your plans tonight?"

"Just taking a shower, then a good book, or a movie."

"You should go out for a while."

"Mom, I don't do the whole going out thing. Especially alone."

Janie shrugged. "Well, then go visit a cousin or something. Get out of the house for a while. Have some girl talk."

Daisy thought about Analise. But Analise would be trying to put Harley to bed and her visit would just get in the way. But Emmalyn didn't have kids. "You know what? Maybe I'll go pay Emmalyn a visit."

"That's a great idea," Janie said.

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Emmalyn rested on her knees beside the toilet. Her arms were draped around the seat and her head rested on her arm as she tried to catch her breath.

"Em, you alright, baby?" Barron asked.

She didn't lift her head, but she did lift a hand and flip him off.

Barron chuckled. "Can I get you anything at all?"

"Leave me alone," she managed to force out between deep breaths.

"I'll be right out here. Just let me know when you need help, okay?"

"It's not supposed to be like this," she said shakily.



“What’s wrong?” Bam asked, sticking his head in the door to see how his youngest was doing. “I’ll just heal her.”

“No!” Emmalyn exclaimed.

“She’s throwing up, honey. I told you that already. It’s morning sickness,” Everly said, appearing behind Bam and peeking into the bathroom from the small opening between the door frame and Bam’s side.

“It’s nighttime! It can’t be morning sickness,” Bam said.

“Go away!” Emmalyn begged mournfully. “Why does everyone want to talk to me when I can’t stop gagging? Just let me be quiet!” she whined.

“Alright, everyone go back in the living room. I got this,” Barron said firmly, but respectfully.

“Come on, hon. Barron’s right. Let’s go back in the living room and allow him to take care of his mate,” Everly said.

“Better him than me,” Bam said, allowing Everly to take him back to the living room. “She’s mean.”

“What does that mean?” Emmalyn demanded, her head finally coming up off her arm to glare in the direction her father went. “I am not mean! I’m sick and I’m exhausted, and I’m throwing up!”

“Means nothing. You see me? I’m right here. Whatever you need. Whatever you want, I got you. All you need to worry about is where I am and what you need next,” Barron said, smiling lovingly at Emmalyn as he stroked an errant sweaty tendril of hair out of her face and tucked it back behind her ear.

Emmalyn pouted a bit, then swiped at her ponytail holder. “I need a softer ponytail holder. This one pulls. And I need some frozen grapes. The green ones. And I need some fried oysters and fried yellow squash.”

“Okay. I can do all that. I even have some grapes frozen already because you liked them so much yesterday.”

“You do?”

“Of course, I do. Who else is going to know what you want before you want it?”

“Nobody,” she said, laying her head back on her arm with a tired sigh.

“You ready to get up yet?”

“I’m not sure I can. I’m so tired. I’m so sick. I’m so tired of being sick. All I do is throw up and lean on the toilet. Why is it like this?”

“Baby, you’re growing a baby. You’ve been sitting here throwing up sporadically for three days. You’re allowed to be tired and you’re allowed

to be grumpy and exhausted.”

“I’d like to go in the living room and lie on the sofa, but what if I need to throw up all of a sudden?”

“Then I’ll rush you in here. If I’m too slow, I’ll just clean it up.”

“I feel like I ran a marathon.”

“Come on, let me get you up and into the living room. Then I’ll take care of everything else you want, alright?”

“I need ketchup for the fried squash and oysters.”

“I already have it added to the list in my head.”

She raised her arms to loop around Barron’s neck as he lifted her from the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’ve spent more than half the last three days with the toilet. I think it’s time to call somebody about the extreme morning sickness.”

“I don’t have morning sickness. I just have sickness. All damn day and night. Daddy’s right.”

“When did this start?” Everly asked as Barron carried Emmalyn into the living room and laid her in her favorite spot on the sofa.

“About three days ago. All day, everyday, and all night.”

“I’ll call the doctor,” Everly said. “This is not normal.”

Barron stopped and looked over at Everly. “How not normal?”

“Some women are very, very sick. They end up having to be hospitalized. I don’t think it’s that bad, but if we don’t do something to stop the nausea it could be.”

“If you could call while I take care of getting her the other things she wants, that’d be great,” Barron said.

Everly took out her phone and started scrolling through her contacts. “You’re still seeing Dr. Boynton, aren’t you?”

“Yes, just saw him again last week,” Emmalyn said, gratefully accepting the overly fluffy blanket from Barron as he walked back into the living room and started arranging it over and around her.

“I brought this scrunchy. How’s this one? Soft enough?” Barron asked, holding out an over sized scrunchy covered in velvet for her to see.

“Yeah,” she said, taking it from him and looping it quickly around her hair. “That’s better,” she said, resting her head on the throw pillow he offered her.

"I'll get you some grapes," Barron said, kissing her forehead before he hurried into the kitchen and came back with a Tupperware bowl full of frozen green grapes and a gumbo pot. He handed her the grapes, then sat beside her, his hand on the bend of her knees, while Everly dealt with the nurses on the telephone.

"Why did you bring my gumbo pot?" Emmalyn asked.

"In case you have to throw up again," Barron said.

"I'm going to need a new gumbo pot if I throw up in that one," she said, eyeing the pot.

"I'll buy you two. How are you feeling, Em?" Barron asked.

She ate another frozen grape and closed her eyes as she chewed.

"Weak."

"Yes, I understand that. But I'm here with her," Everly said. Everly listened for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. Hold on." She held the phone out to Emmalyn who glared at it as she popped another grape into her mouth.

"I got it," Barron said, taking the phone from Everly's outstretched hand. "Hi, this is Barron Sanders. Emmalyn is having trouble. She's been throwing up for about three days."

He listened. Then his brows bunched up. "Yes, I'm aware that it's to be expected. But it's not to be expected for sixty of those seventy-two hours. She needs something for nausea so that she can at least rest. This is not standard morning sickness. It's sickness all the time. She hasn't slept in three days, she hasn't eaten anything except frozen grapes in three days, and even those come back up. Do something!" he snarled into the phone.

Everly raised her brows with a smirk and caught Bam's gaze who was grinning ear-to-ear. "I think he's got it covered," she whispered.

Bam nodded and headed into the kitchen to start cooking the oysters and squash he heard Emmalyn ask for.

"Fine. Thank you. And if my mother-in-law contacts you again, I give you permission to give her any information she wants, or do whatever she asks. She's trying to help me take care of her daughter," he snapped. He ended the call and handed the phone back to Everly. "They said they're calling in something to the pharmacy for the nausea, but if it hasn't stopped by this evening, she might have to go to the hospital to get an IV so she doesn't dehydrate."

"I'm not dehydrated," Emmalyn said.

“You might be. It could be why you feel so weak,” Bam said.

“You think so?” Emmalyn asked.

“I think so,” Everly said.

“Me, too,” Barron said. “Eat those grapes. Anything else you want?”

“Squash and oysters.”

“I’m on it,” Bam said.

“How about some watermelon? You love watermelon,” Everly said.

Emmalyn shook her head and while still chewing rested her head on the throw pillow again. She swallowed and popped another into her mouth.

The sound of a knife hitting a chopping board had her opening her eyes and focusing on her father standing across the large open living room and kitchen as he sliced yellow squash. “Thank you, Daddy,” she said.

“You’re welcome, baby. I didn’t know you’d been so sick.”

“It’s okay.” She ate another grape and let her eyes fall closed again.

“How long before the prescription is ready?” Everly asked.

“Probably about an hour. They’re phoning it into the pharmacy at the grocery since it’s almost 8:00 P. M. They’re only open until 10:00 P. M., so it’ll at least be done by then,” Barron said.

“Alright. I’m going to run get it. With me standing there, they’ll hurry up if it’s not ready when I get there,” Everly said.

“Appreciate it,” Barron said.

“Get some more yellow squash, too. I’m frying everything they have so she’ll have it when she wants it,” Bam said.

“And oysters. I’ll get more of those, too. But don’t fry them until Emmalyn’s ready to eat them. They’re not good leftover,” Everly said.

“Got it,” Bam said, opening and closing cabinets until he found the fish fry to batter the oysters, and the flour and seasoning to put in it for battering the squash.

“Some fruit juice Popsicles,” Barron said.

“Why?” Emmalyn asked.

“More sugars and nutrients in you,” Barron said.

“I’m about to eat squash and oysters. Don’t want Popsicles. Got grape pops right here.”

“Em, I know you want squash and oysters, but I’ll be surprised if you can hold them down. I’m surprised you’re holding down the grapes,” Barron said.

“I just won’t eat them until Momma gets back with medicine.” She ate another few grapes and put her head back on the pillow.

Barron looked over at Everly.

Everly nodded, then winked at Barron. “I’ll get juice Popsicles, and whatever else I think might help.”

“Thank you,” Barron said.

Somebody knocked on the door as Everly was getting her purse.

“Whoever that is, tell them to go away! Emmalyn does not need an audience,” Barron snapped.

“On it,” Everly said, going straight to the door. She pulled it open and did a little excited gasp. “It’s Daisy! Hi, Daisy. How are you, honey?” she asked, pulling Daisy in the house to both get her off the porch with all the flying nighttime insects, and to hug her tightly. “Come on in, Daisy. I’m running to the store real quick.” She hugged Daisy and kissed her cheek, then shouted to everyone else over her shoulder as she went through the door. “I’ll be back!”

Daisy looked around the living room. “Hi.”

Barron lifted his chin in greeting, then suddenly realized Daisy could help heal Emmalyn, at least take away some of her weakness.

“Daisy! Come on in,” Barron said, jumping up to better greet her.

“Hey, everybody. Uncle Bam,” she said, smiling at him as Barron guided her to Emmalyn.

“Hey, sweetie,” Bam responded as he flashed her a smile and finished slicing the yellow squash.

“Em, look who’s here, baby,” Barron said.

Emmalyn, who’d let her eyes fall closed, opened them and angled her head to look at Daisy without actually lifting it. “Hey,” she said, her voice weak and shaky.

“Why didn’t you let me know you were sick? I’d have come to heal you by now. I could have made you better.”

“Well, it’s not exactly sick, sick,” Emmalyn said.

“What do you mean? You’re either sick or you’re not,” Daisy said.

Emmalyn sighed sadly and tears started streaming from her eyes. “I’m pregnant, Daisy. And I can’t stop throwing up, and I’m so sick. And I’m not sure I should be doing this at all. I’ll be a horrible mother. I’m so screwed up, Daisy. What is my kid going to come out like?” she started sobbing.

“Oh, Em,” Daisy said, dropping to her knees right in front of the sofa Emmalyn was lying on.

Emmalyn threw herself into Daisy’s arms and Daisy immediately began soothing her, murmuring to her and stroking her back.

Daisy glanced over at Barron and smiled encouragingly at him.

“I’ll go help Bam,” he whispered.

Daisy nodded, then went back to trying to calm Emmalyn.

“You can’t really believe that your child will be anything other than spectacular, can you?” Daisy asked.

“Yes,” Emmalyn sobbed, pulling back to better see Daisy.

Daisy reached out and used her thumbs to wipe the tears off Emmalyn’s tear-stained face. “Can I tell you what I think?”

Emmalyn sniffled and hiccuped, while giving an effortless shrug.

“I see one of the strongest females I’ve ever known. Of our generation, you’re the strongest. And I see your parents... how many times have we been told the stories of their badassery? Nobody has a story like theirs. And Barron... wow, he is the most calm of all of us. And stronger than most. You know how I know that?”

Emmalyn shook her head.

“Because he tamed you. You knew that he was strong enough to allow you to let down your guard and let him in. You know he’ll never let you down. Right?”

Emmalyn sniffled and nodded.

“The love you two have for each other is enviable. The both of you have this passion for each other that just screams that’s my person and I’ll destroy any who even think otherwise, and that faith you have in each other makes you stronger and helps you grow to be better than you were yesterday, everyday. So, what that tells me is that the same love you two have for each other is what created this child. It’s going to grow up surrounded and supported by that. You’re going to cover that child with endless confidence and the purest love, and they will never, ever doubt who they are and what their place is in this world.”

“What if they end up like me?”

“What, stubborn and a pain?” Daisy teased.

Emmalyn huffed a quick laugh.

“If he or she does start to close herself off because she thinks it makes her stronger... you’ll recognize it immediately because you lived it. And

you'll know how to guide them through it. You're going to be the best mommy."

"You really think so?" Emmalyn asked.

"No, I don't. I know so! And when you get overwhelmed, because you will, every mom does, you'll overcome it and know the absolutely right thing to do about it, because that's who you are. You never let anything win, but you."

Emmalyn laughed through a fresh set of tears as she nodded.

The entire time they'd been talking, Daisy had been holding Emmalyn's hands in hers, and by the time she'd finished, most of Emmalyn's nausea had subsided, and her panic had calmed.

"You okay?" Daisy asked.

"Yeah. I'm just so tired and so weak."

"Here, slide down here on the floor by me, and we'll eat some frozen grapes and watch some T.V. until your dad has your food ready. What are you watching?"

"I don't know."

"We'll find something."

"Okay." Emmalyn slid from the sofa onto the floor and cuddled up with her head on Daisy's shoulder, bundling her comforter around them both. A few minutes later, Emmalyn lifted her head and looked right at Daisy. "Is there a particular reason you came by. Did you need something?"

"Nope. Not a thing. I just felt like you missed me," she said, smiling brightly and not confessing at all that she was having her own issues.

Emmalyn chuckled and leaned her head against Daisy's. "Will you get sick because I was sick?"

"Nope. Some of it was because of the baby. Some was because of your anxiety. I took enough to make you feel better, but not enough to flood my system."

"Smart," Emmalyn said. "Oh! Ghosts! Let's watch that!"

## Chapter 6

By the time Brandt pulled up in front of his house, Tempest was already standing out on their porch, looking down the staircase at him. She'd felt the pain swirling inside him, then his intense need for her, so was waiting for him when he arrived.

He raised his gaze to hers and she simply opened her arms to him. He jogged up the steps to her and she immediately enveloped him in her embrace, kissing his neck and ears as she held him. "Show me," she whispered.

He opened his mind and let her see the replay of the entire encounter between himself and Remi. He threw in the encounter earlier that morning and the condition he'd found Remi in at Vince's. He held onto her just as tightly as she held him, soaking up all the love, all the comfort he knew she'd give him.

When Tempest finally let go enough to ease back and look into his face, she saw that his lashes were damp and he was trying so hard not to get too emotional. This was the hard part of being an Alpha. At least it was for Brandt. He loved all his family, every single one of them was absolutely necessary for his happiness. And he did his absolute best to make sure everyone was safe and had everything they needed so they'd be happy in the clan they all shared. But being an Alpha also meant that sometimes it wasn't enough. If one of your members was really struggling, sometimes the best thing for them was a little tough love. And as in this case, it sometimes went further if the tough love didn't produce the desired affect. "He didn't leave you much choice, my love," Tempest said. "But I promise you it's going to be okay."

"I've trusted and admired Remi all my life. How did it come to this?" Brandt asked.

"He's lost. He's going to need to do the work himself. Until he does, or until something other than you or any of the rest of us happens to touch something deeply enough that he wakes up, nothing else is going to make a difference."

"I shouldn't have been so hard on him. Maybe I should have let the girl in."



“I can tell you right now, you made the right call. She’s all about herself. All she wants is more — of anything. She’s already disrespected you, and intimidated Abby and her kids. She’s trying to separate him from those he trusts. She comes in all sweetness and light, then manipulates him into believing everything she says and blames everyone else for any fall out if they don’t buy into her shit. And he’s hurting so badly inside that he believes it. He’s terrified to be alone, so he’s trying desperately to forge a bond with her.

“He’s got us!”

“We’re not his mate. We have each other. Most of the clan is mated already. He wants that desperately.”

“Stupid bitch,” Brandt grumbled.

“Oh, she’s not stupid by any means. She knows exactly what she’s doing. She’s survived that way all her life. The only reason she didn’t try it with you is because she knows you see right through her. You made the right choice to keep her out.”

“Maybe you can talk to him,” Brandt suggested.

“I’ll try, but I don’t think he’ll react any differently to me. He’s defensive because she’s licking his wounds and justifying everything he says and does while telling him how heartless we all are for not wanting him to be happy.”

“I don’t know how to fix this,” Brandt said.

“It’s going to take more than just you. He’s got to fix himself. Once he does, you can do your part. Until then he wouldn’t recognize any effort you made anyway.”

“Is he going to be alright?”

Tempest smiled at him and smoothed her hand over his cheek. “It’s up to him. Only he can make the choices that take him to where he’s supposed to be.”

The baby, nestled in Tempest’s womb kicked so hard that Brandt felt it. He smiled and looked down at her huge, and I do mean huge, belly.

“Hey, now! Don’t hurt Momma.”

The baby kicked again, and Tempest laughed. “It’s almost time.”

“Now? Right now?!” he demanded, fear coloring his features.

“No, not at this moment, but it won’t be long.”

“Let’s get you inside and off your feet.”

“That’d be great,” Tempest said.

Brandt led her back inside and helped get her propped up on several throw pillows on the sofa. "Can I get you anything?" he asked.

"Just sit with me. I've missed you today."

"Don't have to ask me twice," Brandt said, removing one of the pillows and replacing it with himself.

Tempest leaned back against him and sighed. "Best thing ever."

"Using your mate as a back rest?" he teased.

She laughed. "No, just being beside you. I love you."

"I love you, too. Don't know what I did to deserve you, but thank fuck I did."

Tempest laughed, and snuggled herself against him for an unusually long amount of time until she was comfortable.

"I swear, you're part cat," Brandt said.

"You know my dad's a Dragon. It's kind of like a giant cat. With temper issues. Sometimes."

Brandt laughed this time, but ended up pressing a kiss to her head before leaning his head against hers. "I don't know how to tell everybody Remi's out. I'm going to have to tell not only our people, but all our parents, too. I am not looking forward to that."

"You know what, some may be upset, but ultimately, they'll understand. They're not blind and they've been watching his spiral from the sidelines. Besides, you gave him a choice and he chose to walk away. And it's not forever. It's just until he pulls himself together."

"Isn't that kind of the opposite of what family is? You're supposed to be there for them when they're spiraling."

"Sometimes the people you love are so lost that they don't even see it until something shocks them out of their own heads. Maybe this will do it. And you're forgetting that he practically challenged you. You had to assert yourself, had to stand for the clan. It's what Alphas do. Making poor decisions and trusting the wrong people for yourself is one thing, expecting everyone around you to just follow you blindly into the pits of despair is quite another."

"Why did I want to be an Alpha again?" he asked.

"You were born to it, my dear," she said. She turned in his arms just enough to kiss him. "You did nothing wrong. It'll be okay."

"Promise?" he asked.

"Promise," she answered.



Two days later Daisy was outside helping her dad with lawn work. He was cutting the grass, while Daisy was edging her mother's flower beds. She had her ear buds in, and her safety glasses on, her head bobbing in time to whatever song she was listening to.

Bane had just finished a pass along the empty field next to their house when a car slowly made its way toward him. He brought the lawn tractor to a stop and engaged the brake as he watched the car approach. As it got closer he noticed a little boy in the back seat waving furiously.

Bane grinned and killed the engine on the lawn tractor, swinging a leg over the tractor so he could walk out to the road and greet the driver and his passenger.

The car came to a stop and the window rolled down. "Hello! Hope we're not imposing too terribly much. But you did say any time," Charlie said.

"How you doing, Charlie?" Bane said. "No imposition at all."

Charlie's gaze wandered over to watch Daisy dancing her way down the flower beds with the edger. He chuckled and lost himself for a moment watching her.

"She's something, ain't she?" Bane asked.

Charlie's attention jerked back to Bane. "She really is. I see y'all are busy, maybe it will be better if I just come back later."

"Not at all! Park this thing and get yourself out here and help," Bane said.

"Yes, sir," Charlie said.

"Back it up and park it on the edge of the road back there a bit. Just make sure that people can get around you."

"Will do," Charlie said. He backed up the car and pulled over to the side of the road that ran between Bane's house and the two on the other side. Soon as he turned off the engine, Carson was pushing the back door open and jumping out. He ran right back to where Bane had spoken to them, and still sat waiting. "Stay out of the way, Carson! They're doing yard work."

"I will," he yelled back.

"You ever ride on a lawn tractor?" Bane asked Carson.

"I never rode on any tractor."

“You will today!” Bane said, gesturing for the child to come closer. Carson darted toward Bane, then stopped and looked back at his father.

“You don’t have to do that, Mr. Bane.”

“It’s just Bane. I’m not a mister. And we’ll go cut some grass while you see if you can manage to let her know you’re here.”

“If you’re sure,” Charlie said.

“Of course, I’m sure. I’m never wrong,” Bane said, winking at Charlie as he picked up Carson and put him on the tractor with him, showing him how to start it and then how to turn the steering wheel.

The blades engaged as Bane took his foot off the brake and Carson hunched in on himself.

Bane put his foot back on the brake to stop it. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t like loud noises.”

Bane thought about it for a minute. “You know what? I got some ear mufflers in the house. You sit tight while I run get them, alright?”

“Yes, sir,” Carson said.

“Now, do not start this tractor, or you won’t ever ride on it.”

“I won’t. I’ll just sit here and wait.”

“Good boy,” Bane said. He jogged over the grassy field toward Daisy and Charlie.

Charlie was still waiting quietly for Daisy to look up and see him.

“Boy, just tap her on the shoulder!”

Charlie looked stricken at the idea of that. “No, I don’t think so, sir. She’s really shy, and really jumpy.”

Bane scowled at him, but in all actuality, understood it. Janie had been the same way and he’d had to be extra gentle to win her over. Bane stepped up right beside Daisy and waved a hand in her field of vision. She immediately stopped edging and released the trigger on the edger, then reached for one of her ear pods to remove it so she could hear her father.

“You got company.”

“What?” she asked, realizing only when he stepped away from her that Charlie was standing behind him, and Carson was sitting on the tractor.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were coming by today.”

“I didn’t either,” Charlie said as she fumbled with her phone to turn off the music, took out the other ear pod and dropped them both into her

pocket. "Carson has been begging me since we got home from having dinner with your family the other night to come back. I told him it wasn't nice to come by uninvited, but he pointed out that your mom and dad said any time. So, after much more begging on his part, here we are."

"I see," Daisy said, smiling at him, but still feeling a little uneasy now that the initial surprise had worn off.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. We just thought we'd say hi, and see if maybe you might want to go have a late lunch with us."

"It's almost 2:00 in the afternoon. I ate lunch two hours ago," Daisy said.

"Nothing says you can't have an afternoon snack while two of your favorite friends gorge themselves on whatever it is you'd like to have."

Daisy smiled.

"Go have something to eat, Daisy. Get out from under us," Bane said, as he walked by, headed back toward Carson with a pair of noise reducing ear muffs in his hand.

"I have work to do!" Daisy called out as he got further away. "And I promised to go check on Emmalyn later."

"Didn't you say Everly got her some meds?"

"Well, yeah."

"And that Bam cooked enough for two days, even if Barron eats, too?"

"That's not the point, Daddy."

"Sure it is. Go do something for you. Charlie, go take her away from here. Make her have a good time."

"Yeah, come have fun with me and Carson..." Charlie started.

"Nope. Carson is staying with me. We got yard work to do. You and Daisy go, do something not involving kids, and not involving parents."

Daisy stood almost motionless, trying to determine when her father became such a dictator. Her gaze traveled hesitantly to Charlie, who seemed crestfallen.

"You know what? You don't have to. It's alright, I understand," Charlie said.

She sighed. "No, you don't understand. But if you want to know, I'll tell you at least some of it."

"I'd like to get to know you, Daisy. But if you're not interested, all you have to do is say so. I'm not unreasonable. Fair warning, though."

Carson has decided your dad is some kind of god worthy of hero worship. We may be around from time to time anyway. I hope we can be friends.”

“That’s not it at all, Charlie. It’s just...” she looked away for a second, then back to him, her expression almost afraid. “I’m broken. I don’t know how to fix me.”

“Tell me how to help,” he said.

“I’m not sure you can help. I may be like this forever,” she confessed, her voice going softer and quieter.

“You, just like this, is just fine with me. But I’d like you to be really happy. So if I can help you get to that point, just tell me what you need.”

“You are far too nice to me,” she said, smiling at him.

“I’m just being me. Trying to let you know that I really, really like you. I care about you and I haven’t cared about anyone in a long time. I was raised to be honest, and to let people know when they matter to you. You matter to me.”

“For now,” Daisy said with a snicker, trying to make light of the moment.

“For always, Daisy.”

Daisy’s smile faltered and the lawn tractor with her dad and Carson riding it came back up and made the turn to head back down the field toward the tree line. She watched them as they made the turn, laughing as Carson put his whole little body into turning the tractor. As they started back down the field, following the pattern they’d begun, she brought her attention back to Charlie. “Where is Carson’s mother?”

“She passed when he was just a toddler.”

“So, you’re telling me she’s really gone. There won’t be anyone popping up claiming to be your wife or fiancée, hurling insults at me and threatening me, passing out photos of me and him and leaving them on all the windshields of the vehicles everywhere I frequent, with home-wrecker written across them in red?”

His face went from genuine care to anger in about 2.4 seconds. “Is that what happened? Who the hell did that to you?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I’m just so afraid to trust anybody. I believed him when he said he was divorced. But he wasn’t. He was still very married and I fell for it all. I was such a fool,” she said, her eyes filling with tears she fought furiously to blink away.

Charlie stepped closer to her and placed a single finger beneath her chin, lifting her face so she'd look into his eyes. "First, I need to make sure that you're alright. Then I need to pay this sonofabitch a visit."

"I just want them to forget about me," she begged. "If they find me here, she'll humiliate me here, too."

He shook his head as he pulled her in for a hug, holding her to him, but gently, without pressure. "You're going to be happy again, no matter what that takes. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping it was me in some form or fashion, but even if it's something or somebody else, if that's what you want, that's what you're going to get. Anything it takes. Then I'm going to find a way to make him pay, and his psycho wife, too."

"I just want to forget." She took a step back, away from him and he let her go. "I already left everything behind and came home. I don't want to have to leave home, too."

"You won't. And I mean what I said. You're going to be happy again. That's our mission — no matter what it is that makes you happy. And we're starting with food. Now. You ready?"

Daisy laughed softly. "You're stubborn, you know that?"

"I've been told that before. I prefer to think of it as persistence. Seriously, though. No expectations. Just someone who cares about a very kind lady, taking that very kind lady out to relax and eat and just have no worries for a while. When you want to come back, we will. Deal?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Okay. Deal."

"What do you want to eat?"

"Surprise me."

"I was thinking steak. I found a great steakhouse on the other side of town during the week. If you don't like beef, they have other things, too."

"Are you kidding? I adore steak! Let me trade these shorts for jeans and I'll be right back," she said as she turned and started up the steps.

"I'll be right here," he said. "But don't forget I'm starving!" he called after her.

Daisy hurried inside closing the door hard as she rushed through the living room.

"Do not slam the door, Daisy!" Janie called out.

"Sorry! I'm in a hurry," Daisy answered.

"Why are you hurrying?" Janie asked, her voice raised so Daisy could hear her from the living room.

“I’m going to eat with Charlie! He says he’s starving,” Daisy said with a laugh.

Almost immediately Janie was standing in her doorway, tapping on her closed bedroom door. “Can I come in?!” Janie asked, her mouth pressed to the seam of the door.

“I’m changing!”

“I know, but I have questions!”

Daisy laughed. “Fine.”

Janie opened Daisy’s door and slipped in, closing it carefully behind herself.

Daisy was wearing a pair of jeans, and was in the process of pulling on a shirt, then tearing it off and tossing it to her bed. “I can’t find anything I like!”

“Have you tried your brown one, with the brown sequins on the edges and the fringe over the waistline?”

“It ties in the back, though. It might come loose,” Daisy said.

“Seriously? If I tie it, it won’t come loose. You just don’t want to wear it.”

“I like it. I just don’t want to make too much of a big deal and make him to think it’s a date.”

“Daisy, honey?” Janie said, catching the next shirt Daisy tossed toward the bed. “Is it a date?”

Daisy stopped searching her closet and looked back at her mother. “I think it could be. If I let it.”

“I think that young man would be thrilled to take you on a date. It doesn’t mean you have to marry him. But he seems really nice. And your dad thinks highly of him. I mean, how often is that going to happen?” Janie asked.

Daisy laughed. “Never.”

“I’m just saying, take your head out of the equation just for a minute. What would you feel good wearing?”

Daisy smiled at her mother and pulled on the brown shirt with the sequins edging it, and the fringe. She turned her back to her mother and waited while it was tied in a snug knot at the spot her bra strap would sit, if she was wearing one. This shirt didn’t allow for one. She pulled her pony-tail holder out and shook out her long wavy dark hair, then turned around to face her mother. “What do you think?”



“Gorgeous!”

“You sure?”

“Not a doubt about it,” Janie said. She watched as Daisy pulled on her favorite beat to hell pair of light tan cowboy boots, checked her reflection one more time, then kissed her mother and ran out of the room.

“Be careful, baby!” Janie called after her.

“I will!” Daisy called back.

Janie went into the living room and to the front door that had just been slammed again as Daisy left. She opened the door and walked out on the porch to watch them leaving. “Y’all have fun!” she called out.

Charlie and Daisy looked back quickly, waving at her just before Charlie helped her into his car, then closed the door before walking around to the driver’s side.

Janie continued to watch as the young man made a U-turn in the road between theirs and Bam’s houses and drove away. Once they were out of sight, she closed her eyes, and whispered a small prayer. “Please, God, let him make her so happy that she’ll never think of anything else again.”

## Chapter 7

Brandt slowly drove his truck up the gravel drive leading from the highway to Kaid's property, and the houses of all the older generation of their shifter clan. But this time he was not headed to visit his parents, or even seek advice from Kaid. This time he was actually reluctant to be there. He parked outside Avaleigh's and Daniel's home, and took a minute to settle his nerves before he finally got out. This was not a conversation he was looking forward to having. As he walked toward the door, Daniel pulled it open.

"Hey, Brandt. How's things?" Daniel asked.

"Ain't gonna lie, they could be better," Brandt answered.

The slight bunching of Daniel's brows let Brandt know that Daniel had heard him, but instead of digging for answers, Daniel chose to let Brandt reveal whatever he'd come to talk about in his own time. "No baby yet?" Daniel asked.

"No, and she's about ready to go jogging to get something to start happening!" Brandt said.

"It'll happen soon enough," Daniel said.

"Mind if I come in and talk to you and Aunt Avaleigh for a bit?"

"No, come on in. You want something to drink? You hungry? You know Avaleigh's got food for an army in here."

Brandt chortled a little. "Nah, I'm alright. Thank you, though."

Daniel waited for Brandt to walk past him, then closed the door.

"Avaleigh! Brandt's here!" he called out.

Brandt could hear the clank of a spoon or a spatula against a pot coming from the kitchen.

"I'll be right there," she called. And true to her word, it was only a few seconds before she was breezing into the living room to hug Brandt. "Hey, baby! You good?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm alright."

Avaleigh looked at Daniel, who gave her a little shrug. "Everything okay?"

Brandt sighed as he began to shake his head. "No. No, it's not. That's why I'm here."

“What’s going on?” Daniel asked.

“I came here first because I owe it to the two of you to tell you what’s happening in private rather than spring it on you in front of everybody else.”

“Alright...” Daniel said, putting his arm around Avaleigh’s waist, the two of them standing together to face whatever it was that Brandt had to say.

“Is Remi alright?” Avaleigh asked quietly.

“He’s not injured, but he’s far from alright,” Brandt said. The expression on his face clearly conveyed the anxiety he was experiencing from being in the position he was in, but there was nothing he could do for it.

“What’s happened?” Daniel asked.

“He’s left the clan,” Brandt said.

“What?!” Daniel half-shouted.

Brandt raised his hands to signal that everybody stay calm.

“I don’t understand, Brandt! He was always proud to be a member of this clan! Why would he leave?” Avaleigh asked.

“He’s been struggling, Aunt Avaleigh. He’s found coping mechanisms that are just off the charts, and directly in conflict to the rest of us.”

“Like?” Daniel demanded.

Brandt sighed. “I didn’t come here to tell you all about his behavior. I just wanted to let you know before everybody else found out.”

“Brandt, I appreciate that. But I’m thinking you better start from the beginning and tell us everything. I don’t want anything glossed over to spare our feelings. I want to know what the hell has happened and why our boy isn’t a member of our clan anymore,” Daniel said.

“Let me just start by saying that I hope it’s temporary. I hope he pulls his head out of his ass and makes things right, but until then, I can’t have him the way he is.”

“Tell us,” Avaleigh said.

Brandt sighed and launched into the facts that brought him and Remi to have a face off. “He’s drinking cases of anything he can get his hands on daily. He’s only been to work a handful of times in the last month and when he does show up, he’s half drunk and gets there in time for maybe a half a day. Tried to tell me that he’s been doing accounting instead of being at the

work site, which is bullshit, I had Angelle pull up the sign-in log for me, and he hasn't worked in the books for weeks."

"Do you have any idea how much alcohol it takes to get a Dragon drunk and then cause a hangover?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, I do. So, you see the problem," Brandt said. "He's up all night blaring the music so loud he's making the windows at his neighbor's house rattle, and having different women at his house every damn day. Which, the women, that's his business, but the noise and shit all night long has to stop. Christian lives on one side and Kiernan and his family on the other. He's waking the kids up all night, every night. Keeping Kiernan and Shaun up all night, and they get up for work before six every day. Christian comes home to get some rest between rotations at the hospital, and he's just stopped coming home because there is no rest when Remi is partying all night. Then lately he's got with this girl that is just a problem from the word go."

"For example?" Daniel asked.

"I went to his house to drag his ass to work a couple of days ago. Almost noon and they're still sleeping. She is screaming and yelling at me. He's pissed because I woke him up. She's threatening to sue me because I dared to trespass on 'their property'. I told him to get her off our property because the whole time I'm trying to deal with him, she's screeching at me at how Remi told her to consider his house her house and how I have no right to be there. I finally told her myself to get out before I put her out. He tried to defend her, but I wasn't having it. Found out that she's been intimidating Abby and the kids when she's there. Abby is outside in her own yard with the kids, who the hell wants to intimidate a young mother with babies? Nothing physically threatening, just dirty looks and glaring at her and the kids. And I'm sorry, no matter who it was, I'm not allowing that shit. Not from a stranger, and certainly not from Remi. Our people look to me for safety, and this little..." Brandt stopped himself when he realized he was getting angry about Olivia again, and refocused. "Anyway. She left, and Remi was angry. I told him about not taking care of his responsibilities and to get to work, and he just scoffed. He never did show up at work, but later on Vince called me and told me to come get him. He was falling down drunk at Vince's and the customers were beginning to get uncomfortable."

"Jesus," Daniel said, shaking his head.

"On the way to get him, I find Olivia walking on the side of the road. That's the girl he's hooking up with. As much as I didn't want to, I stopped

and picked her up and took her back to town to drop her off, then went back to Vince's. Vince had been feeding him milkshakes for almost an hour to try to sober him up, by telling him they were alcoholic drinks. By the time I got him home, he was angry and sullen but I tried to talk to him like a man. Told him this girl was no good for him and she was bleeding him dry."

"How do you know that?" Daniel asked.

"She said in the truck that he owed her money for her bills, and some clothes, because he promised to pay for those things if she went to Vince's with him, and since he said he would, he was now responsible for it. He made me a signer on his account years ago. The bank contacted me to let me know he was overdrawn. Then when I tried to direct deposit his money into his account to cover it, the bank contacted me to let me know that the balance was still negative. I told him that, and he said that wasn't possible because he had it set up that if there was ever an emergency the checking account would draw from the savings account if needed. I pointed out that that meant his savings was gone, too. He mentioned that he gave Olivia a card, but he knew she wouldn't do him like that. Anyway, the whole point is that when I dropped him off, we had words. He was pissed because he didn't have his car — we left it at Vince's because no way I was allowing him to drive. He said he'd get Olivia to take him to get it, and I told him to have her pick him up on the highway because she wasn't allowed on our property, and to have her call a locksmith, too, because I had his keys and he wasn't getting them back until he sobered up. I wasn't about to leave his keys with him so he could drive in the condition he's been in. I should have taken them away from him before now. Well, he got pissed and threw a rock at my truck, shattered the back window, and I lost my cool and got in his face. We had words, and I asked if he was challenging me since he bowed up to me and shattered my window. I told him to clean up his life or I'd remove him from the clan. He said he didn't want to be here anyway, he didn't need any of us. I told him to remember he made the choice, not me, and that he had three days to get off the property. Then I hit him. I haven't seen him since."

"You said you had words, what words?" Daniel asked.

"Without going into too much detail, I said some shit I shouldn't have. I was angry. He said some shit he shouldn't have. He was angry. But what it came down to was that none of us understand. We're all holed up with our mates, and he's alone. He said that he lost the woman he loved, lost his

mate, and he finally finds someone who cares about him and we ban her from the property. I told him that we don't want anything to do with somebody like her. Told him that I will not tolerate anybody disrespecting a single member of our clan, on our property. He wants to muddy his life with her, that's his choice, but we don't want any part of it and I will not allow her on our land."

"She really all that bad?" Avaleigh asked.

"Yeah, she is. I told Tempest that maybe I should have been more accepting, understanding even and given her a chance. She said the girl is a user. That all she wants is more."

"More what?" Avaleigh asked.

"More of anything she can manage to get from anybody. When the well dries up, she moves on to the next person."

"I was going to ask you how she knows, but she's Tempest, that's how she knows."

"Yeah," Brandt said quietly. "I'm sorry. I really am. I said some shit that there is no excusing. But no Alpha would put up with everything I have, nor would have exposed his clan to the way he and that girl are behaving. His behavior is affecting everybody that lives near him, and he's not even attempting to handle his responsibilities and that's putting more on the rest of us. And the few times he has managed to find his way to work, like I said, he's drunk. I want you to know that I'm not happy with this. I was serious when I said that I hope he pulls his head out of his ass and figures out he belongs with us. Maybe I should have handled it sooner before it blew up, but I kept hoping he'd wake up and fix it himself. He's not out for good, he's out until he can show a little respect and not resent us for having mates when he doesn't. Besides, his mate didn't deny him, he denied her."

"More or less," Daniel said.

"He shouldn't have let Cristie leave," Avaleigh said.

"When did y'all have this blowup?" Daniel asked.

"Two days ago."

"Two days ago?!" Daniel demanded.

"I was hoping he'd come to me by now. It's pretty obvious, that's not happening."

"So, he's got one more day to fix this?" Daniel asked.

Brandt shook his head. "I'm not holding him to that. He knows the choice he made, whether he goes today or a couple of days from now, it's all the same."

Daniel just shook his head and wandered away for a few feet before coming back to him and Avaleigh and just standing there.

"I'm sorry about all this. It's not what I wanted to happen," Brandt said.

"What about his house?" Avaleigh asked.

"The agreement is the same that y'all have with Kaid regarding this property. You can build your house in whatever spot on the property you choose. But if you ever leave the clan, or decide for whatever reason that you don't want to be a part of it anymore, I buy it back from you so you're not out any money. The house becomes the property of the clan. The only exception is like Kiernan and his family. They're clan, but not family. They rent."

"Do me a favor, Brandt. Don't buy his house back from him. It sounds like he'd just blow the money at this point," Daniel said.

"Yes! Please don't. Make up an excuse if he demands it," Avaleigh agreed. "Just don't give him any cash."

"You alright, love?" Daniel asked.

"No, I'm not. I'm worried about our son," Avaleigh said. "He's losing everything he's ever worked for."

"I'm going to find him," Daniel said.

"I think that's a good idea," Avaleigh said.

Daniel kissed her quickly, then gathered his keys and his wallet and started for the door.

"I can go with you if you want, Uncle Daniel," Brandt said.

Daniel thought about it, but shook his head. "No, I think it's best if I go talk to him alone. Any clue where he is?"

"Check his house. Maybe he's there. I intentionally didn't check there this morning in an effort not to have things escalate again. If he's not there, his girlfriend lives out in the neighborhood behind the grocery store. She drives a little white Taurus. All beat up."

"Gives me a few places to check at least," Daniel said.

"Let me know," Avaleigh said unnecessarily. There was no doubt that Daniel would keep her fully apprised of the situation.

“I will. Don’t worry. We’ll figure it all out,” Daniel promised. Moments later they heard his bike crank, and the rumble of its engine as he drove away.

Brandt remained where he was, his hands shoved into his pockets. “I’m really sorry, Aunt Avaleigh. It’s not what I wanted to happen. I just couldn’t allow his behavior anymore. I thought threatening him with putting him out would wake him up. Instead, he chose to leave.”

“I understand, Brandt. I do. I’m upset, but I know as Alpha, there are lines you have to draw that the rest of us don’t. And it sounds like if he keeps on with his behavior, he’s on a terrible path anyway.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why don’t you come in the kitchen and let me feed you real quick?” she asked.

“No, thank you. I have to go talk to my own clan. I haven’t really spoken to anybody about it but Tempest. I wanted to tell you first.”

“I appreciate that,” Avaleigh said.

He hugged Avaleigh. “I love you, Aunt Avaleigh. And I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for doing what an Alpha does. Maybe he’ll come around rather than leave.”

“I hope so. I’ve always looked up to Remi. I don’t want him to have to leave, but I can’t have the behavior he’s been conducting either.”

“I know, baby. We love you, too. You take care, you hear,” she said.

“I will. I’ll let you know if I see him or hear from him. I’d appreciate you letting me know if Uncle Daniel finds him and what he says.”

“I will. And let me know when Tempest goes into labor.”

Brandt nodded and gave her a sad smile before he let himself out.

Avaleigh sat down on the sofa and let herself cry. With no one there to see it, she allowed herself to sob freely, but it did nothing to release the worry she carried for her son.



Brandt paced back and forth across his porch as he waited for all of his clan to assemble in one way or another, while Tempest reclined on a glider rocker just a couple of feet away, gently swaying the rocker back and forth with one foot.



Havoc and Analise, Hellen and Lucien, Kiernan, Abby, and their kids, and Shaun were all there sitting round the outdoor breakfast table. Barron and Emmalyn were there, though Emmalyn was lying in a lounge a few feet from everybody else with a cool wash cloth across her eyes, and Barron was leaning with his back to the railing and chatting with everybody.

Havoc was talking to Ronan on his phone, while Brandt was holding his phone in his hand, and glancing at it from time to time.

Suddenly Brandt's phone rang, and he almost dropped it, bobbling it from one hand to the next while trying to answer it. "Christian?" he said into the phone.

"Hey. Sorry we're a few minutes late calling. I got in from the hospital a couple of hours ago and just passed out. But we're both awake and here now, though," Christian said.

"Hi!" Addie said.

"Hey, Addie. Thanks for calling in, I know how important grabbing some sleep while you can is, but this really couldn't wait. We'll be quick, though. I'm going to put y'all on speaker so you don't miss anything," Brandt said. He set his phone down on the table, then looked at Havoc and gestured toward Havoc's phone.

"I got Ronan on my phone. He's going on speaker, too," Havoc said. He swiped the necessary buttons on his screen then set the phone down near Brandt's. "You hear me, Ronan?"

"Loud and clear. I'm in my dorm while everybody else is at class, so no distractions," Ronan said.

"We didn't make you miss class, huh?" Brandt asked.

"No, I always schedule a couple of my classes in the evenings instead of the middle of the day. That gives me a few hours of peace and quiet while everybody else is in class," Ronan said.

"Smart," Havoc said.

"Alright, well, let's get started," Brandt said.

"What about Remi and Angelle?" Analise asked. "They're still not here."

"I'm pretty sure Angelle already knows, and I know she hates these get togethers anyway, so I didn't make her come," Brandt said. "Remi, is why we're all here."

Everyone focused on Brandt.

“Let me first say, this isn’t something I’m happy about. But it played out this way, and unfortunately, it’s just the way things are. The reason I waited so long to tell you, is that I was hoping this would all be cleared up. That’s not happened, so, here we are. Remi is no longer a member of this clan.”

Shock, surprise. Questions, and concern came from everyone gathered there.

“I know that you all love him. I love him, too. I’ve always admired Remi and looked up to him, but his recent behavior is not secret. If you don’t know, you’ve intentionally ignored all the signs. Unfortunately, my attempts to rein him back in and get him thinking straight backfired. I told him to get his shit together or he was out of the clan. He said he didn’t want to be a part of it anyway, and was out. I gave him three days to get off our land. That was two days ago. I don’t want this, but he apparently does.”

“Tell them what caused the break,” Tempest said softly.

“We had a confrontation. He shattered the window in my truck, I hit him. And before you ask me what led to it, his drinking, shirking his responsibilities, his latest girlfriend draining his bank account, and the total disrespect he’s shown all of us since he found out Cristie is his mate. I can’t have his behavior affecting the rest of the clan, and I will not have his choice of significant other on our property. She’s not the type of person we want around this clan, and she’s not the type of person we can trust with our secrets. And just to reiterate, I did threaten him with putting him out if he didn’t get his shit together, but I was hoping it would shock him into looking around and seeing the state of things. Instead he said he was out. I’m sure there could have been better ways to handle it, but we were both angry and shit happened. I do regret my part in it, but regardless, his behavior couldn’t be allowed to continue.”

“Is he okay?” Analise asked.

“I don’t know, but I hope so. This morning I went to let Aunt Avaleigh and Uncle Daniel know what happened, and when I left, Uncle Daniel was going to look for him.”

“I’m sorry it came to this, too, but I appreciate you standing up for the rest of us it was affecting,” Kiernan said. “I didn’t expect it to make him leave, though. I feel bad about that.”

“Same,” Christian said.

“I would not have allowed anyone to continue with behavior that is disturbing the rest of our clan. He’s gotta show respect while he’s working through his shit, and he didn’t. Plain and simple. He’s the one who made the choice. I drew the line, he crossed it.”

“So now what?” Ronan asked.

“We move forward. Hopefully at some point, sooner rather than later, Remi will come back to us. He’ll always have a place here, in fact, his house will remain his house and waiting for him when he comes back. I didn’t get you all here to tell you he’s ostracized or you can’t interact with him. That’s bullshit. He’s family. He’s just not welcome to live among us while he’s showing his ass. I brought you all together so I could just say it once and be done. I’ll be honest with you. I’m not happy about it, but until he wants to be here, there’s nothing to be done for it,” Brandt said. “But I will greatly appreciate none of you getting involved. Stay out of the subject of what’s going on between him and me. Do not make things more difficult. You don’t have to ignore him, but do not make things worse.”

“He was pretty vicious the last time I tried to talk to him,” Havoc said.

“He’s pretty resentful of those of us who have mates, since he doesn’t. Don’t take it personally,” Brandt said.

“I’m sorry to hear all this is happening,” Ronan said. “If there’s anything I can do from here, let me know. Hell, if you need me to come home and do something there, let me know.”

“Only thing I want you to do is to keep making the presidents list each semester. We’re proud of you,” Brandt said.

“Thank you,” Ronan said.

“Christian, same for you, nothing to be done by any of us that are here, so no reason for you to feel like you should be doing anything different than you are. Just keep doing you and we’ll see you later.”

“Oh, God, I’m gonna puke again,” Emmalyn mumbled as she got up and ran across the porch to Brandt’s front door. She threw the screen door wide and bolted inside.

“What? Who’s puking?” Christian asked.

“Emmalyn. She’s got a stomach bug,” Barron said, not looking anybody in the eye as he blatantly lied to them all.

“Lots of fluids, Barron. Not that sport drink crap. Go get her some of that Liquid IV mix you put in water. It’ll help,” Christian said.

“Will do,” Barron said.

“Anyway, y’all just keep doing what you’re doing. Hopefully Remi will be rejoining us soon, until then, he’s not clan.”

“I’m going to go see about Emmalyn,” Analise said. “I hope we get to see you soon, Christian and Addie.”

“We’ll be home for a couple of days in a few weeks.”

“You better find some time when I have this ruffian I’m carrying,” Tempest said.

Christian laughed. “Count on it!” he promised. “Y’all take care.” He disconnected the call on his end. Brandt picked up his phone and slid it into his back pocket.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to make it when you go in to labor, Tempest, but please, one of y’all call me so I can pretend to be a part of it,” Ronan said.

“You know I will,” Havoc promised.

“Good. Well, then on that note, I’ll talk to y’all later. I have a paper due on Molecular Robotics and DNA Transport in The Human Genome,” Ronan said.

“I don’t even know how to repeat what you just said,” Havoc grumbled.

“It’s okay, though, I do,” Ronan laughed. “I love y’all. See you soon.”

“Take care, Ronan,” Brandt said.

Havoc picked up his phone and made sure the call disconnected, before putting it down again.

“Where did that boy get his brains?” Barron asked.

“Don’t let him fool you,” Brandt said, pointing at Havoc, and then at Hellen, “or her either. They’re both just as intelligent as Ronan is. He’s just the only one that’s ever applied himself to make it work for him.”

Hellen winked at Brandt.

“Molecular what?” Havoc asked.

“See? He’s still faking it,” Brandt said.

“Well, if there’s nothing to add, we’re going to head back home,” Hellen said.

“You alright? You were very quiet for the whole thing,” Brandt said.

Hellen shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. But it doesn’t really matter if I’m not. It is what it is.” She stood and held her hand out to Lucien. He took her hand and stood to join her as they headed home. “Y’all let us know if anything changes, yeah?”

“Definitely,” Brandt said, watching them as they made their way down the steps leading from his raised porch looking over the river, to the ground below.

“Hellen?” Brandt said.

Hellen paused and looked up at Brandt.

“Don’t go try to save Remi. This is between me and him and the only thing that will happen if everybody else tries to get involved, is that it gets messier and messier.”

“Well, hell,” she said.

Brandt smirked at her. “It’ll be okay. Just let it lie.”

Emmalyn practically burst through the screen door with her head leaning back, her newly freshened wash cloth resting over her eyes as she lifted a corner of it to see where she was going. “Is that all?” she asked.

“I sure as hell hope so, what else did you want?” Havoc demanded.

“I want to go home. Can I go home?” she asked, looking at Brandt.

“Sure, y’all go ahead. Thanks for coming,” Brandt said.

“Let’s get you home, Em. Then I’ll run get you some of that IV drink stuff that Christian told us about.”

Emmalyn nodded and allowed Barron to support her and guide her down the stairs.

“Where is my mate?” Havoc asked.

“I’m pretty sure she’s cleaning up behind Emmalyn,” Brandt said.

“I’m gonna sit right here and wait patiently,” Havoc said, nodding to confirm his decision.

## Chapter 8

“Hey, girl, heeeeeeyyy!” Shaun singsonged as he sauntered into Bailey’s coffee and pastry shop, swinging his hips as he dramatically prissed himself up to the counter.

Bailey started laughing and looked up at him, shaking her head, unable to stop the grin that was plastered to her face. “What are you doing?”

“Making you laugh. What are you doing?”

“I’m waiting for six o’clock.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s going to happen at six o’clock?” he teased.

“Well, there’s this guy, and he’s really cute, and funny. Funny is the most important part. Anyway, he’s coming to take me dancing,” she said, doing a little jig to emphasize what she was saying.

“Is he, now?” Shaun asked.

“He is.”

“Must be a great guy. I’m pretty sure he’s a great guy.”

She finished putting the rest of the apple fritters she’d just made in the display case and took a moment to look him in the eye as she pressed her hands against her side of the case and leaned toward him. “You know, I wasn’t sure at first, but he is. He is just the best thing that I think has ever happened to me.”

Shaun’s confident smirk slowly melted away, and he leaned forward to press his lips to hers. “I wasn’t always. I just want you to know that so you don’t think I ever misled you.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute. If you weren’t, it was because you were trying to do the best you could with what you had at the moment. I’m more than aware that everybody looks back sometimes wondering, ‘what the hell was I thinking’.”

“True. Very true.”

“You’re early. I can’t even begin closing up for another two hours,” Bailey said.

“Yeah, I ran out of things to do, and I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” she said.

The bell above the door jangled and she looked up to greet her customer. “Welcome to...” she stopped when saw Remi and a new girl walking in like they owned the place, “Bailey’s,” she finished. “How can I help you?”

“Bailey’s? Thought it had a different name,” Remi said, his tone sharp, though his words were slightly slurred.

“It did. But since it’s completely mine now, I changed it. Would you like some coffee or something to snack on?” she asked.

“I’d like to find out if you make wedding cakes. Remi is impressed with your donuts, but I’m not so sure,” Olivia said. “So when he said we should hire you to make the cake, at first I declined, but then I thought, why not at least check it out?”

Bailey covered well from the surprise of the words ‘wedding cake’. “Oh, how wonderful! A wedding! Weddings are the best kinds of celebrations. Did you have a particular flavor in mind?”

“Yes, as a matter-of-fact, I did.”

“Okay, which one?” Bailey asked enthusiastically, wearing a bright smile.

“Whatever the most expensive flavor is. I want the most detailed, the most extravagant, the most expensive cake I can find. I doubt I’ll find it here, but Remi insists we look anyway to give this little hick place the benefit of the doubt.”

“It’s pretty good. Everything she makes is really good, actually,” Remi said.

“Okay, so, I’m thinking you’ll want gold flake on the cake,” Bailey said, her pencil already in hand as she started making notes in her order book.

“Is it real gold?” Olivia asked condescendingly. “I don’t want any yellow frosting trying to pass for gold.”

“Oh, no! I would never do that. You obviously have the most exquisite tastes. I’m talking 24k edible yellow gold flake. We’ll apply it to the cake, which will be frosted in pristine white so that the gold is offset and accentuated perfectly. Gold is perfect to highlight your sacred union,” Bailey said. “Oh, and maybe pineapple filling to match the gold.”

“No!” Remi snapped. “I don’t want any gold at all. None!” he practically snarled.

Olivia's face turned into a mask of anger. "I want gold! It's my wedding, and you said I can have whatever I want!"

"Not gold!"

"Why not?!" she whined.

"It means something in my family and I don't want it in our wedding," Remi insisted.

"But I want it! You're allowing your family to ruin my day! I said yes because I thought that you'd put me first, and you wouldn't have your family disrespecting me anymore, but I was wrong," she said haughtily, attempting to cry, despite the fact that no tears were present. If you can't give me what I want in something as simple as a wedding, then I don't want to do this, because you're not going to treat me well on anything."

"Livi, that's not the case, and you know it," Remi said.

"Really? Then what is this? Why can't I have gold?"

"I just don't want it," he said.

"I heard somewhere that gold indicates soul mates, in some cultures anyway."

Olivia's mouth fell open. "Is that why? Your family believes that gold means soul mates and you don't believe I'm yours?!" she demanded.

Remi flicked a hateful glance at Bailey who just smiled sweetly at him.

"I demand gold on my wedding cake. And I demand gold for everything in our wedding! In fact, I'm even wearing a gold dress!"

Remi closed his eyes and sighed before opening them again. "Fine. Doesn't matter what my family does or doesn't believe anyway. I don't have a family anymore."

Olivia smiled brightly and clapped her hands in front of herself gleefully before she leaned over and kissed him full on the mouth. "It's okay, baby," she said through pouty lips, "I'm your family now! They don't deserve you." She didn't even wait to see if he agreed or not, she just turned back to Bailey and pointed at the order book Bailey had been taking notes in. "Lot's of gold."

"Got it," Bailey said.

"Is pineapple the most expensive filling?" Olivia asked.

"They're pretty close in cost, all the fillings, I mean. But I'm thinking something with truffles and white chocolate, maybe some exotic fruits, too, like guava and passion fruit, maybe some dragon fruit. We could make



multiple layer cakes with each layer having alternating truffles and white chocolate with the fruits all placed on connecting pedestals of varying heights.”

Olivia scowled. “I don’t understand.”

Bailey shot Remi an are-you-kidding-me look, but immediately went back to the customer service she prided herself on. “Well, imagine eight or nine cakes, all layer cakes, with offset pedestals to hold them all at different levels, almost like different levels of a fountain, and on each level is a different flavor filling, along with the white chocolate truffles, and all covered in gold flake, of course.”

“Ohhhhhhhh, can we make it a fountain, like with champagne?”

“I guess we could look into it. I’m not sure it’s ever been done, but I can look into it.”

“That’s what I want. If you can do that, you’ve got the job.”

“Well, like I said, we’ll have to check, because you can’t allow champagne to contact the cakes, because then you’ll have soggy, piles of goo. But if we can manage it, I’ll find you a price.”

“Great! Because that is what we’re having. I’ll be the talk of everyone else ever getting married! Everyone will want to be there. Did you hear her, baby? I’m going to have a champagne wedding cake fountain!”

“Mmhmm,” he grumbled.

“And you said she had no talents or vision other than baking. She’s got lots of vision. She just needed the right motivation.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Shaun said, from his spot at the edge of the display counter where he’d been ignored since the moment Remi walked in.

Remi turned his head to glare at Shaun.

“Hi. How you doing, Remi?”

Remi simply glared a bit longer, then turned back to Bailey and Olivia.

“We’ll let everyone come. Oh, maybe we can charge them! Do you think they’d pay to come?”

“Oh, I’d definitely pay to see this,” Bailey said.

“See?!” Olivia exclaimed. “Oh, but you can’t come. You are Remi’s ex, but you can make the cake if you can pull off the champagne fountain wedding cake! You understand, right? I mean, who invites all the service people anyway?”

“Oh, I definitely understand,” Bailey said.

“Listen, here’s my number — it’s private, so don’t let anyone else see it. Do not call Remi. I’m making all the decisions, and frankly, I just don’t think there’s a reason for you to talk to him.”

“Don’t worry. We haven’t talked in a long, long time. We don’t have a single thing in common anymore.”

“I’m so glad to hear that! One less person to run off!” she said, laughing and waving as she dragged Remi out of the coffee shop. “You were so right, baby! I’m so glad you made me go in there! But just between me and you, we’ll never tell anybody where we got the cake. How would that look? Remi and Olivia got their most exquisite cake from Remi’s ex. Oh! I hope she doesn’t poison it or anything!”

“She’s not going to poison it,” Remi drolled.

Olivia dragged him through the front door and out of view of the windows, with him giving no resistance at all.

Bailey looked over at Shaun. “Did he look wasted to you?”

“Yeah.”

“I just can’t believe he’s come to this,” Bailey said.

“You alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said, dismissively. “Doesn’t affect me at all.”

“Bailey, I know how much he meant to you. It’s not in your heart to just stop caring about someone. It’s okay if you’re upset. You don’t have to hide it from me.”

Bailey closed her order book and set it back under the back edge of the counter as she shook her head slowly. “Really, I’m okay. If they’re getting married, I hope they’re happy. I hope he’s happy and it’s all he hopes for. I just hate that every time I see him, he’s drunk, or worse. Is it worse? Is he involved in more than just drinking?”

“I don’t know personally,” Shaun answered, “but I don’t think so. I don’t smell anything on him but alcohol.”

Bailey nodded. “At least there’s that.”

“Hey, how about one of those apple fritters to keep me from starving while we wait for six o’clock?”

“Sure,” she said, taking one of them out of the display case and putting it on a small saucer before handing it to Shaun. She turned to the coffee counter and filled a cup with Shaun’s favorite caramel flavored coffee and handed that to him as well.

“Thank you,” he said, taking his snack and going to the table closest to the counter and taking a seat as she made herself busy. She was obviously deep in thought, but he was thankful she’d not asked about some of the other things Remi had said, like no longer having a family.

“Shaun?” she asked, coming out from behind the display counter.

“Yeah, babe...”

“What did Remi mean when he said he no longer had a family? He’s got the most wonderful family. You all do.”

Shaun sighed and set his fritter down on the saucer. He took an inordinately long time to chew the bite he’d just taken, mainly because he was weighing his options of how much to tell her. Chewing and washing the fritter down with his coffee bought him another few seconds. Finally he looked her way.

Bailey stood right beside the table, patiently waiting for her answer.

“He’s not a member of the clan anymore,” Shaun explained.

“What?” she asked, her brows raised in surprise.

“Brandt has been trying to help him, trying to help him get headed back in the right direction. He just reacts angrily each time Brandt shows up to help him out of whatever he’s gotten into. They got into it and it got ugly. Brandt gave him an ultimatum, and he chose to leave the clan.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” Bailey said.

“Wish I was. But no. Brandt’s pretty torn up over it, but has hopes that once Remi pulls his head out of his ass he’ll be back.”

“This is ridiculous! What did his parents say? They’re part of the clan!”

“I don’t know. We’ve been kind of sitting on it for a couple of days, hoping he’d come back and apologize.”

“I can’t believe Tempest didn’t call me.”

“I can.”

“She’s my best friend! She should have called me!”

“No. She’s the Alpha’s mate. Her first loyalty is to him and the clan. She can’t gossip about the clan’s inner workings with those who aren’t in the clan. Not to mention she’s about to pop! Have you seen her lately?”

“No, I haven’t. We talk on the phone all the time, but she doesn’t like to leave home anymore. I knew having the baby was getting close, but since she didn’t have an exact due date, I didn’t realize how close she was getting.”

“It’s close. She’d probably appreciate a visit.”

Bailey nodded.

“You don’t want to come out to the house because you don’t want to take a chance on seeing Remi,” Shaun said.

“It’s not for the reason you think.”

“I know you still care about him. It’s okay.”

“Yeah, I probably always will. But I’ve moved on. I’m not interested in that way anymore. He hurt me more than I cared for him. Turns out we were in two different places, and never really had a chance anyway. The part that made it okay to move on was that I finally realized it wasn’t his fault. He didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Then what’s the issue when coming to visit Tempest, or me, for that matter?”

“He lives there. I’m just trying to be considerate. It’s not fair of me to invade the place he calls home. He lives in a different house, sure, but the neighborhood, the people, it’s all his family and he belongs there. I just don’t think it’s right to insert myself while he’s still in the middle of a struggle, you know?”

Shaun didn’t tell her, but he scented her for any lies or untruths. It was important to him because of the way he felt about her, that he know if she still harbored romantic feelings for Remi. There was no lie with what she said. And he’d known all along that she’d always care about him, even if she didn’t want him back. “Yeah, I do know. It’s very kind of you to consider that.”

“Thank you.”

“Bailey?” he asked after a few minutes of silence while she went about taking care of the shop.

“Yes?” she asked, pausing to look back at him.

“The reason I asked what the issue is, is because it’s important to me that you feel at home, at my home.”

“At your home? Why?” she asked.

“Because while we won’t live with my brother and sister-in-law, I hope that one day, you and I will share a home, and I’m part of Brandt’s clan. I want to live in the area the rest of the clan lives in. I want to build you a beautiful home there that we can share and raise our kids in. I want you to be able to feel at home there.”

He watched as realization crossed her face. “You alright?” he asked, with a slight laugh.

“I... it... I didn’t...” she said starting several times to speak, but not ever finishing.

He got up and went over to her, taking her hands in his as he looked into her eyes. “I was going to wait a while to tell you so I didn’t overwhelm you in case you weren’t ready, but it seems the conversation has found its way to this moment... I love you, Bailey. I have for a long time. Truth be told, you’re my mate. I know that you may not still be ready, and I know that it’s possible the idea of being in love with another shifter puts you off the whole thing, but this isn’t just a relationship to me. You’re it. I’ll wait as long as it takes for you to want me the way I want you. But you should know, I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going to see someone else and suddenly gravitate toward them, because for me, you’re that person.”

Her eyes had begun to mist over as he spoke, and her fingers gripped his tighter and tighter as he continued to speak.

“How long have you known?” she asked.

“Since the first time I met you, I suspected. After the second or third time I was around you, I had no doubt.”

She shook her head disbelievingly. “And you had to stand by and watch Remi and me together.”

Shaun shrugged. “You were happy. When you love someone, you want them happy, even if the someone that makes them happy isn’t you.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard a more romantic thing in my life. It’s so selfless.”

“Don’t go making me out to be a knight in shining armor — I’m not that. I’m just yours, and I want whatever makes you happy. And look, I only know what you’ve told me, and what we’ve shared so far. I’m not asking for promises of forever immediately. I just want to be with you. I believe we’ll find our way. I mean, we enjoy being together. We have fun. We laugh, we smile, we calm each other, I think.”

“We do,” she agreed.

“So, just maybe keep in mind that this is not dating to me.”

She nodded, but he could sense her nervousness.

“And if you decide that this is too much, you don’t want your future tied to mine, then I’ll walk away and give you that, too. Whatever it is that you decide, is what you’ll have with me.”

She cupped his jaw as she looked at up at him, went up on her tiptoes and kissed his lips. "Thank you, for telling me what this is to you. I didn't know that you were holding all that inside."

He kissed her. "Now, I just need to know one more thing..."

"Okay," she said.

"How much longer 'til six o'clock? I wanna go dancing!" he whined.

Bailey started laughing and poked him in the ribs, making him twist away from her finger. "Eat the rest of your apple fritter and let me finish what I have to do. Then we'll go dancing."

He did an exaggerated performance of 'the twist', sending her into peals of laughter. "I know you're just putting it off, cause you can't handle all of this," he said, twisting around her in a circle.

Bailey laughed so hard she coughed, nodding her head as she got control of herself. "Oh, yeah. That's the reason," she teased as she walked back behind the counter, pausing to look back at him before going into the kitchen.

He was chuckling as he gazed back at her.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Shaun."

"Lucky for you, I'm not going anywhere. Unless you make me, then I'd probably hang out on your porch, begging for a head pat here and there. I'm proud, but not too proud to beg."

She grinned at him. "I'd give you a scrap here and there."

"How kind of you," he said.

"You know better than that! I would never treat somebody I love that way!"

His smile dropped at the same time she heard her own words and her eyes widened in surprise. They looked at each other for a second before she canted her head slightly as she offered him a suddenly shy smile. "I guess you heard that, too."

Shaun nodded.

"It just kind of slipped out."

"Is it true?" he asked.

Bailey hesitated, but eventually nodded. "It is. I'm a little afraid to admit it, because I'm gun shy after all, well, you know. But yeah, it's true. I just still need a little time. Is that okay?"

"It's more than okay. I'm perfectly content to wait until you're ready to shout it from the rooftops. Then you better cover your ears, though."

Because I'm going to make sure the entire parish can hear it. I want their ears to ring with its echo!"

Bailey smiled at him again. "Good. Because I'm expecting to hear it loud and clear myself."

## Chapter 9

Daisy looked across the table at Charlie. "I'm sorry, I've been talking about me all afternoon."

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk about," Charlie said with a grin.

Daisy smiled and shook her head with a soft sigh.

"Seriously, though, we didn't just talk about you. I told you all about me, and about Carson. We've just been getting to know each other."

"True," she agreed. "But now that you know I'm so broken I allowed my married professor to gaslight me, and then his psycho wife to chase me back home rather than standing up to her and finishing my last couple of classes to get my degree, you can run screaming from the restaurant now. I fully understand."

Charlie laughed. "Not scaring me off that easily."

"You sure? This is your opportunity to exit stage left and not get any flack at all from me. I'll even call my cousin to come get me instead of you having to drive me home."

"Honestly, the only question is why didn't you file a complaint when you found out he was still married after conducting an ongoing affair with you?"

"I was embarrassed. I felt humiliated. I should have known. I should have picked up on the cues that indicated what a lie it all was. Instead I was blissfully discounting any doubt I had because I thought I'd finally found someone to love me. To appreciate me, the socially awkward, quiet, homebody, for who I really was. He said he admired my creativity, that I was kind and loving, and that he saw beauty in me that he'd never seen before." She looked down at her hands folded neatly in her lap just beyond the table's edge. "I guess I just wanted that so badly that I bought it hook, line and sinker. Then his wife showed up screeching at me everywhere I went, making it quite clear that not only had he lied to me, but that I wasn't the only one. And I do mean everywhere... my dorm, my classes, the library, everywhere I went on campus and off, there was a ninety percent chance she'd arrive at any moment and begin shrieking 'whore' and 'home wrecker' at the top of her lungs. She even went so far as to start telling anyone who was present that I'd seduced her husband and had sex with him



in her bed. Which I did not do! He seduced me! And we never went to his house.”

“You should have called the police and filed harassment charges. At the very least campus security.”

“I couldn’t. I felt like to a degree I deserved what she was doing. I should have been smart enough to not just take his word for it. I should have checked out his story. I should have paid more attention and I should have believed the little voice in my head telling me to listen, to feel, to scent him! But I didn’t. I just let my need for acceptance, for love, make me fall for everything.”

“You can’t fault yourself for him being a douche bag. You’re too kind to assume people are bad, but people are bad, Daisy.”

“If I’d filed reports, there would have been no way to keep it from my family. They’d have found out, and if they found out, I’d have not even had home to return to.”

“What do you mean? I can’t believe they’d not have allowed you to come home if you needed to.”

“Oh, they would. They’d have most likely come and gotten me. But I’d have never been able to face them. I still live in fear that they’ll find out and be so disappointed in me.”

“Daisy, there’s no way you could have known.”

“But that’s the thing, Charlie. There’s everything about me that screams that I should have known. I still don’t know how I didn’t know. But I didn’t.”

“It’s okay,” he said, reaching out to her. “This professor... what’s his name?”

“Bourne.”

“This Professor Bourne obviously took advantage of other young women. He knew what he was doing. He deserves to have his life yanked out from under him.”

Daisy lifted her hand and laid it on the table so he could touch her, like he was so obviously trying to do.

Charlie laid his hand over the top of hers. “If you ever want to go that route, I’ll be honored to stand beside you through it all.”

“I don’t know if I could. I’m still having panic attacks from it.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through all that... have still been going through all that.”

“I want so bad to trust again, to move on, but I’m terrified. Each time I go out, I scan the room of wherever I am, praying I don’t see her, or him for that matter.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. But like I said, this is when you take the opportunity to run. Just please keep everything I told you to yourself. I just really needed an outlet, and you gave me that. I appreciate it.”

“I am not an outlet. I’m a friend. I’m not going anywhere.”

Daisy chuckled, trying to make light of his commitment to try to remain her friend. “You should. I would.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

Charlie scooted his chair a little closer to the small table they sat at and took her hand in both of his. “Look, Daisy, I don’t know if you even care, but I’ve been trying for months to work up the nerve to ask you out. You always seem to shut me down in such a way that makes me wonder if you’re even aware, or if you just don’t date. Now I understand why. But it doesn’t scare me off. I’ve never met anybody like you. I want to spend time with you. I want to see if it’s possible that we might have something between us other than just this spark that flared to life the first time we met.”

“You felt that, too, huh?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “But I understand you’re struggling through a lot. I guess what I’m asking is if we can just hang out, get to be friends, see where this takes us as you are able to see where it takes us. No expectations, but a lot of hope.”

“Are you sure you want that?”

“You are the kindest, the most sensitive woman I’ve ever met. There’s something uniquely special about you, and I find I can’t even consider not being around you, as often as you’ll allow.”

She had been looking at their hands, and finally raised her gaze to his. “If you’ll promise to let me know if it becomes too much. Just be honest with me.”

“It’s not going to happen, but if it makes you feel better, I promise.”

Daisy smiled at him.

He smiled at Daisy. “I’m glad I could be here for you. I’m always here for you. And you never have to be afraid when you’re with me. If anybody starts any kind of noise regarding you, or even considers offending you in

any way, I'll tackle them so hard I'll break bones. Just promise you'll come bail me out later?"

Daisy laughed. "I promise. And tackle?"

"Yep. I'm all businessman now, civil engineer and slacks, but there was a time I was a pretty decent football player. Was all state in my high-school days. Had perfect tackling form. I promise to use my expertise as needed."

"Deal," Daisy said.

"Good, now tell me some happy stories. Your dad is fantastic. I'm sure there are more than a few."

"You have no idea. You know I have uncles and aunts and cousins that all kind of live within a stone's throw from each other."

"Yeah, it's like a compound it seems."

"Kind of. Yeah. If you decide to stick around enough, you'll definitely meet my family. Sometimes they can be a bit much, but they'd all stand for each other, no matter the situation."

"I wish I had a big family like that to offer Carson. It's just me and him. I'm sure there's an estranged uncle somewhere, but if I've never met them, why look them up now, you know?"

"I can't imagine not having all my cousins. They're a pain sometimes, but I'd be lost without them. Even my cousin Jobe and his family. We hear from them all the time, even though they've moved to Colorado."

"That's a long way from here, especially when his whole family is still in Louisiana," Charlie said.

"He got a job offer from a construction company there. The job benefits and salary were off the charts. He talked to my Uncle Goldy and Aunt Sadie, who are his parents and they all agreed he couldn't pass it up. So, they moved. And Uncle Goldie and Aunt Sadie went with them. But everybody else is still here, and let me tell you, some can be a pain in the ass."

"Well, well, well! What do we have here?" Havoc asked, dropping into an unoccupied chair at their table. He reached out and took a french fry off Daisy's plate. "'Sup, cuz?"

Daisy eyed Havoc, then smiled exaggeratedly at Charlie. "This is the most pain in the ass cousin I have."

"So, no tackles?" Charlie asked.

“Nope. He’d take it as a personal challenge and take you outside where you’d take turns tackling inanimate objects until you could determine who could tackle the toughest targets with the least damage to body and limb,” Daisy said.

“I’d win” Havoc said, stealing another fry. “Damn, girl. Those fries are rock hard and cold. I hope mine are better than that when they make it to the table, or I’m gonna be complaining — loudly.”

“They were hot when they were fresh. We’ve been sitting here a while.”

“Like a week or something?” Havoc asked, making a face at the taste of the last fry he tried to eat.

“No. Just a couple of hours.”

“Hours?! That’s a lot of talking.”

“We’re getting acquainted.”

Havoc looked at Charlie, then at Daisy. He leaned toward Charlie, and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “Hey, my man, let me just lay it out for you. She’s everybody’s favorite cousin. She’s sweet and trusting. You got to pass muster before you’re allowed to take her out.”

“Havoc! Go away. I’m older than you and perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

Havoc eyed Daisy, then Charlie again. “You that guy with the cute little genius artist kid, aren’t you?”

“I think so,” Charlie said, grinning at the antics going on between this man and Daisy. They were obviously family. And close family. They treated each other like siblings, though she’d said they were cousins.

“Yes, this is him,” Daisy said.

Havoc brushed his fingers off on his pants and extended his hand. “Hi, how you doing? I’m Havoc.”

“Hi, Havoc. I’m Charlie.”

“Be nice to my cousin or I’ll hunt you down and cut out your heart,” Havoc said.

“Jesus, Havoc! Go away!”

“What are you doing?” Annalise said, as she and Harley walked up to the table.

“I’m visiting, baby. Look! I found Daisy and Charlie.”

Annalise smiled beautifully at Charlie. “Hi, Charlie. It’s so nice to meet you. I’ve heard all about you and your fabulously talented son.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to meet you as well.”

“I’m Harley. This is my mom, and this is my dad,” she said pointing at them each as she introduced them.

“Hello, Harley. You have a super cool name,” Charlie said.

“I know,” she said, grinning ear-to-ear. “My daddy named me.”

The pager in Analise’s hand started vibrating and she held it up. “Our table is ready!”

“Good, I’m so hungry!” Harley said.

“You ate a bag of chips on the way over,” Havoc said.

“It was a little bag, Daddy,” Harley complained.

“Your boy is what? Six, seven?” Havoc asked.

“Just turned seven,” Charlie said.

“You should bring him over, he and Harley could play while we visit for a while,” Havoc said.

“No! I’d rather he stay around a while, Havoc. I do not need you scaring him off!” Daisy exclaimed.

“I bet Carson would like that. He’s a little quiet, but he could use a new friend,” Charlie said.

“Why is nobody listening to me?” Daisy asked no one in particular.

“Good! Here,” Havoc said, fishing a crumpled business card out of his wallet and tossing it on the table. “Give me a call and we’ll set something up.”

“Let’s go, Daddy! You said we were going out to eat, and I’m still not eating!” Harley whined.

“You go with Mommy. I’ll be there in a minute. I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“You already went to the bathroom,” Analise said.

“I didn’t make it yet. I saw Daisy and felt the need to say hello,” Havoc said. He looked at Charlie. “Your boy ain’t afraid of big orange iguanas is he? ‘Cause Harley’s best friend is a big orange iguana.”

“I don’t know,” Charlie said truthfully.

“We’ll find out,” Havoc said. “Glad you got to meet me. I’ll be seeing you soon!” he leaned over and kissed Daisy on the cheek, then swaggered off toward the restroom.

Analise sighed. “He’s a great male. Wonderful husband and father. But he has no boundaries. If you’re his anything, he’s all involved with or without an invitation. He saw Daisy with you and obviously decided he

needed to insert himself. I hope you don't allow him to determine if you'll see her again. Daisy is wonderful, and she deserves someone who sees it."

"I love that she has family that cares enough to be involved. One little overprotective cousin isn't going to scare me off."

"Good. Because if he invited you to our house, he likes you. If he didn't, you'd already be in your car on your way home," Analise said.

"Mommy!" Harley said, pulling on her hand.

"Alright! Let's go find out where our table is," Analise said. She quickly kissed Daisy's cheek, too, then shook Charlie's hand. "It's nice to meet you. Hope we see you soon."

Charlie watched as they walked away. "I like your family. He's a lot like your dad."

"Actually, he's a lot like his dad, but you have no idea. He's not the only one. I've got dozens of family that will be all up in your face until they feel they know all there is to know."

"Looking forward to it," Charlie said.

"You poor misguided man," Daisy said, as they shared a laugh.

"It's getting kind of dark out there. We've been here all day," Daisy said, as she glanced outside.

"You ready to go?" Charlie asked.

"I think so."

"How about dessert, or would you prefer a strawberry shake on the way home?"

"Ohhh, you know how to tempt me."

He lifted his hand to signal the waiter.

"I'm going to run to the restroom. I won't be but a second," Daisy said.

"I'll be right here," Charlie promised.

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Hellen shrieked with laughter as Lucien grabbed her hand and spun her in a circle before dipping her so low her hair brushed the dance floor.

Lucien laughed wholeheartedly, and most of the women in Vince's sighed and watched enviously. He stood Hellen back up and held her face in his hands as he kissed her slowly, looking deeply into her eyes.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you might kinda like me, sir," Hellen teased.

"Maybe. I'm still trying to decide," Lucien answered with a wicked waggle of his eyebrows.

"Really? Well, if it ends up being a negative, may I just point out that you're a little too late, considering you already mated me," Hellen said.

"I thought it was you that mated me," Lucien said.

"Well, if I'm being honest, we mated each other."

"Repeatedly," Lucien said. "Best decision I ever made."

"Same," Hellen said.

"Want another drink?" Lucien asked.

"Of course!"

"Come along, female, follow where I lead," he teased, pulling her along behind him as he made his way back to their spot at the bar.

"You know I'm not real good at following. I'm more the run right in with blinders on and see how things fall as I go."

Lucien laughed again.

Hellen looked around the bar and grill and shook her head. "I swear you do that shit on purpose."

"What shit?"

"That laugh."

"I cannot help that females like my laugh. It's how I laugh. I've always laughed like that. It's not a conscious thing."

"Good thing I trust you," she said, accepting the shot of whiskey he held out to her with one hand as he poured his own with the other hand.

"I'd trust him, too," Daisy said. "He adores you."

"You see? Daisy trusts me," Lucien said.

"Daisy trusts everyone," Hellen countered, shooting back her whiskey, then turning to embrace Daisy in an almost smothering hug.

Daisy hugged her back, then hugged Lucien, kissing his cheek as well, when he presented it.

"Y'all, this is Charlie. Charlie, this is my cousin, Hellen and Lucien," Daisy said.

"Hi, Charlie. Nice to meet you," Hellen said.

"You, too," Charlie said.

"Want a drink?" Lucien asked, picking up the bottle to pour both himself and Hellen another shot.

“No, thank you. Appreciate it, though. We just stopped by for a strawberry shake on our way home,” Charlie explained.

“You have a drink and stay a while,” Lucien said.

“Yeah, you should. We’re celebrating!” Hellen declared.

“What are you celebrating?” Daisy asked.

“Being together,” Lucien said happily.

“Oh, it’s your anniversary?” Charlie asked.

“No. We’ve only been official for a few months. But anytime I get to wake up beside this woman is a day to celebrate.”

Hellen shook her head. “He’s a little dramatic, but if we drank every time we woke up together, we’d be drunk every day.”

“They’re married,” Daisy said.

“It’s good to see a couple still so in love after the wedding,” Charlie said.

“You know, cher, maybe we should do that. Make it legal and everything,” Lucien said. “Want to do that? Be my wife?”

“I am your wife. A piece of paper doesn’t mean a thing. We’re already bound heart and soul.”

“True, but I kind of want to announce it to everybody else,” Lucien said.

“Well, most people gauge whether or not people are taken by the fact they wear wedding rings or not. We could get some pretty new rings.”

“I’m game. Would you wear my ring, my mate?”

“Every single day!” she exclaimed, falling into his arms when he leaned close to her to kiss her again.

“Ignore them. They’re still in the honeymoon phase and deliriously in love.”

“I’m actually kind of jealous,” Charlie said.

“You going to stay and dance with us?” Hellen asked.

“Probably not. Carson, Charlie’s little boy is at home with my parents. We have to be getting back,” Daisy said.

“Fine, kids come first. I get it,” Hellen said.

“You look familiar,” Charlie said to Hellen.

“Really? I don’t think we’ve ever met before.”

“She’s Havoc’s twin sister,” Daisy explained.

“Of course. I see it now,” Charlie said.

“You met Havoc?” Lucien asked with his eye wide to indicate it must have been a stressful event.

Charlie huffed a laugh. “I did.”

“And you’re still here? You must really care about Daisy,” Lucien said.

Charlie looked adoringly at Daisy, then nodded with a soft smile on his face. “I do. Very much. Even a crazy cousin can’t scare me away.”

Daisy blushed.

Charlie remembered suddenly that he was being watched by two more of her cousins, one of which was a twin of the one he just called crazy and quickly looked right at Hellen. “Not that I meant that in a bad way or anything. No offense meant.”

Hellen laughed. “Not a problem. He is kind of crazy. In a good way. But I’m not.”

“She’s actually the most normal of all of them. Well, one of the normal ones. Analise isn’t all that crazy either,” Daisy said.

“Hey! Look what the cat dragged in!” Vince called out as he walked down to the end of the bar and pretended he’d just noticed them.

“Uncle Vince!” Daisy said.

“Hey, baby! I’m so glad to see you in here during the party hours. Been a long time since you came in here for more than a quick few minutes.”

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be home during the party hours?”

“Got a bartender out with a stomach bug. Guess who’s here to cover the shift?”

“Who else would it be? Just doesn’t feel right when you’re not here,” Daisy said.

“You need to come in more yourself! It’s been a long, long time!”

“Not that long. I was in here with everybody when Brandt and Tempest were still circling each other!”

“That was a long time ago. And even longer before that, like a year or something!” Vince said.

“At least,” Daisy said, beginning to get nervous. She really didn’t want to delve too deeply into the whys of her not being much of a public person since coming home from college.

Hellen sensed her shutting down and grabbed her by the hand. "I gotta pee. Come with me!" she said, pulling Daisy with her. "We'll be back!" she said to anybody who was listening over her shoulder.

Lucien was leaning with his back against the bar, watching Charlie watching Hellen lead Daisy away. He could sense the worry Charlie was feeling as he watched Daisy get pulled away. "So, y'all know each other long?"

"Few months. We met when I took my son to sign up for her art classes," Charlie said, still glancing back at the opposite side of the bar Hellen and Daisy had gone to.

"She's been through a lot," Lucien said.

"Hellen?" Charlie asked.

"No. Daisy. It's a shame really. She's very sensitive and some shit took advantage of that. She won't admit it, but I can feel it."

Charlie didn't say anything, but nodded awkwardly. Part of him wanted to agree, part of him knew there was no way he'd betray Daisy's confidence by voicing what he knew. So he just stood there and nodded like a fool.

Lucien noticed the change in mannerisms immediately and was about to call him on it when Hellen was waving to them from across the room as she pulled Daisy with her onto the dance floor.

Hellen had her arms raised in the air and was dancing to the rhythm of the song that was playing. She turned to Daisy and forced her arms up also, and Daisy laughed, falling into step with her. Both women had natural grace and their bodies moved effortlessly in time to the music.

"We better go get our women before somebody else tries and I have to remove them from the building. I don't share well," Lucien said with a grin.

Charlie followed him through the other couples dancing and before he knew it, thirty minutes and at least six songs had passed. They came off the dance floor, winded, but happy.

"I need a drink!" Hellen announced, still swaying to the music and singing the lyrics to the song playing at the top of her lungs.

"Whiskey?" Lucien asked.

"Oh, yeah!" Hellen agreed.

"Charlie? Daisy? What'll you have?" Lucien asked.

"Just a strawberry shake. We gotta go. Carson will be ready to go by now," Daisy said.

“You sure?” Lucien asked.

“Yeah. We’ll do this again some time soon, though,” Charlie said.

“I’m gonna hold you to it!” Lucien said.

“Alright,” Charlie said. He handed him a twenty. “Make it two strawberry and three chocolates, please.”

“That’s a lot of milkshakes,” Hellen said.

“One for everybody,” Charlie said.

“Yeah, you’re right. Make sure you make a good impression,” Lucien said. He placed the order with the girl helping Vince that night, and turned around just in time to catch Hellen with her arms up swaying. He pulled her in and held her against his body as they swayed back and forth together.

“Oh, my gosh! Look who else is here!” Hellen exclaimed as Bailey and Shaun came toward them through all the people.

Daisy turned to see who it was and smiled when she saw Bailey.

“Hey! How are you?”

“I’m good. Really good. How are you?” Bailey said.

“Hey, everybody,” Shaun said, slipping his arm around Bailey’s waist.

“How’s it going?” Lucien asked, performing a complex handshake move with Shaun straight out of the 80’s.

“What do you want to drink, baby?” Shaun asked.

“Something light, fruity,” Bailey said.

“Amaretto and Pineapple?” he asked.

“Sounds wonderful,” Bailey said.

Shaun let go of Bailey and stepped toward the bar to order their drinks.

“Y’all been here long?” Bailey asked.

“Yeah, a while,” Hellen said.

“We were at the steakhouse in town,” Daisy said.

“Oh, and that’s where Charlie met Havoc,” Hellen said.

“Oh, yeah. That’d be what happened,” Daisy said.

Hellen shook her head. “God love him, he’s a handful. But he’s a good guy. Most of that is just bluff. He rarely lets anybody see what’s underneath, but don’t let all that subterfuge fool you, Charlie. He’s not stupid by any means, and he’s as loyal as the day is long.”

“As much as I’d love to disagree, she’s right. He’s a pain in the ass, but nobody else I’d trust as much I do him, in the worst situations,” Lucien said.

“Who are we talking about?” Shaun said, turning back to the group with his and Bailey’s drinks in his hands.

“Havoc,” Lucien said.

“Call me crazy, but I like him. He’s a character,” Charlie said.

“Me, too,” Shaun said.

“That he is,” Lucien agreed. “Stubborn Sonofabitch!” he finished on a laugh.

“Here you go!” Vince’s bar back said. “All virgin shakes, right?”

“That’s it! Going home to the family,” Lucien said, accepting the shakes two at a time and handing them off to Charlie and Daisy. With the last one, he handed Charlie his twenty back.

“No, man, let me pay,” Charlie said.

“Not a chance,” Lucien said.

“Well, then give it to her as a tip.”

“Already took care of that, too,” Lucien said.

“Then give her an extra tip.”

“That I can do.”

“Y’all leaving already?” Shaun asked.

“Gotta get home to Carson,” Daisy said.

“Carson?” he asked.

“Charlie’s son.”

“Ahhh, okay.”

“Oh, and by the way, Charlie, this is Bailey and Shaun. Bailey and Shaun, this is Charlie,” Daisy said.

“Another cousin?” Charlie asked.

“Um, not exactly. More like adopted family,” Daisy settled on, smiling, satisfied with her explanation.

“Good to meet you,” Shaun said.

“Same,” Charlie answered.

“Thanks for hanging out with us for a little while,” Hellen said, hugging Daisy, and waving at Charlie as they stepped away in preparation of leaving.

“Of course! We had so much fun!” Daisy said.

“Anytime you want a redo, let us know,” Lucien said.

“Will do!” Charlie called out, waved quickly, then allowed the door to close behind them.

Chapter 10

Daniel rode past all the usual places he might find Remi, eventually resorting to riding up and down all the streets of the neighborhood behind the grocery store. Still, there was no trace of him. Finally, with his patience growing thin, he resorted to a very infrequently used head-voice, and called his son telepathically.

Remington! he bellowed at Remi through the thoughts in his mind.

There was no answer.

You have three minutes to send me the address, and step outside so I can speak to you, or I'm going to call the clan, and have everybody take a street searching every damn house until we find you.

Lying on the sofa in the apartment Olivia shared with her roommate, Remi closed his eyes tighter, trying to ignore his father's demand.

Two minutes, Daniel announced.

Remi unintentionally let out a snarl, jerked himself into an upright position.

One minute, Daniel said, the tone in his voice growing angrier and angrier with each passing moment.

I am in no mood to do this right now! Remi sent back to his father.

Don't fucking care. Thirty seconds, Daniel warned.

A growl of frustration bubbled up and out of Remi as he stood up and started for the door. *1327 Friar St. I'm coming outside.*

Check your fucking attitude before I get there! Daniel warned.

"Where are you going?" Olivia asked.

"My dad's looking for me. He'll be here in a second."

She looked at the phone she'd been systematically removing numbers from while Remi napped, then up at Remi. "How would you know that? He hasn't called or texted."

"Believe me, I know."

"Oh. Well, great! I'll get to meet him!"

"No, you won't. Stay inside," Remi ordered, opening the front door and walking outside at about the same moment the rumble of a motorcycle could be heard outside.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Olivia snapped.

Remi pulled the door closed behind himself and stepped outside. He watched while his father brought his bike to a stop and threw a leg over before the engine had even fully stopped running, striding right to him. Daniel was impressive as ever. Standing nearly six and a half feet tall, long black hair falling straight almost to his waist. Tanned skin, muscled body and with the cockiness that only a Dragon shifter could carry.

“Want to tell me what the hell is going on?” Daniel demanded.

“I guess you heard Brandt kicked me out of the clan,” Remi said disdainfully.

“I heard that you pushed enough fucking buttons that he gave you an ultimatum.”

“Yeah, of course, you take his side, just like everybody else.”

“Remi, are you really so fucking stupid that you think you can blame everybody else in your family for being happy, simply because you’re not?”

“I’m not blaming them for being happy!” Remi shouted.

Daniel stepped right up to Remi until their chests were touching. Though Remi was a tall, muscular male, Daniel was bigger, and stronger. He looked down his nose at his son. “I am here because I care about you. You are my son, and I will kill for you without a second thought. I will also whip your ass for your arrogance and disrespect. You talk to me like that again, and I’ll prove it to you. I am not your enemy. Brandt is not your enemy. Do you understand what I’m saying to you, Remi?”

“Yes, sir,” Remi snapped.

“Good. Because this is your last warning. The next time you talk to me like that, I’m just going to knock your teeth out of your mouth. Then we’ll continue this conversation at the dentist’s office when I pay him to put them back in. You got that?”

“Yes, sir,” Remi answered, a little less angrily.

“Now. Tell me why you felt the need to push Brandt so far that he put you out.”

“Because he’s all up in my fucking face like I’m not an adult and can’t handle my shit!”

“You shattered the window in his truck! Obviously you can’t handle your shit. In fact, you’re making it worse!”

“I didn’t mean to do that. I was just angry because he said my girlfriend isn’t allowed on clan property, and my fucking house is on clan property! How can he tell me who I can and can’t have at my house?”

“Because he’s Alpha, son! And because she’s been nothing but disrespectful! She’s made other clan members uncomfortable and taken advantage of you!”

“That’s bullshit. She loves me!”

“She loves what you can do for her! Have you managed to check your fucking accounts lately? Are you aware that your checking account went negative, so it started pulling from your savings account, which is now drained as well?”

“That cannot possibly be right! I had thousands in there! There’s got to be some kind of mistake! If there was a problem like that, the bank would have contacted me.”

“Have they tried?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been answering calls. But I have emergency people on there in case they can’t find me, or if there’s an emergency.”

“Who’s that?” Daniel asked.

Remi closed his eyes briefly and shook his head. “Brandt. And Mom.”

“Well, I’m guessing that when Brandt tried to tell you about the bank letting him know that your accounts were drained, you reacted defensively.”

“I still think there’s a mistake. Olivia wouldn’t do that to me.”

“Why’d you give her a debit card, Remi?” Daniel demanded.

“She was having trouble paying her bills, I helped her out. You’d have done the same if that’s what Mom needed when you first met her!”

“You telling me this girl is your mate?”

“No! Cristie is my mate, but we all know what happened with that! Wasn’t enough that I lost Bailey, I couldn’t even have Cristie! Then when I find somebody that truly cares about me, nobody will even give her a chance to join our family!”

Daniel stood across from his son, calling on every bit of control he had not to hit him. “Let’s bring this to an end before I lose my patience with you. And let me for the sake of clarity here, state that I fully understand why Brandt knocked the fuck out of you. You’re a dumb ass!”

“I…”

“Shut your mouth and listen!” Daniel bellowed, his Dragon clear and present in his eyes.

Remi snapped his mouth shut and glared at his father, not particularly liking what his father was saying, but smart enough not to poke the stronger Dragon inside him.

“You are so far into your pity party that you can’t see anything clearly. You have lost so much of who you are in your deepest soul that you are craving approval from anybody, and let me tell you this girl you chose is not the answer. You loved Bailey, but then you found your mate and it threw you for a loop. I know there was confusion, there was guilt, and I understand where all of that came from. But what you’ve failed to realize is that Bailey loved you, too. She didn’t just cut you loose. She chose to let go so you wouldn’t feel guilt about walking away from her to be where you truly belonged.”

“Cristie didn’t want me, and Bailey walked away anyway!” Remi exclaimed.

“Bailey walked away so you wouldn’t have to deal with the responsibility of leaving her. She did it, so you wouldn’t have to carry that! How do you go from a girl like that to this fucking drain on society?!” Daniel demanded.

“Don’t go there, not now,” Remi said. “I asked her to marry me. We’re engaged.”

“You just enjoy digging fucking holes, don’t you?” Daniel asked.

“You don’t understand,” Remi said, his voice quieter than it had been.

“Yeah, I do. You’re looking for acceptance, approval. You’re looking for the love you have convinced yourself you’ve been cheated out of. You’ve convinced yourself that neither Bailey, nor Cristie cared enough to fight for you. Simple truth is that Bailey put your happiness before her own. That’s love. And she deserves that kind of love in return. You owe her a debt of gratitude for putting you first. And Cristie didn’t shut you down. She understood you were struggling and gave you room. She also told you she wouldn’t wait forever. You didn’t pursue her. She went home. YOU let her slip away.”

Remi shook his head, signaling he was still in denial.

“You can shake your head all you want, but it’s the truth. Then you’re going to resent everybody else in your clan because how dare they have mates when you have nobody. What kind of family or friend does that make you when you can’t even be happy for the people you love? The people that love you? What happened to you, Remi? You have always been the most steadfast. The kindest. The most caring and generous. And now you’re a drunk.”

“I’m not stupid, Dad! It’s not like I’m using drugs!”

“I didn’t say you were stupid. But your behavior is stupid. I did say you’re a dumb ass, and I stand by that. Alcohol is a drug. It’s addictive, and it can ruin a person’s life. You’re very close to going so far over the edge that you’re going to lose everything. Don’t do that, Remi. I’m begging you. Open your eyes. Get your head out of your ass. Stop drinking. Rethink everything from a different point of view. You chose not to claim Cristie, so she went home alone. She didn’t deny you. You denied her. Bailey didn’t turn her back on you to hurt you. She walked away because she loved you. It was her gift to you. Show her she made the right decision.”

Remi was no longer looking at his father, he was staring off in the distance, his jaw clenched, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he dealt with emotions he’d rather not have to deal with.

“Brandt is torn up over having to put you out. Yeah, y’all came to blows. Yeah, you pushed him too far. He’s your Alpha. You cannot treat him the way you did and expect him to pretend it didn’t happen. You swore your allegiance, then you blame him and everybody else for the mess you’ve made out of your life. You’re lucky it wasn’t Kaid you were dealing with. You’d be out period. Brandt is still hoping you find your way back.”

“I’m hurting,” Remi whispered angrily.

“I know you are. But this ain’t the way to handle it.”

The front door opened and Olivia flounced out. She’d obviously been inside furiously preparing herself with makeup and the perfect outfit to present herself to the hunk of man that was apparently Remi’s father. She clipped down the front walk toward where they talked at the street in a pair of three inch heels, her shortest shorts and a crop top that left nothing at all to the imagination. Her hair was piled high on her head, and her makeup was perfection. It really was, the girl could manipulate some makeup. “Hi,” she said, smiling flirtatiously. “I’m Olivia. I can’t believe you’re Remi’s dad! You look like you could be his older brother!” she said, then gave a little giggle, as she twirled a strand of hair around her bright pink and purple nails.

Daniel looked at her, then turned his face to Remi. “Do you see this shit?”

“Yeah,” Remi said, his voice barely audible.

“You got some thinking to do. And you have some decisions to make. Your mother and I have asked Brandt not to buy your house and land back from you. We’re pretty sure this one,” Daniel said, stabbing his finger

toward Olivia, “would burn right through that money, too, if given half a chance.”

Remi swung his irritated gaze toward his father.

“You deserve better, Remi. Please. Please! Consider making some changes before it’s too late.”

Remi just barely inclined his head.

“What does he mean I’d burn through your money? Are you going to let him talk to me like that?! I demand that I be respected as your fiancée!”

“Shut up, Olivia. Get in the house,” Remi said, over the sound of his father’s bike roaring to life.

“Remington!” Daniel yelled.

Remi looked back at his father.

“Call your mother. She worries.”

Remi nodded.

“We both love you. Don’t make me come kick your ass.”

Remi nodded again, then stood there, watching his father drive away. He waited only until he couldn’t hear his father’s bike anymore, then he sighed deeply and walked into Olivia’s house.

“You owe me an apology!” she screeched the moment he stepped inside.

“Where’s all my money, Olivia?”

“How would I know?” she asked.

“I gave you a debit card to pay your bills and get an outfit, and to use in case of an emergency.”

“And that’s all I did.”

“How do you go through the balances in my checking account and my savings account?”

“I only used the one card and whatever account you had it tied to. And it couldn’t have been that much because I only paid my bills and I bought a couple of outfits before it didn’t work anymore.”

“There was fifteen thousand dollars in the savings account alone!” he yelled angrily.

“You said I could use it when I needed to!” she screamed, tears starting to flow.

“Besides! It’s a mistake! Somebody else must have had access! I didn’t spend that much. And if I did, then you better find a way to replenish

it, because I'm pretty sure which ring I want, and if I'm going to wear a ring forever, it's not going to be one I'm ashamed to be seen with!"

"And a 24 karat gold flake covered cake. And real crystal champagne glasses, and a gold dress, and gold shoes..." Remi said.

"Exactly! I deserve the best, and I'm going to have it one way or another!"

"Does that include hitting on my father, Olivia?"

"What? I would never!"

"You're telling me you didn't come out there all made up dressed like a whore, trying to get my father's attention?"

"I was just trying to show him that his son has a lot to be proud of!"

"And if you didn't agree that I deserve those things, all the best of everything, you wouldn't have asked me to marry you, you wouldn't have agreed to pay all my expenses, and you wouldn't have taken me shopping for the perfect cake. You said I could have it. You said I could have the golden wedding. You said you would pay all my bills, so everything, all of it, is your responsibility now!"

"I said you could pay your past due bills. I said I'd buy you an outfit and to keep the card in case of emergency. I didn't say take everything I had. I didn't say you could spend every penny I had."

"I didn't know it was every penny. And maybe you should find a job that pays more. Because obviously my lifestyle is more demanding than you're used to."

Remi rubbed his forehead a couple of times as he looked around the living room. So many things were going through his mind that he didn't know what to do and how to proceed. But he knew one thing without a doubt. "The engagement's off."

"You can't do that!" she shrieked, running toward him and throwing herself against him as she dissolved into sobs. "You love me!" she shouted between sobs and hysterical tears.

"It's over. It's not happening." Remi walked out of her house and left the door wide open as he left.

"Wait! Remi, don't do this! You need me!" she screamed after him as he walked down her front walk and took a left, leaving, on foot, determined to at least get away from her. It wouldn't fix everything, but it was a start. It would at least stop the bleeding of his finances.

He was eight blocks away and walking past the grocery store before he realized he'd left his phone, his wallet, everything at Olivia's house.

Dad? he sent telepathically to Daniel.

What? Daniel answered right away.

I left Olivia's, but I left everything there. Can you ask Brandt to shut off service to my phone? I'm pretty sure the cards in my wallet are useless by now anyway, so I'm not worried about them.

Just head home. I got it, Daniel answered. He hadn't made it home yet, and simply made a U-turn and headed back the way he'd come. He kept his eyes open on the way, but didn't see Remi, so he just continued on to Olivia's house. When he arrived, she must have heard him and opened the door to drape herself against the door jamb as he approached.

"I knew you'd be back! Your son has no clue what he's just lost. I do not allow anyone to disrespect me the way he did. I'm sure a man of your caliber already knows that," Olivia said.

"Where's Remi's things?"

She straightened up immediately, her angry eyes glaring at him. "I don't have any of Remi's stuff!"

"Really? So he didn't leave his wallet, his phone, or anything else here?"

"He did not," she said haughtily.

"Fine. We'll just add it to the list of items we provide to the police when we press charges for grand theft." Daniel turned his back on her and started back to his bike.

"Hold on! I'm not a thief! You can't accuse me of stealing when he gave his card willingly."

"Sure I can. Everybody saw him drunk and out of his right mind. You took advantage of him and emptied his bank account. I have no doubt every single charge can be traced back to you, while he was incapacitated."

Her eyes widened in fear and she ran back into her house to grab Remi's phone and wallet, even his boots before running outside. "Wait! I just remembered he left these things!" she yelled as she chased Daniel toward his bike.

Daniel turned to see what she was offering him.

She thrust the items toward him. "See? I don't steal!"

"Where's the debit card he gave you?"

"I already gave it back to him."

“Bullshit. Where is it?”

“It’s in his wallet,” she snapped.

Daniel opened Remi’s wallet and rifled through it. “No, it’s not.”

Olivia huffed out an irritated breath, then turned and marched back into her house. She grabbed her purse — a designer purse — and marched right back out. She came to a stop in front of him and opened her matching designer wallet, took out the debit card, two hundred dollars in cash that was tucked into the front portion of her wallet, and handed them both to Daniel. “There! That’s all I have left!”

“That I believe. Better appreciate that purse and wallet while you can. It’ll be evidence shortly,” Daniel said.

He stuffed the cash and debit card in Remi’s wallet, and dropped it along with Remi’s phone and boots into his saddle bags before cranking his bike and riding away.

“You’ll regret threatening me!” she screamed after him. “You can’t do this to me! I’m a good person!” She screamed, punched the air and literally pulled on her own hair as she stormed back into her house. “I hate you!” she shrieked as she slammed the door.

All the way back through town Daniel kept his eyes open for Remi, but didn’t see him. *Remi?* He asked telepathically.

I need some time, Remi thought back at him.

Fair enough. I have your things. We’ll be waiting.

Chapter 11

The vibration of Tempest's cell phone had her digging in the recliner beneath her for the phone. "I don't want to talk to anybody!" she complained while still digging for the phone. But by the time she managed to find it, it had stopped vibrating, which meant the caller had hung up, which was fine for her. Except when she checked the recent call log to see who it was, the call had been from Bailey. "I like Bailey," she said. Sighing irritably, she hit redial.

Almost immediately Bailey picked up. "Hey!"

"Hey, yourself," Tempest said.

"How are you feeling?" Bailey asked.

"Huge. Tired. Achy. Ready to have this baby!" Tempest practically growled.

Bailey laughed. "I'm sorry. I've heard it can be miserable near the end."

"So miserable," Tempest echoed.

"Sorry I haven't been to visit you. First I was busy because I'm running the place by myself now, and now, honestly, I just don't want to be a pest. I know you're uncomfortable and don't want to add to it," Bailey explained.

"It's okay. I understand. It's as much my fault as yours that I haven't seen you in the last few weeks. I just can't make myself get up, get dressed and get down these stairs to go anywhere."

"It's fine. I don't expect you to. Besides, if I'm being totally honest, I really didn't want to run into Remi, either."

"Yeah, he's pleasant to be around lately," Tempest said.

"Shaun told me he's been removed from the clan."

"Hopefully it's just temporary. Brandt is upset about it, but when you become combative to your Alpha, and argumentative to anybody else in the clan, you really can't expect much more."

"Sorry. He is definitely not himself lately."

"Oh? You saw him?"

"I did. He and his fiancée came into the shop."

"Fiancée?!" Tempest asked.

“Oh, yeah. She wants whatever flavor of wedding cake is the most expensive one. And gold flakes on the cake. And a gold dress, and gold everything.”

“She’s a piece of work, isn’t she?”

“I really don’t know her, but I got the impression she’s very worried about money.”

“What did Remi say?” Tempest asked.

“He only slightly tried to dissuade her, then simply shut up and let her plan whatever she wanted.”

“I am going to have to yank him up, I can see it now,” Tempest said.

“Not until you have the baby. Brandt’s firm about little-to-no magic until the baby is born,” Bailey said.

“I may not have a choice. The girl has already emptied his bank accounts, insulted Brandt, intimidated Abby and her kids, and is just an unpleasant individual all the way around. You know, the kind that comes off as sweet, gentle, live and let live, then takes control of everything and everybody, while alienating her target from all those he knows and loves?”

“Ah, narcissistic. Yep. I do know. I’ve seen that myself, but was afraid it was just a little prejudice on my part because of who her partner is.”

“Oh, no. You were spot on. So am I.”

“I really hate that Remi is struggling through all this. He’s such a good guy, he deserves his mate.”

“I know. I hope he finds his way.”

“You know what I don’t understand?” Bailey asked.

“What’s that?” Tempest asked.

“Why has no one contacted Cristie? If he won’t listen to anyone else, maybe he’ll listen to her.”

“He refused to see her before she left. If I was Cristie, I’d refuse to see him.”

“Yes, but, you’re not his mate. She is. We don’t know how she’s feeling. She has no idea that he’s gone off the deep end. Maybe she’d come back to call him on his behavior and straighten him out, even if she doesn’t want him personally anymore. I mean, they were childhood best friends before they realized they were mates,” Bailey said.

“That’s true. And if it were any other time, I might have thought of that myself. Or, I might have even acted on it. But in all honesty, all I want

to do is get this baby out of me!” Tempest said, raising her voice to put emphasis on her frustration.

“It won’t be long. Shaun says you look like it’ll be any day.”

“Lord, I hope so!” Tempest said.

“Oh, the bright side, want some positive news?” Bailey asked.

“Yes! Please!” Tempest answered.

“Shaun and I have been getting closer, a lot closer. I really, really care about him. He makes me laugh, Tempest. Life is fun with him.”

“Aww, I’m so glad!”

“Me, too. He said that I’ll never have to worry about him finding his mate and choosing them over me, because I’m it. I’m his mate, and he knew it when he saw me, but I was happy with Remi, and part of loving somebody selflessly is wanting them to have whatever makes them happy, even if it’s not you.”

Tempest was sniffing.

“You alright?” Bailey asked worriedly.

“That’s so romantic! Why’d you have to tell me that? Now I’m crying,” Tempest said.

“You’re crying?”

“It’s hormones. I cry over freaking dog food commercials!”

Bailey laughed. “I’m sorry.”

“You know, everything happens for a reason. I swear it does, it’s not just a saying. And if Remi hadn’t brought you into the fold, maybe you and Shaun wouldn’t have met.”

“That’s true. Or maybe we would have. I’m sure he’d have come in for coffee at some point.”

“He doesn’t like coffee. He’s just forced himself to learn to tolerate it, because you sell it.”

Bailey burst out laughing. “Again, he just makes me laugh.”

“Aw, crap,” Tempest said, struggling to sit the recliner up so she could get out of it.

“What’s wrong?” Bailey asked.

“I gotta pee. Again.”

“Oh, well go ahead and take care of you. I’ll see you soon.”

“I want you at the hospital when I have this little ruffian,” Tempest said. “So, even if I don’t think to let you know I’m in labor when the time comes, you’re welcome there. You’re my best friend.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I hear about it.”

“Thank you. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” Tempest said. “And I’m happy about you and Shaun, but I really gotta pee.”

“Bye!” Bailey said, and ended the call as she was laughing. She sat there for a few seconds, the idea of getting in touch with Cristie rolling around in her head. Apparently none of Remi’s clan were going to do it because they believe that ship had sailed. Plus he was no longer really associated with any of them — at least for now.

She opened her laptop and went to her search engine. She typed in ‘Cristie Colter, and smiled as Cristie’s information popped up on her screen. Address, age, possible relations, but no phone number. Bailey kept searching diving deeper, and deeper until she finally happened on a phone number for a diner, that seemed to be right next door to Cristie’s house, if the addresses were any indication. When she researched the diner, she found that Riley and Maia Colter were the owners of the building. “Well, it’s worth a shot,” Bailey said, keying the phone number for the diner into her phone, and pressing the button to send the call.

She waited while the phone rang four times before being picked up. “The Best Bite! How can I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Bailey. I’m trying to contact Cristie Colter. I don’t have her number and was hoping that you might be able to help me.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t give out her number,” the girl said.

“I understand, but would you be able to take my number and pass it on to her if you happen to see her?”

“Uhh, sure. I can take your number, but I can’t guarantee when I’ll see her again.”

“That’s fine. I appreciate any help at all.”

“Alright, give me one second to grab something to write on... okay, I’m ready. Shoot!”

“My name is Bailey. I’m Remi’s ex-girlfriend. I’d really like to speak with her if she wouldn’t mind calling me back. Anytime, at her convenience, doesn’t matter what time.”

“You mind me asking what this is about?”

“Without getting too much into detail, it’s about Remi. There are some things I think she should be aware of,” Bailey said.

“Alright. I’ll give it to her whenever I see her, but I can’t guarantee she’ll call.”

“I understand. I appreciate you taking my number for her regardless. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Bye.”

Bailey ended the call, then made sure that the ringer was all the way up in volume on her phone, plugged it into charge and went to take a shower. She looked back at the phone one last time, feeling like she really hadn’t achieved much of anything. “It’s all I can do right now,” she said to herself before getting in the shower and trying to wash away all the stress she was feeling.



Julia hung up the phone near the cash register and held a strip of receipt paper out to Cristie. “She said her name is Bailey, and she’s Remi’s ex.”

“Yeah, I know who she is,” Cristie said.

“She said there are some things about Remi that she feels like you should know. Anytime you want to call her would be fine.”

“Thanks, Julia. I appreciate it,” Cristie said.

“You’re welcome. I hope it’s nothing too serious.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever know. I’m not planning on calling.”

“I’m sure that’s fine, too. Only you know what’s best for you,” Julia said.

Cristie nodded and tried to smile, but didn’t do a very good job of it. “I’m going to call it a night. I’ll probably see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here bright and early!” Julia said.

Cristie waved to a few regulars as she went out of the front door and crossed the parking lot. She keyed the pass code into the keypad on the gate that separated the parking lot at the diner from the expansive yard surrounding her family home and paused long enough to make sure that the gate closed securely behind her, then went straight to the house and inside. She let herself in and took the stairs two at a time until she reached the second floor.

“Cristie? Is that you, baby?” Maia called up the stairs.

“Yes! I have a headache. I think I’m going to lie down for a while.”

“You alright?” Maia called.

“Yes. Just really tired. I might wake up later and come get something to eat. I just need to lie down for a little while first.”

“Alright. Let me know if you need anything.”

Cristie lay down on her bed and opened her laptop. She opened the file on her hard drive called “Remi”, and started scrolling through all the pictures of them together as children. There were shots of them running around barefoot at barbecues, at seafood boils, and bonfires. More shots of them in the same sleeping bag in a tent. Curled up on a sofa sleeping on the same pillow as very, very young toddlers. There were even a couple of pictures of them at Christmastime sitting in front of Uncle Kaid’s tree with all the rest of the kids.

A tear ran from the corner of her eye and she swiped at it angrily. Frustrated that anybody could make her feel like she wasn’t good enough, she closed her laptop, and flopped over on her side determined to do exactly what she told her mother she was doing — get some sleep, and hopefully in the process manage to block him from her thoughts again.



Hours later after countless episodes of tossing and turning, flipping the pillow and fluffing it again and again, Cristie finally sat up in the darkness. She’d managed to grab a bit of snoozing during the hours since she’d told her mother she had a headache, but hadn’t really fallen deeply asleep. Irritated that the moment she’d managed to fall asleep, Remi’s face would pop into her mind while he reached for her, waking her, had her more irritated than she’d been when she’d first tried to sleep. Sighing in exasperation, she turned to her nightstand and snatched the scrap of receipt paper off its top. She looked down at the name and number scrawled there. “I am never going to get any sleep until I get this over with,” she grumbled, digging her phone out from beneath her pillow, where she always kept it when she slept. She swiped her finger across her cell phone screen to wake it up, and realized it was past midnight. She considered waiting until morning, then decided, to hell with it. Bailey had said any time, whatever was convenient for her, and this was as convenient as it was going to get. Cristie dialed the number and waited, while her heart nearly pounded out of her chest.

Three rings later, Bailey answered. “H’lo?” she mumbled sleepily into the phone.

“Bailey? This is Cristie.”

Bailey’s attention sharpened at once. “Cristie! Hi!” she rushed out as she cleared her throat and tried to force herself to wakefulness.

“Hi,” Cristie said, schooling herself silently to remember that this girl was at fault in no way. She was actually very, very nice. “Julia said you called and asked her to pass along your number.”

“I did, and now that you’re calling back, I’m second guessing myself.”

“Well, you must have had a reason to call in the first place,” Cristie said.

“I did, yeah, um...”

“Sorry it’s so late, but your message did say whenever it’s convenient,” Cristie said.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I just have to figure out where to start.”

“How about Remi’s an ass?”

Bailey laughed. “Yeah, well, he’s actually a very kind male. Problem is, he’s lost, so he is behaving like an ass.”

“What do you mean lost? Literally? They can’t find him?”

“Oh, no. I mean, spiritually, intellectually.”

“I don’t understand,” Cristie finally said, sighing tiredly.

Bailey could hear the fatigue in Cristie’s voice and didn’t know for sure, but hoped that it was due to her and Remi being apart. “So, he’s spiraling. I’ve been watching from a distance when I happen to see him, or when someone mentions something about him, and I’m pretty sure that if someone doesn’t step in, he’s going to be gone for good.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re calling me,” Cristie said.

“Because no one else has, and I find it strange that in a family of shifters, two generations on site, no one thinks to call the mate that may be the only person that can talk some sense into him.”

Cristie sat quietly for a moment.

“You still there?” Bailey asked.

“Yes. Just not sure what you expect me to do.”

“Let me start at the beginning. I walked away from him, while you were still here, or had just left, I’m not exactly sure. But I did it because Tempest explained to me about mates and the uncontrollable pull. I was the odd man out, not you and not him. The only way to make him feel like he

owed me nothing and was free to be with you, the one he's actually destined to be with, was to take that choice away from him. So, I ended things.

When I went over there to end it for good, he was drunk. I mean, seriously drunk, could barely hold his head up, surrounded by bottles both empty and half-drunk, and a partial case in the kitchen of bottles that had not yet been opened. He was mean, surly, and hateful. He was in a state that I'd never seen him in. I told him that I didn't want to be a part of it, I was done, and he needed to make things right with you, and left. I found out later he threw a bottle through the front window of his house. Since then, I hear that he's falling down drunk all the time. I mean All. The. Time. He's fighting with his Alpha, doesn't even bother going to work most days, and has even managed to get himself kicked out of the clan."

"Oh, my God," Cristie said. "And Brandt is patient! It's hard to push him to that point."

"Yeah, Brandt is very nice. He's mated to my best friend."

"Tempest," Cristie said. "I liked her."

"Yes! Anyway, in addition to getting himself removed from the clan, he was sleeping around, a lot for a while but hey, that's not a crime. But then he hooked up with this girl. I'll be honest here, I don't know her. She might be lovely. But first impressions say she is not. She was all about the money and nothing else when they came into my shop to order a wedding cake."

"Wedding?!" Cristie half-shouted.

"Yep. I asked her what kind of filling she wanted and she said she didn't know exactly, but she wanted whichever one was the most expensive. I suggested that she cover the cake in edible 24 karat gold flake, sarcastically but also just trying to see how far she'd go, and she jumped at the chance and finally settled on a 24 karat gold covered cake with the most expensive filling, and balanced among a champagne fountain, because it most likely can't be done and hers will be the first. I've heard that he's paying her bills, and buying her clothes, and I'm not sure personally, but I've been told that all his money is gone, too. Literally all his money. His bank account is negative. I can't help but think that she's spent it, or transferred it to her own accounts. Now, that is speculation on my part, I don't know if she's done that or if it was him drinking it all away, but I do know that he gave her a debit card and within less than a month, he's overdrawn."

“And he’s still drunk.”

“Yes. I mean falling down drunk, Cristie. Like, Vince called Brandt to come get him out of the bar and grill.”

“That’s horrible,” Cristie said.

“It is. It breaks my heart, but I know that if I step in and try to speak to him, he still harbors so much anger toward me, that he might just get drunker to show me he can.”

“What do you expect me to do?”

“Cristie, I don’t know if you saw it or not, but when you were here, he was captivated. I mean, fully focused, every cell in his body, the very core of his soul was honed in on you. And rightly so, you’re his mate. Created to be his match. He’s defensive, and offensive even, when anyone tries to talk to him and point out what’s happening, what he’s doing to himself. Maybe if you spoke to him, he’d listen. Maybe you can save him, Cristie.”

“Bailey, I don’t know... he refused to see me before I left. I made sure that he knew and he avoided me like the plague.”

“Because he knew that if he looked at you again, he wouldn’t be able to look away.”

“He didn’t want me, Bailey,” Cristie said.

“Oh, yes. He did. And that was part of the problem. He felt guilty for wanting you after the relationship we’d built. Which is why he avoided you. If he’d been honest with me to begin with, I might have been a little hurt, but I’d have understood. I do understand. I really, really want him to be okay.”

“What do you get out of this? Why did you decide to call me?”

“I want him to be as happy as I am. I want him to be the man he was before fate screwed him all up. He’s too good. That’s why the guilt ate him up so bad. And when you left, and I was gone, the frustration and the pain of being separated from you was just too much for him to bear, but I don’t even think he realizes it. He’s just focused on pain, period.”

“So he started drinking,” Cristie said.

“Yes. I really think you’re the only one that can possibly make him snap out of it. You may not want him anymore, and that’s all between the two of you, but if there’s a chance you can help him, Cristie, please do it. Please try. I don’t think he’d fight against you like he does the rest.”

Cristie sat on her bed, her covers bunched around her, holding her phone to her ear as she listened to Bailey describe Remi and his behavior

since the last time she'd seen him. If the pain of separation he was feeling was anything like she'd been feeling since discovering he was her mate, he was suffering greatly.

"I don't know, Bailey. It's a lot to consider."

"I know. And maybe I shouldn't have reached out, but if it was me, and I was to find out later his life had fallen apart and nobody even bothered to tell me, much less give me a chance to step in and see if I could help, I'd be angry. I know I don't know you well, but I do know one thing that's clear to anyone who ever meets you. You're strong, so strong, and confident, and you're a good person. I know you'll do the right thing."

Cristie sighed deeply. "I'll think about it. I make no promises, but I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask. And at the very least, you're aware and the choice is now in your hands. I'm sorry it had to be me to call, but no one else was and frankly, I'm not a member of the clan, so if they were standing on ceremony, I don't have that problem. So I called."

Cristie laughed. "I can see why you're Tempest's best friend. And don't kid yourself, you're strong, too. Stronger than you know."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. The number I called you on is my cell phone. If anything else happens that you think I should know about, please call me directly."

"I will. Thank you for hearing me out, Cristie."

"No, thank you. Now, go back to sleep. You're going to have a lot of people standing in line in the morning, looking for some of that delicious coffee and donuts you offer."

Bailey chuckled. "It was good talking to you, Cristie. Good night."

"Good night," Cristie said, ending the call. She lay back down and spent the rest of the night thinking about everything Bailey had told her. By the time the sun began to rise, she was only sure of one thing... Remi needed a wake up call. And she was the one who had to deliver it, in person.

Chapter 12

A couple of days later Daisy stood in the kitchen looking nervously at the piles of home made toaster pastries she'd made. They were perfect. Perfectly golden brown, crispy on the outside, fruit filled centers, and more than enough vanilla frosting on the tops of them. But she still wasn't convinced they were good enough.

"Are you sure this'll be okay?" Daisy asked.

"Honey, why are you so nervous about bringing a dessert? Getting together with your cousins is nothing new," Janie said. "And yes, the homemade toaster pastries are fine. Three choices of flavors and lots of frosting — what could be better?"

"You should have made something," Daisy grumbled.

"Why?"

"Because I want to be sure it's good," Daisy said.

"They are good. I ate three, one of each flavor."

"Hope everybody else agrees," Daisy mumbled as she packed up all her pop-tarts.

"You do realize you're cooking for your cousins. Some of them ate dirt as kids! I'm sure it'll be okay," Janie said.

Daisy couldn't help but chuckle, but quickly squelched it. "I just want them to think they're good."

"They will. And seriously, why the worry? You usually just show up, add your contribution to the table, and not think about it."

Daisy sighed, spun on her heel and faced her mother with her hands on her hips. "Because I haven't shown up in a while! And Charlie's coming, and I want him to think I can cook!"

"Ohhh. I understand. Well, you can cook."

"Not like you."

"Not a lot of people can cook like me, except Avaleigh, and nobody cooks like her. But we all have our specialties. I grew up cooking. You didn't. But what you do cook, is always very tasty," Janie said.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. If you want to learn to cook a wider variety, start cooking more at home. I'll help you."

“I’ll have to find time for that. I really have to up my game,” Daisy said.

“Up your game? I didn’t know you had game.”

“I don’t, apparently. Which is why I need to up it.”

“Well, then you let me know when you have time and we will up your game. Honestly, though, I don’t think Charlie cares too much about your cooking skills. He’s more interested in the woman, not the skills.”

“I hope so. I really let my guard down with him, and I’m regretting it already.”

“Don’t. He’s a good man, and he adores you, and Carson adores you.”

“Carson adores Dad,” Daisy said with a laugh.

“Oh, my God, he adores your Dad so much!”

“It’s sweet,” Daisy said.

“It really is. Especially because your dad loves him, too,” Janie added.

Daisy tucked a sheet of wax paper over the last layer of her home-made toaster pastries just like she’d placed between each of the layers stacked inside the picnic basket she’d loaded them into, and closed the lid. “Alright, I guess that’s it,” she said, looking around to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything.

“Is everybody coming?” Janie asked, as she followed Daisy to the front door.

“I don’t know. Havoc called yesterday and said, and I quote, ‘Barbecue at my house tomorrow afternoon after work, be there or be square. Charlie’s coming with Carson. Bye.’”

“He just hung up after?” Janie asked.

“Yep.”

“I guess I’m not surprised. I’d hoped that Analise would smooth his hard edges, but it looks kind of hopeless now.”

Daisy laughed. “He’s one of the smartest, most thoughtful, intentionally irritating males I’ve ever met. And he has changed so very much. He just still likes to poke at the rest of us every chance he gets.”

“Analise is the one we should be admiring. She not only mated him, she married him,” Janie said.

Daisy laughed.

“Love is blind,” Janie said as she walked out on the porch to see her daughter off.

Daisy's steps stumbled to a stop. She turned slowly to look at her mother. "Is it? Is that why I'm trusting Charlie? What if he's secretly a horrible person? I can't read him, Mom. I can't read him like I can read everybody else. Why can't I read him?"

"Daisy, honey, calm down. It's okay. Your dad already told you that he's a good man, remember?"

"Yes, but why can't I see that? I can see everybody but those I'm interested in. I couldn't see..." Daisy stopped talking, clamping up when she realized she was about to say too much.

"You couldn't see who?" Janie asked.

"Doesn't matter. I just can't seem to read anyone when it affects me, but I can see everybody else and their mates."

"I don't know. But I remember that there was an issue with Bam and Everly. Bam could tell when everyone else met their mates, but when he looked at Everly, he saw nothing, so he thought they weren't really mates and avoided her because it hurt him so much to be around her and know that he couldn't have her. Maybe it's something like that."

Daisy thought about it. "Yeah, maybe," she echoed.

"You should ask your Uncle Bam the next time you see him," Janie suggested. "I know they figured it out eventually. Obviously."

Daisy nodded. "Yes, you're right. That's what I'll do."

"Good. Now, go have fun. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon, and evening for that matter."

"I will, Mom. Thanks," Daisy said.

"For what?"

"For always knowing exactly what to say."

"I love you," Janie said, quickly kissing her daughter's cheek. "Be careful crossing the road. People speed up and down that thing like it's a racetrack."

Daisy waved at her mom as she backed out, and headed off toward Havoc's house.

As she pulled up the first thing she noticed was Harley and Carson sitting across from each other in the side yard with Gerald. Carson was holding a long green bean while Gerald took bites of it and chewed lazily.

Havoc was standing at the grill checking whatever he was grilling, and Charlie stood the moment she pulled into the driveway, grinning as he watched her put her jeep in park and turn off the engine. Before she even

had her door opened fully, he was standing there. “Hey! You have a lot to get? Let me help you carry it.”

“Hi!” she said. “I just have my keys and the picnic basket. I’m leaving my purse in the jeep.”

“Give me the basket,” Charlie said, the excitement he felt at seeing her impossible to hide.

“I got it, it’s not that heavy,” Daisy said, as she got out and tucked her keys in her pocket, her phone in the other, and slipped the handles of the basket over her arm.

“Give me the basket!” Charlie insisted, gently removing it from her arm.

“If you insist,” she said with a laugh, allowing him to lead her toward the patio where they were congregating.

Havoc closed the lid on his car-sized grill and made a show of making his way over to her with exaggerated steps until he finally reached her and gave her a bear hug, planting kisses all over her face.

Daisy laughed, trying to push him away, but he only let her go when he was ready.

“About time you got here! We been out here cooking for at least twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes doesn’t seem that long,” Daisy said.

“Considering I could walk to your house in ten minutes, it’s twice as long as it should have been, and like, five times as long as it should have been since you were driving.”

“I’m profoundly sorry,” Daisy said.

Charlie chuckled at the banter between them.

“Daisy! Look at the iguana!” Carson exclaimed.

Daisy looked over to where Carson and Harley sat with her iguana. “I see him. He’s pretty special isn’t he?”

“He is. I like that he’s orange. Orange is a happy color,” Carson said as he looked at the iguana. Then he focused on Daisy again. “Is Mr. Bane coming, too?”

“No, baby. He’s with his friends today.”

“Oh. Okay. I thought I might show him Harley’s iguana.”

“He’s met Gerald,” Harley said.

“Has he?” Carson asked.

“Yeah. He laughed when I told him that he’s better than a dog. Then he tried to get him to sit, but Gerald only sits when Gerald wants to sit,” Harley said.

Carson nodded thoughtfully. Then without getting up he twisted his little body to face Daisy fully. “This is my friend, Daisy. Her name is Harley.”

Daisy smiled at him. “Harley is my niece.”

“Is she?” Carson asked. He took a few moments to think about it, then nodded his head at whatever had occurred to him. “I should have known. She’s nice like you are.”

“Aww, thank you, Carson.”

About that time Gerald lifted one of his clawed feet and tapped at Carson’s hand to remind him that he was still eating.

“Oh, I have to finish feeding Gerald,” Carson said.

“Do I hear my favorite cousin?” Analise asked, as she came down the stairs leading from her raised front porch to the ground level.

Daisy looked up and waited for her to reach them. When she did, Daisy took one of the platters Analise was holding.

“Could you hand that one to Havoc?” Analise asked.

“Sure,” Daisy said, doing exactly what Analise had asked.

“It’s baked potatoes, well, partially baked. I cooked them halfway in the microwave, then slathered butter and kosher salt on the outside and wrapped them in foil to go on the grill with the steaks,” Analise explained. “They’re gonna get some of that smoky flavor and the skin will get a little crispy. And when we have them, we’ll load them up with all this!” she said, placing a tray of bowls on the outdoor table. It held sour cream, grated cheddar cheese, butter, crumbled bacon, chopped green onions, a bowl of sauteed sweet yellow onion, and even a small bowl of chili.

“We have a baked potato bar?” Charlie asked.

“Yes, we do!” Analise said.

“What’s for dessert?” Havoc asked.

“I brought home made toaster pastries.”

His eyes narrowed as he looked at Daisy. “You brought me pop tarts?” he asked.

“Yes. I did. I made blueberry, lemon, and apple. Take your choice.”

His eyes remained narrowed. “You put frosting on them?”

“Lots of frosting. Too much frosting,” Daisy answered.

“Give me one,” he said, holding out one hand as he prodded the coals with the long grill fork he held in his other hand.

“Which one?” she asked.

“Apple,” Havoc said. “Wait, hold on, how many you bring?”

“About forty.”

“Forty? You made forty pop tarts?”

“Yes. I wasn’t sure who all was coming, and I wanted to be sure there’d be enough.”

“Smart,” Havoc said. “Give me a lemon and a blueberry, too.”

Daisy handed him the toaster pastries he asked for just as he closed the lid again. “Coals are ready for the steaks,” he announced. “I’ll put them on in a minute.” He took a second to look at the toaster pastries he was holding, then bit into one of them. He chewed it slowly then quickly finished it off while nodding his head. “Excellent. Freaking crispy, then full of sweet apples. These are good, Daisy! I didn’t know you could do this!”

“I can do lots of things. I bring something every time we have a get together.”

“Yeah, but I always assumed Aunt Janie cooked it.”

“I resent that!” Daisy exclaimed.

“I didn’t say it was bad. I just said I didn’t know you cooked it. Damn, these are good. Taste this, baby,” Havoc said to Analise, holding out his last toaster pastry for her take a bite of.

“Oh!! Oh, wow. That is good,” Analise said.

“Thank you,” Daisy answered.

“Alright, so we’re going to have ribeyes, baked potatoes with all the fixings, garlic bread, and Daisy’s toaster things. Charlie, grab you one of those things, my man. I’m telling you. So damn good.”

“I’ll wait for after dinner,” Charlie said.

Havoc pinned him with a glare. “Get one.”

“Okay,” Charlie said, walking over to the basket and choosing a blueberry one from the looks of the blue jam showing at one of the seams.

“You want to come upstairs and help me get the bread together?” Analise asked.

“Sure thing,” Daisy said, as she followed Analise up the steps to hers and Havoc’s home.

Havoc watched the women until they’d gone inside then turned to Charlie again. “When your woman brings something to a get together, you

eat it and you keep eating it until you're sick of it. You make them think it's the best damn thing you ever ate. Makes them feel good. Geesh, how do you not know that?!"

Charlie shrugged. "I was trying to be polite and wait until everyone else was having some."

"I didn't wait!"

"Like I said, I was trying to be polite. I never said you were."

"Hey! Watch yourself," Havoc snapped. Then he gestured at the blueberry toaster pastry that Daisy had brought. "It's good, huh?"

"It really is," Charlie said, finishing it off.

"And don't think I didn't notice that you didn't have any objection to Daisy being called your woman," Havoc added.

"She's not exactly my woman, but you're right, I'd have no objection to it."

"Yeah, she is. She hasn't been with anybody in a long time. And even then she didn't bring anybody around. She likes you, a lot. But don't tell her I said that. She might hit me," Havoc said.

Charlie laughed. "I like her a lot, too. That's not even nearly enough to explain how I feel about her, but she's not ready. She's made it clear she needs some time, and I made it clear that I'd wait as long as it takes for her to feel safe."

"You know, Daisy wasn't always so cautious. She was always on the calmer side, but she loved life and she was comfortable in her own skin. If I could figure out who the fucker is that took that away from her, I'd make him sorry he was ever born. And I'm not the only one trying to figure it out."

"Daddy! We do not say fuck in this family!" Harley stood up and announced indignantly.

Havoc shook his head as he and Charlie tried not to laugh. "You're absolutely right. We do not say that bad 'F' word in this family."

"You owe Momma five dollars for her swear jar!"

"I thought it was two dollars?!" Havoc exclaimed.

"It was. But Momma said it must not be enough because you kept saying it. So now it's five dollars."

"Fine, here," he said, shoving his hand in the pocket of his jeans and giving her a ten dollar bill. "Go give this to Momma."

"Come on, Carson!" Harley called.

Carson jumped up and followed her as she ran toward the house.

"I gave her a ten because I'm sure I'll say it again before the night's over," Havoc grumbled.

"I know his name," Charlie said.

Havoc stabbed his grill fork into one of the steaks marinating in one of Analise's favorite baking pans and put it on the grill. As it began to sizzle, he turned and looked at Charlie over his shoulder.

"What was that?" Havoc asked.

"I said, I know the man's name. The guy that hurt Daisy."

Havoc's entire expression changed as he abandoned the grill and walked right up to Charlie. "The hell you say!"

"I do. She told me."

"Tell me. Before she comes back."

"Professor Bourne. He was one of her professors."

"A fucking professor! Hurry up, the rest..." Havoc said, his eyes glancing toward the porch to make sure Daisy wasn't coming back out.

"He didn't tell her he was married. His wife found out and stalked Daisy. Showed up everywhere yelling insults at her, even outside her classes and dorm. She couldn't go anywhere without being insulted. He told everybody that she came onto him and seduced him."

"That motherfucker!" Havoc half-shouted. "And if he knew Daisy at all, he knew how gentle and trusting she is! I'm gonna teach that fucker a lesson, and his stupid fucking wife, too."

"I want to come," Charlie said quickly.

"You can't come. Shit will go down that you probably don't want to be involved with."

"I don't care. I want to come. I owe it to Daisy. To avenge her so to speak."

Havoc eyed Charlie. "You can't come. There are things you don't know that might come to light."

"I. Want. To. Come!" Charlie insisted.

"Yeah, it's a little complicated, but we'll see what we might be able to work out."

"We got the bread!" Analise called out.

"And the dishes, because you can't eat steaks on a paper plate," Daisy added.

“Amen to that,” Havoc said, lifting his hand and placing a finger in front of his lips to signal Charlie to be quiet.

“The kids are coming. Harley is showing Carson her rock collection,” Analise said.

“Hey, baby. Why don’t you call Lucien and Hellen and see if they want to join us. We got enough, don’t we?”

“Oh, yeah. We always prepare for the whole crew,” Analise said. “I’ll call her.”

“Oh, I like them. They’re very nice,” Charlie said.

“You know my sister?” Havoc asked, as he put the rest of the steaks on the grill.

“I do, we met them at Vince’s, same day I met you,” Charlie answered.

“Alright then. It’ll be like old home night,” Havoc said.

“Should I call everybody?” Analise asked.

“I wouldn’t bother with Brandt. He ain’t leaving Tempest’s side, and she’s not moving from the sofa until it’s time to go to the hospital. You can ask everybody else, if you want to.”

“I’m pretty sure Emmalyn is feeling bad. She is not interested in eating anything at this point,” Daisy said.

“True,” Analise said, making eye-contact with Daisy to confirm that they both knew the reason.

Daisy gave a slight, nearly imperceptible nod.

“Well, Christian isn’t here at the moment — he’s not off until this coming week, and Remi’s definitely not...” Analise said.

“Can you believe that shit?” Havoc asked.

“I know. I feel so bad for him. I want to go talk to him. Maybe I could make a difference,” Daisy said.

“No, best to just steer clear of that situation. Allow Brandt and Remi to work it out,” Havoc said.

“I know I can heal part of his pain,” Daisy said.

“We know you can, too, but you’re just becoming yourself again,” he shot a look at Charlie, “thank you Mr. Charlie, and you do not need to be taking on somebody else’s suffering because you healed them.”

“Yes, but I...”

“Seriously, Daisy. Ask your brother. He’s not Alpha for nothing. He’s not going to allow it. Besides, Remi was stupid enough to stand up to him,

what did he think was going to happen? Anyway, my point was before I got distracted, and Charlie, be warned, I do that sometimes,” Havoc said. “My point was that Kiernan takes over the kids when he gets home and gives Abby a break, and Shaun is with Bailey, so I’m sure it’ll just be us and Hellen and Lucien if they want to come. But feel free to invite whoever you want.”

“Sounds good to me,” Analise said.

“Same,” Daisy agreed.

Charlie nodded his agreement, but his mind was spinning. He’d noticed how Daisy called members of her family female and male instead of man and woman, and how she referred to those she’d mentioned as mates instead of husband and wife. Now Havoc was saying that Daisy’s brother wouldn’t allow her to heal somebody and that he was Alpha and somebody named Remi shouldn’t have stood up to him, and what the hell was happening with Daisy possibly healing somebody? There was something going on here and he was definitely the only one that didn’t know about it.

Analise had stepped away with her phone in her hand, and now she wandered back. “They’re coming!” she announced.

“Good! Lise, maybe you should shoot off a quick text, ‘just so you know we’re cooking steaks, but don’t feel beholden to come’ to the females we already know ain’t coming. I already hit up the males,” Havoc said.

“On it,” Analise said, tapping out a quick text to those who most likely wouldn’t come, just so they’d know they were thought of regardless.

“Daisy, do you mind if I snack on another of your toaster pastries? They are so dang good,” Charlie said.

“Help yourself. You don’t have to be so formal. We are definitely not formal,” Daisy said, opening the basket to offer him his choice. After he chose one, he smiled at her and stood next to her, which of course made her blush.

Charlie kept relaxedly glancing at Havoc, waiting for him to message or call the males of the family. He knew Havoc had said he already did, but there was no doubt in Charlie’s mind that he had not, so either he lied to his wife, or he was getting ready to contact them. Again... strange goings on around here.

“I hear somebody’s cooking steaks!” Lucien shouted as he rounded the driveway and walked into the side yard where Havoc’s grill was all set up

complete with a large picnic table and lounge chairs.

“Yes, indeed!” Havoc answered. “Hey, you met my man Charlie?”

Lucien was wearing a pair of denim shorts and an unbuttoned short sleeved, collared, summertime shirt.

Havoc turned to him and scowled. “I told you to put your damn clothes on when you around my house!”

“Why? You worried your woman will like me better than you?” Lucien asked.

“Hey! You could have waited on me!” Hellen insisted, coming up behind them all.

“But, baby, it’s just across the street, and they are having meat, baby. Steaks! I had to get here quick. I’m starving.”

“You just ate the sandwich I made you,” Hellen said.

“But this is steak. On the grill, baby,” Lucien said.

“Jesus,” she grumbled. Then she noticed Daisy and Charlie sitting at the picnic table. “Daisy! Charlie! Hey, y’all!” she went over and started talking to them, helped herself to one of Daisy’s toaster pastries before Daisy even told her she’d brought them, and tuned out everything else.

“Lucien?” Havoc said.

Lucien was investigating the baked potato fixings when Havoc called him and glanced up at him.

Havoc tilted his head away from Lucien and toward the barbecue grill a couple of times, inviting him to come closer.

“What?” Lucien asked.

“Come here,” Havoc ordered.

Lucien went, but reminded Havoc with every step that he needed to stop ordering him around. “You know if you weren’t my brother in law, I’d have eaten you by now, right? Stop ordering me around, ass.”

“You’re confused, my dad is called ass. I’m just the awe inspiring Havoc,” Havoc teased. He leaned his head close to Lucien’s and whispered his newfound knowledge regarding the man who hurt Daisy in his ear.

“The hell you say?!” Lucien exclaimed.

“What? What is the hell he said?” Hellen asked.

“I don’t know. I’m trying to figure it out myself,” Lucien said, shooting her a flirtatious smile, while blinking his eyes slowly at her.

“He’s up to something,” Hellen said, going back to her conversation with Daisy and Charlie, and Analise now that she’d joined them as well.

“I’m telling you, Charlie knows the guy’s name. Daisy told him,” Havoc said.

“Charlie! Come visit with us!” Lucien said. “Let us save you from all those women.”

“I’m coming,” Charlie said. “Going to hang out with the testosterone,” he joked.

As soon as he got close enough Lucien threw an arm across his shoulders and stared him in the eye up close and personal. “Daisy gave you a name?”

Charlie looked at Lucien and then at Havoc. Havoc nodded.

“Yeah, she did.”

“Good. We’re taking a road trip. Maybe even tomorrow if we can work it out,” Lucien said.

“Only if I’m coming with,” Charlie said.

Lucien regarded him through a half-closed, heavily lidded eye, and for a split second Charlie would have sworn he saw the pupil in Lucien’s eye go slanted, like a reptile’s, but then it was gone just as suddenly. “Is Daisy yours?”

“One day, I’m hoping. But for now, we’re just dating.”

“Dating don’t get you in, my brother. You need to commit or not.”

“It’s Daisy holding him off,” Havoc said.

“Ain’t that some shit? Women always holding you at arm’s length. But that’s alright, we’re going to take care of her hurts here real soon. Then no more stumbling blocks,” Lucien said.

“Hopefully,” Havoc said.

Charlie nodded along like he was understanding everything going on around him, but truth was the only thing he really knew was that he was completely clueless to the way things were handled in this family. Something completely out of the ordinary was going on here.

Chapter 13

“Em? I just heard Havoc is grilling steaks,” Barron said, walking into their living room.

“Yeah, me, too,” Emmalyn said, holding up her phone to show him the text from Analise.

“You wanna go?” Barron asked.

“As much as I’d like to go, I can’t even imagine the smell of cooking meat right now. So, no. Feel free if you want to go, though.”

“Naw, I’m good. I’ll stay with you.”

“Aw, you’re so sweet to me,” Emmalyn said.

“Course I am. I’m a sweet Sonofabitch,” Barron teased.

Emmalyn laughed, then they both looked toward the door when someone knocked on it.

Barron walked over and opened the door. “Is it time?” he asked, on finding Brandt standing there.

“No, but I’m heading over to Havoc’s anyway for just a little while. Daisy and her boyfriend are over there, and apparently he knows the name of the fucker that hurt Daisy so badly. Thought I’d go introduce myself and see what he’s all about. Wanna come?”

“Em?”

“Go. I’m fine here. Got my Yoohoo, got my popcorn, I’m good.”

“You sure? I can stay home,” Barron said.

“Please go. You’re interrupting my videos.”

“Just a thought and I’m right back here,” Barron said.

“I know. I’m okay.”

“I won’t be long.”

“You’ll be there long enough to eat a steak,” Emmalyn said as she scrolled on her phone.

“Yeah, I’m hoping they’re ready when I get there,” Barron admitted.

“I’ll bring him right back, Em,” Brandt called to her.

“You can keep him a little while. He’s been locked in with me for more than a week,” she answered.

“Yeah, but I need to be back for Tempest shortly,” Brandt said. “Just gotta check on my sister and this guy and see what it’s all about.”

Have fun,” Emmalyn called out, snuggling down into the sofa and adjusting herself on the numerous throw pillows she was reclining on.

“What is she watching?” Brandt asked as Barron stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind himself.

“Some Chinese mini-drama things she’s found on scrolling on social media. Long as it keeps her distracted I really don’t care. She’s been miserable.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling. Tempest is about ready to bring the whole damn world down around her ankles just to get the ruffian, as she calls our kid, out of her,” Brandt said.

Barron nodded, then stopped and looked at Brandt when he realized what Brandt had said. “Can she do that?”

Brandt shrugged. “Let’s just hope everything goes well, and goes soon. She’s completely out of patience and I can’t say I blame her.”

“We driving?” Barron asked.

“Thought we’d just cut through the woods,” Brandt said.

“Even better,” Barron said.



“Well, look what we have here!” Havoc said, lifting his beer in a semi-toast to Barron and Brandt as they walked up the driveway toward Havoc’s impromptu cookout.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” Barron said sarcastically.

“We’re having a play date!” Analise said. “Want to join us?”

“Of course, they do. They not here because we invited them, they smelled meat and followed the scent. That’s why I sent an invite. If they didn’t get invited, they’d be butt-hurt,” Havoc said, taking a bite of his steak and chewing appreciatively. “And it’s good, too!” Havoc said.

Barron and Brandt looked at each other then at Havoc. “So where’s ours?” Brandt demanded.

Havoc laughed. “Got it right here,” he said, lifting a large cover off a buffet server so they could see inside.

“Oh, my Lord, load me up,” Barron said, grabbing a plate and holding it out for Havoc to put a steak on his plate.

“Want a potato? Analise made a potato bar set up,” Havoc said, waggling his brows in what he thought was a provocative manner.

“Hell, yeah,” Barron said, waiting while his plate was filled.

“Same,” Brandt said, patiently waiting his turn. Then standing behind Barron waiting for him to finish fixing his potato so he could do his.

“You look like Mr. Bane,” Carson said from where he sat, his gaze firmly on Brandt.

Brandt looked over at the boy. “I do, don’t I? That’s because he’s my dad. I’m Brandt. Who are you?”

“I’m Carson. Mr. Bane is my new friend.”

“He’s a good friend to have,” Brandt said, adding cheese, sour cream and butter to his potato.

“Yeah. And so is Harley. She’s my new friend, too,” Carson said. “And Gerald.”

“Sounds like you got a lot of new friends,” Brandt said.

“I do. Do you have any friends?”

Brandt laughed. “I guess that depends on the day.”

“Don’t let him fool you, Carson. He’s my brother. He’s a good male and he has lots and lots of friends. And his wife is about to have a baby. He’s going to be a daddy!” Daisy said.

“Are you going to be a good daddy?” Carson asked.

Brandt smiled as he finished preparing his meal and sat down next to Daisy. “I pray every day that I’m as good a daddy as my dad was.”

“Respect,” Carson said, with a firm nod of his head.

“What?” Brandt asked.

“That’s what Mr. Bane said. The kids causing everybody all the problems haven’t ever been taught respect,” Carson said. “And accountability.”

“How do you know a word like accountability?” Brandt asked.

“I know lots of words,” Carson said.

“I’m telling you, the kid’s a genius,” Havoc said.

“I see that,” Brandt said. “Want to come over to my house and help me with my baby?”

“Or mine,” Barron said. He looked up when there was no reply from anybody.

Everybody kind of looked at each other, not sure if they should admit they already knew Emmalyn was pregnant.

“Oh, come on. Like there’s even one of you who didn’t already know,” Barron said.

Everybody laughed.

“Does Emmalyn want us to know yet?” Havoc asked.

“I don’t know. Sometimes she does, and other times she doesn’t. Take a shot, either way you got a fifty/fifty chance of getting her on a good day,” Barron said.

“Is she happy about it?” Lucien asked.

“Yeah. I think she was just stunned at first, and now she’s really scared because she’s so sick all the time. Well, that and she’s afraid she’ll get one like herself.”

Havoc laughed heartily. “Please, Lord, give her one just like her,” he said, still snickering while he looked up at the sky and pressed his hands together.

“It’s a Gator. Gators make the mothers so sick they can barely function,” Lucien teased.

“If it’s a Gator, you and me are going to have a long, serious talk,” Barron threatened.

Lucien chuckled.

“Just gotta stir it, don’t you?” Hellen asked.

“It’s expected. It’s my place in the dynamics of things,” Lucien said, leaning over and kissing her. “But you know it’s impossible. I love you, cher. Only you.”

“Mmmmm. You’re okay, I guess,” Hellen said.

Brandt looked across Daisy to the unknown male, who must be her boyfriend. “Hi. I’m Brandt.”

“Brandt, it’s good to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Charlie. Carson is my son,” he said, gesturing toward Carson.

Brandt nodded and sliced off a piece of steak, stuffing it in his mouth. He chewed for a few seconds, then swallowed. He mixed around all the topping on his potato and took a bite. Without looking up he spoke directly to Charlie. “So, what makes you worthy of dating my sister?”

“Brandt!” Daisy admonished.

Charlie’s brows rose a little and he looked at Brandt, who totally ignored him as he waited for the human to answer. Charlie made eye-contact with Daisy briefly. “Daisy, forgive me for this, but apparently, it needs to be said.” He refocused on Brandt. “I’m not going anywhere, Brandt. I’ve walked through my life on auto pilot lately, nothing much ever changed. Then I met Daisy, and every damn thing in my life has color now.

This is where I'm meant to be. This is where my boy, who usually doesn't talk to anyone very much but talks to everyone in this family like he's known them all his life, is meant to be. You are welcome to think of me what you will, or not think of me at all. I really don't care, but I will not be going anywhere unless Daisy insists that I do, and if you try to make Daisy feel badly for wanting to spend time with me, I feel I should warn you now; I will not stand for it. Nobody's going to harm her, nobody's gonna hurt her in any way. Nobody's even going to make her even momentarily sad on my watch. Not even you. She's had enough crap from the rest of the world, and I'll now be standing between the rest of the world and her."

Daisy's mouth fell open in surprise.

"Now that is an answer! I like him!" Havoc said, chuckling as he shoved a bite of potato into his mouth as he repeated Charlie's words under his breath. "Not even you..."

Brandt put another bite of meat in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully as he watched Charlie and weighed Charlie's response to his question.

Without another word Daisy leaned toward Charlie and pressed her lips against his cheek.

Charlie smiled at her and leaned his forehead against hers before turning his attention back to Brandt.

"Well, then there's only one thing to do," Brandt said. He held out his closed fist for Charlie to bump.

Charlie raised his fist, unsure of meeting Brandt's apparent fist bump, but not wanting to fail to follow through.

The moment Charlie's fist bumped Brandt's, Brandt nodded. "Welcome to the family, my man. What the fuck took you so long?"

"Amen," Barron said, nodding in approval.

"Ooooo! You owe my momma five dollars!" Harley said, shaking her head in disappointment at her Uncle Brandt.

"Was worth it to make my point," Brandt said, reaching over the picnic table to boop her on the nose.

Harley scowled at him and pretended to snap at his finger, even clacking her teeth together.

"Hey, now! I'm bigger than you! Don't bite the Alpha!" Brandt said.

Harley laughed and fed a piece of potato to Gerald.

"Well, since it seems you're family now, I'm Barron, how you doing?" Barron said, extending his hand to Charlie.

“Good to meet you, Barron.”

“You met any of our parents yet?” Barron asked.

“Only Mr. Bane and Mrs. Janie. I have to say, I love them both already. They just pull you right in and make you feel welcome.”

“Uncle Bane made you feel welcome? Damn. He doesn’t even make me feel welcome all the time.”

“That’s because we thought you might not make an honest woman of his niece.”

“Wait? Aren’t you his nephew? You called him Uncle Bane,” Charlie asked.

“Yep,” Barron said.

“And you married his niece?” Charlie asked.

“I did. But, you have to understand, which you will once you get all the names and families straight. Each of us calls each other cousins, family, uncles and aunts. But only some of us are actually related through blood,” Barron said. Daisy and Brandt are actually siblings, and their parents are Bane and Janie, as you know. Bane’s sibling is Bam, who is married to Everly. Their daughters are Analise and Emmalyn.”

Charlie glanced toward Analise.

Analise winked at him. “That’d be me and my sister.”

“So, I mated Emmalyn. She’s literally Bane’s niece, but I’m not literally Bane’s nephew, though we all call the parents’ generation aunts and uncles because we all grew up together and live in the same vicinity,” Barron explained.

“I knew it was more or less a family compound sort of thing, but now I’m a lot clearer.”

“Glad to be of service,” Barron said. “When you meet the rest of them, Kaid and Delilah are my parents. He was Alpha before it was passed to Brandt.”

“Okay, and when you say Alpha, you mean... what exactly?” Charlie asked, looking back and forth between Barron and Brandt, then Havoc before looking back to Barron.

There was a silent ‘oh fuck’ moment, when Barron and Brandt realized Daisy hadn’t explained everything to Charlie yet.

“Uh, it’s more of a you’ll understand it better as we go along kind of thing,” Barron said.

Brandt just shook his head and glared at Daisy. “Couldn’t find time to tell your man, yet, huh?”

“I just found out he was planning on sticking around when you did. I’m not the one assuming anything, you are. Don’t look at me.”

Brandt focused on Charlie. “Will you trust me to say that you’ll understand everything in time? You will. I give you my word on that. Everything works out with you and Daisy, you’ll see first hand.”

Charlie held Brandt’s gaze for a few moments, before he looked at Daisy and smiled gently at her. “Looks like I’ll have to if I plan to stick around.”

“You ain’t going nowhere,” Havoc said.

“Changing the subject if I may, Barron and I were talking this morning and got some changes to discuss. We were going to wait until everyone was together, but who knows when that will be, and most of the parties involved are here now, so...”

“Sure, go for it,” Havoc said.

“First, y’all see Barron and Emmalyn’s house is laid out. We’re about to have the slab poured and get started on it,” Brandt said.

“Really? Why? She already comes over here at the butt crack of dawn every damn day she’s feeling good,” Havoc said. “Now she’s going to be living across the street.”

“Yes, but now you can go irritate her whenever you want to,” Analise reminded.

Havoc thought about it, his head leaning first to the right, then to the left as he looked off into the distance while his mind worked. “You know, that could be a good thing. I might like this.”

“You do realize you’d have to get up before dawn to come to our house and bother Emmalyn,” Barron said.

Havoc scowled. “I don’t like that idea anymore,” he grumbled.

“Either way, we’re going to be working on their house,” Brandt said. “Once it’s finished, that’ll leave Barron’s home empty.”

Lucien and Hellen shared a look.

“We were thinking since Lucien likes the water so much, it might make sense to offer it to Hellen and Lucien,” Brandt said.

“Yes!” they both said at the same time.

Barron chuckled. “Sorry we had to talk you into it.”

“We’ve been thinking that if no one else wanted it, we’d like to have it,” Hellen said.

“Consider it done,” Barron said.

“And that leaves Hellen’s house.”

“I don’t think anyone wants to live in it. I don’t even really want to live in it, but it is what it is,” Hellen said.

“What if we tore it down, and put in a pool. I’ve heard a couple of y’all mention it, and I really like the idea. We could use the whole lot and even make a splash pad for the littles, and maybe put in a fire pit on the opposite side for bonfires and all.”

“Yes!” Everybody said.

“I need a lazy river, so I can float my ass around it while I enjoy a beer,” Havoc said.

“I doubt we’ll put in a lazy river, but a large pool is doable,” Brandt said.

“Olympic sized?” Havoc asked.

“Definitely,” Brandt said.

“That could work,” Havoc said.

“It’ll be right down the street from y’all, though, and during the summer, all the kids will want to be there.”

“Good. Nothing more I like than playing with my baby. We’ll be there first, right?” Havoc asked Harley.

Harley nodded enthusiastically. “Can Gerald swim?”

“Baby, I don’t know if iguanas should be in chlorinated water,” Analise said. “We’ll figure it all out, though.”

Daisy raised her finger just about shoulder level to get attention, as she might have done in school even. “I, uh, I’ve been thinking about maybe starting my house. I mean, if we’re talking about restructuring and all.”

“Remi’s will be empty,” Barron said, without thinking too much about it before he heard himself saying it.

“No. Remi’s house is going nowhere. It’ll always be there for him when he decides he wants it. This is not a permanent situation with him,” Brandt said firmly.

“Oh, I don’t want Remi’s house. I was thinking of building my own.”

“Where do you want it?” Barron asked. “We got places on every street back here. Just pick one.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe across from Remi and Christian’s. Maybe across from Brandt and Tempest, opposite side of the road back there, though.”

“We can open up some new streets back here, too. It’ll just take a little while,” Barron said.

“I think that you should live right next to us, then Carson can come visit me every time he’s at your house,” Harley said.

“Problem with that is that Havoc owns everything on his side of the street, up to the lot before the corner,” Brandt said.

“Didn’t want anybody building right on top of us,” Havoc said.

“I’m thinking that I really don’t want to be right on top of the river. Maybe the opposite end of this street, across from Remi and Christian and Kiernan? I’d like to have two lots myself just to be able to keep a little space for whatever else I might want to do one day.”

“Take the ones behind you, too, to keep somebody from being too close to your back yard. You can keep the woods there,” Havoc suggested.

Daisy nodded. “What Havoc said.”

“We can put you right across the street from Remi, Christian and Kiernan, but in the middle and you’d have however much extra space you want. Before you go home today, you should come walk it out with me and give me an idea of what you’re thinking,” Brandt said.

“Okay. It’s not a rush or anything. I just, think I should start thinking about it,” Daisy rushed to clarify. “I’m just, thinking is all. Right now, anyway.”

“It’s a good thing to pick your spot. We still got Ronan, Angelle, and anybody else to consider. Eventually, even our kids are going to want their own place,” Barron said.

“Which is why I got so much land. We can put in another road off the highway further down and they can designate their own area. We’ve still got space here for everybody to have their own home, and three or so extras for visitors and family during holidays and such, without crowding each other out. The next generation is already allotted for at the other end of the property, if they want it,” Brandt said.

“If it ever comes to it, Kaid has more land out near the stream, too,” Havoc said.

“Yeah, but I hate to destroy that area. It’s beautiful there. So many memories,” Brandt said.

“Same,” they all echoed.

“There’s no need for that,” Brandt hurried to assure them. “We’ve only cleared and accessed a quarter or so of the acreage I bought. There’s plenty of room on the roads we already put in for all of us. When we need more, like I said, we can open up more further down on the other end.”

“We going to have us our own town before we’re finished,” Havoc said. “I volunteer as governor of the territory,” he said dramatically, making his naturally country accent thicker than usual.

“I’m pretty sure the Alpha has that responsibility, baby, but I’m sure he’ll let you know if he needs help,” Analise said with a pat on his shoulder.

“Fine,” Havoc said, forcing an indignant tone into his voice, but not quite able to hide his grin.

“If we’re all finished, I’m going to start taking all this food upstairs, and make plates to send home for the soon-to-be-mommas,” Analise said.

“I’ll help,” Daisy said, getting up and taking several plates in hand.

“I guess I will, too,” Hellen said, picking up the platter with all the small bowls of potato fixings on it and following them upstairs.

“Can I have a toaster pastry?” Harley asked.

“You can,” Havoc said, grabbing the basket and reaching inside to take out enough for everybody to choose what they wanted. He laid out two layers of pastries still wrapped in their wax paper, then straightened them all out and closed the top of the basket on those still inside. “More in the basket if anybody wants them,” he said. “Here baby-girl, why don’t you and Carson go play while you have your dessert?”

“Okay,” Harley said excitedly, taking two of the pastries he offered her. “Which one do you want?” she asked Carson.

“That one,” he said, pointing to an apple one.

“Come on, let’s go see if we can find some bugs for Gerald,” Harley said.

As soon as the males were finally alone, Havoc, Lucien, Brandt and Barron all focused on Charlie.

Charlie looked at all of them staring at him. “What?” he asked, looking from one to another of them.

“What’s his name? What did she tell you?” Brandt asked.

“He was a professor of hers. He didn’t tell her he was married. When his wife found out she stalked Daisy, popping up even outside her classes and at her dorm, literally everywhere she went shouting obscenities at her. Screaming to everybody within earshot that she was a home wrecker and

had lured her husband to commit adultery and shit. For his part, he claimed that's exactly what Daisy did.

"That's bullshit," Analise said quietly, having come right back out to get the rest of the dishes. "Daisy said that he wore down her resistance, and told her how special she was and how he never thought he'd feel that way again after his divorce. Only there was no divorce."

"You knew what happened?" Brandt asked.

"A couple of us do. But she didn't want anyone to know. So, we just took care of her the best we could."

"Why didn't she sense his lies?" Barron asked.

Analise shrugged. "She said she's so embarrassed that she allowed herself to be taken advantage of. She should have known better, but she just didn't pick up on it."

"Could be that he's her mate. A fucking asshole, but her mate. Look at my dad and his first mate. He had no idea. And Uncle Bam couldn't read Everly, so maybe it has something to do with that," Havoc suggested.

"What happens if he was her mate?" Charlie asked, not at all sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Oh, that sonofabitch has already signed his own death certificate," Lucien said. "So, I wouldn't worry too much about it."

"No, he's wanting to know what happens to him and Daisy if her professor was her mate," Analise said.

"There are often connections to more than one person that we never notice, or explore and they don't work out for one reason or another. Doesn't mean you can't forge a bond with someone else. Doesn't mean you can't have another mate come along."

"Our mom is our dad's second mate, and he loves her stronger than he ever did the first," Havoc said. "Of course, she was a psychotic bitch, but, still, it applies."

"When are we heading into New Orleans?" Lucien asked.

"I cannot leave Tempest right now. I'm talking any hour now," Brandt said.

"I can go. I just have to be sure Everly can stay with Emmalyn for me. And whatever you do, don't freaking tell Emmalyn, she'll insist on going to whip some ass."

"It's alright. We got this," Havoc said. "Me and Lucien can handle it."

"I'm going," Charlie said.

Brandt's gaze flicked up to Charlie. "I'm not sure you want to get involved in this, Charlie. We're not planning on just bruising him up a little bit. It could get really ugly. And like it or not, we plan to pay his wife a little visit, too."

Charlie nodded slowly. "I understand that. One of them lied to, took advantage of, and betrayed Daisy. The other terrorized her and humiliated her so badly she left school before graduation and never went back to finish the few hours of her degree. I want to be there."

"Charlie, you're not exactly married into the family yet," Barron pointed out.

"Clearly," Charlie said. "And if I don't stand up and show that I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep her safe and sane, then how would I ever convince her that I'm the right man for her. If you're not willing to give your everything for the woman you love, then you don't deserve her."

Havoc grinned at him, his crooked smile on full display. "You got that right. Hey, you sure you're human?"

Charlie's expression showed what a ridiculous question he thought that was. "Pretty sure there's nothing else to be," he said. "But I'm going. And I think you should invite Mr. Bane, too. He knows something's off with Daisy, and if it was my daughter, I'd want to be included."

"He's right. I'd never hear the end of it," Brandt said. "When are y'all planning on going?"

"Tomorrow?" Lucien asked.

"Tomorrow," Havoc said. "Barron, you stay with Emmalyn. There's going to be four of us already. We got this."

"Four?" Brandt asked.

"Me, Lucien, Bane and Charlie," Havoc said.

"I already said I wasn't sure it's a good idea for Charlie to go," Brandt said.

"You gonna stop him? He's got a right," Havoc said.

"They're not married!" Brandt insisted.

"If I have my way, we will be," Charlie said.

Brandt sighed. "You need to have a talk with Daisy. If after you have that talk you still want to go, you let us know. Until then, you're not going. And it shouldn't be tomorrow. We need a little time to get some details. We got a name now. We need to do a little research."

“And on that note, I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear this conversation. I am not a witness when Daisy gets mad she wasn’t advised before hand,” Analise said.

“I’ll take the heat. The bastard needs to die,” Lucien said.

“Hey! You forget we’re waiting?!” Hellen called from the porch.

“I’m coming,” Analise said, stacking a few more plates in her hands and leaving them all to finish their plan.

Chapter 14

“But I haven’t seen Mr. Bane, yet,” Carson said.

“I know, Carson. But it’s already dark outside. We’ve spent the whole day with other friends. It’s time to go home now.”

“Why don’t you just stop by for a few minutes?” Daisy asked.

“We don’t want to impose,” Charlie said.

“Come on. It’s just a few minutes. Carson is happy. My dad is happy. Everybody’s happy,” Daisy said, nudging Charlie with her elbow.

Charlie smiled at her. “Your dad is going to get so tired of seeing us.”

“Not a chance,” Daisy said. “I’ll see you there.”

Charlie nodded, but didn’t really say much else.

“You alright?” Daisy asked as she started to walk toward her jeep, but then stopped and looked back at Charlie.

“Yeah. Just think there are some things I still don’t know about you.”

“There are a lot of things we don’t know about each other. But I’m looking forward to learning all of them. Are you?”

“I am. I really am. Just wondering why Brandt said that we need to have a conversation.”

“Brandt said that, huh?”

“Yeah. And then there’s the way your family says couples are mates, and referring to Brandt as the Alpha, and calling men and women males and females rather than men and women.”

“None of it is really wrong, it’s just different terms,” Daisy suggested.

“Could be. But I can’t help but think there’s more here than just different terms. The way Brandt said that he’d thought you already had the conversation with me... What conversation?”

Daisy looked a little defeated, but smiled at him anyway. “Why don’t you meet me at my house, and Carson can visit with my dad if he has a minute, and we’ll try to find a little time to talk about some of it.” She got in her car and drove away without waiting for him to confirm he’d be there or not.

“Are you ready, Dad?” Carson asked, looking up at him.

Charlie looked down at Carson. “Yeah. I guess I have to be,” he said.

“Let’s go see if Bane’s at home. If he’s busy though, we might have to come

back another day.”

“Okay,” Carson said, satisfied that he’d get to see Bane at all.

It took Daisy all of about three minutes to get home and park her jeep. She hurried up the steps and into the house, calling for her father before she’d even closed the door all the way.

“I’m sitting right here,” Bane said, from his spot on the sofa.

“Oh, sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“You gotta do better than that, Daisy. You have to be paying attention at all times, baby. I’ve told you this.”

“I know, Daddy. Look, Charlie and Carson are going to be here in a little while. I was wondering if you could entertain Carson for a few minutes.”

“Sure. He’s my buddy. But why?”

“Brandt and Barron came over to meet him at Havoc’s today. I guess they assumed I’d already told him because I was bringing him around. They weren’t real careful with what they were saying, and apparently, I haven’t been either. Brandt wanted to know why I haven’t told him yet, and then told him that he and I need to have a little talk.”

“That’s all normal. Why are you so put out over it?” Bane asked.

“Because I like him! I really, really like him. And I started to believe that we could be something special, and now I have to tell him the truth about us. He’s going to walk away.”

“Why do you think he’ll walk away?”

“Because we’re not like him. Because he won’t want his son to be around us.”

“Then why tell him at all?” Bane asked.

“Because if he’s going to be around us, he needs to know.”

“True, but he might go tell everybody.”

“It’s like you always said, nobody would believe him anyway, and if they did, Tempest could just mist their memory of what we are away. But if he reacts negatively, I have to let him go. And I’m just now feeling like me again. It’s just not fair.”

Bane stood up and walked over to her. “Just be honest. Be who you are. He cares deeply for you.”

“You keep saying that. If he does, shouldn’t I be able to feel it?”

“Not necessarily. Bam couldn’t feel Everly because she was his true mate.”

They both turned at the knock on their front door.

"Trust yourself, and Charlie. He's got more feeling for you than you'd ever guess."

"Human me," she whispered.

Bane scowled at her, but went to the door. He opened it and pretended he was surprised. "Carson! How are you, buddy? Hey, Charlie."

Carson beamed at Bane, then his father. "Told you he'd be glad to see me."

"You sure did," Charlie said.

"Want to come watch a movie with me?"

"What are you watching?"

"Captain America."

"Yes. Yes, I do," Carson said, walking right past Bane and grinning up at Daisy as he walked past her and scooted himself up on the sofa.

Bane laughed. "We have a movie to watch. We'll see y'all in a little while," Bane said, dismissing both of them.

Daisy glanced toward Charlie but barely made eye contact. "Let's go outside so we won't disturb their movie," she said.

Charlie followed her outside and down the porch stairs to the yard.

When she heard his footfalls on the grass behind her, she turned toward him, her arms crossed over her chest, practically hugging herself.

Charlie immediately noticed her body language and rushed to reassure her. "No matter what you have to tell me, it's not going to change how I see you."

"I wish that was true. But it's pretty big."

"I meant every word I said to your brother at Havoc's house. Go ahead. Tell me, you'll see that I still feel the same."

Daisy didn't even smile, she simply looked at him, the emotion in his eyes before she dashed all his hopes, and then had to have Tempest erase his memory of everything she was about to tell him, and of him caring about her, and implant one that made him believe he wasn't interested at all. "Before I tell you everything, I want to thank you for helping me start finding myself. For believing in me when I couldn't, and for bringing Carson to my art classes. You both have made such a difference in my life."

"Daisy, I'm not going anywhere."

She smiled this time, and nodded as she looked down at the grass in the darkness. She didn't look up when she next spoke. "I'm a Bear shifter.

So is my father, my brother. In fact, most of my family are shifters of one species or another. My mother is human, as are several others who have been taken in, or are mates.” Daisy paused to give him a chance to say something, but he didn’t say a word. She raised her gaze hesitantly to his face, and found him just standing before her with a confused look on his face.

“I’ve seen that before. You think I’m crazy.”

“No. No, I’m just trying to put together all the pieces. You mean a shifter like a werewolf? Like in books and movies and all?”

Daisy nodded. “Yes in that we can shift from our human selves into our animal selves, but no in the way that we are not all rabid, wild creatures just waiting to feast upon some unwitting human. We are the same people when in animal form as we are in human form. We say female and male rather than woman and man, because woman and man is indicative of humans. As I said, we do have some humans in our clan, but most of us are not human ourselves, or at least not fully human. We call Brandt Alpha because Brandt is our leader. Kaid was our leader before he passed the authority down to Brandt, but basically, a male is born with certain tendencies that will make him Alpha or not. It’s not something you just decide to do. Kaid was born Alpha, and so was Brandt. There are others that could have been Alpha, but for the most part, it’s a lot of responsibility and most don’t want to be bothered.”

Again, she paused to give him a chance to react, but he gave no reaction; he just remained focused intently on her.

“We use the word mates because it’s so much more committed than a marriage ever could be. Mates are monogamous, for the most part. Some are assholes, but for the most part they’re monogamous. Mates is a soul-deep connection that is all but impossible to ignore. Some have tried and after years have been successful. Others have tried and have had their entire lives ruined. One of my cousins is fighting exactly that right now.”

“Is that the Remi y’all spoke of at Havoc’s?”

“It is. He’s the kindest of all of us. I hope he figures it all out.”

“Part of the humiliation and embarrassment about what happened to me with my professor is that I’m a shifter. I can scent lies. I can scent deceit. I should have known that he was manipulating me, but I fell for it hook, line and sinker. I never doubted him. Partially because I tried to detect any untruths on his part, and I found none. I’m a healer. I can heal

illnesses, I can heal heartbreak. I'm empathetic. I should have known. I don't know how I was so easily misled."

"Because you trusted. You wanted deeply to be loved and accepted and you made yourself believe it."

Daisy shook her head. "Have you heard anything I've said? I've made this huge revelation and you're worried about explaining away my past mistakes."

"Because I don't want you to blame yourself for someone else's bad behavior. And yes, I've heard you. I'm not exactly sure how I feel about what you've said. I'm not totally sure I believe it, but I believe something very out of the ordinary is going on here."

"You don't believe that I'm a Bear shifter."

"I believe you believe it, and I'm not yet sure what I believe. But I don't doubt you're a healer. I'm not the least bit surprised by that."

Daisy sighed, locked eyes with him and shifted into her Bear. A huge Black Bear with the softest fur and the most kind eyes.

Charlie's eyes grew wide, then he squatted down in front of her. "Holy shit," he murmured, looking into her eyes. "You're amazing."

Her big, block head canted slightly when he told her how amazing she was.

Charlie smiled. "And there's the woman I love, right there, in those eyes."

Daisy shifted back to her human self and stood before him, completely naked. "That's it? No freaking out and running to save your child from my father so you can make a quick getaway?"

Charlie's eyes were wider than they'd been when she shifted into her Bear. "Daisy, you're naked!"

"Well, yes." She gestured toward the torn remnants on the ground at her feet. "They're too small for my Bear and were ripped to shreds!"

"Oh, no. No, no, no," he muttered as he pulled his own shirt off over his head and hurried to her, holding it up so he could slip it over her head. He held it still as she slipped her arms inside, then tugged it down her body. It just barely touched the tops of her thighs. "What if somebody saw you?"

Daisy laughed. "Charlie, we're all shifters. We've run and played together since we were toddlers. We are all naked when we shift back from our beasts. Nakedness is nothing to a shifter. It's just another state of being."

He pursed his lips and focused on her face. "Forgive me for being a little possessive, but I haven't even seen you naked yet, and we're standing in your front yard."

Daisy smiled at him. "This is the gist of it, Charlie. My Aunt Avaleigh used to say that we're just people like everybody else. We just have a little extra umph thrown in. I'm no different than I was an hour ago, or a week ago, or the first time you met me. But I get it if it's too much and you don't want any part of it. I'll take care of it so you won't have to remember any of what I've told you if that would make it easier for you."

"Wait, you would wipe my memory?"

"If you have an issue with me, with us, I don't have much choice."

"You can do that?"

"Well, not me personally, but Brandt's mate can. You'd never know, there's no pain, she'd give you the suggestion that I'm just a nice lady from the art school that you are definitely not attracted to."

Before she even finished speaking he was already shaking his head. "I don't want to let this go. I have no doubt that I'm going to be stupefied later, but I'm okay with that. All that matters to me is that I want you in my life. I want to be a part of yours. I don't care what you are, as long as the soul inside you at any given time is you. Truthfully, I already figured out that something very unusual was happening. There's been whispers of supernatural creatures rampant on social media since its inception. People believe in ghosts, Bigfoot, and the Loch Ness Monster, why not shifters? Native Americans have believed in skin walkers since the beginning of their civilizations. So, really, how far out of the ordinary is it?"

"There are more mysteries in the world than either you or I will ever encounter," she said.

"True." He stood there for a few seconds, hands shoved awkwardly in the pockets of his jeans. "So, everybody is a Bear shifter?"

"My immediate family is as well as others, but we also have Foxes, Lions, Wolves, and even Dragons. Oh, there's also an Alligator who's recently joined us."

He stood there, his mouth slightly ajar, before he started laughing.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked. "I'm telling you the truth."

"Havoc," he said, still chuckling.

"Yes?"

"He's a Wolf, isn't he?"

Daisy grinned. "Yes, he is."

"And Lucien is the Alligator."

"He is."

"Okay, so here's the thing. It's your soul that I'm drawn to. You're as beautiful inside as you are outside. And everything that you are or have ever been exposed to, makes you who you are. So, as wild as it sounds, for me it's simple. I'm involved with a girl who's a Bear shifter."

Daisy watched Charlie with a bit of awe flowing through her. He was taking this unbelievably well. "I know it's not fair to you, but I couldn't tell you before. It's not exactly something we walk around advertising. It's just not safe. Some people would consider us a threat that had to be eliminated, so I couldn't tell you until it was clear to me that we weren't just casually dating. And then we happened so fast that I didn't have time to work it all out before everybody else just decided to assume you knew and talked in front of you like they did. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before you had to find out this way. If you want to just go..."

He stepped forward quickly, took her face gently in his hands and kissed her. Not just a peck, he kissed her slowly, tenderly, taking the time to let her feel the power of the emotion he held inside for her. When he finally gave her a chance to breathe, he looked deeply into her eyes. "Again, I'm not going anywhere. Kind of freaked out a little, but not enough to let it keep me from having you in my life."

"If at anytime you change your mind, you'll tell me?"

"Can't you feel how sure I am?"

She shook her head as her eyes filled with tears. "I can't read you. And I couldn't read him either. I don't know what's wrong."

"I promise I'll tell you, but I'm not changing my mind. Your dad can read me, and he knows I'm for real."

"Dad!" Carson called from the front door. "You should come see Captain America! He's awesome!"

"Okay. I'll be there in just a minute, alright?"

"Okay." Carson closed the door, then opened it immediately. "Miss Daisy, what happened to your clothes?"

"Oh, they got mud on them, Carson. And your dad was nice enough to loan me his shirt."

"Dad is nice," he said, closing the door again.

They both laughed.

“Are you okay?” she finally asked.

“I am. If you hadn’t shifted, I’d be thinking I was in love with a woman that needed a lot of psychiatric help. But there’s nothing to say after seeing your Bear, other than, I’m in love with a female who has a little extra umph. That’s what your aunt said, right?”

“You’re in love with me?”

“Have been for a while. Been unable to think about anything other than you. Been unable to get you to go out with me until a couple of weeks ago.”

“I was attracted to you, too. I was just afraid. Thank you for not giving up.”

“Couldn’t. Maybe we’re mates.”

Daisy’s smile fell and she looked at him with a surprised expression.

“Would that be so bad?” Charlie asked.

“No, just, maybe we are.”

“I hope we are,” he admitted.

She stood quietly for a few seconds before she met his gaze again.

“Me, too.”



It was well past dark when Cristie turned off the highway and onto Kaid’s land. She followed the familiar gravel road up through the property, and waved politely at an unfamiliar vehicle that waited for her to pass before it turned from the fork that led to Bane’s and Bam’s houses onto the gravel road and headed toward the highway. She pulled up in front of Avaleigh and Daniel’s house and took a moment to compose herself before she went to the door. Second guessing herself was not usually in her nature, but she’d been doing a lot of it the last couple of days. She eyed the door and considered her options once more. Finally shaking her head she opened her car door and got out. “Didn’t come all this way for nothing,” she grumbled.

Cristie walked up to the front door and knocked on it.

A few moments later the door opened and she smiled brightly at the handsome face of one of the most steady, trustworthy males she’d ever known. “Hi, Uncle Daniel.”

“Cristie?!” he exclaimed, surprised by her arrival.

“I got a phone call from someone that urged me to come see if I could make any difference at all,” she explained.

The big strong male seemed to falter a bit before he reached for her and pulled her into a hug. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Cristie hugged him back, and patted his back while she allowed him to hold her. “I don’t know if it’ll make a difference at all, but I couldn’t not try.”

“I know. And thank you for coming.” Daniel finally let go of her and stepped back so she could enter the house. He closed the door and turned to call out to Avaleigh, but chuckled when he found Avaleigh already holding onto Cristie.

“I’m so happy to see you,” Avaleigh said tearfully.

“I’m sorry it has to be under these conditions. But I had to come back to try to help.”

“I’m so glad you did. Are you hungry baby?” Avaleigh asked.

“Actually, I really need to pee. Then I’d love some of whatever you have. I’m not particular.”

“You know where the bathroom is. Go right ahead. Take a shower even if you want to after your drive. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, Aunt Avaleigh,” Cristie said. She hurried to the bathroom, relieved herself, freshened up a little, though she decided to forgo a shower, and went back out to talk to Daniel and Avaleigh.

They were both in the kitchen, as was Angelle, who was finishing her dinner.

“Hey, Angelle. How are you?”

“I’m okay. How are you?”

“I’m tired,” Cristie said. “It’s a long drive.”

“I could never make a drive like that all by myself,” Angelle said.

“Well, you get used to it, doing things on your own, I mean. And you’d be surprised what you can do when you have to.”

“I guess,” Angelle said.

“Oh, I know you could do whatever you needed to. You might not like it, but you could. Your mom and dad are some of the strongest. I know they taught you to be the same.”

Angelle smiled gently. “They tried. I hope we never have to put it to the test, though.”

“Me, too!” Cristie said.

“You going to talk to Remi?” Angelle asked.

“I’m going to try.”

“We’ll have to find him first,” Daniel said. “I have a few ideas of where to check, though.”

“Have a seat, Cristie. We had leftover roast for dinner. I made you an open-faced sandwich with toast and mayo,” Avaleigh said.

“And lots of gravy?” Cristie asked.

“Of course. I know how you loved it when you were little,” Avaleigh said, placing a plate with two slices of toast slathered with mayo, then drowned in tender beef roast and a thick brown gravy. “Root beer?” Avaleigh asked.

“Actually, could I have just ice water?”

“Of course,” Avaleigh said, filling a glass with ice and water and putting it next to her plate.

Cristie took a bite of her food and moaned with her eyes closed. “Just as good as I remember.”

Avaleigh smiled delightedly. “I’m glad.”

“So, Cristie, who told you that Remi is struggling?” Daniel asked, unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

“Bailey. But she didn’t say he was struggling. She said he’s crashing and burning. My words, not hers. But she made it clear that he needs some kind of intervention, and nobody’s stepping in because he and Brandt had a face off and now Remi’s out of the clan.”

“That’s true. I went to see him, found him at his girlfriend’s house and we had a come to Jesus meeting out front right before she marched outside dressed provocatively trying to come on to me. I’m not sure what happened after, but he reached out,” Daniel said, tapping his temple to let her know Remi contacted him telepathically, “and told me he left his phone, his boots, and his wallet at her house. I went back for it and had to practically threaten her to get her to give it to me. I don’t know where he is now. Nobody’s heard from him since.”

“Bailey said that she was hoping that if I speak to him, he’ll listen. If nothing else it’ll give him a wake up call. She said he was so focused on me when I was here for Analise and Havoc’s wedding he couldn’t force himself to look away from me. I’m hoping that rather than react defensively, he’ll actually hear me out.”

“I’m hoping the same thing,” Daniel said.

“Same,” Avaleigh said.

Cristie kind of laughed. “Bailey said that she wasn’t sure why no one else had thought of calling me, but if it was because of some crap with clan dynamics, she really wasn’t worried about it because she wasn’t clan, and could do whatever the hell she wanted to do. So, she called and left me a message. I thought about not returning her call, but I’m glad I did. I don’t know what’s going to happen, or not happen, but regardless, I care about Remi. We’ve been friends all our lives.”

“Brandt tried to handle it within the clan — I think he was trying to protect him from the fallout if everyone in our generation heard about it so he kept it among his own branch of the clan. We didn’t even find out until just the other day when it came to a head. We’ve been trying to bring him back to us, without antagonizing him further,” Daniel said. “It’s a tightrope to walk. Push too much, he pulls back even more. Don’t push enough he doesn’t hear you. Finally, he just stopped responding. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to us to try to contact you. But I’m thankful you’re here.”

“God bless Bailey,” Avaleigh murmured.

“Yep. I like that girl,” Cristie said.

“If this works; I, we, owe her a debt of gratitude,” Daniel said.

“I don’t think she wants a thing except to see Remi happy and thriving, his usual self.”

“What if what he wants is you?” Angelle asked.

“Angelle, that’s none of our business at this point,” Avaleigh chided.

“No, it’s okay,” Cristie told Avaleigh. She shifted her attention to Angelle. “He’s refused me once already. I hold no silly expectations. I’m not here as his mate, I’m here as his lifelong friend. But if I have to use the mate thing to make him pay attention to the advice I plan to give him, I’m not above manipulation where it’s necessary.”

“That’s my girl!” Avaleigh said.

Cristie smiled sadly. “I just don’t want anyone to expect this to end in a happily ever after for Remi and me. He doesn’t want me as a mate, and I’ve accepted that. I’m here as a friend.”

Chapter 15

Bailey looked up from the change she was counting out to a customer and just about burst into tears. Cristie was standing there with Remi's dad. Bailey finished giving her customer change, handed them their cups of coffee, then rushed around the counter and grabbed Cristie in a hug any self-respecting bear would be proud of. "I'm so glad you're here!" Bailey exclaimed tearfully.

Cristie hugged her back and waited until Bailey managed to get herself under control to gently pull away. "That's what I'd call a greeting," Cristie said.

Bailey smiled at her while she used her fingertips to blot away the few tears that had escaped her. "And you, too, Mr. Daniel. I'm happy to see you."

"You, too, Bailey. Thank you for calling Cristie. I'm sorry you had to get in the middle of it, but thank you just the same. Avaleigh and I are grateful," Daniel said.

"I'm sure if you'd known, you'd have done the same," Bailey said. "I understand hierarchy and all, but I just kept thinking, why is nobody calling Cristie?!"

"Thankfully, you did."

"When did you get here?" Bailey asked.

"Last night. We searched for him all night, with zero luck I might add, but we're not giving up. We came in for caffeine, then we're off again," Cristie said.

"What will you have? My treat," Bailey said, hurrying back behind the counter.

"Anything vanilla and caramel," Cristie said. "Extra sugar, extra caffeine."

"You got it, and Mr. Daniel?" Bailey asked.

"Something strong and black," Daniel answered.

"Coming right up," Bailey said. While she busied herself getting their orders, a couple of more customers entered and stood in line waiting for their turn. Bailey gave both Cristie and Daniel extra-large coffees, then filled two plates with a variety of sweet donuts and bacon, egg, and cheese

croissants. When she was done, she handed them a tray with everything on it. "If you need anything else, just let me know," Bailey said.

"This is too much, Bailey. Let me pay you," Cristie exclaimed.

"Nope. You're here because I called you. The least I can do is feed you. And you, too, Mr. Daniel," she said, when she saw him taking his wallet out. "Your money is no good here. Y'all enjoy," she said, then turned her attention to the customers standing behind them. "Hi! Good morning, what can I get you?" she asked, very politely ending the conversation between Cristie and Daniel and herself.

Daniel shook his head as he took the tray from Cristie. "I guess that's that," he said.

"We'll leave a big tip on the way out so she can't return it," Cristie said. She sipped her coffee and closed her eyes in appreciation. "That girl can make a fantastic coffee."

"Yeah, she can. And try the breakfast sandwiches," Daniel answered.

It wasn't long before all the customers were taken care of and Bailey was refilling the display counter and brewing fresh pots of coffee.

The door opened and Shaun walked in. "Where's my girl?" he called out teasingly.

Bailey laughed. "Haven't seen her."

"Well, you better find her!" Shaun said. He leaned over the counter and pecked her lips. "Good morning. How's your day so far?" he asked.

"Fantastic! Good things are happening!" Bailey said.

"Oh, yeah?" he lifted his hands and fluttered his fingers in a come to me motion toward himself. "Tell me."

"Cristie is here, and she and Remi's dad are looking for him. They're going find him and set him straight. I just know it."

Shaun's hands gradually returned to his sides and he smiled softly at Bailey. "I'm really happy to hear that. I know it means a lot to you. It means something to me, too. I really like Remi."

"I knew you'd understand how much I worry," she said, coming around the counter to hug him.

"You wouldn't be you if you didn't," Shaun said, hugging her to him. When he looked up from holding Bailey close, he realized that both Cristie and Daniel were seated in a booth, and both were watching him and Bailey. "Annnd they're still here," he said quietly.

"Oh, yeah! Didn't you notice?"

“Not until just now,” he said.

The tone of the door opening and closing sounded again as more customers entered. He kissed her forehead quickly when she went off to take care of her customers, then decided the right thing to do would be to speak to Cristie and Daniel. Shoring up his courage, because let’s face it, Daniel was a Dragon shifter, he made his way over to their booth. “Mr. GreyStorm, Cristie. Good morning.”

“Good morning. It’s Shaun, right?” Cristie said.

“It is. We met when you came in for Havoc and Analise’s wedding,” Shaun said.

“I remember. How are you?” Cristie asked.

“I’m good. Real good,” Shaun said. He looked at Daniel and offered an awkward inclination of his head, since Daniel hadn’t said anything yet.

“Good to see you, Shaun,” Daniel finally said.

“And you, Mr. GreyStorm.”

Shaun stood there awkwardly for a few moments, before he decided to blurt out the obvious. “So, Bailey tells me that you’re here to talk to Remi.”

“We heard,” Daniel said.

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure you did. I’m glad you came, Cristie. You might have more success than anyone else has.”

“If we can find him,” Daniel said.

“What do you mean?” Shaun said. “He’s not with you and your family?”

“No. He’s not. Last time I saw him was when he left that woman’s house. Haven’t seen him or heard from him since.”

“We’ve been searching all night. Checked everywhere we could think of. Even the stream in the woods on Kaid’s property where we all played as kids. He’s been there, but he’s not now.”

Shaun kind of chewed on the inside of his cheek as he considered just how much he should say.

Daniel watched him for only a second before he made it clear he knew Shaun was holding something back. “Spit it out,” Daniel ordered.

“I just, it’s not my business,” Shaun said.

“I’m asking you point blank, if you can help us find my son, tell us what you know,” Daniel said.

“Have you checked Vince’s?” Shaun asked.

“Twice,” Cristie said. “And his home repeatedly. The other bars in town, and even the restaurants that have bars in them. We’ve walked the property at both Kaid’s and Brandt’s, and moved up and down the river searching for any scent of him. There’s nothing fresh.”

“We even sat outside Olivia’s house for a while... nothing,” Daniel said.

“You check the liquor store? Or the grocery? They sell liquor, too,” Shaun said.

“Yeah. They both say they’ve seen him, but not in the last day or two.”

Shaun thought about it for a minute before raising his gaze to Daniel’s. “If he’s still drinking, maybe somebody else is buying it for him.”

“Who? And where is he going to drink it?” Daniel asked frustratedly. “I’ve tried to contact him,” Daniel tapped his temple, “but he’s blocking me. So I’m pretty sure whatever he’s doing, he doesn’t want any interruptions. That and the fact that I read him the riot act last time I saw him.”

“I’m sure that helped,” Shaun quipped before he locked eyes with Daniel, horrified that he’d actually let that comment out where the Dragon shifter could hear it. “Sorry,” Shaun hurriedly said.

Cristie smothered a grin, but didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of any help. I like Remi. I hope everything works out for him. And I’m thankful you’re here, Cristie. I hope it’s the catalyst that he needs to yank himself up,” Shaun said.

“Thank you, Shaun.”

“Y’all have a good day,” he said, taking his leave and heading back to join the line at the counter to talk to Bailey again, and get his customary breakfast sandwich and tea. Coffee was not his thing.

When it was finally his turn again, Bailey handed him a tray, complete with an extra-large hot tea already sugared the way he liked it, and two sausage and egg croissants.

“Well, that went well,” he said, keeping his voice low.

Bailey smiled sympathetically at him. “I heard.”

“I just wish I could help somehow,” Shaun said.

“Is there anywhere else you can think of that he might be?” Bailey asked.

Shaun shook his head. “I’m trying. I just, I don’t really know any of his friends or anything.”

“The clan are his friends. He always stayed close to family,” Bailey said.

“I know none of us have seen him. In fact, Brandt suggested that we don’t meddle and make things worse.”

“If I was on a binge, I’d go home and hide in my house,” Bailey said. “But he’s obviously not of the same mindset.”

“If I was on a binge, as deep as the one he’s on, I’d go surround myself with others of the same mindset and hide myself away there,” Shaun said. Almost as though he was aware of his own words once he heard them, his head canted slightly, and he handed her back his tray. “Hold on,” he said, walking quickly back over to Daniel and Cristie. “Excuse me, but I might have an idea.”

“We’ll consider anything,” Daniel said.

“There’s a group of people living out in the woods behind the warehouses in the industrial park.”

“And you think Remi’s there?” Daniel asked doubtfully.

“Maybe. I mean, they’re not the kind of people you really want to spend a lot of time with. Started out a safe place for homeless and the struggling regardless of whatever they were struggling with, but it’s been infiltrated with a few that are hiding out for one reason or another. It never occurred to me that Remi might go there, but if he’s really trying to disappear, it’s a good place to do just that. And he has no reason to fear anybody, so all the more reason for him to feel safe there.”

“That and maybe he just doesn’t care if he’s safe or not,” Cristie said.

“Exactly,” Shaun said.

“That’s a couple miles past the grocery, isn’t it?” Daniel asked.

“Yes, sir. It’s closer to the older end of the industrial section,” Shaun said.

“That’s only a few miles from Olivia’s house. It’d make sense that he could have gone there.”

“If he found it, yes. If not, at least it’s another place to scratch off your list.”

Daniel and Cristie nodded at each other, guzzled the rest of their coffee, and stood in preparation of leaving.

“Thank you, Shaun. I think this may be where we find him,” Cristie said.

“You’re welcome. Might help if you do find him, you don’t tell him it was me that thought of where to look,” Shaun said. He watched as Daniel and Cristie hurried out of the coffee shop. Daniel turned around at the last minute and made eye contact with him. “How did you know this place was there?” Daniel asked.

Shaun shrugged sheepishly. “We didn’t always have somebody like Brandt to take a chance on us. We just did the best we could. I’ve been thankful for a place like that many times in my life. I’m in a better place now, but I always make sure to find out where the people who are struggling are taking shelter no matter where I am. Even if all I do is take them a little food when I can, and coats and blankets in the wintertime, I do it. Most of the people there didn’t do anything to end up there, life just sucks sometimes.”

Daniel nodded slowly. “Thank you for bringing it to my attention. Was a time we were more aware of the goings on in our town. I figure it’s time we made sure to be like that again, and to offer a hand, too.”

Shaun nodded.

“I’m glad you and your family found us,” Daniel said.

“Thank you, sir.”

Daniel gave him a single nod of his head, then hurried out to join Cristie.



Daniel led the way through the woods, but both he and Cristie were focused on the sounds and scents wafting to them on the air. As they got closer, they finally got a look at the encampment. There were a couple of tents, small ones for just one person or two. There were ropes strung between trees with blankets hung across them that offered at least some type of shelter. Broken and bent chairs were scattered here and there, and everywhere you looked was somebody watching them suspiciously, while others slept on the ground blissfully unaware of the fact that outsiders had found them.

A couple of people quietly disappeared into the shadows, obviously not wanting to be found for one reason or another, and others who were so high they couldn’t even focus, waved and called them over to come share in whatever it was they’d managed to get their hands on to feed their habits

that day. As they moved through the camp, they came across a couple of well maintained camp sites set away from the rest, and very little kids were hurriedly ushered into a tent while their mother, who couldn't have been more than 20 or 21 herself stood outside it, daring them to come closer with no more than the strength in her eyes.

"Why didn't we know this was here?" Cristie whispered. At first she thought Daniel wasn't going to answer, and when he did, she almost wished he hadn't.

"Blissful ignorance," he said softly. He stopped far enough from the campsite that belonged to the mother and kids that she wouldn't feel that he was intruding too terribly much, and offered her a smile. "Hi, I don't mean to bother you, but I'm looking for my son. He's a little taller than me, a little thinner, shorter dark hair and brown eyes. He's most likely drinking — a lot."

The woman eyed him suspiciously, obviously weighing her answer. Finally, she shook her head. "Haven't seen anyone like that."

Daniel nodded, sensing the lie she told him. "If he happens to turn up, please tell him that his father is looking for him. Tell him we love him, and we just want him home. If he doesn't want to come, that's fine. But we want to help him, whatever it is that he might see as help."

The woman looked at him silently, until Daniel and Cristie started walking again.

The woman cleared her throat and Daniel looked back at her. She pointed to their right, then went into the tent with her kids.

Daniel and Cristie changed direction and walked through the woods littered with old rusted tin cans, broken bottles, and fire barrels that had been used to build fires so many times they'd rusted out and collapsed onto themselves. Eventually they heard voices and laughter. A few minutes later they walked up on three men leaning against an old fallen tree trunk, each holding a bottle, telling each other wild tales. One of them was Remi.

"I'm telling you, just 'cause it looks human, don't mean it is!" Remi said.

"Here, trade bottles with me, boy. I need some of whatever it is you're drinking," one old man said.

The other man laughed and offered his bottle, too. "Yeah, me, too. But on second thought, maybe not. Whatever you got in yours has you imagining all kinds of crazy shit."

Remi laughed, and so did the two old men.

Daniel stepped back and gestured for Cristie to proceed. He went far enough back into the woods that none of them, maybe not even Remi in his condition, would notice him, but he could still be there in less than a heartbeat if Cristie needed him for backup.

Cristie circled around to the side so they'd see her approaching, rather than walking up behind them. Common sense said it was safer not to surprise somebody. Her presence alone would be surprise enough.

When she stepped into the small clearing they were in, Remi's head swiveled unsteadily toward her. "Like her! See her? She's a puma. You see a woman, but not me. I see a puma." He nodded to emphasize his point. "And a heart breaker."

"I don't know about a puma, but that's a mighty fine little lady. She can break my heart. I volunteer as tribute," one of them said, which sent them all into cackling laughter, which died down only long enough for them to take another swig from their bottles.

Cristie smiled and chuckled a little with them. When their laughter finally tapered off, and their comments stopped, she focused on Remi. "Hello, Remi."

Remi turned his head toward her to try to focus on her again.

"Shouldn't have come, Cristie," he said, his words slurring together.

"When have I ever been one to do only what I'm supposed to do?"

"Pretty much all the time," he said, giggling as he drank from his bottle.

"Maybe once, but you don't know me anymore."

"Can't know you when you deny me and run back home," he said.

Cristie was suddenly standing in front of him, leaning over to grab him by the shirt and press her nose to his so fast both old men got a little freaked out.

"How'd you do that?!" one of them asked.

"You a track and field kinda gal, ain't you? I knew it when I saw you!" the other said.

"Damn that's fast! You needa go to the Olympics!" the first said.

Cristie ignored them as she stared into Remi's eyes. "Let me be perfectly clear here, mate. You denied me. I told you I'd be leaving and I wouldn't wait forever, so you needed to decide how you wanted to proceed. You made no effort to get in touch with me at all, not even to tell me you

didn't want me. In fact, you avoided me completely, including when I went looking for you to tell you I was leaving the next morning. It is you who denied me."

Remi turned his head briefly to the side and brought the bottle to his lips, taking a swig while looking her in the eye. After he swallowed he grinned at her. "Fucked that up, too, didn't I?"

She dropped him, shoving him away from her as she did, but she remained standing over him. "What are you doing here, Remi?"

"Hiding," he said without hesitation.

Cristie looked around then back at him pointedly. "You didn't do a very good job of that, either."

"Obviously," he grumbled as he rearranged himself to recline against the tree trunk.

"Okay, I'll bite. What are you hiding from?" she asked.

Avoiding her question, he smiled up at her. "These are my new friends. They don't care what I do, they still like me. Don't you?" he asked.

Both men nodded. "Yep. He ain't bad. Ain't bad at all," one of them said.

"See? I ain't bad," Remi said.

"Remi, you have people worried sick about you. There is no reason for you to be hiding here."

"My people have turned their backs on me."

"Your people got enough of your disrespect and disruption and gave you an ultimatum. You chose to leave. You could have cleaned up your act and stayed."

Remi looked away from her and shook his head, as he took another drink.

"I really don't understand how you ended up here, Remi. Not here," she said, lifting her arms to encompass the woods they stood in. "But in this situation, estranged from everyone you love, and hating them because they dared to have mates."

"I don't hate them!" he shouted. "I'm pretty pissed off at them, but I don't hate them," he said, his voice calming.

"Why?"

"Because none of them understand."

"They do, believe it or not. But you withdrew so far into yourself you didn't give anybody time to try to be there for you. You went straight to all

out blinding drunkenness, and dare I say, a whole crew of women.”

“Women are nice,” one of the old men said.

“Yeah, very nice sometimes,” the other agreed.

“I’m not mated, I can have women,” Remi said sullenly.

“That’s on you, dude,” she said.

“And you,” he said.

“What did I do?!” she asked.

“You made me lose Bailey.”

“I hate to break it to you, but that, too, was all you. And even if it hadn’t been you, eventually, you’d have lost her.”

“That’s ridiculous! We were happy!”

“Yeah, you were. But do you know who her true mate is? I mean, born and destined for?” Cristie asked.

Remi focused on her as best he could, his expression one of serious doubt. “She doesn’t have…” he stopped as his brain began slowly clicking into motion again. “No. Don’t tell me it’s Shaun.”

Cristie nodded. “It’s Shaun. And they are so deliriously happy.”

“Bullshit, otherwise he’d have challenged me for her way before you got here.”

“You’re wrong. You want to know why? Well, it doesn’t matter if you want to know or not, I’m going to tell you. He didn’t say a word about it when you two were together, because she was happy. And that mattered to him. All he wanted was her complete happiness, and if you were the male that gave that to her, no matter what he personally felt, he wasn’t going to take it from her.”

Remi looked at her, his head bobbling as his mind processed what she’d said. “What utter crap,” he finally said.

“It’s not crap, Remi. It’s love. It’s loving someone more than yourself. It’s what being a mate is all about. And luckily for Bailey, she loved you enough to walk away so that you could be guilt free if you chose me, because even she as a human understood the bond mates could have.”

“But we don’t,” he said.

“Again, on you. My point isn’t us, my point is them. She cared enough to let you go, and that couldn’t have been easy. And when she wasn’t with you anymore, Shaun stood beside her, being her friend, being whatever she needed until she was healed enough to see him as a whole. Then he declared his love for her. She’s happy, and I’m willing to bet that you still

can't find it in your heart to be happy for her. It's still all about you, rather than about someone you profess to love."

Remi glared at her.

"I obviously shouldn't have come. But I didn't know when I did that you'd become something I'd never recognize. I've loved you all my life in one way or another. First as friends. Then we got older I looked to you for guidance. You were my rock, my safe space. Always sure to give the best advice and keep me grounded. Then suddenly as my mate. I was as confused as you were when that happened, but it all made sense. You were always so protective over me, so nurturing." She smiled sadly as she looked off into the woods. When she looked back at him her entire expression had changed into one of pity. "I came back here to try to talk some sense into you, but now I realize there's only one more thing left to say."

"And that would be?" he asked angrily.

"Thank you, for finally showing your true colors and helping me dodge a bullet. I'd rather spend a lifetime alone, than with someone who loves himself more than he loves me. I see now that that's all you could have ever given me. In fact, it's probably all you ever gave Bailey. I'm glad she's free of you, too."

"You don't know what you missed!" Remi shouted.

"You know what, Remi? I do. And therein lies the worst pain there is." She turned her back on him and walked away.

"Oh, just come find me, make me feel like shit and then leave me just like everybody else, huh?!" he yelled at her.

Cristie looked back at him. "If you don't do anything else. Please contact your mother. Aunt Avaleigh deserves better treatment than this from you. You're killing her." She turned and took one step, then stopped and looked at him again. "And I've figured it out."

"Figured out what?" he demanded.

"What you're hiding from... it's you. You're hiding from yourself. You don't want to see you. It's a shame really. You used to be the best male. Period. Just the best."

He threw his bottle at her.

Cristie caught it and poured it out while she looked him in the eye, then she dropped it where she was standing and walked away.

When she got far enough away, Daniel fell into step with her.

"I'm not sure that went the way I'd hoped," Daniel said.

“Give it time,” Cristie said. “I told him the truth. I insulted him by questioning his integrity on everything that’s in his heart right now. It’ll eat at him until he comes to tell me how wrong I am.”

“I hope you’re right,” Daniel said.

“If not, you know where he is and can come drag him out.”

“True,” Daniel said.

On the way out, he stopped at the tent belonging to the mother and her kids. He waited patiently until she came out of the tent.

“Thank you,” he said, holding out cash to her.

She looked at the cash in his hand, then at him. She shook her head. “I don’t take charity.”

“Consider it a finder’s fee. Without you, I might not have found him,” Daniel said.

Again, she shook her head.

Daniel sighed. “Why did you tell me where he was?”

She shrugged like she didn’t really care, but when he started to walk away, she spoke. “It’d be nice to have somebody just want to know I’m okay. My own people don’t even care enough to find out if I’m alive. Or if their grandkids are alive. You care about your son.”

“What’s your name?” Daniel asked.

“Giada.”

Daniel held out the money again. “Giada, please take it. Maybe use it to buy some things your kids might need. It’s not charity. It’s because I care.”

She hesitated, but eventually stepped close enough to take the money from him. “Thank you. I’ll pay you back one day.”

“I don’t want it back. But you’ll see me again. I’m going to talk to my people and see how we can help everybody out here. This is no way to live.”

“It is if you have no choice,” she said.

“You should have a choice. Everybody should.”

Chapter 16

Daisy was a night owl, doing some of her best work late at night. She didn't usually get to the art studio until a little after noon each day, but this day she got up and got dressed early, before going into the kitchen. She made herself a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich and a strawberry/banana smoothie for breakfast, and packed her lunch which she'd eat around 5 that afternoon. When she was finished, she smiled to herself as she used the rest of the bacon to make another sandwich, then took about a half dozen of the oatmeal raisin cookies she'd made the night before and wrapped them in wax paper before putting them in a little brown paper lunch bag and pouring the rest of the smoothie still in the blender into a to-go cup. She gathered her purse, and everything else she'd need for the day, and slipped out much earlier than she usually did without saying anything to either of her parents.

She sipped her smoothie as she drove, smiling as she passed her art studio, intent on surprising Charlie with lunch, and a bag of cookies for Carson. She was happy. Truly happy for the first time in a long time, and Charlie was responsible for that. Not that her happiness was dependent on him, but he'd been patient. He'd listened when she'd finally confided in him, and he'd not blamed her for the mistakes she'd made. He'd even convinced her that none of the things she'd endured were her fault. And she believed him. She threw up a quick little prayer of thanks to whatever power may exist in the universe, and smiled even more brightly at the thought of seeing him, as she pulled into the parking lot in front of the office building Charlie worked in.

She took Charlie's lunch, his smoothie, Carson's cookies, and her keys, leaving everything else in the jeep as she ran in. She went right up to the front desk, smiling at the receptionist. "Good morning!" Daisy said.

"Good morning," the girl returned. "How can I help you?"

"I'd like to see Charlie Blessey, please."

"What's your name?" the receptionist asked.

"Daisy Marchande'."

"Okay," the girl said as she wrote down Daisy's name on a message form. When she was done she looked up at Daisy. "I'm sorry, but Charlie's

out for the day. May I give him a message when he returns?"

"That's strange. I spoke to him last night and he said he had work today."

"It was a last minute thing. He asked for a personal day of leave yesterday. I think it has something to do with his girlfriend. He's been extra happy lately," the girl said, smiling at her dreamily.

"Oh, okay. Have you met his girlfriend?" Daisy asked, afraid of the answer.

"No, but some of the guys must have. I heard them talking about how pretty she is."

Daisy nodded slowly, realization setting in. She'd been made a fool of again. He wasn't at work, he was spending time with his girlfriend, and the people he worked with had met her.

"Is there any message, or a number he can call?" the girl asked cheerfully.

Daisy shook her head. "No, that's okay. You know what? Don't even mention I came by. I'll get in touch with him later. Thanks, though," she said, walking slowly out of the lobby. She walked to her jeep on auto-pilot, backed out and drove away, refusing to allow anything to break her as much as she'd been broken before she'd met him. She survived that, and she'd survive this, too. Her lower lip trembled as she drove, but she refused to give in. Instead, she went straight to her art studio, let herself in, and locked the door behind herself. It would be hours before anyone came in for a class. She had plenty of time to cry it out before her students arrived.



Janie and Bane were enjoying breakfast, when a firm knock on the door had them both stopping mid-bite and simply looking at each other.

"Who doesn't just walk in?" Janie asked.

Bane jumped to his feet. "Daisy left early!" he exclaimed.

"Do you think it's bad news?!" Janie asked, racing after him toward the front door.

Bane yanked the door open, and visibly released the breath he'd been holding. "Charlie," he said, relief clear.

"Is something wrong?" Charlie asked.

“No, just nobody ever knocks. They all walk right in, so when you knocked, and we realized Daisy left early this morning, we thought, it might be something to do with her.”

“Oh! No! No, nothing like that. I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure, but shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I took the day off. There’s something me and some of my friends are going to do. I thought you might want to come with us.”

Bane just looked at him. “With you and your friends?” Bane asked.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t really know your friends.”

“Actually, you kind of do,” Charlie said.

He stood aside and Havoc leaned out of his truck. “Hi, Uncle Bane!”

“You’re going to spend the day with Havoc?” Bane asked.

“And Lucien.”

“Why?” Bane asked with a laugh.

“Because we found out who hurt Daisy. We’re going to New Orleans to pay him a visit,” Charlie said.

Bane’s laugh stopped immediately.

“I thought maybe you’d want to come along,” Charlie said.

Bane looked over his shoulder at Janie.

“Yes, he does,” Janie said, putting both her hands on Bane’s back and ushering him through the door.

“Send Kaid and Maverik if I don’t come back right away.”

“It hasn’t been that long. I know the drill. Go avenge our baby,” she said as she grabbed up his wallet and pulled cash out of it. She kept the wallet, but gave him the cash.

“Don’t you need your wallet?” Charlie asked.

“No. You never take your ID with you.”

“Oh, okay,” he said, taking his money out of his wallet, and handing it to Janie, too.

“I’ll call when I can, love,” Bane said, kissing her before he followed Charlie to Havoc’s truck and climbed in.

“Welcome aboard the ‘don’t fuck with Daisy train’,” Havoc said as Bane got in. “Next stop New Orleans.”

“Where in New Orleans is this?” Bane asked.

“Bayou St. John. Fucker has a big expensive home right on it.”

Lucien, who was riding in the back seat leaned forward. “They’re gator meat.”

“Not until I have a chance at them,” Bane growled.

“Same!” Charlie insisted.

“I tried to get him to stay home. He refused,” Havoc told Bane.

“Just because he’s human don’t mean he can’t do some damage,” Bane said. “Now, somebody want to tell me what these people did to Daisy, and why there’s more than one?”

“Her professor seduced her. Told her everything a girl wants to hear. Had an affair with her for a lot of her college time. Told her he was single, he loved her, she was his future and you know the drill. His wife found out and had a melt down. Stalked Daisy everywhere she went, told everybody Daisy seduced him and was a whore and a home wrecker, screaming at her in public. And the best part is that he told everybody his wife was right and all but drove Daisy to run home for shame.”

“Daisy said she came home to get away from the constant harassment, but she never told anybody here except Emmalyn and Analise because of the embarrassment and humiliation. She said she should have known better, and doesn’t know why she didn’t. She believed every word he said and she loved him. Then his wife found out and it all blew up and he blamed her. We’ve been investigating. Seems Daisy isn’t the first he’s taken advantage of. But somehow, it’s always swept under the rug,” Charlie said.

“Why did the wife target Daisy so heavily when it’s not the first time?” Bane asked.

“Maybe she don’t know about the rest,” Havoc said. “Either way, I figure they both deserve a bit of shifter payback.”

“He’s a fucking professor. These kids’ welfare is in his hands, and he’s taking advantage of them,” Bane growled.

“Yep, and messed up Daisy so bad that she won’t even talk about finishing her degree. They stole everything from her. And what’s with the bitch wife following her to her classes, to her dorm, to the freaking store and screaming at her the whole time, telling strangers that she fucked her husband and tried to steal him, and is a home wrecker because she knowingly had an affair with him? She fucking knew the man started the whole fucking thing and harassed Daisy when she should have fucking been targeting her own fucking husband. And the more upset Daisy became, the better the bitch liked it,” Havoc said.

Bane slowly turned his head back and forth, cracking the tendons in it, while grinding his teeth. "It's wrong to kill a woman, right?"

"I really want to press charges on her for stalking, harassment, and anything else we can find. I want to file complaints with the university and get him fired and his credibility ruined. But I just don't think it would cause them enough damage. Fear might. Fear might make them so afraid they run. Uproot their entire lives and run. I'll wait for them to get settled and send whatever university or school he ends up with a letter telling them to check into his history of seducing female students," Charlie said.

"Charlie, you're probably going to want to stay in the truck," Bane said.

"Why the hell does everybody think I'm weak just because I can't change into an animal?" he demanded. "So, I'm human? So what? I still love Daisy. I still have the right to put this bastard in his place, right along with his fucking vindictive wife!"

"You're thinking of legal, justifiable actions. That's not how we handle things. Should the woman have been mad? Yeah. Should she have run my daughter out of town and humiliated her to every single person that happened to witness the fucking banshee in action? No! Her husband is where her anger should have lain. Daisy didn't know she existed. He's the one that told Daisy they were divorced. And he's the one that made a vow to the bitch, not Daisy," Bane said. "I don't know what you were thinking was going to happen, but this isn't going to be a lodge a complaint kind of experience."

"I think I should just kill him to start with. And we'll see how it works out with her, maybe she'll get caught in the cross fire," Lucien said.

They drove along quietly for a while before Havoc glanced over at Bane. "You think he was her mate? I mean, I know Charlie's her mate, probably. But my dad had two."

"Maybe. Could be why she couldn't read him. And Maverik couldn't read his first mate. He had no clue she was screwing around on him, until he'd have had to be blind to miss it. Then Bam couldn't read Everly. Maybe that's why Daisy trusted this bastard so much without question. She sensed he was her mate and put all her trust in him."

They got quiet again, but then Bane started to talk to no one in particular. "You know, she's a grown woman. She can do whatever she wants to do. But she's innocent, and she's trusting. And he fucking took

advantage of that. He's a goddamn teacher that's supposed to keep his fucking hands off the students! Then for his wife to stalk her and harass her that way. There's no excuse. You don't get to be a fucking professor who seduces your students with multiple complaints, without your wife knowing it. She knew. And she was sick of it which is why she targeted Daisy. Had Daisy been Emmalyn, or Hellen, the whole fucking college would have known and they'd have been begging her to back off. Instead, they found a sweet, vulnerable innocent in Daisy, and they broke her. She never even had a fucking boyfriend before she went off to college. That fucker took advantage of her."

"Which is why they're gator meat," Lucien said.

Bane lifted his hand and held it over his head.

Lucien slapped his hand against Bane's.

"Alrighty, then," Havoc said. The conversation died down again, but only for moment before Havoc started singing at the top of his lungs sung to the tune of The Farmer in the Dell.

"Aaaaaa, hunting we will go, a hunting we will go.

Professor's a molester, he can't keep it in his pants.

He'll learn to stay away, from girls with angry 'rents.

He has a psycho wife. The wife will cry tonight.

Castration hurts, we'll cut off his nuts.

Revenge is really fun, maybe we should have brought a gun!"

"Rents?" Bane asked.

"Parents!" Havoc shouted, then went right back into the impromptu song again.

Then Lucien joined in, and they sang all the way across the Causeway Bridge. All 23 miles of it.

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Bam pulled his beloved cherry-red, antique pickup truck into the parking lot at Daisy's Art Studio. He got out of his truck, with his head still bobbing in rhythm to the last song he was listening to. He took a deep breath, his eyes closed, his face tilted toward the warmth of the sun, and smiled — life was good. Both of his girls had found their mates, he had a precocious, too smart for her own good granddaughter, and a new grandbaby on the way.

He whistled a little tune as he continued bobbing his head as he approached the art studio, reached out to turn the knob and walk inside, but instead, walked right into the door — because it was locked. Bam stood back and looked at the door, then over to where Daisy always parked her jeep just to be sure he did actually see it, then knocked on the door. He leaned over a little and pressed his eye to the peephole like he could actually see through it from the outside, then grinned when he wasn't able to. He knocked on the door again, and waited. Nothing. No answer, no noise from inside. For just a split second he considered worrying, then decided that Daisy just forgot to unlock the door. But just to be sure, he walked over to her jeep and laid his hand on its hood. Ice cold. Which meant that it had been here a while.

Bam went back over to the building and made his way around the building, peeking into every window he passed. Eventually, he found her, sitting in her office with her head on her desk. He tapped gently on the window, smiling brightly as he waited for her to lift her head and look at him. But she didn't lift her head. She continued to rest with her head on her desk. "Daisy!" he called.

She didn't answer.

Getting worried now, he took a deep breath and bellowed her name while knocking on the window so hard, he stopped just short of breaking it. "Daisy!"

Daisy startled, her body jumping as she raised her head and pushed herself up in her chair suddenly. She blinked a few times and looked around the room, obviously disoriented.

When she finally noticed Bam, he smiled at her and pointed toward the front door.

Daisy didn't smile. She didn't even pretend, she just nodded, got up and started for the door.

Bam's brows furrowed as he watched her. It was obvious to him that something was wrong. He hurried around the exterior of the studio until he got to the door, which Daisy had unlocked, and walked away from. He turned the knob, stepping inside, and looked around. "Daisy?" he called.

"I'm going to my office. I have some work I need to finish," she answered, but didn't come back into the main room of the studio.

Bam started toward her office, not even stopping at her door, but instead walking right in and taking one of the chairs for when people came

to see her about lessons and moving it around so he could sit right beside her behind her desk.

She looked at the chair, then at him. "What?" she asked.

"I don't know. You tell me," Bam said.

"I'm just busy, Uncle Bam. I promise," Daisy said.

"Lie!" he shouted. "You have never lied to me. And now you have. I don't know if I should cry or be angry!"

"It's not a lie, exactly. I just don't want to get into it," Daisy said.

"And it's not that big of a deal anyway. I should have known better, it's on me."

Bam dropped his big body back into the chair and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "I'm not going away. So, you might as well tell me. I won't tell anybody. I promise."

"Yes, you will. Then I'll end up with you and Daddy, and everybody else from your generation, and mine, terrorizing some poor guy because I read more into it than there really was."

"You have to do better than that, Daisy. I'm not as quick as your Daddy," he said, pointing to his temple.

"Yes, you are. And you know it. You just let people think you're not."

"Come on, tell Uncle Bam what the problem is."

"I'm an idiot, that's what the problem is," she grumbled.

Bam chuckled. "If there's one thing you've never been, it's an idiot."

"What else would you call a female who has found two mates and they both lied to her and made a fool out of her?"

Bam thought about it for a second. "I don't understand, Daisy. You have to give me more information."

She huffed an irritated grumble and shook her head. "I thought I found my mate. He told me everything I wanted to hear, including that he was not married."

"And he was..." Bam said, completely straight-faced with all traces of humor completely gone.

"Yes, he was. And I believed every single word he told me. Including when his wife started stalking me! I figured out real quick that he was lying to me, but why didn't I know that the minute he started lying? Why didn't I know? I'm a shifter, I'm supposed to know! And then the worst part is just when I'm starting to feel okay again, starting my studio, looking forward to waking up in the mornings, I do it again."

“The same male?” Bam exclaimed, his forehead wrinkled as he tried his best to be understanding.

“No. But with a different one. I not only fell in love with him, I fell in love with his son! And now I find out he’s lying to me, too!”

“Hold on, is this guy the one with the little boy that’s been hanging out with Bane? Wait, I know his name...”

“Carson,” Daisy said.

“Yes! Carson! I like that little guy. He’s brutally honest, and so smart!” Bam said.

“Yes, he is,” Daisy said, turning away from Bam.

“No, now, don’t do that. Tell me why you think he’s lying, too,” Bam encouraged, pulling her chair back to face him.

“It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not. It’s got you torn up. Tell me.”

“I woke up happy today. It’s been a long time since I’ve done that. I made my breakfast, because I have late days, then I made Charlie lunch.”

“Charlie is Carson’s daddy?”

“Yes. And I took it to him. He’d told me he’d be working today and had a meeting so might not have time to call me, which is fine. But when I got there, I told the receptionist I was dropping off lunch for Charlie, and she said, ‘Oh, he’s not here. He didn’t come in today’. Then she explains that he asked for personal time off today, something to do with his girlfriend, and did I want to leave a message.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, Daisy. She’s just a receptionist. She doesn’t know.”

“I asked if she’d ever seen his girlfriend and she said no, but she heard some of the guys talking about how pretty she was, so they must have.”

“How do you know they didn’t see you?”

“Where? We haven’t been dating all that long. And I have the same problem with him that I did with my professor. I can’t read him. I can read everybody else. I can see their auras. I can feel what they’re feeling before they even begin to tell me what they’re experiencing. But I couldn’t with the first one, and I can’t with Charlie. What’s wrong with me, Uncle Bam? Why can’t I tell when the men I’m interested in are lying to me? Why can I see everyone else’s happily ever after, and not my own?”

“Okay, let’s take these two one at a time, okay?” Bam asked.



“I’m done after these two. I can’t trust myself to not walk right into a lying narcissist again.”

“Let’s look at Charlie, alright?”

“I don’t want to look at Charlie.”

“Let’s look at Charlie!” Bam insisted. “I couldn’t read Everly. Couldn’t pick up on what she was feeling. Couldn’t see her aura at all. I was drawn to her just like a mate, but couldn’t see the gold aura when we met, or at anytime since. And honestly, if it wasn’t for me telling everybody, they probably wouldn’t know they’d found their mates either. Only a healer can see the auras. I can see gold when mates meet. Just like you can.”

“Here’s the thing, though, Daisy. We can’t see the gold aura of ourselves, or of our own mates.”

“I remember hearing that, but why?”

Bam shrugged. “I don’t know. Trick of fate? Who knows? But it’s just the way it is. So, if somebody is your mate, you can’t read them or see your aura. Now, after you mate, and you’ve bonded, you’ll be able to read them, but you won’t be able to see their aura, ever.”

“Then how do I know?”

“You ask me. Because I can see their auras. And I can read them now, just like your dad can. Charlie is your mate. You are both so gold it’s almost blinding. And he’s a good guy.”

“How do you know?”

“I told you I’d met Carson. What makes you think I didn’t hang around to see you and his daddy together. All it takes is one glance. You’re mates.”

“But he’s got a girlfriend. He lied to me,” Daisy said. “I can’t take anymore lying.”

“You don’t know that. All you know is some receptionist is telling you what she heard when she was eavesdropping. You don’t know if it was even Charlie they were talking about. All she heard was girlfriend — as far as you know.”

Daisy thought about it. “I guess you could be right. She seemed to think she was right, though.”

“Yeah, the girl that’s eavesdropping on her co-workers. Who knows how much of the conversation she missed. Could have made all the difference in the world.”

“That is true. But why did he lie about going to work today?”

“Here’s what I want to know... Who’s this professor? Is he one of your teachers? The same teachers that’s supposed to guide you and nurture your education?”

“I wouldn’t say nurture, but yes, he was my professor. And I’m so embarrassed. I would never have become involved with a married man. And then for his wife to stalk me... I never told anybody because I was so humiliated, and so hurt. I thought he was my forever,” Daisy said, blinking away tears.

Bam pulled her closer and hugged her. “People are horrible creatures, Daisy. They’ll lie and cheat and manipulate and steal to get whatever they want from whoever they want without worrying how it affects the other person. They’re horrible. You can’t blame yourself for the lack of integrity in someone else’s soul. You’re a good soul. You can heal for goodness sake! And you trusted him. That’s not on you. That’s on him. He should be humiliated. He should be embarrassed, running to hide himself away rather than face what he did to you. All you did was put faith in him. You can’t blame yourself for being trusting.”

“I just thought I should have known.”

“Unfortunately, not even a healer knows when they find their own mates. Everybody else’s mates, everybody else’s emotions, piece of cake. Those that matter most in your particular universe, those that can either save or destroy you? Not a chance, at least not until you’re bound.”

“So, you think they are both my mates?”

“Yep. I think the first one is shit, and deserves his ass whipped, if not removed and handed to him — literally. I think the second one deserves the benefit of the doubt.”

Daisy took a deep breath and let it out slowly with her eyes closed. Bam wasn’t holding her anymore, but he was still holding her hands in his as he waited for her reply. “I don’t know if I’m strong enough.”

“You have no idea how strong you really are until you have to use your strength to actually survive. You’re a Marchande’. You’re my brother’s child. You’re the healer of your generation. I know exactly how strong you are. Just stop blaming yourself for others’ shortcomings.”

Daisy nodded, but was obviously still not fully convinced.

“And one other thing...”

Daisy looked at her Uncle Bam and nodded, waiting.

“Does Charlie know about that professor?”

“Yes. I told him about it. He tried for so long to get me to go out with him, and I finally confessed the whole situation so he’d understand that it wasn’t that I didn’t like him, I was having a hard time trusting even myself, much less him.”

“Mmhmm. And did you tell Havoc and Lucien?”

“No. Although he and Havoc are friends. And Lucien, too, I guess. He’s met them both and even had a play date with Harley and Havoc.”

“Does your Daddy know?” Bam asked gently.

“No, definitely not. I didn’t want to hurt him, and I was too humiliated to admit how stupid I’d been.”

Bam nodded slowly.

“Why? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Don’t freak out, okay?”

Daisy sat back. “What do you know?” she asked, her voice hushed and worried.

“I saw your daddy leave the house this morning with Charlie, Havoc, and Lucien. They pulled up in Havoc’s truck and sent Charlie to the door to get him, then they drove away.”

“Nooooo,” she breathed.

“That was a while ago, though. Whatever they’re doing, it’s too late to prevent.”

Daisy immediately opened her mind, planning to reach for Havoc.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Bam said.

“I have to tell them to stop. If they’re going to see to what I think they are, they could really get in trouble.”

“First, they’re grown shifters. They can figure a way out of it. And Kaid and Brandt both keep enough cash for bail on hand regardless. Second, don’t interrupt in case they’ve gotten themselves into a sticky situation.”

“I didn’t want this, Uncle Bam. I didn’t want anyone else to have to pay for my idiocy.”

“You’re not an idiot. You’re trusting, and innocent, and loyal, and you expect everyone else to be the same. They’re not. People are horrible.”

They sat quietly for several minutes before Bam tapped her on the knee and stood up. “Come on.”

“I can’t leave. I have students coming after school.”

“We’re not leaving. You’re going to teach me how to sculpt.”

“With metal, like Aunt Everly?”

“No, with clay.”

“Like a wheel, vases and stuff?”

“No, like using my hands to form and carve away pieces until I have a beautiful gift to give to my Ever.”

Daisy smiled, though it was a little tense. “That’s so sweet. I want a man that loves me like that.”

“I think you’ve found one.”

“You really think that?”

“I do. And you do, too, or you wouldn’t have trusted him with the things you haven’t told anyone else.”

Bam took Daisy by the hand and led her to the back room where she kept the sculpting clay and tools, and pottery wheels. “Okay, show me how to make something for my ever,” he said.

Daisy nodded, then she hugged him. “Thank you, Uncle Bam.”

“You’re welcome, my Daisy,” he said, kissing her forehead quickly like he used to when she was a little girl and would so easily get her feelings hurt. “I know you’re still worried, but it will be okay. Trust me.”

## Chapter 17

This part of Bayou St. John was, believe it or not, a wide, well manicured expanse of water that split the city. The more wealthy who lived on the far side of the bayou lived in gated communities, the back yards of their homes backing up near the bayou. They often peddled their peddle-boats, and paddled their kayaks along the bayou when they got home in the evenings, and more on the weekends. This was exactly where the professor and his well-deserved wife lived in an overly large, overly ornate three story, gated home completed with an in-ground pool and glass walled pool house just beyond.

On the opposite side of Bayou St. John, where the everyday people lived, Havoc, Bane, Charlie, and Lucien sat in Havoc's truck, finishing off the last of their poboys, as the sun went down and they kept an eye on Professor Bourne's house.

"What's the name of that restaurant?" Lucien asked.

"Liuzza's" Havoc said. "Best damn pretty-much-anything they offer in the city."

"Yes, indeed," Lucien said. "I want that seafood muffaletta next."

"You're just now finishing the last bite of that sandwich! It's a freaking foot long and full of shrimp!"

"Yep. And I think I need the seafood muffaletta next."

"Man, that's a lot of food," Charlie said. "The sign said it weighs sixteen pounds. It feeds six to eight!"

"Or one gator! And yes, it is a masterpiece! Garlic butter soaked and toasted muffaletta bun, a layer of fried catfish, a layer of fried shrimp, a layer of fried oysters, a layer of fried soft shell crab, a layer of fried crawfish tails. Cocktail sauce and tartar sauce between the layers; what's not to love?!" Lucien said.

"Why didn't you get it when we were there?" Havoc asked.

"I needed to be sure I could move fast. If I'm really, really stuffed, the gator don't move so well," Lucien said with regret.

"Hey, look, is that him?" Bane asked, focused on the house, instead of the incessant banter of his nephews.

“It’s somebody, him or his wife,” Havoc said, his eyes now locked on the house and he wiped his hands on his sixth or seventh napkin and dabbed at his mouth. For as rough around the edges as he was, he had impeccable table manners, even when there wasn’t a table present.

They watched as the driver’s side door opened and a woman got out. She was dressed to the nines and wore heels so high it looked like she might teeter off of them at any given moment. Her hair was bleached so blonde it was almost colorless. Makeup on so thick, that if she wore it that way every day, there was zero chance her skin had felt the sunlight in years. She turned back to the car and shrieked at it. “Can you get out and get the damn door?! I told you I wasn’t digging for the keys! It messes up my nails. GET THE DOOOOR!” she screeched again.

The passenger side door flew open and a man got out. He was dressed as nicely as she was, and was actually an attractive man. “If you keep screaming at me like that, I’ll put you through the damn door!” he yelled.

“Yeah, right. Then you go live on your teachers’ salary! Daddy would put you out of my house so fast!”

“It’s not your house. It’s ours!”

She laughed almost hysterically. “Yeah, like I’d allow you to have anything!”

“Fuck you,” he spat.

“No, fuck you! And open the fucking door!” she screamed.

The man opened the door, bitching about it the entire time, then went inside the very large, very expansive house, giving the woman time to get inside, then slamming the door behind them both.

“Holy fuck,” Havoc exclaimed. “I’d shoot my fucking self, if I was either one of them.”

“I’ll just kill them. Nobody will mind. Hell, nobody will miss them,” Lucien said.

Bane eyed the area they were sitting in. The sun had set and it was getting darker. The street lights that would normally light the area were out, as was par for the course in New Orleans. And the bridge he needed to take to cross the bayou to get to the house was a few blocks down, and even darker on the side they were on. He looked again, to assure himself that no one even gave a damn that they were there, then he got out and started walking the half a block to Bayou St. John, where he would then turn East and go over the bridge to the mansions sitting on the other side.

“Hey! Hey, wait!” Havoc called out, hurriedly getting out and running to catch up with Bane.

“You better hurry if you want a part of this,” Lucien said, leaving the truck behind.

Charlie reached for the keys Havoc had left in the ignition, shoved them in his pocket, then got out, too and fell in behind them. He had no idea what would happen, but he knew one thing. These males loved Daisy and they were here to make sure these horrible fucking people knew that whatever they faced was because of the trauma they put her through. And that meant, that he needed to be a part of it. Because if anyone ever tried to harm Daisy in any way again, he’d likely be spending the rest of his days in prison, and that would be okay, because he knew that Daisy’s family would take excellent care of Carson while he paid for whatever he had to do to protect the female he loved. “I’m coming, too!”

Bane started across the footbridge.

Havoc and Lucien intentionally gave him enough time to cross, then lingered for another few minutes before they finally crossed, laughing and talking, giving the impression they were just buddies on their way home.

Charlie was smart enough to realize they were giving the impression they didn’t know each other. So, he took out his phone and pretended to be having a conversation as he lingered at the front of the foot bridge. When he was sure there was no one else around, he finally crossed the bridge, still talking on his phone. Waving his arms around to make it look like he was having an animated conversation with whoever was on the other end.

When he finally made it to the other side, he hesitated for a moment, not quite sure where they all went. He knew the house, but wasn’t sure that they’d all gone there.

A couple of pairs of glowing eyes, glaring at him, let him know at least two of them were squatted down near the wrought iron fence surrounding the professor’s back yard. He nonchalantly made his way in that general direction, until he was confident he, too, was hidden in the shadows and rushed to join them.

Havoc grabbed hold of his shoulder and forced him further back in the shadows. He got up close in Charlie’s face and held a finger against his own lips.

Charlie nodded.

Havoc snarled, then grabbed Charlie's cell phone and held it up almost against his nose.

Charlie's eyes widened and he nodded as he hurried to turn it off completely. If they didn't bring wallets, they damn sure shouldn't have brought phones.

Lucien shook his head, knowing they'd all be caught and have to call their mates to tell them they'd be home in 8 - 10 years, if they could manage good behavior.

"Where's Bane?" Charlie whispered.

"You have got to teach him to use his head voice," Lucien whispered.

"He ain't got one!"

"Some humans do! I've heard about it," Lucien whispered.

"Naw. Well, maybe. I think that my Aunt Janie might have been able to communicate with Uncle Bane," Havoc whispered, then he got aggravated, growled at Lucien and shook his head vehemently. "Can we discuss this at another time?"

Lucien shrugged uncaringly.

Charlie lifted his arms as though to say, 'well, I still don't know where he is'.

Havoc pointed at the house, just as they heard a loud banging on the door.

"Aw, shit," Lucien said, hurriedly standing and running toward the front of the house.

Havoc was right behind, and surprisingly, so was Charlie.

"If shit goes south quicker than we expect and we shift, grab the clothes. Don't leave a damn thing here," Havoc said as he and Charlie brought up the rear.

"Got it," Charlie said, just as they came to a stop and hesitated just out of sight behind a pair of huge magnolia trees in the professor's front yard.

"Can I help you?" Professor Bourne asked, his voice full of attitude as he checked his front door for damage.

"No, but I'm here to help you," Bane said.

"You almost broke my fucking door. This is sinker cypress and cut glass! You have any idea how fucking much this door cost?"

"What is going on in here?!" his wife demanded, walking into the foyer with a drink in her hand.

"I'm handling it! Go back inside," the professor ordered.



“Don’t fucking tell me what to do! You’re obviously not handling it well.”

“Do either one of you have any idea how fucking much the penalty is for abusing a male’s daughter. A male’s innocent daughter?!” Bane bellowed.

“Hey, fuck you! I haven’t abused any fucking body!”

The wife’s face was suddenly irately furious. “He hasn’t done anything that wasn’t provoked! Little whores keep throwing themselves at him because they’re too stupid to pass otherwise! And he’s just a man, he’s only human, he can’t help himself!” she shrieked.

“Yeah? Well, I’m here to dole out a little justice for mine. And for the record, it’s not just him I’m here for,” Bane snarled.

“I don’t know you. I don’t know your daughter!” the professor yelled, “and get the fuck off my property!”

“The name Daisy Marchande’ mean anything to you?” Bane demanded.

The professor smirked. “Oh, yeah. I do know that one. She was a sweet one. Stupid, too for falling for all the shit I spewed at her. You should have taught her to keep her fucking legs closed if she didn’t want somebody crawling between them.”

“She was a whore, just like all the rest! Should have kept her legs closed and out from under my husband!” the woman screamed.

Bane’s hand shot out and grabbed the professor by the throat with one hand, while he balled his other hand into a fist and planted it right in the middle of the professor’s face, breaking his nose and sending blood pulsing from his nostrils.

Lucien suddenly appeared from behind Bane and his hand wrapped around the woman’s throat. “You know that’s my sister, right?” he asked, pouring on his thickest Cajun accent. “You know what we do to people that take advantage of our sisters down in the bayou, don’t you?” Lucien smiled, his eyes staring into the eyes of the professor’s wife. Then he laughed, knowing full well what his laugh and that accent he put on when it suited his situation did to women. His laugh died out and he licked his lips. “We feed them to the gators, yeah.”

The professor’s wife desperately clawed at Lucien’s hand, claspings her throat just tight enough to keep her from getting away.

“Now, you want to tell me what really happened?” Lucien asked.

The woman's gaze darted to the side, she was watching Bane beat her husband. "Stop!" she squeaked out. "Make him stop! He's going to hurt him!"

Lucien looked lazily over his shoulder at Bane, who'd let the man go and had baited him to leave the shelter of the doorway to try to fight him. Lucien chuckled. "Ya know, he can just tear his throat out anytime he wants, yeah. He's just playing now, getting a little revenge for what your husband did to his daughter."

"Stop it!" she rasped, still prying at Lucien's hand.

Lucien rolled his eyes and shook his head disbelievingly. "He fucked other women. Manipulated them, young women, he should have been guiding and teaching. And instead of leaving that piece of shit, you harassed the women. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I'll, I'll do anything," she said, suddenly changing tactic. "Just make him stop hurting my husband," she sobbed, as Bane hit the professor for the eight or ninth time. She stopped prying at Lucien's hand and ran her fingers up his arm, in what she thought was the beginnings of seduction.

Lucien's face twisted into what could only be a look of disgust, and he let go as he shoved her away from him. "Oh, fuck no! Not if I was dying and you were the fucking air. That's just gross!" he said, wiping his hand on his jeans as he pretended to have a full body shiver.

Her husband's predicament momentarily forgotten as the rage at Lucien's refusal began to burn her pride. "I'll have you know, I'm so much better than you! I have class! I have pedigree!"

"You are a psychotic whore who harasses the young women your husband has seduced and drives them away from the school they have a right to be in so they won't stick around long enough to figure out they should be pressing charges instead," Lucien said. "It just hit me, that's your whole game. Drive them away, humiliate them, and they'll run, instead of pressing charges and bringing your perfect little life down around your ears. You, lady, are a pathetic cunt. An old, not very attractive, pathetic cunt, at that."

Havoc couldn't help it, he started laughing.

Charlie grinned, but then something caught his attention. He tapped Havoc on the shoulder and pointed over the door.

"Aw, fuck. You know how to handle all the security shit?" Havoc asked, noticing the small, discreet closed-circuit security camera mounted

over the door.

“Yeah. I got it,” Charlie said, starting toward the house. “There’s a reason I should have scoped it out first. I could have taken the security cameras down.”

“Just take care of it now,” Havoc said, right on his heels.

“Get up!” Bane shouted. He kicked the professor in the ribs as he struggled to get up off the ground.

“I’ll fucking kill you,” the professor threatened, spittle and blood, flying from his mouth as he skidded across the ground, then started trying to get up again.

“I wish you would get up and at least make it a little less embarrassing. I almost feel bad to be beating a man who can’t fucking throw a punch,” Bane said, standing back to allow the professor to finally get up.

While he struggled, Charlie and Havoc went by. Charlie pushed his way past the professor’s wife, who immediately started screeching as he entered the house.

Havoc paused on the front porch and with one well placed leap toward the transom at the top of the door, grabbed hold of the small security camera mounted there, and yanked it free. “We just gonna take care of this,” Havoc said, then pushed his way past the professor’s wife.

“Get out! Get out of my house! Help, help police! Police! Somebody help us!” the woman shouted.

Bane shot a look at Lucien.

“I was trying to avoid that,” Lucien said.

“Help!” she screamed.

Lucien grabbed her and slapped his hand over her mouth and her nose. He held her back close to his chest so she couldn’t move and held her still, unable to breathe until she finally passed out.

He should have laid her down at her front door, but instead, he just allowed her to drop to the ground.

The professor, on his knees now, his breath heaving in and out of his body while he spewed vile threats, happened to see his wife as her body dropped to the ground and gave a slight bounce before coming to a rest. “You, killed, my, wife!” he tried to shout between pants.

“Na, she’s just taking a little nap,” Lucien said.

“I’ll kill you. I’ll kill all of you!” the professor screamed, struggling up from his knees to teeter over to Bane, who struck him another four or five times in the face, the chest, the gut and the face again before he could even lift an arm to even consider striking back. He stumbled backward and fell, writhing in pain as he struggled to get up despite his inability to even defend himself at this point.

Footsteps could be heard echoing across the tiled floors inside the house, announcing Havoc and Charlie as they returned from erasing the security footage from any data bank that may have been connected.

“Got it. He even logged into the security data base and erased the last three days. Cheap bastards aren’t even on a security website that could be backed up. It’s just sending video from motion activated cameras to a spare desktop computer in the office. It’s alright, we crashed the whole system. Ain’t nobody getting a damn thing from the security footage. We even located the external hard drive it was backing up to and destroyed it. There’s nothing electronic or computer based left working in there,” Havoc said.

Charlie looked down at the couple, lying in the shadows of their own yard. “You killed them already?”

“They’re alive,” Bane said. “Let’s go.”

He leaned over the professor’s unconscious body and slapped his face until the man finally regained consciousness. “Hey! Just thought I’d let you know. When I get home, and everyday until Daisy sees things clearly, I’m going to encourage her to file charges against you. And we’re going to find other women you did the same thing to, and we’re going to encourage them to file charges too. We’re going to file a complaint with the university, and we’re going to file stalking and harassment charges against your wife. We’ll contact the media and make sure it makes headlines. You’re finished. And if the justice system is fair enough, you’ll never teach or be around any student of any age again. And if you are, we’ll be sure to be there and we’ll announce to everyone exactly what you’ve done, just the same way your wife tormented my daughter, despite the fact she was the victim and you were the predator. Just wanted to leave you with that.” Bane hit him again, then turned and walked away.

“Y’all go ahead. I’m gonna clean up real quick to make sure there’s no finger prints or anything,” Lucien said.

“I’m sure we didn’t. We were careful. But, I’ll show you where we were,” Charlie said.

“Y’all got this? I’m going to keep up with Bane,” Havoc said.

“Yep, go,” Lucien said.

Havoc followed Bane, and Lucien followed Charlie into the house.

“Did y’all even think that you might be leaving behind fingerprints?” Lucien asked as he followed Charlie to the downstairs office.

“Yes, actually. I said we were careful. We didn’t use our hands for anything we didn’t have to. Turned on lights with our elbows and all.”

“Good. Less to clean up. Now, turn off the lights and show me everywhere you went.”

As Lucien followed Charlie through the darkened house, he used his Gator’s thermal vision to look for remnants of heat on fingerprints left on any of the surfaces they might have touched. There were only slight indications of remnants of heat in a place or two since it had been a while, but he wiped off any surface that Charlie indicated they touched regardless.

“Alright. I got it all. Let’s go,” Lucien said.

“How do you know you got it all?”

“Thermal vision, my dude. I’m a Gator.”

Charlie just shook his head and grinned as he followed Lucien back out of the house, stepped past the woman still lying on the ground, despite the whimpers and stirrings she uttered as she started to wake up.

“The man’s gone. Didn’t Bane knock that bastard out again?” Lucien asked.

“Yeah, but I was leading you inside. I don’t know what happened after that,” Charlie said.

“Hell, he might have decided to throw the fucker in the bayou,” Lucien said with a laugh. “Let’s go catch up with them and head home.”

They took their time getting back to the footbridge, knowing they’d have to cross it individually anyway. But by the time it came into view, they realized that there was a threat they didn’t bargain for. The professor lurking far behind Havoc and Bane. He was unsteady on his feet, but still posed a threat. He was keeping far enough behind that he wouldn’t lose them, but hopefully wouldn’t be seen either.

“Look at that dumb bastard, thinking he can take on Bane. He can barely fucking stand,” Lucien said.

“It’s like he just wants to die,” Charlie said.

Then the real threat was realized. The professor leaned his thigh against the waist high support column for the pier gate protecting one of many privately own piers along Bayou St. John, and aimed a gun at Bane's back as he walked further into the distance. Havoc was with him, but there was no doubt that Bane was the one he had it in for.

"Oh, hell, no!" Lucien exclaimed and broke into a full out run.

Charlie's heart dropped when he realized the man might actually manage to injure Daisy's dad. But then, as he watched, Lucien neutralized the whole situation in what seemed like one smooth move, but was actually a combination of actions. Charlie had never seen anything like it in his life.

Lucien ran as quickly as he could, launching himself into the air as he shifted to his Gator, his clothes ripping and falling away from his muscular, reptilian body as a threatening hiss and bellow left his throat and chest. The professor turned just in time to see the remainder of Lucien's human likeness as it fully shifted into the Gator that lived inside him. His huge jaws were stretched wide as he glided through the air like a missile, the professor his target.

The professor screamed and raised his arms in a futile effort to stave off the gator coming right toward him just as Lucien's jaws clamped down on his upper body, immediately breaking both the professor's arms and several ribs as he increased the pressure of his bite and allowed the momentum of his body flying through the air to take both him and the professor down the bank of Bayou St. John and into the murky water. The professor screamed the entire way until the splash of the water silenced him and the white ridges of the churning water where Lucien's beast's body went into a death spin below the surface were the only evidence that something had gone into the water.

Charlie's eyes were wide and shocked as he stood looking down into the water.

A female began screaming somewhere behind him.

Charlie turned to find the professor's wife, disheveled but fully functional after her ordeal, rushing unsteadily toward the edge of the bayou. "No!!!! No!!!" she screamed again and again.

Bane and Havoc had already made it halfway across the footbridge and looked back in time to see everything happen, but were too far to stop the woman.

Charlie didn't think, he acted on instinct. He was the only one close enough to stop her. He rushed the few feet to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her to make her stop. "Stop it! Stop it or you're next!" he shouted at her.

"I saw it! I saw that man turn into an alligator, then he ate my husband! He ate him! I saw it, so did you! I know you saw it! He'll eat us both!" she said, pulling away from him in an effort to get away.

Havoc came rushing back across the bridge. "Yo! C!"

Charlie, who'd started to run after her, hesitated and looked back at Havoc.

"Anybody hears her will think she's nuts. She'll end up locked away somewhere. Either way, she's not a threat and I'm pretty sure she's horrified for life."

Havoc motioned for Charlie to follow him.

Together they ran across the footbridge and went straight to Havoc's truck where Bane was already waiting.

Charlie fished the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Havoc. "I'm waiting for Lucien."

"Get in the damn truck," Havoc ordered.

Charlie shook his head again. "I'm waiting," he said, before he went back to the water's edge, albeit the opposite side of the bayou.

"Move the truck down that way," Bane said, pointing away from the area of Bayou St. John where the footbridge crossed. "I'm gonna go talk to Charlie."

Havoc did what Bane asked, and started the truck in preparation of moving it down the bayou from where everything had taken place.

Bane started toward Charlie, but then saw something the others might not have noticed yet. He turned so he'd be seen in the headlights of Havoc's truck and pointed before continuing toward Charlie.

There, coming toward them in the darkness of the night, and keeping to the water's edge down below the visible banks of the bayou, was a naked, soaking wet, Lucien.

Havoc whipped the truck around and pulled up onto the grassy bank of the bayou.

Lucien ran up the bank and jumped in the truck.

Havoc drove the distance to where Bane and Charlie were, and both got in.

“Nothing like an eventful evening on the bayou,” Lucien said, wringing his hair out.

“What did you do with the body?” Bane asked.

“Stuffed it in a gator hole. Don’t let nobody tell you there’s no gators in Bayou St. John, I just pissed one of them off,” he said with a lighthearted laugh. “If they find him, it’ll look just like the gators got him.”

“What about your clothes and all?” Charlie asked.

“Regular everyday clothes you can buy anywhere. I’m not in a computer anywhere, and if they try to check the DNA they’ll find Gator mixed in and think they got another victim. I ain’t worried,” Lucien said.

Charlie sat in the back seat and made every effort to keep himself under control. He’d witnessed a lot tonight, carried out by males related to the woman he loved. And the more he considered it, the more he realized the everyday person would wish they had the options these people did. They didn’t wait for some useless law to finally take effect and do nothing more than be a slight inconvenience years down the line. They protected their own. And he was okay with that. If somebody hurt Carson, he’d gladly go to jail for life and never give it a second thought.

“Hey, your boy wasn’t leaving you,” Havoc said, his gaze flashing in the rear view mirror when he looked at Lucien.

“Oh, yeah?” Lucien asked with a smile.

“Yep. He wasn’t going a damn place without you. Come together, leave together. That’s what he told me,” Bane said. “He’s a good man.”

Lucien grinned at Charlie and extended his hand. “I won’t forget that. You didn’t know they wouldn’t leave me, and you stood firm anyway. I won’t forget.”

Charlie shook his hand, then focused on Bane. “Sir, I’d like to ask permission to marry your daughter.”

Bane’s brows were high on his forehead as he turned around to look over the seat at Charlie. “If you’re asking permission to ask her, please do. If you’re asking permission to marry her, the only person that can give you that is Daisy herself.”

“Yes, sir,” Charlie answered.

“But I sincerely hope she says yes,” Bane said, as he turned back around.



## Chapter 18

“Daisy?” Janie asked, pushing open the screen door and sticking her head outside to look in Daisy’s direction.

Daisy sat in an Adirondack chair on the far corner of the porch, sipping some chamomile tea. She turned her head toward her mother. “Yes, ma’am?”

“I’m going to have some pie. You want a piece?” Janie asked.

“No, thank you.”

“You sure? It’s key lime.”

“No, I’m not really hungry.”

“Okay. You mind if I come sit with you?”

“No, come on out,” Daisy said. She smiled a little to herself, knowing that no matter where she went, or what she did, her mother would always want her company, especially when her dad wasn’t around. Her parents were inseparable, and when her father was out and about, her mother always gravitated toward her. And that was fine. Daisy actually liked the security.

It wasn’t long before Janie was back, smiling happily at her daughter, carrying a plate of pie and a cup of coffee.

“I don’t know how you sleep at all when you drink coffee so late in the evening,” Daisy said.

“Well, you’re drinking tea,” Janie said.

“Yes, but it’s chamomile. It’s relaxing, to help you sleep.”

“You always did have a bit of insomnia. But I really feel like you do your best work in the middle of the night,” Janie said.

“I do, don’t I?” Daisy asked, sipping her tea again.

“You do.” Janie looked around and smiled. “I do like these pre-fall nights. It’s not summer anymore, but it’s not really fall either,” Janie said.

“I’m so looking forward to it getting cooler. I love the fall and the winter,” Daisy said.

“Me, too. I think I might ask your father to take me for a walk in the woods when he gets home, if it’s not too late and he’s not too tired,” Janie said.

Daisy looked at her mother again. “Where is Daddy?”

“He had a few things to take care of,” Janie said thoughtfully, not wanting to lie, but not wanting to tell the truth either.

“Seems suspicious.”

“Why in the world would it seem suspicious?” Janie asked, giggling.

“Because you’re giggling, which you do when you try to mislead somebody. And because you’re being evasive. Just evasive enough to not tell a lie so I can scent it. And because Uncle Bam told me he saw Charlie drive away with Havoc and Lucien, and Dad went with them, too.”

“Oh, Daisy,” she said, still giggling, “you’re imagining things. And so is Bam!”

“Mom! Uncle Bam does not imagine seeing all four of them driving away.”

The headlights of a vehicle shone in their direction from the fork of the road near Kaid’s house, then the vehicle started slowly down the road toward them. “Maybe that’s your dad,” Janie said.

“I’m pretty sure it is,” Daisy said, keeping watch on Havoc’s truck as it got closer.

Janie set her plate and cup aside and stood, walking slowly toward the front of the porch.

Daisy could sense the apprehension in her mother as she waited for Havoc’s truck to reach them and come to a stop.

As soon as the truck actually stopped, the passenger side door opened, and Bane got out. “Honey, I’m home,” he said wearing a hint of a smile.

Janie rushed down the steps and threw herself into his arms. “I know you’re capable, I do. I really, really do. But I hate when you go out to take care of things, even when I’m all for it. I just worry so very much.”

“I know, love. But it’s fine. Look,” he said, hooking his thumb in the direction of the truck, “nobody got hurt. Lucien is naked, but that’s the worst that happened.”

The rear driver’s side door opened and Charlie got out.

Daisy’s gaze pinpointed him immediately. She set her cup down on the porch railing then stood up and moved toward the steps. “What is going on here?” she asked.

Havoc opened the driver’s door and got out, standing on the running board of the truck so he could wave at them over the top of his truck. “Hey! How y’all doing tonight? Everything’s lovely, no unexpected issues. Handled our business all neat and problem free.”

Daisy looked from Charlie to Havoc, and then back again. “What business?”

The rear passenger side window rolled down and Lucien stuck his head out. “I can’t get out. Naked as the day I was born, but I just want to say that I’ve been feeling the need to address the situation since I first met you, so it should be no surprise. Brandt was supposed to go, but since Tempest is ready to pop, he opted to stay home, so Havoc, Charlie, and Bane opted in.”

“I insisted we tell your father. He had a right more so than the rest of us,” Charlie said.

“Except for you,” Havoc reminded him.

Daisy knew without a doubt what they’d gone to attempt to do. She just didn’t know exactly how they went about it. “What exactly did you do?” she asked.

“Paid a worthless piece of shit a visit, told him to expect some charges to be coming his way. Beat a pound or two of vengeance out of his flesh while we were at it,” Charlie said.

Daisy shook her head and her gaze fell on the stair between them.

“Yeah, and that psycho bitch he was married to, too. Lucien just terrified the hell out of her, and made her pass out a little more roughly than it should have been if she was any kind of woman and not a damn banshee psycho,” Havoc said. “I tell you, if I was either one of them, having to live with the other, I’d have shot myself a long time ago.”

“Yep, you did say that,” Lucien said.

“Why are you naked?” Daisy asked, already knowing before she asked.

“My Gator’s big. When he makes an appearance, all the clothes go to tatters,” Lucien said with a wink, grinning at her.

“Why did you shift?” Daisy whispered.

“We left them both alive. Pissing on themselves and out cold, but alive. Then he made the mistake of chasing down your dad while me and Charlie were wiping away the evidence of us being inside the house. He pulled a gun on him and was going to shoot him. There wasn’t no decision making about it. It was your dad, or him. And it’s him I left stuffed in that gator hole back in the bayou, so your dad could come home,” Lucien said.

Daisy shook her head, as tears started to slowly leak from between her lashes. “I didn’t want you to know. I didn’t want any of you to be dragged

into the gutter along with my name. I wanted to keep you out of it. I'm so embarrassed."

"Seriously?" Havoc asked flatly. "They are shit people, or were," he said with a grin. "They ain't a pimple on your ass, not that I know you got a pimple on your ass, but still, if you did, it would be better than that fucker or his wife. They deserve every damn thing waiting on them in hell. Do not stand there and tell me that you think a damn thing they ever thought or did made a difference."

"I should have known better," Daisy said.

"You couldn't have known," Charlie said.

"How do you know?" Daisy asked.

"I learned a lot about shifters and mates on the drive there and back. You couldn't read him because he was probably a mate. But he wasn't the mate, I'm the mate. And I'd go there again and again and again to make them pay for what they did to you."

Daisy raised her gaze to his.

"You're not the only one, Daisy. There are others. His wife harassed them all, intimidated them into leaving so they wouldn't press charges and disrupt her gilded life. You can't blame yourself for being victimized by a predator. Especially not one you were conditioned to trust, because he was one of your instructors."

"And we all feel better, relieved. So don't worry about feeling guilty because we went to avenge you. That's what family does — ours anyway," Havoc said.

"Yeah, and I found the best fucking restaurant. I cannot wait to go there and get the seafood maffaletta. I'm tasting it already," Lucien said.

"It's all taken care of, baby-girl. Just let it go. It's done," Bane said, still holding Janie as he looked up at her standing on the porch.

Daisy nodded, but she didn't seem convinced.

"I bet you wake up tomorrow lighter. Some of that guilt and self-loathing you been carrying lifted and gone," Lucien said. "Didn't I tell you if you didn't tell me who hurt you, I'd find out and kill them all?"

"I believe what you actually said was that you'd follow me around and kill everybody until you got the right one."

"Same thing, less effort," Lucien said, laughing. "And don't worry about the wife. She's breathing, but I'm pretty sure she'll be in a rubber room for the rest of her life if she keeps telling the stories she's gonna tell."

Daisy looked at him, not quite understanding.

“She saw me shift into a Gator, then take her husband into Bayou St. John, do you really think anybody is going to believe her? Especially with the way she screeches about everything and demands people listen to her? They’ll medicate her and lock her away. Some things worse than death, you know? And Charlie told her we’d be back for her, so any sense of peace is gone. She’s scared for the rest of her life.”

Charlie moved closer, pausing just before the bottom step. “Daisy?”

Daisy focused on him. “This is what you took the day off for?”

Charlie nodded.

“I went to your office to take you lunch, but you weren’t there.”

He smiled at her. “I had business to take care of.”

“The receptionist said that you had to take the day off... something about your girlfriend. I thought she meant someone else. I even asked her if she ever met your girlfriend. She said no, but she heard the guys talking about how pretty she is. I just thanked her and left.”

“That was you they were commenting on. One of them knows you from high-school. He recognized the name when I told them about you. I had to confess about meeting somebody special when one commented that I was actually nice now, and asked what had changed,” he laughed. “I didn’t realize I hadn’t been nice before.” He smiled at Daisy, who still seemed a little shaken. “Daisy, I was going to do this in some kind of special way, but it seems to me, this is the time. There is no one other than you. There never will be, if that’s okay with you. I want to spend the rest of my days making you happy, protecting you, and sharing every day we’re gifted together.”

Daisy stepped down onto the first step from the top.

“I love you. I am your mate. The one you were meant to be with. I already asked your dad for permission to ask you, and he gave it. It doesn't mean you have to say yes, but, I hope you’ll consider. Will you marry me?” Charlie asked.

Daisy teared up fully as she hurried down the steps and into his arms.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. Glad you decided to keep him. He knew too much to let him walk away,” Havoc said.

“Havoc, shut up,” Bane said,

“What? You know I’m joking! He knows it, too! I’m joking! Don’t you, C?”

“C?” Daisy asked, her face pressed against his neck.

“That’s his new nickname,” Havoc said.

“I’m gonna tell you what,” Lucien said. “C refused to leave me. I mean, I wasn’t getting left, but he didn’t know that, and stood his ground. ‘I’m waiting for Lucien’, is what he said. That’s my boy, there. I got his back.”

Daisy smiled up at Charlie, her face still wet with tears. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Charlie said, sighing as he squeezed her against his chest. “But just to be clear, that’s a yes, right?”

Daisy laughed. “Yes, it’s a yes.”

“Alright, well I’m out of here. Who’s coming and who’s staying?” Havoc asked.

“My naked ass is sitting right here until you take me home. My Hell don’t like me showing my ass to nobody. Do you know she’s got a jealous streak?”

“Oh, hell, yeah. Me, too. We come by it naturally,” Havoc said.

“Carson is at Havoc’s house having a sleep over with Harley. He’s never had a sleep over before,” Charlie said to Daisy.

“I think…” Daisy started.

“Do what you want, but don’t disturb the boy, he’s learning he can do more and more things every day. He needs to feel capable,” Havoc said, interrupting her. “Tell you what. Come on with me and get your car, then you can do what you want after that. But let him wake up tomorrow feeling like a big boy.”

Charlie nodded. “You’re right. He was really excited when I told him that he was going home with Harley today.”

“I didn’t even know he was there. I would have taken him to class if he wanted to go,” Daisy said.

“Couldn’t let you know until we’d finished taking care of business,” Havoc said.

“I’ll be back in a bit?” Charlie said.

Daisy nodded. “I’ll be waiting.”

Charlie kissed her, then walked over to the passenger side front door to get in since Bane wasn’t coming with them. He rolled down the window and leaned on the sill. “I’ll be right back.”

Daisy nodded, but spoke to all of them. “Thank you, all of you,” Daisy said. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough. You cared so much about me

that you risked yourselves even though I tried to keep it all a secret. I feel so humbled.”

“What are we good for if not protecting our own. If not for standing up for those that would never hurt anybody ever? You’re our Daisy, and nobody’s going to hurt you and not answer for it,” Havoc said.

“He’s right,” Bane said.

“Yep. I didn’t know you, and could feel how good you are. The assholes of the world will always zero in on kindness and use it for target practice. They deserved even more than we gave them,” Lucien said.

“I will always stand between you and anything that makes you the least little bit sad,” Charlie said.

“I love all you guys,” Daisy said. “And especially you, Daddy, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what I was going through.”

“Don’t thank me, baby. It’s my job, and my privilege to take care of you,” Bane said.

Daisy nodded as her Daddy hugged her with one arm, and watched as Havoc backed up the whole length of the road whooping out the window the entire way until he reached the fork, instead of just turning around and driving out like a sane person.

“I swear to God that boy does shit like that just to have people say, ‘you see what he’s doing now?’, Bane said.

Daisy laughed, though she was still sniffing a little. “You’re probably right.”

Janie stepped away from Bane’s arms and enveloped Daisy in a hug. “I’m so happy for you, my girl!”

Daisy nodded and started tearing up again.

“Why are you crying?” Janie asked.

“I’m just so happy,” Daisy croaked out, wiping tears off her face with both hands.

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“Are you hungry, my love?” Janie asked Bane as Daisy took a seat on the porch to wait for Charlie to come back.

“I’m starving. What do we have?” Bane asked, dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

“I roasted a chicken in the oven. I knew you’d be hungry. It’s piping hot and swimming in gravy and lots of carrots and onions and celery with it.”

“Mashed potatoes, too?” Bane asked.

“Yes,” Janie answered.

“Sold! But what are you going to eat?” Bane teased, insinuating that he’d eat the chicken and potatoes himself.

“The key lime pie I didn’t offer you,” Janie said.

“Oh! You know how to hurt me,” Bane said, chuckling. He looked over at Daisy and didn’t like the idea of leaving her outside alone. “Daisy, baby, you want to come inside and eat with us?”

“No, thank you, Daddy. I’m not hungry. I’ll wait for Charlie to come back.”

“Alright. If y’all get hungry, come on in,” Bane said.

“We will.”

Bane paused for a second to watch Daisy staring off into the darkness with the most beautiful smile on her face, waiting for Charlie to come back, before he and Janie went on inside.

“It makes me so satisfied, so at peace to see her so happy,” Bane said once they’d walked in the house.

“Me, too,” Janie said. “Thank you for going to handle all that. I’m sorry it got ugly.”

“Did you really think it wouldn’t? I wanted to shift and tear his heart out, then hand it to him. But I tried to maintain some control, knowing if we could get her to file charges he’d live a life of humiliation. But when he tried to shoot me, Lucien took that decision out of my hands.”

“Thank God!” Janie exclaimed.

“True. I’m relieved about him being dead. I’m relieved about his wife being terrified and looking over her shoulder for the rest of her life. I’m so at peace that Charlie and Daisy will be married. He’s a good man,” Bane said emphatically. “He really is as good as she is. She’ll never have to worry about where he is or what he’s doing. He’s devoted to her already.”

Janie had been serving his plate while he talked, and set it down in front of him, then poured him a glass of sweet tea, before she made her own plate and sat across from him.

“How are you feeling?” Bane asked.

“The knot I’ve been carrying around in my stomach is finally gone. I can breathe easily,” Janie said.

“I wish I’d have known months ago,” Bane said. “That’s my only regret.”

“We can only address what we know. And we addressed it the moment we became aware.”

They heard the screen door creak as it opened. “Mom, Dad? I’m going to Charlie’s.”

“Alright. Text me the address,” Janie called out.

“Have a good evening, baby,” Bane called out.

Suddenly they could hear her running toward them through the house. She leaned over and kissed her father, hugging him for all she was worth. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too, Daisy,” Bane said, patting her arms as she hugged him from behind. “Y’all be careful, you hear.”

“We will,” Daisy said, letting go of her father to quickly hug her mother. “I might be late!” she called as she finally ran back through the house. They heard the screen door slap its frame and the engine of Charlie’s car as they drove away.

“And just like that we’re empty nesters.”

“What? I know that’s not true. She’s not moved out yet,” Bane said.

“But it’s only a matter of time,” Janie pointed out.

“And we have grandkids! Brandt’s is due any day. And we have Carson. And I’m sure Daisy will want one really soon. She loves babies,” Bane said. “There is no empty about our lives at all!”

Janie smiled as she watched her husband convincing himself that their lives were still full. “You know what? You’re absolutely right. Besides, it’ll be nice to get a little quiet time to ourselves between visits.”

“Yes, it will. You know? You’re still the prettiest girl in the room.”

Janie laughed. “In this room, maybe.”

“So, want to go spend a little kissy kissy time with me?” Bane asked, waggling an eyebrow at her.

“Why, sir, I do believe you’re flirting with me,” Janie said with a smirk.

“No. I’m promising you, you will be screaming before the night is out. With pleasure, of course.”

Janie took a shaky breath and then a bite of her food. “Hurry up and finish. I’d like to scream with pleasure all night, starting now.”

Bane stood up and strode around the table, scooping her into his arms. “Food can wait until later,” he growled as he carried her toward their bedroom. “My woman wants me now, she’ll have me now!”

Chapter 19

Charlie unlocked his front door and stepped inside, flipping on his lights and looking around his apartment. "Come on in," he said, closing the door behind her and securely locking it once she'd entered the apartment. "It's not much, but it's home."

Daisy walked into the living room, looking around with interest. "It's nice. I'm surprised it's so big."

"Yeah, it doesn't look it from outside," he said.

"You hungry or want something to drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks."

"Alright, well, if you don't mind, I'm going to run take a shower real quick. We got sweaty, and then I rode next to a dripping Lucien, who smelled just like the water he'd been in just before we left. I'm telling you, you don't want to go swimming in Bayou St. John."

Daisy laughed. "That bad, huh?"

"Come on, you can smell it on me," he said.

Daisy nodded and grinned at him. "Yeah, I can. It's pretty bad."

"I'll be right back. Kitchen's right there, as you can see. My room is to the left. Carson's is to the right. Help yourself to whatever you want, and feel free to dig. I have no secrets from you. Never will."

Daisy smiled at Charlie.

Charlie started to go kiss her before leaving the room, but then decided against it since he smelled so bad. Instead, he just went directly into the bathroom and turned on the shower so the water could heat up as he got undressed. Once it was hot enough, he got in, and squirted shampoo directly onto his head before starting to lather it with his eyes closed. He was whistling to himself as he scrubbed, using some of the lather from the shampoo to wash his body before reaching for the soap to finish the job.

He froze when his hand touched soft, warm skin instead of the rack he kept the soap on. He leaned his head under the water enough to rinse the soap from his face so he could open his eyes. Daisy stood just a foot away from him in the shower, completely naked.

He swallowed. "Daisy?" he asked.

“You’ve healed my heart. Today you and my family went and healed my pride. But my body still carries traces of shame. I need you to take that away,” she said, looking directly into his eyes.

He reached for her and pulled her into his arms, kissing her tenderly at first, then more passionately as she kissed him right back. Charlie lifted his lips from hers and looked into her eyes.

“You don’t have to say it, I know it’s all in my head. But I need you take away his touch. Replace it with love. Replace it with yours, the way it will be for the rest of our lives.”

“I will always give you whatever you need,” he promised. “But just one thing...”

Daisy looked up at him, waiting for him to tell her what that thing was.

“It’s been a long, long, long time. I’m not sure how much control I’m going to have the first time, but I promise, it’ll get better the second time.”

She grinned at him and leaned against him, kissing him again.

Charlie ran his hands up and down her back, stroking her skin with his fingertips, eliciting little moans of pleasure from her as he turned her into the warm water so she wouldn’t get cold. He kissed her again, then held her at arms’ length to be able to really see her. “You are beautiful,” he said. “I can’t believe you want the likes of me.”

Daisy laughed nervously. “I was just thinking exactly the same thing.” She let her eyes travel down his body again. He was the epitome of the former high school and college football player who’d kept himself in good shape. His body hair matched the hair on his head and was golden brown. It was scattered over his chest, then organized itself into a path leading from his belly button to the part of him that was very, very excited to see her. He was just north of well endowed, but not so well endowed that she’d walk funny for a week, and that was exactly what she’d hoped for. Enough to completely fill her needs, but not enough to break her. His jaw was square, his nose Romanesque. His cheekbones high and his hair neatly cut, while leaving just enough length on top to still be a little messy when he didn’t feel like styling it. His eyes looked into her soul as he let her look her fill.

Daisy reached out and gently cupped his scrotum, feeling his testicles sit heavily in her hand as she gently worked them back and forth.

Charlie hissed in pleasure and let his head fall back on his shoulders as his hands held onto her upper arms.

Daisy let go of his testicles, then slowly ran her hand up the shaft of his cock, stopping at the top to stroke him in and out of her grip, making the crown of his cock ruddy and flushed.

“Daisy?” he asked, his voice sounding half-strangled.

“Hmm?” she asked, not taking her gaze off his now throbbing member.

“Do I still smell bad?” he asked.

“No, not at all.”

“Thank fuck,” he muttered, pushing her against the shower wall behind her before dropping to his knees and lifting one of her knees to drape it over his shoulder while he pressed his face against her, opening his mouth and finding all her secret little places with his tongue and teeth.

Instead of throwing her head back, she forced herself to continue looking down at him as she panted and mewled when he found just the right spot. Daisy gasped, her legs beginning to shake as he lapped at her.

When he’d brought her almost to an orgasm, he sat back on his heels and held her open, wanting to see everything that would be his forevermore.

Panting hard, unable to catch her breath, she reached out and lifted his chin to raise his attention to her face.

He smiled at her as his eyes roved her body up and down several times. “Perfect,” he said. She wasn’t a typical female shifter. She never had been. She was a little bigger boned. A little round in the hips and breasts. Her tummy was soft and swelled gently, rather than being tight and taut. Her long dark hair spilled down to actually touch her ass, and her natural waves meant she rarely had to do more than wash it and allow it to dry on its own. It always looked like she’d curled and styled it. Her eyes were dark and her lashes long and black. Daisy’s skin looked like she had a never fading suntan. Golden, and it practically glowed.

“You look like you’re glowing. Your skin is almost golden.”

Daisy’s smile fell and she pulled him to his feet as she looked right into his eyes, only inches away. “I look golden?” she asked.

He smiled, kissing her lips again.

“And all glowy from the water, too.” He kissed her while he ran his hands down to the juncture between her legs and stroked her there, until he found her clit. Once he had the swollen nub under his finger, he rolled it in little circles, while applying just enough gentle pressure to have her squirming in his arms. He stopped kissing her as he built up more pressure,

and her entire body began to shiver and she let out a keening noise that made him want to come right along with her. But he didn't. He held himself in check, waiting, his hand stroking her through her first orgasm with him. He waited until she'd begun to come back to herself, then he lifted her and sat her across his hips. He leaned her back against the shower wall, as her lower body leaned out toward him, his cock slipping into her at the last moment.

Daisy moaned, looking at him like she'd finally found home, and waited while he adjusted her and his feet so that they were completely balanced and there was no chance for her to fall. He slipped his hands under her thighs to help support her, then started stroking himself into her waiting body.

"Oh, God," she murmured, as her eyes closed and she pressed her head against the shower wall behind herself.

"Is that okay? You comfortable enough?" he asked.

"Don't stop," she said, her channel clenching at him every time he withdrew, only to have him thrust his way back in.

"Never," he said, his voice hard and guttural as he slipped his arms under her legs and lifted her a couple of inches more, his hands gripping her ass as he picked up speed. "I want you to let go, Daisy. I want you to come apart on my dick. I want to feel your body as it squeezes mine."

"Yes," she rushed out. "Yes, please."

His hips picked up speed, he slammed his cock into her faster and deeper than he had before. The louder she moaned, the harder he stroked into her.

Just when he thought he couldn't hold back anymore, her whole body seized up, every muscle tightening as pleasure raced through her. She even held her breath as the tremors carried through her over and over again.

"Breathe, my love. Breathe," he encouraged.

Daisy opened her mouth and gasped for breath, as her body gave the first signs of relaxing.

Charlie wasted no time. He'd waited a long, long time for this. He began pistoning his cock in and out of her body.

Daisy was panting harder than she had yet, looking at him with hesitation in her eyes.

But he didn't stop, he clenched his jaw, pulled his lips back and let out a running growl as his face contorted and he finally let go, filling her body

full of his release, shooting so far inside her that he had no doubt, if she was in the right time of the month, she'd be telling him in a few weeks that they were pregnant. Just as the last bit of his release left his body, Daisy bent her knees bringing her legs up closer to her chest as she came again, screaming his name this time.

Charlie kept stroking until she was whimpering. Only then did he lower her legs, setting her on her feet.

"Let me get you cleaned up and we'll move this to the bedroom," he said, kissing her ear. He quickly soaped up his hands and ran them over her body, then down between her legs to wash away his semen as it dripped from her body. When he was done, he kept one hand on her waist as he quickly washed his own body, then turned off the water and quickly dried himself first, before wrapping her in a towel and carrying her to his bedroom.

"I hope it's always like this," she murmured as he lay her down on his bed.

"It will be," he promised, as he lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms.

Her head was lying on his chest, so she turned her face upward to better see him. "I can't believe I found you."

"I hope that's a good thing, because you're kind of stuck with me. I'll love you forever."

They lay quietly for a few minutes before he asked what was weighing on his mind. "Daisy, how do you feel about children? I mean of your own. Children with me."

Daisy lifted up on her elbow so she could really look at him. "I don't know if you noticed a moment of hesitation a little earlier... that was exactly what I was thinking. I think maybe we should use protection before we take any more chances."

"So, you don't want them?" he asked.

"Oh, no! I want like, ten or eleven! I just don't know if you do."

Charlie laughed boisterously. "If that's what you want, my love, that's what we'll have."

She laughed, too, then rested her head on his chest again. "Charlie, what if we already..."

"Daisy?" he asked.

"Yes?" she asked quietly.

“There’s something I have to confess...”

Daisy felt her heart thud in her chest wondering if she even wanted to know anything he considered a confession. “Okay,” she said softly.

“The day after we had a play date with Havoc and his family, and the rest of your extended family...” he stopped, waiting for her to acknowledge what he’d said so far.

“Yes,” she said.

“I went shopping. I talked to Carson first,” he said, getting up and walking across his bedroom, completely comfortable with his nudity as he took a couple of seconds to dig around in one of the drawers in his dresser. He seemed to find what he was looking for and came back toward her wearing a huge grin, “and he was so very excited about what I was shopping for that he wanted to be a part of it, too.”

“I don’t understand,” Daisy said.

As she watched, he went down on his knees beside the bed she still lay in, and presented her with a very small, velvet box.

Daisy’s eyes widened and she sat bolt upright in the bed as she watched him speechlessly.

“I’ve known since the moment I met you that there was something special about you that I’d never find in anyone else. When you and your family took us both in like they’d known us all our lives, any reasonable doubt I might have had disappeared. I love you, I’ll always love you. I’ll make you happy for all of my life, and I’ll even try in the after life if I get the chance. With what I’ve learned of your family, I believe I’m your mate, but will you also be my wife?” He opened the box and Daisy gazed down at a brilliant cut round, pale yellow diamond set in platinum with a halo of white baguette diamonds of varying lengths surrounding the main stone, giving it a look similar to the rays of light leaving the sun.

Daisy’s mouth fell open, and remained open as she stared at the stone.

“Carson said he thinks of the color yellow when he thinks of you, and I can’t help but see the light shining from your soul, so I chose this one. If you don’t like it, we can exchange it for another.”

“No! It’s perfect! I’ve just never seen anything so beautiful! It’s perfect!”

Charlie smiled at her and took the ring out of the box, quickly discarding the box somewhere behind him before sliding the ring on her finger. “Perfect fit,” he said.

“Oh, Charlie. I love it! It’s beautiful!”

“So, is that a yes?” he asked.

Daisy realized he was still on his knees, waiting for an answer. “Yes! Yes, a thousand yeses!” she exclaimed.

Charlie launched himself into the bed and took her in his arms again, kissing her breathless.

When they finally came up for air, she smiled at him with tears still in her eyes. “I love you.”

“That’s all I want, forever, and I really, really hope we’re already pregnant. But if we’re not, we’ll make sure we are soon,” he promised.

Daisy hugged him close, as she laughed. “I am so happy!”



Two days later, Avaleigh had just poured the creamer in her coffee and taken her first sip in the hazy early morning light before the sun had completely risen. Before she’d even poured Daniel’s cup, a soft tap on the front door had her looking in that direction. Keeping her coffee in hand, she started that way.

“I’ve got it,” Avaleigh called out when she heard the comforter and sheets on the bed rustling as Daniel prepared to get up.

Daniel had been still lying in bed taking a few extra minutes to lounge around, but was already on his way to the door. “Let me get it.”

Avaleigh recognized the protective instinct roared to life in her mate and without a second thought, let him take the lead.

Daniel looked through the peephole, then shot her a look that said ‘no worries’, before unlocking and opening the door.

Remi stood there, disheveled, dirty, exhausted, ashamed. He lifted his head just enough to look at his parents, but came just shy of looking either of them in the eye. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Daniel stepped into the threshold of his front door and curved a hand around the back of Remi’s neck, pulling him into an embrace. “I love you,” Daniel said softly. “We both do.”

Remi nodded, but didn’t answer. He was struggling to stop the trembling of his lips, the tears dampening his lashes, though he fought valiantly to keep them inside.

“Come on. Let’s sit for a while,” Daniel said, guiding him fully through the door and closing it behind him.

Avaleigh went to her son, holding him to her with one hand, trying not to spill the coffee in the other.

Remi grabbed her and leaned over, burying his head against her neck. “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m so sorry,” he said, as tears began to flow more freely.

Daniel took her cup from her hand so she could hug Remi tightly.

It took a good five or six minutes before Remi finally got ahold of himself, and stood back from Avaleigh, taking deep, calming breaths as he used the bottom of his shirt to dry his eyes.

“I’ve really made a mess of things,” Remi said.

“You have. But that doesn’t mean they can’t be fixed,” Daniel said.

Avaleigh walked over and sat down on one end of the sofa.

Daniel placed a hand on Remi’s shoulder and guided him to sit beside Avaleigh, then he sat on Remi’s other side.

Remi sat there, looking down at his hands, not quite sure where to start.

“There’s a lot going on inside you. Whatever feels like it needs to be said, say it. If something feels too raw to put a voice to, don’t. We’re not going anywhere Remi — never,” Avaleigh said.

“Mom’s right. We might track you down and kick your ass, but it’s with love,” Daniel said.

Remi chuckled and shook his head ever-so-slightly. “I know. I just, there’s so much to make amends for. With you, with my clan, with yours. My behavior has embarrassed so many people that are important to me. I’ve let so many people down.”

“Can I ask what sent you over the edge?” Avaleigh asked.

“So many things, but mainly frustration, rage.”

“Rage?” Daniel asked. “At who?”

“That’s the thing. I’m not even sure anymore. After Cristie came to find me, I spent hours thinking about all the things she said to me. And at first I was indignant. Who the hell was she to even presume to know how I felt? Then I realized, she was probably the only person that had a right to be there calling me on my bullshit. I mean, yes, you’re my parents, but you’ll always lean toward forgiving my behavior. No matter how fairly you’d make me face whatever issue I’ve created, you’d personally forgive me, because you love me unconditionally. Brandt, not at all the right person,

because I'd grown to resent him and everything he had, because I didn't have it. I wanted a mate, a family, a baby. A home that was haven for me and mine. And I thought I'd found the person to build that with in Bailey. I loved Bailey, I really did. Even now I wish her nothing but happiness. But it makes me angry, too. I should have known she wasn't the mate I longed for, and I think on some level, I did know. I just wanted that so badly. I'd always thought so highly of her that I just, I don't know, I just said, okay, she has always been drawn to me, I've always been drawn to her, this is it. Let's go for it. Then Cristie came to Havoc's wedding, and my world fell down around me, while at the same time all the possibilities of what my world could be opened up. I was so confused. My Dragon demanded that I grab Cristie and run, my conscience demanded loyalty to Bailey. Then anger at myself for dragging Bailey into a situation she should never have had to struggle through. So much guilt," he said.

"All of that is understandable," Daniel said. "True unfortunately, but understandable."

Remi leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together. "I fought to keep myself under control, but everywhere I looked was what I wanted, in someone else's home. Not their females, but their situations. Brandt has Tempest and they have their baby on the way. Christian has Addie and she's moved to his apartment in New Orleans until he finishes his residency and they can settle closer to home. Havoc and Analise, Barron and Emmalyn, Hellen and Lucien. Even Kiernan and Abby and their kids. I was surrounded. Everywhere I looked was peace, love, home, shelter, sanctuary, except for me. And Bailey wouldn't even speak to me."

"Did you really try?" Avaleigh asked.

Remi thought about it, then shook his head. "No, I denied everything she asked about, hell bent on forcing things to the vision I still held onto desperately. Even while Cristie was here, patiently giving me the opportunity to reexamine my choices. To consider all angles, but I refused to see anything other than the perfect path I'd forced into being for months. Cristie left without another word because I ignored her. Bailey cut me loose as she should have in no uncertain terms, and I spiraled. I resented everyone that had what I didn't. My chest would ache and burn, making it all I could do not to unleash my rage anytime I saw anyone exhibiting any kind of love between themselves and their mates."

“Remi,” Avaleigh said.

“I mean, what was wrong with me that I couldn’t have what they did? I did all the things I was supposed to. I was a good son. Since I was a little boy, I’ve always tried to be so good so you’d know how much I appreciated the love, and the life you both gave me. I’ve never, not one time turned my back on any of our family that needed help, whether they asked for it or not. I’ve never said no a single time to anybody. Something needs to be done... I’ll do it! I got it! So, why am I the only one f... screwed out of a life bond with my mate? With the mate I was born for? Why? And it hurt so bad to realize that maybe I’d been bad all along. Maybe that’s why my birth mom didn’t survive. Maybe that’s why my aunt hated me so much. Maybe I was bad even back then, and no matter what I did, no matter how dependable, how helpful, grateful, kind, anything else good that I tried to do, it didn’t matter because I was born bad. So, I started drinking. And when I was sober a few hours later, I drank more. And more. And more, and when I was finally numb, I thought. I can do this. Keep it numb and I got this. But I still saw what I wanted each time I looked at my clan mates, and it still hurt so freaking bad. I’m told there were women, I don’t even remember. Seems like there might have been — it’s foggy. But then I found someone who seemed to think I was everything.” He raised his gaze to Daniel and then to Avaleigh. “And she was as bad as I thought I was, so, we fit. And I just drank more and jumped in with both feet.

Didn’t take long for Brandt to try to talk some sense into me. He tried, he really did. And he tried to keep it all from y’all and everybody on this side of the clan. In retrospect, he was protecting me, or trying to just as steadfastly as I was refusing to save myself.”

Remi sat quietly for a few minutes, his hands scrubbing at his face, before slowly falling away. “Then Cristie found me, hiding out in the woods with some people who didn’t give a damn what I did or didn’t do. Their parts of society had forced them out, too. I thought I belonged there. But she made me question who I was. Who I’d always been. She reminded me of what she always knew me to be, even before the mate instinct roared to life. And she was right. She was right about everything she said.”

Remi huffed a sharp laugh. “She pulls no punches. And she was exactly the right person to call me on my shit, because I’ve never pretended with her. Not for an instant. Whoever I was, whoever I am, I’ve always been completely transparent with her. And where you would have forgiven

me, so I felt I could feel sorry for myself a little longer and justify it, Cristie wasn't going to take that for an answer. She was all, 'I'm here. I see you. I saw what you were and I see what you are, and what the hell are you thinking? Where is the integrity that I know lives inside you? Where is the man that everyone looks up to? I'm so disappointed in you. I thought more of you. But no more. You've dug this hole, I'm letting you lie in it. But call your mother before you completely disappear because she deserves more. And oh, by the way, did I say I cannot believe what you've allowed yourself to become? Oh, I did? Okay, good. Because again, I'm so disappointed in you.'

Remi laughed bitterly. "When your best friend, the person who knows you intimately, and has watched every step of your life, the only person other than your parents that you've always known you could be yourself with, tells you what a failure you've become, and how much you've fucked up, it's hard not to listen."

"You're not a failure, Remi. You just decided to take the easy way out, no matter who you hurt in the process. You can fix you, though. You're one of the few that is strong enough."

Remi's head jerked up at the sound of Cristie's voice.

She was standing in the archway leading into the hallway his and Angelle's bedrooms were in, wearing a pair of pajama pants and a tank top.

"I didn't know you were here," Remi said, careful to keep his voice even and calm.

"I didn't want you to know I was here," Cristie said. "I've gotten really good at that."

Remi nodded and smiled sadly. "I'm sure you have." He sat there between his parents, waiting for Cristie to say something else, but she didn't. He wasn't surprised, he knew she'd never make any of his efforts to reclaim what he'd once been easy. "Thank you for coming. Thank you for finding me and being so brutally honest with me. I don't think I'd have heard anyone but you. I was just trying to explain to my parents what I was feeling. Not justifying my actions, because there is no justification. But I wanted them to at least have an idea of why I just... quit. That's what I did. I quit."

Cristie nodded. "I heard." She tapped the side of her nose. "No lies there."

“I am sorry for all the trouble I caused. For all the pain I caused, and if you’ll allow me, I’ll make it up to you. All of you,” Remi said. “I’ve been such a fool. I’m embarrassed by my behavior. I’m embarrassed that everyone I cared about was witness to it. I have a lot of amends to make. But it’s you, Mom and Dad, that I owe the biggest apology to. I’m so sorry. I’ll never be able to take away the worry, the concern, or the humiliation I caused you in front of everyone else in our clan, but I’ll try. I’ll never stop trying.”

Avaleigh hugged him, while Daniel rested his hand on Remi’s shoulder, squeezing supportively.

“I know I can’t fix things with a single conversation. My actions will speak for my intentions over time, and I hope one day you’ll see the sincerity behind them.”

“I’m sure we will,” Daniel said.

“But if you start to slip again, I’m sending Dad to yank you up!” Avaleigh said with a half-serious, half-joking tone in her voice.

“Deal,” Remi said.

Cristie didn’t say anything, and it suddenly became very awkward between Remi and Cristie.

Avaleigh and Daniel shared a knowing look, then Avaleigh, who was still half-hugging Remi, patted his back like a mother will. “Are you hungry, baby? Can I get you something to eat?”

“I haven’t eaten in a few days, Mom. I’m not sure how that’d go over,” he said honestly.

“I understand. Something simple. Scrambled eggs, toast. Maybe a little breakfast sausage, maybe not,” Avaleigh said.

“Sure, I’ll try,” Remi said.

“I’ll help you,” Daniel said, patting Remi’s shoulder before he stood up and went into the kitchen with Avaleigh.

“I’m going to pack my things,” Cristie said. “You’re here, and that was my goal.” She turned away from the living room but only got a few feet away before Remi stopped her.

“Cristie? I’m so sorry. I know I’m a far cry from the person you trusted implicitly, but I’m still me. That guy is still in here somewhere.”

Cristie turned back to Remi, who was now standing right behind her. “I know. That’s why I made the effort to come down here. You’re worth the effort. Always were.”

Remi flashed a quick smile. “Can we...” he stopped and tried to rethink his approach. “Is there a...”

Cristie reached out and rested her hand on his chest. “Remi, let’s not go there. So much has changed. So much has happened that can’t be undone between you and I. Let’s not make it worse. I’m happy you remembered that you care enough about your clan and your family to pull yourself together. I’m happy you’re fighting for yourself. And I’m happy to go home knowing that you’re going to be okay here.”

Remi looked into her eyes, and she unflinchingly looked back.

Finally he nodded slowly, accepting her delicately phrased affirmation that she was going home, alone. “Thank you for caring enough to come wake me up.”

“Thank you for caring enough to listen.” She leaned forward and very chastely kissed his jaw, then smiled at him while she gently caressed that same spot on his jaw. Then she walked away, leaving him standing there.

Chapter 20

Cristie walked into the kitchen twenty minutes later with her backpack over one shoulder and her purse over the other. She was freshly showered, with her still damp hair pulled back into a French braid at the back of her head. “Well, I’m going home,” she said, smiling brightly.

“That fast? Won’t you at least stay for breakfast?”

“No, but thank you. I’ve got a long drive and I’d rather drive earlier than later.”

“Alright, but, let me make you a wrap real quick,” Avaleigh said.

“You sure you don’t want to stay an extra day or two?” Daniel asked.

Cristie shook her head. “I shouldn’t be here. He’s got a lot of healing to do, and I can’t be the reason he does it. It’s got to be about him.”

“You are right about that,” Daniel said. “He’s in the shower in the master bathroom. You don’t want to wait until he’s out to say goodbye?”

“We already did. But I want you to know how much I appreciate you both and your hospitality. How much I appreciate the trust you put in me. And I’m so thankful that I was able to help. I do think he’d have come around eventually, but sooner is better than later, right?”

“I’m not sure you’re right about that. If he’d stayed in that mindset, he might have just kept sinking. I really believe you’re the fulcrum that caused him to pull his head out of his ass,” Daniel said.

“There’s that delicate diplomacy I fell in love with,” Avaleigh said with a laugh.

Cristie laughed too. “I’m going to miss you guys.”

“We’ll miss you, too, sweetie. I hope you’ll come back real soon,” Daniel said

“That’d be real nice,” Cristie said, careful to not say she would or she wouldn’t.

Avaleigh handed her an insulated lunch tote with a frozen reusable ice pack inside. “There are a couple of bottles of water and one of tea. There’s some nuts and granola bars, and some cheese and pepperoni, and I slipped a couple of my homemade pralines in there, too.” Then she handed her a traditional brown paper bag. “There’s a bacon, egg, cheese wrap in there,

and here's your coffee. I used vanilla creamer in it," Avaleigh said, handing her an insulated travel mug of coffee.

"Aunt Avaleigh! You're awesome!"

"Of course. And don't forget who your favorite aunt is," Avaleigh said, hugging Cristie as best she could around everything she carried.

"Here, let me carry some of that," Daniel said. "I'm going to take a quick look at your truck before you leave, too."

"I can do that, Uncle Daniel," Cristie said.

"Didn't say you couldn't. I said I'd take care of it for you," Daniel said.

"I appreciate it. It's parked by Kaid's house."

Daniel took her backpack off her shoulder, and her lunch tote, and lunch bag with her breakfast in it, leaving her with her purse and her coffee.

"Thank you again, Aunt Avaleigh," Cristie said, as Daniel headed toward the front door.

Avaleigh cupped Cristie's face in her hands and looked into her eyes. "No, baby. Thank you. I'll always be grateful."

Cristie hugged Avaleigh then hurried to follow Daniel.

"You have your phone charged?" Avaleigh called after her.

"Yes, ma'am, I do!" Cristie answered before the sound of the door let Avaleigh know she'd left the house.

Ten minutes later, Daniel was back, and taking his seat at the table once again.

"Want me to warm your breakfast for you?" Avaleigh asked.

"No, I'm good love," Daniel said, rolling up some scrambled eggs in a slice of toast and eating them like a taco.

"That shower was wonderful," Remi said, walking into the kitchen wearing a pair of his father's sweat pants and one of his teeshirts.

"Isn't it amazing, how such a little thing as a shower can bring so much, I don't know, renewal, cleansing and I don't mean dirt," Daniel said.

"Yes. I thought for sure you'd all hear my sigh when I first stepped under the water," Remi said. "And thanks for laying the clothes out, by the way. Didn't want to walk across the house naked to get to the few things left in my room with Cristie here."

"Good call. She was staying in your room while she was here. But, she's gone. She left just about fifteen minutes ago, heading back to Missouri," Avaleigh said, watching Remi closely.

Remi nodded, but didn't seem any more affected than he had before. "Yeah, I figured she'd be going soon. She said as much after you two came in the kitchen."

Avaleigh walked toward him from the stove, placing a plate of eggs and toast in front of him. "You know, she cares more than you realize."

"She did once, and that's just going to have to be enough," Remi said.

"No, she still does. She was deeply hurt by your rejection, but she still got in her truck and drove down here without hesitation the minute she found out she might be able to help you," Avaleigh said.

Remi looked up at his mother.

"Eat your food, it'll get cold, and even your mother's eggs are not that great when they're cold," Daniel said.

"I told you I'd warm your food up," Avaleigh said.

"I said I didn't need it," Daniel said, popping the last bite of his toast and egg 'taco' into his mouth and grinning at her as he chewed.

Avaleigh took Daniel's plate with her back to the stove and filled it again, then filled her own, and took them both back to the table. She slid Daniel's plate in front of him, and took her seat next to him. "So, what's next? How can we best support you while you get on your feet again?" Avaleigh asked.

Remi chewed his food, as he thought about his mother's question. Finally he looked at both her and his father after he swallowed and gave a little shrug. "If you wouldn't mind too much, I'll need a new place to stay. I don't have any money at the moment, and I'll need to find a new job, so it might be a few weeks, but as soon as I get some income coming in again, I'll be paying you rent until I can get another place."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Daniel said. "Besides, this is always your home. You'll always have a bed here."

"You will want to close that account at the bank, and open another before you put any money into it," Avaleigh said.

"Yeah, definitely," Remi said. "I'll take care of that right away. Closing the old one at least. I'll open another one when I get my first check."

"Anything else we can do?" Daniel asked.

"No, sir. The rest is on me. Like I said, I have a lot of amends to make. People I hurt, people I let down. It's not enough to own your behavior and

apologize, but it's a start at least." He yawned a couple of times in rapid succession, then stretched before he went back to his food.

"Maybe get you some rest first, then decide where to start," Daniel said.

"What I really need to do is go look for a job," Remi said.

"I might have an idea, if it suits you," Daniel said.

"Oh, yeah?" Remi asked.

"Those people Cristie and I found you with... they got me to thinking. They need help. There was a mother there with two little children, and something she said struck me. She said, the reason she told me where to find you is because I cared. She said she had nobody to care if she and her kids were okay or not. And as I walked around that place, I realized that was probably the case for a lot of them. So, I've been talking to Kaid. We decided we're going to do something about it. We're buying the land, and putting mini houses on it. It'll be for anybody who needs a safe place to live. If you've got a drug or drinking problem, all you have to do to be able to stay there is attend one of the programs we'll have active in one of the warehouses. It came with the land and isn't in bad shape so we decided to keep it and make use of it. We'll hire counselors to work there. We'll split the property into an area for families and kids, and another for people who are struggling like you did. I just don't think it's a good idea for little bitty kids to see all the addiction, so we're going to keep it separate. But there is nobody we'll turn away. If they need more help than we can provide, we'll find another place that can offer it."

"That's amazing, Dad."

"If it wasn't for you losing yourself, I'd have never known they were there. They need help, we can help."

"I'm glad something good came out of it," Remi said.

"It's going to need someone to be there, to oversee the houses as they get built and placed according to our plans. Someone to oversee all stages of the community. We're in the process of applying for permits from the parish now. It shouldn't take more than a couple of months to start accepting the first people that want help. With just me, Kaid, Maverik, Bane and Bam, we can build three tiny houses a day, electricity and water included in that. We'll build more as they're needed. Hopefully, we can help people get back on their feet and find jobs, eventually they can move on. I was wondering if you'd be interested in helping us oversee this

project. You know some of them. They might be more open to accepting help if you offer it. And it pays. It could be the job you're looking for."

"It sounds perfect. I'd really like to help people. I know how fast you can slip and not even realize it until you're at the bottom."

"Great. You're hired," Daniel said.

"Don't you need to clear it with Kaid?" Remi asked.

"No. It's my idea, Kaid is funding it, but I'm running it. Everybody is helping because they want to."

"I'm in," Remi said, gratefully.

"Good. Eat and get you some rest. You start tomorrow morning."

Remi sat, his mind wandering instead of eating.

"Remi, are you alright?" Avaleigh asked.

"Yeah. Just thinking about Cristie driving all the way home alone."

"Are you sure you're alright with Cristie leaving?" Avaleigh asked.

Remi shrugged. "I have to be, don't I? I burned that bridge personally. But I have to go on regardless. I can't do that until I start fixing the mess I made of things, and of me, too. This opportunity Dad has for me, I think might be just what I need to start healing."

"No better way to heal than helping other people," Avaleigh said.

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A few days later Remi sat in his car, parked on the shoulder of the highway just before the turnoff for the neighborhood Brandt and the rest of his clan had established. It was well past the three days he'd been given to get off their property, and the last thing he wanted to do when trying to apologize for his behavior was to offend Brandt again. It didn't matter that his own house was still technically on Brandt's property. It was understood that it now belonged to the clan because he'd, like an ass, chosen to walk away.

Remi tried for the third or fourth time to reach out to Brandt telepathically, to request permission to be on clan land, but he'd been blocked. There was no one there to make a connection with. So, instead, he picked up his brand new cell phone he'd just bought earlier that morning, and dialed Brandt's number from memory. Remi's brain worked like that, once he heard a number, or a sequence of numbers, it was there forever. He listened to the rings for a few seconds, before Brandt finally answered.

“Yeah?” Brandt demanded, not being familiar with the number Remi was calling from.

“Hey, Brandt. It’s Remi. I was wondering if you might happen to have a few minutes to talk to me. I’m outside the road leading into the neighborhood, but I didn’t want to offend you by coming onto it without your permission.”

There was a momentary pause before Brandt finally replied. “You alone?”

“Yes, absolutely. Completely alone. And I’m not here to cause any trouble.”

“Tempest is close to delivering. If you’re here for any kind of drama, it’s not gonna happen today. Put it on hold and I’ll catch up with you later,” Brandt said.

“Nothing like that,” Remi said.

“Alright, you have permission to be on the property. Today,” Brandt said.

“Thank you,” Remi answered. “I’ll be there in a minute or two.”

Remi waited until Brandt ended the call, then ended it on his phone, pulled forward and took a right onto the property. His stomach was threatening to empty itself, and his hands were less than steady. This was not something he looked forward to doing, and he knew it was only the first of many times he’d feel like this. He drove down the main road through the property, and glanced just barely down the cross street his own house was down, then quickly to the left where Havoc’s and Hellen’s were, but kept going until he ended up in what could be described as a rudimentary cul de sac, with Brandt’s home to the left and a slender road that was little more than a path leading to the right and eventually to Barron’s house.

Remi pulled up in front of Brandt’s home, and took a deep breath to settle himself. “A grown ass male cleans up the messes he makes,” he reminded himself aloud. With that spoken reminder, he got out of his car and started toward the steps leading up to Brandt and Tempest’s raised, wrap around porch. As he made his way up, he wasn’t surprised at all when Brandt didn’t come out to meet him. He knew full well that Brandt would treat him like an outsider. That’s what he was. He’d made that choice while wildly out of control, but still, he’d made that choice.

When he reached the top of the steps, finally standing on the porch, he looked out over the river taking a second to take a deep easy breath before

turning to the front door. He knocked twice, then stepped back from the door and waited.

The door swung open and Brandt, his face unreadable, stood there facing him, his arms crossed over his chest as he waited for Remi to speak his piece.

“I’m sorry for the interruption, but there was no other way to get in contact with you.”

“I understand,” Brandt said.

“I won’t take up too much of your time. I’m here to apologize. I owe you and everybody else an apology for my behavior, for my lack of control and for my disrespect. I will be eternally ashamed of the way I treated you and everyone else in our clan. There are no excuses for my actions. I was weak. I was jealous. I was petty. I can’t make it go away, and I can’t make things like they used to be. But I’m here to tell you that I deeply regret everything I caused, and I own my own actions. I do not ask for forgiveness, I ask for you to hear me, and to allow me to make amends in anyway, at any time you might choose, to balance the behavior I’ve exhibited.”

Brandt stood there, his posture still the same, but something had softened in his face.

“What are your plans?” Brandt asked.

“I’ve asked my parents for the use of my old room for a little while until I can get my own place, and start to rebuild me. I’ll be overseeing the homeless shelter my Dad is spearheading at the back of the industrial park. A lot of the people we hope will take advantage of it, don’t have anyone to come hunt them down and make sure they’re okay, like my parents did me. I think it’ll make a big difference. I don’t expect anyone to have much faith in me, but hopefully they’ll see my actions and know that I’m sincere. You being included in the ‘they’.”

“What happened?” Brandt asked.

“I was an asshole,” Remi said.

Brandt laughed. “No, I mean to bring you here today.”

“Cristie. Bailey called her, she drove down here and found me in exactly the spot we’re putting the shelter and gave me a look at yourself and what you have become talk. It was a wakeup call. And I’m not afraid to admit that coming from anybody else, I probably wouldn’t have heard the message.”

“Where is she now?” Brandt asked, glancing down at Remi’s car.

“Home. She said she was glad that she’d achieved what she came for, and she was happy to go home knowing that I’d be here, working to be the man she knows I am.”

Brandt’s brows raised in surprise. “That’s... rough.”

“I didn’t expect any more than that. At least she cared enough to come try to help. And look, I’m not here to ask for favors or anything of the sort. I’m here to apologize, genuinely, and tell you how bad I feel for the situation I created.”

“Why don’t you come in, let’s talk some,” Brandt said, stepping to the side to give Remi access.

“Tempest?”

“She’s resting for now. She won’t mind you being here. She’s been worried. We both have.”

“Okay,” Remi said, following Brandt into his house.

“You hungry?” Brandt asked.

“No, please, no. My mother has been feeding me for two days straight. I’m gonna be fat,” Remi said.

Brandt laughed. He looked at Remi, then covered the few feet between them and hugged him roughly. “Hardest damn thing I ever had to do, Remi. Fucking hurt, man.”

Remi nodded. “Yeah, I know. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was just so fucking blind and so lost, resentful and petty. I was...” Remi sighed, then shrugged, “fucked up and feeling sorry for myself. And then I was just broken. I’m trying to rebuild me, though. It’s like starting over from square one.”

“You still got your house here.”

Remi shook his head. “You keep it. I feel like I have to go a different way somehow.”

“You’re part of this clan, Remi. The whole point in me giving you an ultimatum was to try to snap you out of whatever it was you were going through. I never thought you’d actually leave.”

“I can see that now. I could see it at the time, but it just pissed me off even more that you were so magnanimous when I was being such a prick.”

Brandt shook his head. “So, now what?”

“Went to town this morning. Closed my old bank account, opened another. My parents fronted me a little money until I get my first check. I

got a new phone. Got a job at the new homeless shelter. Never done anything like it, but I feel like I need it at the moment. Going to get a little place of my own, find a balance inside me and figure out what's next."

"You'll always have a place here."

Remi smiled. "Thank you, Brandt. I'm sorry I disrespected you. I'm sorry I disappointed you."

"Brandt?" Tempest called sleepily from the bedroom.

"I'm going to get out of here and let you take care of your mate. Tell her everything I said. Tell her I said I'm so sorry and I hope she can find it in herself to give me a chance to make amends."

"I will. You come back here. You call me. You do whatever you need to. We are your family," Brandt said.

Remi hugged Brandt, and they pounded each other on the back like males do. "Thank you. I'll be in touch," Remi promised, then he let himself out of the door and was gone before Brandt made it to the bedroom.



The bell above the door jangled, and Bailey finished placing the turnovers she'd made in the display cabinet. "Welcome! I'll be right with you," she said. Placing the empty baking sheet on a different counter top behind herself, she finally turned back to smile at the new customer. The moment she saw who her customer was, her smile dropped. In fact, her entire countenance changed.

"Remi," she said softly.

"Hi, Bailey."

"What can I get for you?" she asked uncertainly.

He shook his head. "Nothing, thank you, though. I came to talk to you real quick."

She took a good look at him and realized he was clean, he was sober, in fact, he looked better than he had in a while. "Okay."

"I owe you a huge debt of gratitude."

As per her usual self, she brushed it off. "Don't be silly. You don't owe me anything."

Remi smiled but was unconvinced as he slowly walked up to the counter. "You broke up with me to free me from having to make that decision and carrying that guilt in the hopes that I would find my way to



Cristie. That was the most selfless, most loving thing anyone has ever done for me. I was too much of an ass to realize it at the time, but I realize it now. It had to be very difficult, and I'll be forever grateful for that gift."

"Honestly, as much as it hurt, and as hard as it was, at the same time it was the easiest thing for me."

He looked confused for a second until she explained.

"When you love someone, you want them to be happy, even if it's someone else that makes them happy. Their happiness is more important than yours. So, you don't have to thank me, and you certainly don't owe me anything."

He smiled at her, that soft smile that she always associated with Remi before he'd gone off the deep end. "And you called Cristie, when no one else did. You knew that she'd be the one to get to me, even through all the haze and the alcohol and the self pity, you knew I'd hear her."

Bailey smiled at him. "What we had was great, and for her to be able to turn your head, what the two of you could have had must have been spectacular. I just thought of the way you couldn't look away from her, couldn't even hear anyone else's voice if she was in the room, and I knew. If anyone was going to get through to you, it was her."

"You were right. You took away any possibility for me to feel guilty for finding my way to Cristie, and you called her in to save me when no one else could do it. Like I said, I owe you a debt of gratitude. I always will."

"You know what I demand in payment?" she asked, propping her hand on her hip.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Be happy. Just be happy. No matter what that looks like. Be healthy, be happy."

"Shaun is a very, very lucky male," Remi said, nodding to himself.

"He knows. I remind him of it often," Bailey said with a laugh.

"I hope he loves you enough to want you to be happy no matter who or what it is that makes you happy," Remi said.

Bailey's face lit up when she thought of Shaun. "He does. He's... everything. He's my mate."

Remi grinned at her. "I'm so glad you're happy, Bailey. You deserve the best of everything. I'm sorry I was so hateful at the end. I'm sorry I was so selfish the entire time. I shouldn't have pulled you into the world we live

in. I loved you, I really did. But I knew I was forcing things. You weren't my mate, I just wanted it so badly."

She reached across the counter and laid her hand on his forearm. "If you hadn't brought me into your world, I might not have met my mate. You did the right thing. And you don't have to apologize for anything. You were hurting. I'm just glad the Remi I know is back."

"I'm working on it. I was carrying some baggage I didn't even know I was carrying. And things have changed but I'm building me from scratch again. I think it's going to be okay. I'll make me better this time."

"You were pretty special before. Can't wait to see all you achieve this time."

"You're one of my best friends. I hope that's okay with you. I love you, and I'm so very happy for you and Shaun. I'm glad you have him, and I'm even glad he has you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm proud to be your friend."

The bell on the door jangled, breaking them out of their conversation.

Remi glanced behind himself, inclined his head at the couple entering the shoppe, before he turned back to Bailey. "I'll see you later, okay?" he said, backing toward the door.

"You better," she called out as he waved and stepped outside.

## Chapter 21

Remi pulled into the parking lot and immediately saw more than a few cars he recognized. Lunchtime at the work site very often meant Vince's, and obviously, today was no exception. He parked, strode up to the door and pulled it open. The moment he stepped inside, he realized that more people were there than he anticipated. Barron, Havoc, Lucien, Kiernan, and Shaun were seated at the bar, elbows deep in burgers, onion rings, and a varying array of shakes and root beers. But at a table on the far left of the room were Kaid and Delilah.

Since Kaid and Delilah were watching him expectantly, he went to their table first.

"Uncle Kaid, Aunt Delilah," Remi said.

"Hello, Remi. It is very good to see you up and around," Delilah said.

"Yes, ma'am. It's good to be up and around," Remi replied.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to offer you my deepest apologies for my behavior. I was offensive, selfish, and completely out of line. It was not my intent to be disrespectful to you or anyone else. I can't take it away, but I can certainly make every effort to make amends by way of my actions, and I'm doing so."

"Thank you for that, Remi. I appreciate you taking responsibility for your actions. It can be a hard thing for a lot of adults to figure out how to do," Kaid said.

"Yes, sir. There is no excuse, but I am truly trying to make apologies, and prove that I'm not that broken, pitiful excuse for a male."

Kaid surprised him when he stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. "The best of us are often the product of having been broken at one time or another. Me among them. It takes a strong male to recognize that he needs to take control of himself, and make strides to improve himself."

"Thank you for saying that," Remi said.

"Don't let him just leave it at that," Vince said, coming up behind him carrying a tray. He placed Kaid's and Delilah's meals in front of them, handed Delilah a fresh ketchup bottle, then looked at Remi directly. "He shot a hole in my damn ceiling in the middle of his being broken. I mean, a hole, Remi! It was raining in my damn bar!"

Remi chuckled.

“Go away, Vince,” Kaid said, patting Remi’s shoulder before sitting down to enjoy his food.

“Before you do, let me apologize to you for making a spectacle of myself in your place of business. I’m so embarrassed, and even sorrier for my behavior.”

“We’ve all done some things we regret, son. Just learn from it. That’s the best we can do.”

Remi nodded. “I want to thank you, too. You called Brandt to come get me and take me home safely. If you hadn’t stepped in, I’d have driven myself and I’m sure it would not have been good. Someone could have been killed because I was having a pity party. Thank you for taking care of me and calling my Alpha.”

Vince hugged him. “You’re welcome. You’re a good kid. Always have been, you just got a little lost.”

“So, I’m guessing we don’t rate high enough for an apology?” Barron shouted across the room.

Remi grinned. “I’m getting there!” he called out, without looking toward Barron and his own generation. He looked at Kaid again. “I asked my parents if I could stay with them for a little while as I get on my feet again, but I’m thinking maybe I should have asked you first since it’s your property.”

“No. Not at all. I have no say in what happens in any of the families who belong to my clan other than making sure they don’t do anything that will cause grief of any kind to the rest of the clan. Their business with their children is up to them. Now, having said that, if you’d asked, and they’d turned you down, I’d have offered my spare room to you, because in my eyes you’ll always be that little dark haired, dark eyed male that faced off against your daddy and my Delilah to protect your momma when you weren’t sure of the rest of us. You, Remi, saved your momma in a way that none of the rest of us could. And for the record if you didn’t get your head out of your ass soon, I was coming to help you remove it from the shadows so your momma wouldn’t be upset by you anymore.”

Remi nodded. “Thank you, Uncle Kaid. For all of it.”

Kaid gave him a single nod. “I’m glad to hear you’ll be at the shelter, too. Now, go see your people so I can eat my onion rings before they get cold.”

Delilah reached out and pulled the platter close to herself.

“Hey! Half of those are mine,” Kaid said.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she answered.

“You see that? That’s why I thought Emmalyn was theirs instead of Bam and Everly’s,” Lucien said. “She’s got a mean streak, a lot like Delilah.”

“Do not speak my name, person who shall not be named!” Delilah called across the room. “I’m still angry with you for not including me in your little excursion to New Orleans.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Lucien exclaimed. “Brandt called that one!”

“And I shall make sure he’s familiar with my opinion on that as well.”

“Seriously, Aunt Delilah. We had to go, suddenly, all of a sudden,” Havoc explained.

“That’s redundant, Havoc. Say it once and be done. I’m still put out with not being included,” Delilah said.

“Uncle Vince! Please take Aunt Delilah some more onion rings! On me,” Havoc shouted.

“Done,” Vince called from the kitchen.

“My mate does not have a mean streak,” Barron grumbled.

“Yes, she does,” every other male at the bar said.

Remi grinned as he walked over, extending his hand to shake Barron’s.

“No, that’s bullshit,” Barron said, getting up and hugging Remi. “Do not shake my hand when we’re practically brothers. It’s good to have you back. We were all worried about you.”

“I appreciate that, but I was fucking up left and right. I’m sorry for anything I caused you, and everybody.”

“It’s okay. Come on, I’m next, come give us some sugar,” Havoc said, turned around on his barstool, waving Remi to him.

Remi moved toward him, planning to give him a man hug, but Havoc grabbed him and yanked him in, wrapping his arms and legs around Remi, clamping down on him and giving him a full body hug.

They all laughed.

When Havoc finally released him, Remi looked up and down the row of them and shook his head. “I don’t even know where to begin. I’m just so sorry. I’ll fix it though. I give you my word, if it’s still worth anything.”

Havoc sobered and shook his own head in disbelief. "You took me in when I committed the worst offense against family and mates that can be committed. Not everybody wanted to even look at me, and I get that. I earned it. But you never once wavered in your support and friendship for me. Do not even speak another word. You're family. You're friend, and if I'd had to, I'd have gone and dug your ass up outta where you'd got to and forced you to clean your act up. But everybody has a right to wallow from time to time. It's necessary in some instances."

"Thank you, Havoc. But please don't hug me with your whole body again."

"Didn't you like it just a little?" he teased.

Remi laughed, but then focused on Kiernan. "I am so sorry that I exposed your mate and babies to somebody that would cause them distress of any kind. If it's alright with you, I'm going to come by later this evening once you get home and apologize to her personally. I hope you can both find it in your heart to overlook my behavior."

"It's forgiven," Kiernan said. "But thank you for apologizing. I appreciate it."

"Thank you, Kiernan." Remi turned his attention to Shaun who sat quietly beside Kiernan eating his burger. "Shaun, I owe you so much. You are so much a better male than me."

Shaun turned around and looked stunned when he met Remi's gaze. "You don't owe me a thing, Remi."

"I do. You knew that Bailey was your mate from the first time you saw her. But because she was with me, you kept it to yourself. You continued to treat me with respect, and you told no one what she was to you."

"She was happy. When you love someone more than yourself, you want them to be happy..."

"Even if it's not you that makes them happy," Remi finished.

Shaun smiled and nodded.

"She told me that a little while ago. You were willing to keep your unhappiness to yourself so that she and I could be happy. You told me once you admired me... no, man. It's me that admires you. I hope that I can one day be half the male you are."

Shaun just smiled, unsure of how to reply to such a huge compliment.

"And let me tell you just one other thing... when I went to apologize to her earlier, when I said your name, her whole face lit up. The joy was just

beaming out of her. She never, not even for a second, loved me like that. You have brought out a confidence and a love in her that nobody else ever could. I'm happy for the two of you. I wish you both every imaginable happiness and a long, loving life together."

"Thank you, Remi. I appreciate that," Shaun said, extending his hand to shake Remi's.

"You, are a true gentleman, Shaun. I apologize for not giving you the same respect and consideration that you tried to give me."

"What about me?" Lucien said. "Don't I get a sorry?"

"I am sorry for my behavior, Lucien," Remi said.

"What'd you do?" Lucien asked, knowing full well what he'd done though it never personally affected him.

"I was an ass," Remi said.

"Ain't we all?" Lucien asked, then handed him one of his burgers. He had three.

Remi looked at the burger in his hand and laughed. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Lucien said. "Sit the fuck down."

Remi had no sooner sat down and everyone returned their attention to their food, along with juvenile jabs at Remi, then everyone suddenly stopped eating and even chewing, at exactly the same time. Their heads all snapped up, some of them reaching for drinks to wash down food they were choking on, while they stood up and started digging in pockets for keys while moving toward the door.

"Hey," Kaid said, picking up on it immediately, "what's going on?!" he asked, concerned as all the males except Remi rushed out.

Remi looked at his phone, which had begun vibrating in his back pocket. "Tempest is in labor," he said.

"Where'd everybody go?" Vince asked, walking out of the kitchen to find only Remi standing at the bar.

"Tempest is in labor," Remi said.

"Wrap it up, Lion! We have to get there right away," Delilah exclaimed delightedly.

"Yes, ma'am, your highness," Vince quipped.

Remi started counting the cash he'd pulled out of his pocket, unsure if he had enough to cover all the food his clan mates had ordered and rushed off from without paying.

"No, Remi. I got that! Vince, put everything on my tab," Kaid yelled.

“The boys, too?” Vince yelled back.

“Yep!” Kaid answered.

“No, I can get mine,” Remi insisted, still feeling too guilty to accept anything, even a lunch from anyone in their clan.

“No. I got it. And go on, get gone, they’re having a baby. Why are you still here?”

“I’m not sure I should be there,” Remi admitted.

Kaid walked right up to him. “Boy, you need to forgive yourself. You fucked up. You recognize it, move on and don’t do it again. End of.”

Remi nodded. “I’m trying.”

“Good. Did Brandt not message you directly?”

“He did.”

“And what did it say?”

Remi lifted his phone to read from the screen. “Baby’s on the way, get here quick!”

“Then get there quick, he wants you there. I’m gonna let everybody else know, and we’ll see you there. We’ll be right behind you,” Kaid said.

“Yes, sir,” Remi said.

Remi got in his car and realized he didn’t know where exactly they were going. He’d kind of been out of the loop. He sent a quick text to Brandt. “Which hospital?”

“No hospital. Home! Hurry the hell up!”

“On my way,” Remi answered.

His face was a mask of worry as he drove to Brandt’s house for the second time that day. “No hospital?” he murmured to himself.



Tempest lay on her bed, panting, gripping the corners of the pillow her head lay upon.

“Baby, are you sure we shouldn’t be in a hospital?” Brandt asked.

“Can’t. What if it’s a boy and it has horns? What if it’s gray, or blue like my grandfather?” she bit out from between clenched teeth.

“Alright. But, midwife or something at least,” Brandt half-yelled.

“Called my mother. She’ll be here,” Tempest snarled when another contraction hit.



Brandt heard the front door open and heard footsteps running toward them.

Daisy rushed into the room, falling to her knees beside Tempest. "I'm here! How can I help?!"

"Thank fuck!" Brandt said, glad to not have to deliver his child alone.

"Tell me what to do," Daisy said.

"Hurts," Tempest whimpered.

"Give me your hands," Daisy ordered.

Tempest reached for her and Daisy clasped Tempest's hands in both of her own. "Let me in, Tempest. I can't ease your pain if you don't let me in."

"Let her in, baby," Brandt begged.

"Go. Away," Tempest said, looking directly at Brandt.

"Baby!" Brandt exclaimed.

"Brandt, there's a reason women have done this only with other women since the beginning of time," Daisy said.

"Hey! We here!" Havoc yelled as a multitude of footsteps could be heard entering the house.

"Go take care of everybody else," Daisy said, flashing a forced smile at Brandt.

"Okay. Okay, got it," he said, rushing out of the bedroom. "I love you, Tempest! Call me if you need me!" he called after himself.

Daisy turned back to Tempest. "Let me in. I'll take part of the pain."

"I can't," Tempest said. "We'd lose you."

"What? I'm not going anywhere," Daisy said.

Tempest shook her head. "Can't let you see," Tempest said, then started panting again, tears streaming from beneath her closed eye lids despite her trying to hold them back, with a growing moan building in volume.

When the contraction passed and Tempest was breathing a little easier, Daisy tried again. "Tempest, I can ease the pain."

"She can't, dear," an unfamiliar voice said from right behind her.

Daisy spun to a defensive position, facing the woman suddenly standing behind her. Daisy placed herself between the woman and Tempest who was in no condition to protect herself while at the same time she heard a commotion from Brandt's living room. Shouting, the sound of scattering feet, the demand from several males for someone to identify themselves.

That alone unnerved her, but to be facing a woman who'd just appeared out of nowhere, had already pretty much set her on high alert.

"It's okay, Daisy. I'm Lily, Tempest's mother, and the sounds you hear from the living room are because I dropped Tempest's father, and grandparents, and her uncle there as I appeared in this room. Everyone is a little surprised, I'm sure."

"Hey! Hey!!" Daisy heard Brandt yell. "This is Tempest's grandparents and her dad! Calm the hell down!"

"I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. I only met you the one time, and I'm a little stressed here," Daisy said.

Lily smiled at Daisy. "It's fine. I understand. When I was last here, it was a quick visit."

"Mama," Tempest whimpered, and started crying. "It hurts so bad. Make it stop, Mama. Please make it stop."

"Let me feel what's wrong, Tempest. I'll fix it," Lily promised, as Daisy moved out of the way so Lily could sit beside her daughter.

Tempest reached for her mother, and Lily leaned toward her, holding her as her long silver hair fell like a curtain around them. Immediately purple and silver mists began seeping from Lily's body, and slowly enveloped the both of them. Within seconds Tempest stopped panting and the labored breathing stopped. She was surprisingly relaxed and appeared to be resting.

"Is she okay?" Daisy finally whispered.

"She will be. The baby is turned. That's why she's in so much pain."

"I tried to help relieve some of it, but she wouldn't let me," Daisy said.

"It's not safe for you to have access to her mind that way," Lily said. She glanced up at Daisy and could see that Daisy didn't understand. Lily smiled at her. She really liked this girl. She was kind, and gentle, and loyal. Not to mention, she was a natural healer. "If you were to see the things that Tempest can see, you'd be deeply disturbed. Things from the spirit world, things that move just out of sight and reach of the mortal world. You may lose all sense of sanity, and certainly any sense of safety. It was for your own sense of well-being that she refused."

"I'd have taken the chance. It was killing me seeing her suffer so badly."

Lily smiled. "Me, too. And don't worry, she's not hurting right now. Everything will be fine. Perhaps you could go into the living room and soothe those who are still a little unsettled," Lily suggested.

Daisy heard the front door open and close again and more and more familiar voices, some of them exclaiming, 'Holy shit'.

"I think they've met Tempest's grandfather, or father, depending on how he's reacting. Both can be a little unnerving. Can you see to it for me while I tend to Tempest?"

"Yes, of course. Anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you, Daisy," Lily said.

Daisy watched as Lily took Tempest's hands in hers, and began to meditate, her mists began to swirl and completely enveloped both Tempest and Lily more heavily than before. Though she wanted to stay and watch, she knew she'd told Lily that she'd keep things calm in the living room, so, off she went, closing the door quietly behind herself so as not to disturb them as she left.

"How is she?" Brandt demanded the moment Daisy walked into the living room.

"Much better. Her mother is with her and she's actually getting a little rest," Daisy said.

"All will be well, then," Delilah said.

"It's amazing," Daisy said wide-eyed as Delilah nodded at her.

"To be that powerful!" Daisy said.

"It's a great responsibility," Delilah said.

Finally, Daisy took the time to look around the living room. Her entire clan was there, with the exception of Daniel. Her eyes widened when she noticed a few other people she wasn't familiar with. "Hello. Welcome. I'm Daisy, I'm Brandt's sister and Tempest's sister-in-law."

A very large, blueish-gray skinned male with elaborate horns growing out of his head and large wings folded close against his back, grinned suddenly and looked at the woman standing next to him. "Like frower!" he said.

"Exactly," the woman said, smiling at him.

"This is my sister, Daisy," Brandt said, so out of his head with worry that he was introducing her despite the fact that she'd just done so. "She's a healer and was trying to help Tempest with the pain."

“Oh, no, honey. That’s not a good idea. Her mother is here now, she’ll handle it,” a tall, muscular, very, very beautiful male said. He had golden brown hair and swirling green and gold eyes. His words held just a hint of an accent giving him a regal edge, but the accent wasn’t quite identifiable.

“I was willing to try anyway. I hated seeing Tempest hurt that way,” Daisy said.

“I’m sure Lily will make sure she feels no more pain. I’m Carrik, by the way, Tempest’s father.”

“Oh! It’s so nice to meet you,” Daisy said.

“Likewise,” Carrik said.

“Have you met everyone?” Daisy asked.

“We have not,” Carrik said, “but thank you for asking.”

“’Arnge!” the big, blueish-gray male said, slapping himself on the chest.

“This is my mate Carnage, and I’m Carolena,” the woman said.

“We’re Tempest’s grandparents. Lily is our daughter, and Boon of course is our son,” Carolena said, indicating a handsome male, almost as big as Carnage was with many of the same features. He was big and bulky, but his skin was a paler color, with more of a slightly softer silver undertone. His horns were almost identical to his father’s, but instead of being bald like Carnage was, he had thick, shoulder-length, dark silver-gray hair, with lighter streaks of silver running through it. His demeanor seemed much quieter than either his father or his mother, but not rude in the least.

“Hello, Boon,” Daisy said.

“Hello,” Boon said, giving her a flash of a smile and inclining his head in recognition of her, then went back to trying to not be noticed.

“I remember hearing about you,” Daisy said to Carolena and Carnage. “Tempest is very proud of you both. She’s told us stories of her grandfather’s achievements as General Elite of the Royal Army of the Sovereign of Sentries.”

Carnage was shocked to hear this girl he’d never met speak admirably of him. He puffed his chest out and raised his chin just a bit while he grinned at her, his fangs fully on display.

Carolena chuckled as Carnage started strutting just a little at the mention of all he’d been in the past. She hugged him from where she stood beside him, smoothing her hand over his huge bicep. “Oh, that’s so sweet. We’re very proud of her, too,” Carolena said.

“Hmm, let me see,” Daisy said, “You haven’t met everyone, so I’ll run through it quickly. It’s a lot, so don’t hesitate to ask later if you don’t remember who they are. Everyone here is either a shifter or human, except for Tempest of course. Where do I start... okay, let’s start with Brandt and myself. These are mine and Brandt’s parents, Bane and Janie.”

“Good to meet you,” Bane said as Janie smiled welcomingly.

“And you,” Carolena said.

“And next to them are our Uncle Bam and Aunt Everly.”

“Hello,” Everly said from her perch on the arm of the sofa beside Bam. Bam gave them a wave so they could see who he was.

“Their daughters are Emmalyn who is right there,” she said, pointing at Emmalyn who was sitting beside Barron, “and Analise, who is right there,” Daisy said, pointing to Analise who was in the kitchen filling glasses with sweet tea and lemonade and putting out anything else she could find to snack on.

“Hi!” Analise called out.

Tempest’s family waved back politely.

“That’s Kaid and Delilah, and their daughter Tessa. Kaid and Delilah are the original Alphas of the clan.” Delilah performed a quick curtsy to Carrik.

Carrik in turn, bowed to Delilah, recognizing her status as a Dragon Queen, though she was so much younger and less powerful than he was.

“That’s Barron, sitting beside Emmalyn, he’s her mate, and he’s Kaid and Delilah’s son.”

“Analise who is in the kitchen, is mated and married to Havoc.”

“Right here!” Havoc said, seated with a little girl on his lap. “This here is our daughter, Harley.”

“Hello sweetheart,” Carolena said.

Harley grinned at the nice lady. “And I got an orange iguana named Gerald, but Mom and Dad wouldn’t let me bring him today.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I’d like to meet Gerald one day,” Carolena said.

“You see?” Harley asked, turning to smirk at her father.

“Hush,” he whispered, while still trying to smile at Tempest’s people.

“Havoc’s parents are Maverik and Valerie,” Daisy said, pointing them out. Maverik lifted a hand and gave them a wave. “Glad to meet you,” Maverik said.

“Hello,” Valerie said, as Daisy continued with introductions. “And they have four more children, but the only other one here at the moment is Hellen. Havoc and Hellen are twins.”

Hellen raised a hand. “But I’m the nicer twin,” she said.

“I don’t think so!” Havoc insisted.

“They’re competitive, too,” Daisy said. “And that’s Hellen’s mate, Lucien, right beside her,” Daisy said pointing out Hellen and Lucien.

“A’gator!” Carnage exclaimed.

“Really?” Carolena asked.

“”Es! A’gator!” Carnage insisted.

“He’s actually very pleasantly surprised. Some of our best friends back home are Alligator shifters,” Carolena explained to Lucien.

“Nice,” Lucien said.

Carnage nodded enthusiastically.

Lucien gave him a thumbs up, and Carnage gave him a thumbs up right back.

“Ho! Look at those claws,” Lucien said.

Carnage nodded and smiled coldly. “Goyle,” he said, wiggling all his fingers adorned with lethal claws for Lucien to see.

“Hellen?” Lucien said still staring at Carnage.

“Yes, my love,” she answered.

“Should I be concerned that a Gargoyle is wagging his claws at me?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met him before today.”

Carnage started laughing and shaking his head.

“I think you’re good. He thinks you’re funny. Just be on your best behavior,” Hellen said.

“Let me see, who have I forgotten?” Daisy said. “Oh! This is Kiernan and his wife Abby, and their babies. And this is Kiernan’s brother Shaun — his mate is Bailey and she’s Tempest’s best friend, but she’s at work. And Abby has a sister named Addie who is Christian’s mate. Christian is on duty in New Orleans, he’s finishing his residency at one of the hospitals. And this is Remi. His parents are Avaleigh...” Daisy said pointing out Avaleigh who smiled graciously at the three of them, while Daisy paused looking around the room for Daniel. Suddenly the front door opened and Daniel walked in followed by Angelle. “There you are! Daniel. Daniel is Avaleigh’s mate, and I think that’s Angelle hiding behind you, isn’t it?” Daisy asked.

“Sure is,” Daniel said, looking around at everyone.

“This is Tempest’s family. Her dad, Carrik, her grandparents Carnage and Carolena, and her Uncle Boon.”

“Ah, okay. Hello. I’m Daniel. I’m Avaleigh’s mate, that’s our son Remi,” he said, pointing out Avaleigh, then Remi, not realizing Daisy had already introduced them, “and this is our daughter Angelle.” Daniel looked behind himself, then pulled a young woman gently to the forefront so they could all meet her. “Say hi, baby,” he said.

“Hello,” she said softly, without really making eye contact with anyone.

Boon suddenly stepped between his parents. His head canted back and forth slowly, his eyes wide, while he focused on Angelle.

“Boon?” Carolena asked.

“It’s her,” he whispered to his mother.

“Her, her?” Carolena asked. “Are you sure?”

Boon nodded slowly, as he simply watched the young woman Daniel had introduced as Angelle.

Daniel didn’t miss the sudden interest in his daughter, and made it a point to keep her on his far left as he made his way across the room to get to Avaleigh.

“Did you see that?” he murmured right in Avaleigh’s ear.

“No, what?” she asked.

Angelle looked up to see what she’d missed. When she did, her gaze landed on Boon. His gaze was locked on her, his dark gray-blue eyes practically unblinking.

Boon took a half-step in her direction, but stopped himself, and offered her a gentle smile instead of approaching.

Angelle quickly looked down at the floor, but just a second later, she glanced up, found Boon still looking at her, and gave him a shy smile before she looked down again.

“I saw that, though” Avaleigh said quietly. “She actually smiled at him. She doesn’t smile at anyone but family.”

“Okay, I think that’s everybody. Oh, except my mate, who is stuck at the office today. I’m sure you’ll meet him later,” Daisy said.

“Great. Since everybody’s been introduced now, can somebody tell me how my mate is?!” Brandt demanded angrily.

Daisy went directly to her brother and hugged him until she felt his heart rate slow down. When he was breathing a little easier, she smiled encouragingly. “She’s fine. Her mother is with her, and I’m telling you, Brandt, there is nothing her mother can’t fix.”

“If you think Tempest is strong, you haven’t seen anything yet. Lily holds more power twenty times over,” Carrik said.

“Why was she hurting so badly?” Brandt asked.

“Lily said the baby is turned, but she’s fixing it.”

“That’s not good, Daisy! Is Tempest okay? She’s got to be hurting! Is the baby okay?”

“Of course, she’s hurting,” Janie said. “She’s having a baby.” Janie looked at Bane with an expression that said, ‘that’s your son’.

Carolena turned to Janie and nodded in a show of support.

“I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all,” Brandt grumbled, running his hands through his hair.

“Hey, it’s okay. Lily helped her fall asleep and now they’re both in a bunch of mists and I was dismissed to go smooth things over out here,” Daisy said. “But the baby will be fine. And Tempest will be fine, and I’m willing to bet whatever her mother is doing took all the pain away because she fell asleep.”

“You should be back in there. We’re fine out here.”

Daisy canted her head just a little and looked at her brother. “Are you, though? Are you really?”

Carnage laughed. He slapped his chest. “My like frower,” he said, snickering.

“Frower?” Daisy asked.

“You. Your name is Daisy, like a flower,” Carolena explained.

Daisy smiled brightly. “I like you, too. But you’re a little intimidating.”

Carnage winked at her.

Daisy laughed.

Carnage grinned at Daisy. He liked her.



## Chapter 22

Still running his hands through his hair, Brandt paced back and forth near the hallway the bedroom was off of. It wasn't long before his anxiety got the better of him. He came to a stop right outside the hallway staring toward the closed bedroom door. "I'm going in!" he finally said, then looked back to see if anyone was going to stop him.

"It's your mate, your child, your house, your clan. I don't think anyone is going to tell you you can't," Kaid said.

"I hate this. I feel so helpless," Brandt said. "But I don't want to get in the way while she's trying to give birth to our child. If she wanted me, she'd call for me, right?"

"In childbirth, you are helpless," Carrik said. "But I'll tell you this, if you get in the way, Lily will just send you right back out here."

"He's right," Daisy said. "And, Tempest already told you to go away. I'm sure if there was a problem, we'd know already."

"There is! The baby's turned," Brandt said.

"And Lily said she's fixing it," Daisy said.

Brandt clamped his jaws shut and went over to sit near Barron and Emmalyn. "I fucking hate this," he whispered. "What if she needs me?"

"Didn't Daisy say that she already told you to go away?" Emmalyn asked. "Sometimes we just want all of you to go away so we can do what we need to do."

"You're not making me feel any better," Brandt snapped.

"I'm not trying to make you feel better," Emmalyn snapped back.

"What's wrong with you?" Brandt asked.

"She's pregnant," Barron reminded him. "Hey, did you notice the way that Boon dude went on alert when Angelle came in?"

"I think he likes her," Emmalyn said. "I hope he does. And I hope she likes him. She deserves to be happy, too."

Brandt growled irritably, then got up and wandered around the room a few times before settling beside Remi, who immediately started trying to soothe him, while at the same time keeping an eye on the guy who was staring at his sister.

"Take it easy. She'll be fine," Remi said.

“I hope so. I’ll make your meltdown look like an afternoon at happy hour if something happens to Tempest. I’m sorry I wasn’t more tolerant,” Brandt said.

“Should have kicked my ass at the first indication,” Remi said.

“We are not doing this again. No more kids. I can’t take this chance again,” Brandt grumbled.

Remi had been watching Boon watching his sister and didn’t even hear Brandt’s claim to have no more kids. “What do you know about Boon?” he asked, without looking away from Boon.

“He’s Tempest’s Uncle. She adores him. He hates people, loves the woods,” Brandt said. “Hey, do you think she’s going to be alright?”

“Who, Angelle?” Remi asked.

“No! Tempest!”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine, Brandt. She’s strong, and she’s determined, and she’s got some shit inside her that could scare the hell out of anybody that she doesn’t like. And her mother’s here. And look at her dad, he’s laid back, not showing the least bit of worry. So, this guy Boon, he’s a Gargoyle?”

“Yes. How long does it take to have a baby?”

“Could be hours, could be a day or two.”

“Oh, fuck. I’m going to have a stroke out here waiting. I’m going to die before I ever meet my kid,” Brandt said.

“No, you’ll be good. You just need to calm down. How long does it take to get to where these people live?” Remi asked.

“A while. Less than a whole day. Why?”

“Because if Angelle goes off with him, then we need to be able to reach her.”

“They glamour the place so nobody can find it,” Brandt said absent-mindedly.

“I’m not too sure about this. I mean, they can’t actually have anything in common, can they?” Remi asked.

“Can we talk about my problem today?” Brandt demanded.

Though Boon was near Brandt and Remi, he didn’t hear any of the exchange taking place between them. He was focused fully on Angelle. She was a pretty girl, with dark brown hair and big blue eyes. She was so quiet, almost afraid it seemed, and he wanted nothing but to make her feel safe. Her father, though had been staring him down almost constantly since

they'd arrived. Knowing he'd have to get past her father to be able to talk to her, he took a deep breath and walked over to Daniel. "Hello, sir. I'm Boon," he said, extending his hand.

Daniel looked at him suspiciously, but held out his hand and shook Boon's. "Daniel."

"I'm Tempest's uncle."

"You don't look old enough to be her uncle. Her brother maybe," Avaleigh said.

Boon smiled at Avaleigh. "No, ma'am. I'm her uncle. Gargoyle's age very, very slowly," he explained.

"Oh, I see," Avaleigh said. "How fascinating."

"I was wondering if Angelle might accompany me over to the kitchen to enjoy a snack," Boon said.

"No," Daniel said.

"Yes," Angelle and Avaleigh both said at the same time Daniel said no.

Angelle looked up at her father, shocked that he said no.

"Oh, Daniel, let her go. It's just right there on the other side of the room," Avaleigh said.

"Sir, I have only the best of intentions. I will not disrespect her, you, or her mother in any way. I have the utmost regard for Angelle," Boon said.

"You don't know Angelle, how could you have any regard for her?" Daniel asked defensively.

"I'd like to get to know her," Boon said. "Under your watchful eye, of course," he quickly added.

"Please, Daddy," Angelle said.

Daniel raised his eyebrows in surprise. His daughter hardly spent time with her cousins, much less strangers. "Do not leave that kitchen," Daniel said harshly.

Avaleigh shot him a scolding look.

"Please," he added.

"Sir, I would give my life for hers. There is no need to fear for her safety."

Angelle grinned up at Daniel, then Avaleigh as she placed her hand in Boon's extended one and allowed him to lead her to the kitchen island. He held the stool steady as she sat, then nudged the plates of snacks closer for Angelle to better reach them, before he took a seat next to her. He'd known

the moment she walked into the room that she was his. Surely, Angelle was the reason Tempest had insisted he come when she gave birth to her child.

“Thank you for sharing a few moments with me.”

Angelle blushed. “Thank you for asking.”

“Daniel, look at them!” Avaleigh said, watching from across the room. “She’s so happy.”

“Yes, I see,” Daniel said begrudgingly.

“Be nice! She likes him!” Avaleigh said.

Suddenly Daniel was slapped on the back so hard he stumbled forward several steps and had the breath knocked out of him. He turned around ready to strike someone and found Carnage standing there grinning like a loon, with his wife standing beside him. “Did you just hit me?” Daniel demanded.

“It was more like a pat on the back,” Avaleigh said hurriedly. “A really, really hard pat on the back.”

“Yes. Sorry. He doesn’t know his own strength sometimes,” Carolena said.

Carnage scowled for a moment at Carolena. He knew exactly how strong he was, and he’d shoved Daniel on purpose. He didn’t like anybody glaring at Boon. Boon was a good male. And Boon liked his daughter and this male would just have to get over it because if Boon wanted her, he’d help Boon take her just like he had Carolena.

Daniel looked at Carnage, then at Carolena, but he wasn’t fully convinced it was an innocent shove.

“Booon maate,” Carnage said, pointing at Boon and Angelle across the room at the kitchen island, as he nodded enthusiastically.

“How do you know?” Daniel asked.

“Booon lone. Now, Booon no lone,” Carnage said.

“Boon has never been one for crowds. He much prefers the quiet of the woods, hunting, fishing, camping to all the small talk required at a social gathering. He wouldn’t have come today if it hadn’t been for Tempest. He and Tempest are very, very close. She told Boon that when she went into labor, he had to be here. He’d regret it for all of his life if he didn’t come. The way he’s taken to your daughter, I wonder if Tempest knew they were meant for each other. Look how happy he is,” Carolena exclaimed.

“Pest know,” Carnage insisted, crossing his arms over his chest defiantly.

Daniel looked over at Angelle speaking animatedly to Boon, and Boon hanging on her every word, smiling at her and nodding as she spoke.

Avaleigh laid her hand on Daniel’s arm. “Look at her coming alive talking to him. And she’s just like him. She doesn’t like crowds and people she doesn’t know, and she loves fishing and camping. It’s like it was meant to be.”

Daniel continued staring at his daughter and the Gargoyle who might be her mate. “Can’t be,” he mumbled. “Just can’t be.”

A baby’s weak cry brought all conversation in the room to an immediate standstill, as everyone in the house waited for another cry. Finally, after what seemed like an unbearably long time, a stronger wail filled their ears, followed immediately by another and another.

“You’re a daddy!” Remi said, hugging Brandt.

Brandt was grinning, but was still scared. Nobody had said a word about Tempest yet. He stood, his hands clasping and unclasping as he stared in the direction of the bedroom, waiting to be called.

They all heard the bedroom door opening, and Lily walked into the living room. “Brandt? Tempest is asking for you.”

Brandt almost ran across the room as he rushed past Lily on his way to the bedroom.

“Mother and baby are both fine,” Lily said, smiling at everyone with tears in her eyes.

Brandt rushed into the bedroom and came to a sudden stop when he found Tempest lying in bed, reclining on a stack of pillows, with a bundled baby held gently in her arms.

“Tempest, are you alright?” he asked, hurrying around the bed to kneel right beside where she lay.

Tempest smiled tiredly. “I am. I’m just tired. But Momma made sure that I didn’t have much pain, and she managed to turn him so that he could pass through the birth canal. We’re both fine.”

“Thank the gods,” he said, resting his forehead on her shoulder. Then his head popped up. “Him? It’s a boy?” he asked.

“It’s a little boy,” Tempest said, pulling the baby away from her chest so Brandt could look down at him. “And he’s perfect.”

“Yes, he is,” Brandt said, his voice cracking. Now that he knew she was going to be alright, he could appreciate the miracle that was their son. “He’s got your eyes,” Brandt said.

“He does. And he’s got a head full of your dark hair. And look,” she said, loosening the blanket swaddling him so Brandt could better see him, “he’s got a silver streak in the back. That’s my grandfather’s blood making an appearance, and it makes me really happy.”

Brandt laughed. “Me, too. He’ll be a warrior.”

“He will! And look at him. He’s already got a hint of a little tiny jawline. Like a little bitty grownup already. I think he’s going to have your jawline.”

Tempest completely unwrapped him, and laid him across her lap. “Ten fingers, ten toes. All his parts and pieces are in the right places,” she said as he gripped onto her pinkie finger. “He’s so strong.”

“Can I try?” Brandt asked.

“Of course,” Tempest said, gently pulling her finger free of their son’s grip.

Brandt held his pinkie finger against the baby’s hand and he immediately grabbed hold. Brandt laughed. “He’s got a grip!” Brandt said.

“You want to hold him?” Tempest asked.

“Should I?” Brandt asked.

“I hope so. He’s your son,” Tempest said.

“No, I meant, yes I want to, but should I? Doesn’t he need you to hold him?” Brandt asked.

“You can hold him,” Tempest said.

Brandt nodded, his eyes sparkling as he tried his best to rewrap him, then picked him up with more caution than he’d ever used for anything. He settled him in the crook of one arm and finished tucking the baby blanket in around him. “He’s perfect, Tempest,” Brandt said, blinking away the tears. “I can’t believe we did this!”

Tempest laughed softly. “Me, either. But we did. And now, we have to name him.”

“Maybe we should have found out if he was a boy or a girl before and we could have had a few names picked out.”

“Well, look at him. Close your eyes, what name comes to mind?” Tempest asked.

“Have you done that?” Brandt asked.

“I have.”

“And?”

“And I want you to tell me what you feel when you do the same.”

Brandt looked closely at his son, gently stroking his face with a fingertip. The baby opened his eyes and looked right at him. “You look like an Eli to me,” Brandt said.

Tempest smiled. “Elijah. Elijah Brandt Marchande’,” Tempest said.

“I like it. It feels right,” Brandt said.

Tempest had closed her eyes, but she smiled. “Mmhmm.”

“Baby, are you sure you’re alright? Should you see a doctor?” Brandt asked.

“I’m fine. Just really want to sleep. I’m sure Momma did something to make me want to sleep so my body can recover.”

“Did she heal you?” Brandt asked.

“Yes. But it’s still traumatic. Just a little rest, I’ll be fine.”

“Can I take him out and introduce him?”

She opened her eyes and looked at Brandt. “He’s your son, too. You don’t have to ask.”

“I know nothing about babies. I didn’t know if I can do that or not. He’s so little.”

“You can.”

“I’ll be right back to check on you again,” Brandt said.

“Take your time, I want to sleep,” Tempest said, her eyes drifting closed again.

Brandt held Elijah close in one arm as he tugged the comforter up to tuck Tempest in. “I love you so much. You are my world. Thank you for our son,” he whispered.

Tempest smiled, though she didn’t open her eyes.

Brandt gently rubbed the back of his hand against her cheek, then quietly left the room.

He proudly stepped into the living room, holding Elijah in his arms.

“Oh, my gosh!” Janie exclaimed.

“Everybody, meet Elijah Brandt Marchande’.”

They all started moving in for their chance to see the baby.

“You know what?” Avaleigh said, “Why don’t you sit and everyone else can sit beside you or look over your shoulder.”

“That’s a great idea,” Bane said.

Brandt nodded, while smiling down at his son, who'd somehow managed to pull a hand free and start sucking his thumb. Brandt chuckled as he took a seat on the end of the sofa, and adjusted his hold on Elijah so everyone could see him. "He's already hungry."

Janie started to sit beside Brandt, then stopped and looked at Lily. "Sit beside Brandt so you can get a good look."

"You are so nice," Lily said. "But you sit beside him. I insist."

Janie started to object, but Lily shook her head. "You forget. I delivered him. I had a few moments to say hello."

Janie nodded, smiling gratefully. She sat beside Brandt and Bane sat beside her. She oohed and ahhd over Elijah while everyone got their chance to see him and as they all surrounded him to hold his little hand and ask how Tempest was. Once everyone had had a chance, Brandt looked at his mother with a grin.

"What?" she asked.

"Want to hold him?" he asked.

Her eyes flew wide, and she clasped her hands together at her throat. "Really?"

"Of course," Brandt said. With an exaggeratedly slow motion, Brandt turned his body toward his mother and placed Elijah in her arms.

Janie did her best not to cry, but of course, there were tears. "He's so beautiful," she murmured, watching the little boy suck on his thumb.

"Hello, Elijah. I'm..." she looked at Brandt. "Who am I?"

"Nana," Brandt said.

"I'm your Nana," Janie said. "I can't stop crying."

"Mom?" Lily said.

Carolena, who was crying herself, looked over at Lily. "Would you like to hold him, next?"

"Oh, I don't have to," Carolena said.

"Of course, you do!" Janie said. "In fact, come sit right here and you can hold him now."

"Are you sure?" Carolena asked.

"Very," Janie said, easily standing with Elijah in her arms.

Janie placed Elijah in Bane's arms, and while he looked down at the baby, Carolena took Janie's place.

"I didn't know it would be like this," Bane said, his voice scratchy.

"I had no clue," Brandt exclaimed.



“I can’t tell if it hurts, or if it’s just so much love,” Bane said.

“Right?” Brandt said.

“It’s both. Unfortunately, you don’t get one without the other,” Carolena said.

“No truer words,” Bane said. He smiled at Carolena, then carefully handed Elijah over.

“Our first great grandchild,” Carolena said, smiling up at Carnage.

“Oh, let me show you,” Brandt said. He moved the blanket away from Elijah’s head and gently turned him in Carolena’s arms. “Look,” he said to Carnage.

Carnage leaned in closer to better see, then his mouth opened in surprise and he laughed. “Like Boon!”

“Tempest said that’s your bloodline.”

Carnage nodded and pressed his lips together to keep his emotions under control. It meant the world to him that the baby had something to indicate that he carried Carnage’s blood.

“’Arnge hold ‘Lijj?” Carnage asked hesitantly. He knew most people were afraid of him.

“Yes,” Brandt said. He stood up and gave Carnage his seat. Carolena carefully handed the baby to Carnage, who cradled the child so naturally. Carnage started a rumble in his chest, that he kept going while he hummed an ancient tune that only Carolena, Lily, Tempest, and Boon had ever heard before. It took about a minute for Elijah to open his eyes and blink a few times, focusing directly on the source of the sound.

Carnage grinned at Elijah.

Elijah popped the thumb out of his mouth and reached toward Carnage.

Carnage pressed a kiss to his tiny palm.

Elijah flashed a grin, or he had gas, but Carnage would never admit that, and closed his eyes again.

“His eyes are like your’s Carrik,” Lily said. “That bright green with flecks of gold.”

Carrik smiled. “I’m so proud of him. Just like when we first had Tempest.” His smile fell. “Do you think...”

Lily raised her brows. “I hadn’t even considered it,” she said with a laugh.

“Considered what?” Brandt asked.

“Tempest used to have a habit of just transporting herself to wherever she wanted to be. It’s one of the reasons we moved back home to Whispers. We couldn’t have her materializing out of thin air in the middle of the ice cream shops,” Lily said.

“Hey, if she hadn’t tried it at least one more time after you moved home, I wouldn’t have met her. And she may never have met Brandt,” Maverik said.

“That is very, very true. I’m thankful for that one time. The rest... I had a lot of explaining to do over the years,” Lily said.

“May I take him?” Carrik asked.

“Noo!” Carnage said. Then he started laughing. “Es!” He patted the sofa arm and Carrik rested there for a second before Carnage handed him over.

Carrik looked down at his daughter’s baby. “I never in a million years dreamed of the happiness your mother would find. I didn’t want her to leave. I tried to keep her from leaving. But I was so very wrong. Look at the love and richness she’s filled her life with. And you are the center of it,” he said to the baby.

“I told you,” Lily said.

“Yes, you did,” Carrik said.

Elijah gave a little baby sigh and fussed a little, until Carrik rested him against his chest, gently patting his back. Then Elijah settled in right away.

“No greater feeling in the world than a little one trusting you implicitly.”

“Or a testament to love,” Lily said. “And speaking of babies, I’m going to check on Tempest again.”

“I’ll go,” Brandt said.

“No, you stay with your son and your family,” Lily said. “I just want to make sure she’s still sleeping.”

Brandt nodded, and watched as Carrik cradled Elijah.

“Did you hear that?” Avaleigh asked.

Daniel cut his eyes in her direction, but didn’t actually look at her.

“He didn’t want Tempest to leave, even tried to stop her, and now he’s glad he was wrong. He’s grateful she’s happy and her life is so full.”

“I heard,” Daniel said.

“Then don’t make things so hard for Angelle if she likes this young man.”

“He’s a Gargoyle, Avaleigh. He can’t live here. He might be seen, so she’d have to go live in his community,” Daniel whispered.

“And you were a Dragon that I hated. I was willing to leave everyone I loved and never look back to escape you. But you camped out on my porch. You forged bonds with my family. Remember how much you hurt when I kept rejecting you.”

Daniel looked at her.

“There’s always a way if it’s meant to be,” Avaleigh said, leaning toward him.

Daniel hugged her to him tightly. “I just don’t want her to get hurt, ever. I can protect her here.”

“And he can protect her there. And we can go visit.”

“Maybe. This may be nothing more than a flirtation,” Daniel said, his gaze landing on Angelle and Boon again. “And why is his shirt so oversized? It’s like he’s hiding something.”

“His father has wings, maybe he does, too,” Avaleigh said as nonchalantly as if she was talking about the weather.

Daniel shook his head almost in disbelief.

“What? You have a whole Dragon inside. Who cares if he has wings?!” Avaleigh lowered her voice and hissed at him. “Be nice!”

“I am!” Daniel said, before turning his gaze back to his daughter and the male that might be the one to take her away from them. And that was his whole problem. He couldn’t stand the idea of someone taking her away from them.

Brandt saw Carnage go in the kitchen and got up to follow him, mainly using it as a excuse to check on Angelle and Boon.

Angelle and Boon hadn’t stopped talking all evening, except for when the baby was introduced.

“Y’all doing alright?” Brandt asked.

“Very well, thank you,” Boon said.

“You alright, Angelle?” Brandt pressed.

“I’m having a very nice time, Brandt,” Angelle said.

“Okay. If you need anything, y’all let me know. We kind of just forgot about y’all over here all by yourselves,” Brandt said. He walked past them into the kitchen. “You find something to nibble on?” Brandt asked, directing his question to Carnage.

“Choc’at?” Carnage asked.

“I don’t think we have any,” Brandt said. “Oh! But you know what? Tempest had me buy two gallons of chocolate ice cream. Would that work?”

“Es!” Carnage said excitedly, holding out both hands.

Brandt got one of the gallons of ice cream out of the freezer, and took it over to scoop some into a bowl.

Carnage waited right beside him, and once he’d put some in the bowl and added a spoon, he offered the bowl to Carnage.

Carnage grinned at him, pushed the bowl away, picked up the gallon that was still sitting on the counter top and grabbed the spoon from the bowl. He winked at Brandt, then went into the living room to finish off all but the one serving that he’d left with Brandt.

Brandt laughed and put the bowl on the kitchen island between Angelle and Boon. “Here, have some ice cream.”

“No, thank you. I prefer sherbet,” Boon said.

“So, do I!” Angelle said.

“Peach!” they both said at the same time, then started laughing.

“I don’t have that, but if there’s anything else in there that you want, help yourselves,” Brandt said, walking back into the living room. It was clear to him they were hitting it off and Angelle was comfortable with him. He went over and took possession of his child again then settled in the rocking chair he’d bought for Tempest a couple of months before. He rested Elijah on his shoulder as though he was going to burp him and rocked slowly as he hummed to him.

“He’s good with the baby already,” Boon said.

“Yes, he is,” Angelle said. “And he was so nervous about never handling a baby much.”

“I guess it just comes naturally,” Boon said.

“Guess so. I’ve got practice, though. I helped with Tessa when she was a baby.”

“So, you want babies?” Boon asked Angelle.

“I don’t think it’s in the cards for me, but I love all babies. I’m going to wait a couple of days then come back over and spend some time with the baby when he’s not being passed around so much.”

“Yeah. He might get tired of it and let them all know soon.”

Angelle looked the room over and realized that most, other than the grandparents and great grandparents, were settling for just looking at him, rather than actually holding him. “I think that most are planning the same

thing that I am. The grandparents and great grandparents are the ones who deserve to be seeing him more today.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” Boon said.

“Well, I live here. I can come over whenever I want,” Angelle said.

“Brandt and Tempest are always very welcoming to me.”

“I like Brandt. He’s good for Tempest, and he’s loyal and strong,” Boon said.

“Brandt’s awesome,” Angelle said.

“Is it in your plan to have babies some day, or maybe even just one?” Boon asked.

Angelle looked at Boon. “I don’t know. I always thought of having children. But, now I’m pretty sure that I’ll end up alone. It’s okay, though. I’ve accepted it.”

“Why would you think that?” Boon asked.

Angelle shrugged. “To be honest, I’m not good with people. I get overwhelmed easily. I rarely even spend time with my cousins; everybody you see in this room that is about my age, is a cousin or a clan member, or both. There’s so many of them. I can only take that many people in small doses. I don’t like a lot of noise. I don’t like crowds. I just want to be home. I’m happy with my books and sketch pads, and spending time alone out by the creek. I’ll go camp there when the weather is nice. That’s why I was late getting here. My father had to come find me. I was fishing. I love to fish! I feel so accomplished when I catch one. I throw it back, usually, because I don’t want to hurt them, but I like to catch them.”

Boon laughed. “I like fishing, too. I eat them, though — usually. But I still don’t understand why any of that would make you think you’re going to be alone forever,” Boon said.

“What male, or even man, is going to want to spend his life being limited because his wife is limited? Even if I ever did meet someone, when they figured out how boring I am, and that I don’t want to go out with their friends, and I don’t have a very adventurous spirit, they’d run far and fast. And that’s okay, really. I’m not up to changing myself for anybody. I’d be such an overstimulated mess. I need quiet, and calm. And peacefulness.”

Boon didn’t take her hand in his. Instead, he lay his hand palm up on the edge of the kitchen island right in front of her.

She looked at his hand, then at him.

He lifted his hand toward her a couple of inches, urging her without words to take his hand.

Angelle hesitantly placed her hand in his, then raised her eyes to his as he softly curled his fingers around her hand. "This male would want to be a part of exactly what you described."

Angelle swallowed visibly, her eyes wide and a little afraid as she looked at him. "Oh."

"So you'll know, I love fishing. I love camping and sleeping in the woods with the stars above me. I love being alone, in the quiet peacefulness of the woods. I don't like to be around a lot of people, other than my immediate family. What you've described sounds like exactly the life I've always wished for."

"It does?" she asked quietly.

"It does. You don't have to be alone unless you want to be."

She blinked and looked away, before slowly looking back.

"Breathe. Take your time. Weigh each word, each thought one at a time. When it feels right, months from now, weeks from now, hours from now, it doesn't matter when. You let me know. But for now. This is enough. Just talking with you. Being in your company. I'm happy."

Angelle offered him a shaky smile. "I think... I think I might be, too."

## Epilogue

Three months later...

Remi finished packing his clothes and his tool chests, a few things that made him feel a connection to home, and placed them in his car. He put his laptop in his backpack along with all his chargers for his electronics and put it on the front passenger side floorboard of his car. He stood back and looked at the car. There wasn't much there. Yet, it was all he was taking. Clothes, shoes and boots, tools, phone and laptop.

"You got it all?" Daniel asked walking out and draping an arm over Remi's shoulder.

"Looks like it," Remi said. "I even took my photo album, and the family picture from my bedroom wall."

"We're going to miss you so much, son," Daniel said.

"I'm going to miss you, too. But I'd never forgive myself if I didn't try."

"I understand. And we can be there in a day if you need something. Right away if it's an emergency. Tempest can blink us over there, or whatever it is that she does."

Remi laughed. "I will let you know. And don't worry, I'm not going off the deep end again. I will not."

"If you do, I'll make Tempest find you, she's not pregnant anymore. And when I get my hands on you, I will embarrass you so badly," Daniel said.

Remi laughed. "Deal," he said, glancing down at his boots. "I really am sorry about all that."

"It's alright. It brought you to here, right?"

"That it did. Humbled me more than I thought I needed to be humbled," Remi said. "But also introduced me to a great job, and some awesome people. On the one hand I hate to leave, but Giada has a good grip on it. She fully grasped everything I was doing, and if it's about building, she knows to go to you. She'll do you proud."

"I think so, too. She's really come into her own since she moved into the shelter and started working for us. She can handle it," Daniel said.

“She loves her little house. It’s perfect for her and her two little ones,” Remi said.

“Here you go! I loaded you up with sandwiches, brownies, chips, protein bars, and there’s a small ice chest for you sitting just inside the door that’s full of drinks, too,” Avaleigh said.

“I’ll grab that for you,” Daniel said.

“Mom, you didn’t have to do all that,” Remi said.

“Yes, I did. I won’t get to do it for a long time, and I needed to make sure you’re taken care of for the drive, if nothing else,” Avaleigh said.

“I might be back sooner rather than later.”

Daniel shook his head as he handed over the small ice chest. “Nah, just dig your heels in and fight.”

Remi nodded.

“You talk to anybody yet?”

“No, I’m going by Brandt’s on my way out of town, though.”

“That takes care of home, but what about there? You should call before you get on the road,” Daniel said. “I know it’ll be no problem, but it’s just a matter of respect.”

“Yes, sir. I might. I don’t want to be turned away before I get there, though.”

“There is that chance. But you can always head that way anyway,” Daniel said.

“Remi?” Angelle said from the doorway.

“Hey, come tell me goodbye,” Remi said.

Angelle ran over to him and threw herself in his arms. “I’m going to miss you. I’ve always had you to depend on.”

“I’m going to miss you, too. And you can still depend on me. I’ll come back and shake some things up if you want me to,” Remi said. “And you can call me anytime you want. I’ll always answer your calls.”

Angelle laughed. “Okay.”

“Besides, you have somebody else to depend on now. I kind of think he’s more than capable of handling the job.”

“Who?” she asked.

“Boon! He’s been here twice since Elijah was born! I don’t think he’s that excited about the baby. It’s you.”

“Don’t rush her,” Daniel said.



Remi laughed. "Angelle knows better than you or me what she wants. She's a lot stronger than anybody gives her credit for."

"I'm sure you're right," Avaleigh said. "But I can only lose one of you a month."

"You hear me, Angelle? Don't forget how strong you are. Don't let fear stop you from reaching for what makes you happy," Remi said.

"Momma taught me that a long, long time ago. And I know she told you the same thing. Don't forget it."

"I won't," Angelle said.

"When's your boyfriend coming back to see you?" Remi asked.

"I don't know," Angelle said. "And he's just a friend."

"Don't you believe that for a second," Remi said. "I've seen the way he looks at you."

Angelle blushed, but didn't answer. Instead she hugged Remi again. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too. Take care of Mom and Dad for me."

"I will," Angelle said.

Remi hugged Avaleigh and Daniel. "I love you. I'll keep in touch."

"See that you do. I love you more than anything," Avaleigh said.

"Me, too," Daniel said, hugging him tightly. "I love you, son. We'll see you soon."

"Let me know when you get there," Avaleigh said, as Remi got in his car.

"I will. I'll call. Love you guys!"

Remi put his car in gear and backed away from the house, then turned his car toward the gravel drive. He followed it to the highway, crossed over and drove straight to Brandt's house. He noticed Daisy's jeep outside and smiled to himself. Ever since Elijah had been born, she'd been spending a lot of time at Brandt's with the new baby.

He knocked on the door, and waited. He'd not told anybody he was stopping by.

Brandt opened the door almost right away. "Hey! I didn't know you were coming over."

"Me, either. Am I interrupting anything, or do you have a minute?"

"Come on in, it's just family. We're relaxing and trying to decide what we're going to send out for."

“Nobody delivers this far out here,” Remi said, walking into the house behind Brandt.

“I know. That’s what brother-in-laws are for,” Brandt said, tagging Charlie in the back of the head with the burp cloth he had on his shoulder.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Charlie said. “It’s not my company you want, it’s the delivery service.”

“Did you ever think it was anything else?” Brandt teased. “No, seriously, though. Bailey and Shaun are coming over, and are going to bring whatever it is we decide on.”

“Nice. Two delivery services,” Remi said with a chuckle.

“Hey, Remi,” Tempest said.

“How you feeling, Tempest?” Remi asked.

“Other than the breaking down at stupid commercials on television, I’m alright.”

“Hormones,” Daisy said. “It’ll get back to normal soon.”

“It’s been three months! I mean, how much time do they need?” Tempest asked.

“More months,” Daisy said with a shrug.

Elijah started whining in his bassinet and Tempest got up.

“You know what? Let me,” Remi said, moving toward the bassinet.

“Really? Okay,” Tempest said.

“Yeah. It might be a while before I get to see him again,” Remi said, lifting Elijah and cradling him close. “Man, those eyes! They’re so green!”

Tempest smiled. “My boy is pretty.”

“Yeah he is,” Remi said.

“What are you talking about, might be a while?” Brandt asked.

“I decided last night. I’m heading out. I’ve been saving every penny I could get my hands on, granted it’s not a lot, but it’s enough to make a start, and that’s all I’ll need.”

“Where are you going?” Brandt asked.

“I gotta see what’ll happen if I refuse to accept things as they are.”

“You mean if you make a nuisance of yourself,” Brandt said.

“Yeah, well, I can’t just leave it alone. It would kill me never knowing,” Remi said.

“I get that, ten thousand percent. And, let me buy your house back. I’ve just been waiting, leaving it the way we left it until you said otherwise. I can transfer the money today.”

“No, Brandt. I don’t want you to be out of that much money. I really hope I don’t come back, at least not full time — no offense. I don’t need it. Give it to Daisy. Daisy, you and Charlie are getting married, right? You and Charlie can have it.”

Daisy raised her finger and waggled a round yellow diamond at him. “You know we are! But, we’ve bought Jobe’s house. Jobe isn’t coming back unless it’s to visit, and we decided to stay close to my parents. Dad and Carson are really close. That’s where Carson is now! And it just feels like home over there to me, you know?”

“Makes sense. You always kind of have seemed like an older, wiser individual than any of the rest of us. The other side fits you,” Remi said.

Remi focused on Brandt again. “So, what about Shaun and Bailey? I don’t know if they’d be interested, but maybe see if Shaun and Bailey want it.”

“I might. But in the meantime, I’m going to pay you for it. If you ever come back or just visit, something will be available. Maybe we’ll just keep yours as one to use when people visit. We still have Ronan, and Cristian’s brother and sister, and Tessa, too that may want to build on the property. But now, yours is the only one not occupied. We are past due on having a few available for whoever might need one, even if it’s just during the holidays. Thinking about starting to build again soon and take care of that.”

“See, you’re going to need your money. I don’t want to be a burden,” Remi said truthfully.

“You never have been a burden. You’re family, Remi. And you’re clan. No matter where you go, or what you do, you’ll always have a home here. I hope, though, that you never come back here unless it’s with your own family.”

Remi smiled as he held Elijah close. “That’s a second from me.” He handed Elijah to Tempest, then hugged her. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” Tempest said, tearing up. “I hate tears! Why are you making me cry?”

Remi laughed. “I’m sorry.”

“Come here,” she said, lifting her free arm toward Remi. “Give me another hug.”

He leaned over and she pulled him in tight.

A green mist scattered from where her hand rested on his back, and down his back where it quickly dissipated, evidence that Tempest put a

layer of protection around Remi. “You take care of you, and let us know you’re alright when you can.”

“I will,” Remi said as he went over to hug Daisy. “It does my heart good to see you happy and your old self again.”

“Thank you. Turns out all I needed to heal was Charlie.”

Remi shook Charlie’s hand. “Just because I’m not here doesn’t mean you get to cut me from the guest list.”

Charlie and Daisy both laughed. “Not a chance. You will be there,” Charlie said.

“Come on, I’ll walk you out,” Brandt said.

“I’ll miss all y’all. I love you guys,” Remi said, following Brandt out of the door.

“We love you!” they all called out.

When they got out on the porch, Brandt reached in his pocket and pulled out some cash. “Here.”

“Brandt...”

“Take the money, or I’ll be worried about you not having enough. And text me your account number.”

Remi sighed.

“I’ll just get your momma to give it to me. And you know she will,” Brandt said.

“Fine,” Remi said, taking his phone out and texting Brandt his checking account number.

Brandt looked at the text when his phone pinged and nodded. “It might take a few days. It’s a large amount and it has to go to a different bank. But it’ll be there.”

“It’s all good. You just gave me some extra money right here. And I wasn’t planning on money from the house anyway.”

“Ain’t it nice how good things happen that we didn’t expect?” Brandt said.

“It is. And I’m so happy for Daisy. Haven’t seen that light she has inside her for a while.”

“She’s not the only one that did some healing,” Brandt said.

“That is true,” Remi said, as he started down the stairs.

They walked down to ground level and Brandt just stood there for a minute looking at Remi’s car. He stepped forward and hugged Remi for a long time. “I always wanted to grow up to be like you,” Brandt confessed.

“Oh, Brandt, no. You’re so much better,” Remi answered, hugging Brandt just as tightly.

“You call me,” Brandt said, tapping his own temple. “You’re not blocked, and you won’t be. All I need is your call for help and a location and I’ll have Tempest get me there so fast you won’t even believe it.”

“I appreciate it.”

“You drive safe, Remi.”

“I will, and I’ll let you know when I get there.”

Brandt nodded and walked back over near his steps. He stood there and watched as Remi pulled out and drove away, before he slowly went up stairs and took a minute just for himself, outside on his porch.

Remi drove up to the front of the neighborhood, pausing just before pulling out onto the highway. He put his car in park, and looked down at his phone riding in the cup holder near his knee. He picked it up and dialed a number he knew from memory.

It rang three or four times before it was finally answered. “Hello?”

“Uncle Riley?”

“Yeah?”

Remi took a deep breath and let it out as he gathered his courage.

“Uncle Riley, I request sanctuary.”

The line was quiet for a few moments.

“It won’t be easy,” Riley said.

“I am well aware,” Remi said.

“I just got one thing to say...”

“Yes, sir?” Remi answered.

“What took you so damn long?!” Riley demanded.

Remi smiled to himself. “Had some healing to do.”

“You get it done?” Riley asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Come on, then. I grant you sanctuary — temporarily. You’ll have to earn permanent status.”

“Yes, sir. I’m on my way,” Remi said.

The end, for now.

Thank you for reading “Healed, Legacy, Book 5”.

Please consider leaving a review.

## From The Author

Thank you for purchasing this book. I hope that my stories make you smile and give you a small escape from reality. I write for me, simply for the joy of it, but if someone else smiles as a result of my stories, even better. Your support is greatly appreciated. If you liked this story, please remember to leave a review wherever you bought it, so that more people can find my books. Each review is important, no matter how short or long it may be.

See you in the pages of the next one!

Sandra R Neeley

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Bane's Heart, Book 2	Destroy, Book 2
Kaid's Queen, Book 3	Enthrall, Book 3
Maverik's Ashes, Book 4	Lore, Book 4
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## About The Author

Hi, I'm Sandra R Neeley, and I'm an International Best-Selling Author of Paranormal, SciFi, and Fantasy Romances. I'm 61 and married, with two children, three grandchildren, a multitude of pets, and I'm a Self-Published Author. At a very young age I recognized that the stories and fictional characters living in my head were not something everyone understood. But after deciding to craft them into books, surprisingly, people have loved them. Every story will leave you feeling like you've been visiting with a long-lost loved one during a respite from reality. Every story ends in a happily ever after, but a bit of a warning; there are some 'triggers' in my stories that certain people should avoid, so please read the synopses and warnings supplied with each book before buying.

I've got multiple series published at this time. Avaleigh's Boys, Riley's Pride, Legacy, and Roar are all Paranormal Shifter Romances. Whispers From the Bayou and The Orcs of Clan Cumhdach are Fantasy Paranormal Romance, Haven is SciFi Romance, Variant is a dark genetic manipulation romance with military overtones. In addition, I've collaborated on several projects and collections, and published a couple of standalone novels and several short stories. I've even got a few stories under pen names you might find here and there. There's always something new rolling around in my head, and so much more to come. I'm always glad to hear from my readers, so feel free to look me up and say hello. My website is [www.sneeleywrites.com](http://www.sneeleywrites.com), where I post snippets of works in progress, and all my links for books and social media can be found there as well.

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